

Salvation and Glory

Exodus 12:14–13:16

We live today in what is hands down the most safety-conscious time in history, in probably the most safety-conscious part of the world. It might be more accurate to describe it as *safety-obsessed*. We drive the safest cars on the planet, with the safest tires, while our kids ride in booster seats wearing 5-point harnesses. We can monitor our security system at home with a smart phone. It's not enough for our kids to wear a helmet, you've got to have knee pads and elbow pads and wrist guards—especially if they want to ride a bike. We even have “safe spaces” on college campuses in case you encounter an idea you don't agree with. “Safety first!”—that's our motto.

Sometimes I scoff at this. We never wore bike helmets when I was a kid. Seatbelts weren't even required by law until I was 10; I remember crawling around in the back of the station wagon on road trips. I'm not even sure my parents ever used a car seat. Then my kids climb into the car today and I'm all, “Everyone have their seatbelt on? I'm not putting this car in gear until you're all buckled up!” Chloe probably thought her name was Careful until she was three—“Careful. Careful! What are you doing? Be careful!”

Even as Christians we're obsessed with safety. We pray for safety whenever we travel. When someone goes on a missions trip, one of the most frequent prayers is for safety. Sometimes it's the *biggest* prayer, as opposed to Jesus actually doing something. When trial happens or tragedy strikes, we pray for the end of that trial or tragedy—for healing, or health, or a new job; we pray for a change in *circumstances*. Which isn't bad, except when assume that the only purpose of hardship is getting on the other side of it.

Now there's nothing wrong with praying for safety or taking precautions or longing for a change in circumstances. But what if there's more to life or to following God than *self-preservation*? What if by focusing on and fearing the difficult circumstances before us, we end up missing the bigger and more beautiful picture of who God is and what he's doing?

One of the greatest mistakes we can make in our understanding and experience of God's salvation is *to confuse salvation with safety*, or self-preservation. To think that God's whole agenda in creating and saving us is to keep us from harm, to rescue us from trouble and trial, to give us our best life now, free from difficulty, and most of all free from suffering. To make us happy and safe. As though losing our life would destroy us, or receiving our best life now would satisfy us.

And perhaps one of the clearest pictures of that difference—between salvation and self-preservation—is found in our passage this morning, and God's great defeat of Egypt and deliverance of Israel at the Red Sea.

If you're just joining us, we have been on a journey through the book of Exodus for several months, watching and beholding God's faithfulness, power, and mercy. God has come down to deliver his people from generations of slavery in Egypt, and he's done it in such a way as to leave no question about who's really in charge, who really has authority over not just his people, but the whole world. Through a series of signs and wonders—ten plagues—God made himself known to Egypt in judgment and to Israel in salvation. In ch. 12 we saw the climax of his saving work, the deliverance of Israel not only from Egypt, but from God's wrath against sin as he poured out his judgment on the firstborn in the land. While Egypt suffered unbearable loss, God provided a substitute for his firstborn son, Israel, through the Passover Lamb. The lamb died in place of the son—something Israel must never forget (hence the new rituals God institutes, that we looked at last week).

And so the next morning Israel left Egypt. “And the people of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children. A mixed multitude also went up with them, and very much livestock, both flocks and herds” (12:37-38).

But they're not out of harm's way yet. Even though the deathblow was already dealt to Egypt through the tenth plague, they have not yet surrendered to God or been fully destroyed. Thus there is one final battle to be fought. In terms from World War II, you might think of the Passover as D-Day, where Israel's victory was sealed. But VE-Day has not yet come. The head has been cut from the serpent, but he's still flailing and writhing and remains very dangerous.

But as we will see, God's goal in saving Israel is not merely to change their circumstances or rescue them from harm. His goal is to *demonstrate his incomparable glory and power*. God cares about the wellbeing of his children, obviously. But there is something much bigger at play than Israel's self-preservation. God is getting his glory over Pharaoh and Egypt. He is showing his glory to Israel. And so he orchestrates this final act of salvation in such a way that only he can receive the glory. God writes the plan (13:17-14:4), does the work (14:5-29), and gets the credit (14:30-31). God saves his people in order to demonstrate his incomparable power and glory.

God Writes the Plan (13:17–14:4)

Let's start with the plan, ch. 13:17 through 14:4. Chapter 13 ends by emphasizing God's guiding presence with his people. As they leave Egypt, he is the one leading them, in a rather miraculous way: “And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night” (13:21). God is with his children to guide them.

But notice that he doesn't lead them in a straight line, or down the shortest path. We know their ultimate destination is Canaan, the land God promised to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; he's told us this several times (Ex. 3:8; 6:8; cf. Gen. 12:9). But God takes them on the scenic route. Verse 17: “When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near.”

Why not? Two reasons. First, to protect them from themselves and the temptation to turn back when the road gets hard. Verse 18: “For God said, ‘Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt.’” The land God is giving to Israel isn't exactly vacant; he is going to use Israel to drive out the idolatrous inhabitants when they get there. In the event that

they decide serving Pharaoh is better than risking war, he doesn't want the short route to tempt them to return.

The second and more significant reason for the long route is what we read in ch. 14. God is luring Pharaoh to his final defeat. Chapter 14:1:

Then the LORD said to Moses, ² "Tell the people of Israel to turn back and encamp in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, in front of Baal-zephon; you shall encamp facing it, by the sea. ³ For Pharaoh will say of the people of Israel, 'They are wandering in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.' ⁴ And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD." And they did so. (14:1-4)

God writes the plan for Israel's salvation. And it involves not just changing their circumstances but demonstrating his power and glory. He's the one who guides Israel on what must have felt like a wild goose chase at first. He's the one who hardens Pharaoh's heart into pursuing Israel and finally meeting his fate. God writes the plans.

And they're not always the plans we would write. Think about some of the unexpected journeys we take in life. Who among us would choose to lose our home, or our job, or our health, or our family? That's not the path we want to walk. If Israel had written the plan, it would have been the shortest route, the path of least resistance to get them into the Promised Land. They certainly wouldn't have planned a path that would pin them between Pharaoh's army and the Red Sea.

But God never gives wrong directions. It's not like Moses' GPS lost the signal in the wilderness and kept recalculating so that they were wandering in circles. God wrote the plan. And the path he leads us down doesn't always make sense, and isn't always the one we would choose. But it is always the one that will bring him the most glory. That will show his incomparable worthiness and power. Which also means that it's the one that will bring us the greatest good. Because in his glory we find our greatest good, a good that will truly satisfy and last forever. God writes the plan.

Second, God does the work.

God Does the Work (14:5-29)

As one author describes, "When the Bible talks about salvation, God is the key, the center, the prime actor."¹ That's precisely what we see in vv. 5-29: God is the prime actor in Egypt's defeat and Israel's salvation.

In vv. 5-9 we see that God's plan to entice Pharaoh to pursue Israel works.

When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the mind of Pharaoh and his servants was changed toward the people, and they said, "What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us?" ⁶ So he made ready his chariot and took his army with him, ⁷ and took six hundred chosen chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them. ⁸ And the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued the people of Israel while the people of Israel were going out defiantly. (14:5-8)

¹ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Salvation Belongs to Our God* (CDGP; Downers Grove: IVP, 2007), 39.

Not only does he pursue them, but he overtakes them in v. 9. Egypt catches up. And Israel freaks out.

And here, in vv. 10-14, we have one of the clearest windows into the difference between Israel's understanding of salvation, and God's actual purpose in salvation. Israel sees Egypt "marching after them, and they feared greatly" (14:10). And to be fair, it's not hard to understand why. This looks like the end. The plan has failed. Egypt has caught up. And so they cry out to the LORD and say to Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness" (14:11-12).

If salvation is merely about safety, or self-preservation, then Israel has a point. This doesn't look like the safe route. It would be far safer to have stayed put in Egypt. Sure they'd still be enslaved, oppressed, beaten, stripped of dignity, and subject to the angry and insecure whims of a tyrant. But better than dying in the wilderness!

Israel has confused salvation with safety, self-preservation. And the reason, if we look closely at the text, is because of what they are focused on. Notice the emphasis on what Israel *sees* in vv. 10-14. "When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel *lifted up their eyes*, and *behold*, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they *feared* greatly. . . ." (14:10). Israel is focused on their circumstances rather than the God who saves; as a result they responded with fear. Contrast that to Moses' response in v. 13: "*Fear not*, stand firm, and *see* the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you *see* today, you shall never *see* again." They're focused on the wrong thing. Don't focus on the problem; focus on God your Savior. This isn't just about getting out of a bind. This is about beholding the incomparable power and glory of the LORD. And Israel's been given a front row seat.

When we focus on and fear the difficult circumstances before us, we risk missing the bigger and more beautiful picture of who God is and what he's doing—saving a people for his own glory. We get fixated on our own wellbeing, our own sense of what we want or think we need in life, and we fear the loss of that. But God is so much bigger, so much worthier, so much more satisfying. And we will see that if we focus not on the situation, but on our Savior.

And he has orchestrated the situation here in such a way that there is no question about who does the saving or deserves the credit. There is *nothing* Israel can do to save themselves. Egypt at their heels, and an unpassable sea before them. They can't go around it. There's nothing they can do.

But there is nothing they need do. And that's the point. God is the one who fights this battle. As Moses says in v. 14, "The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent." Israel contributes nothing to their salvation. God writes the plan. God does the work. God gets the credit.

And we see his handiwork unfold in vv. 15-29. Not even a massive sea poses an obstacle to God. Now there's some discussion about whether this should be translated "Red Sea" or "Sea of Reeds," and which body of water is being referred to. Without getting into the details, the best

scholarship suggests this is indeed talking about the Red Sea between modern day Egypt and Saudi Arabia, probably the Gulf of Suez.² It's an impossible situation.

But God is bigger than the impossible. And so he tells Moses just what to do:

Lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go through the sea on dry ground. ¹⁷ And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. ¹⁸ And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen." (14:16-18)

And that's exactly what happens. God's runs coverage for Israel as they approach the sea (14:19-20). "Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided" (14:21). It's language reminiscent of Genesis 1—God gathered the waters and dry land appeared (Gen. 1:6-10). God's saving work is described in language of a new creation; it's as if Israel is being born anew as the covenant people of God.

But as Israel passes through the sea in safety, Egypt follows them in only to meet their doom. The LORD causes chaos while in the sea—chariot wheels get clogged; the soldiers get trapped—until God tells Moses to stretch out his hand once more and send the sea crashing down (14:27-28). "You blew with your wind; the sea covered them; they sank like lead in the mighty waters" (15:10). God got his glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. He demonstrated, in no uncertain terms, his supreme glory and power. He wrote the plans, he did the work; therefore, he gets all the credit.

God Gets the Credit (14:30-31)

And that's the third thing we see in this story—that God alone gets the credit for saving Israel. He saves his people in order to demonstrate his incomparable glory and power.

Notice the conclusion to the story in 14:30-31:

Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. ³¹ Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.

There is only one person who gets the credit for what happened on that day: Yahweh, the LORD. And Israel *sees* that. Remember again their problem in v. 10—they focused their eyes on the situation, on the problem, and they feared greatly. And Moses told them instead, "Fear not, stand firm, and *see* the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today" (v. 13). And so v. 31 tells us, "Israel *saw* the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people *feared* the LORD [instead of fearing their situation, they feared God in worshipful reverence], and they *believed* in the LORD and in his servant Moses."

² For a helpful summary, see Philip Ryken, *Exodus* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 359-360.

When we focus on our circumstances, on getting out of a hard situation, *when salvation becomes self-preservation*, it reveals that we are putting our hope in what this life can give, as though losing our life will destroy us, or gaining it will satisfy us.

For some of us that's all we have, if we don't have Christ. If you're here this morning and you're not a Christian, you haven't trusted your life to Christ, then the loss of this life *is* the loss of everything, and gaining as much as you can from this world in the few days you have is the best you can hope to do. Which means that every trial, every setback, every tragedy is something you cannot help but fear, and must therefore clamor for escape.

But for the Christian it's different. Because we have one who has gone before us, who has done for us what we could never do for ourselves. One who has taken not only our own hardship, suffering, and trials, but the suffering and trials of the entire world, including all of our sin against a holy God, and made it all his own, that he might bear it in our place and make all things new. When Christ prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night he was betrayed, the Enemy was at his heels, and an unpassable sea lay before him—the cross. There was no going around it, only going through it. He could have run. He could have crumpled in fear. In fact he prayed to his Father, “if it be possible, let this cup pass from me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as you will” (Matt. 26:39). He fixed his eyes on his Father. “For the joy that was set before him [he] endured the cross, despising the shame, and is [now] seated at the right hand of the throne of God” (Heb. 12:2). He parted death's sea and went through, giving his life as the true and better Passover Lamb, and rising from the dead on the third day in order to secure for us “an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time” (1 Pet. 1:4-5).

We cannot save ourselves, any more than Israel could escape from Egypt. But we need not, because God has done the work of salvation for us through his eternal Son Jesus. He wrote the plan, he did the work, he gets the credit. We need only trust in him.

And so taking our eyes off of our situation—as hard as that is, as impossible as that feels, especially when you're backed against the wall and the whole world seems to be falling in on you—taking our eyes off of our situation and focusing instead upon the LORD, not only delivers us from fear, it recalibrates our entire perspective on life.

It reminds us that this life is not all there is to the story. That in Christ there is nothing this world can take from us that is able to destroy us—our money, our stuff, our health, our friends and family, even our life. God is the one who saves us, and who therefore has the power and authority to keep us forever. Jesus says, “I give them eternal life, and they will *never* perish, and *no one will snatch them out of my hand*. My Father, who has given them to me, is *greater than all*, and *no one* is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand” (Jn. 10:28-29). In Christ there is nothing this world can take from us that is able to destroy us.

And that there is nothing this world can give that will truly satisfy. As the psalmist sang, “Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps. 73:25-26). There is only one thing able to satisfy our hearts, to anchor our souls, ground our identity, secure our future, and give us everlasting life—God himself. And to find our all in God, is to magnify

his glory. It's in glorifying God that we find our greatest good. Or as John Piper has famously put it, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him."³ Nothing in this world can compare to him.

Moreover, it reminds us that there is nothing that happens under heaven that doesn't accord to God's sovereign and mysterious plan. Even the hard things. And that changes the way a Christian suffers. God didn't slip off his throne when Egypt caught up to Israel; he isn't caught off guard when our lives fall apart. Though we wouldn't choose it, and don't really like it, it's actually the hard situations that remind us that salvation is bigger than getting out of a tight spot. It's seeing God at work when all earthly hope is lost, that we see his glory displayed most clearly, and that our hearts overflow the most in faith and worship (instead of fear and self-protection). It's no mistake that Israel's response to being saved in ch. 14 is to sing a song of praise to God in ch. 15. We are saved for God's glory; his salvation produces our worship.

God never gives wrong directions. The path he leads us down doesn't always make sense, and isn't always the one we would choose, but it is always the one that will bring him the most glory, which also brings us the greatest good. This was true of Israel's experience before the Red Sea. It was true of Jesus' experience before the cross. It will be true of anything God's children face in this fallen world. And so when you find yourself with the Red Sea before you, and Egypt at your heels, look to your Savior—to him who has gone before you and who reigns sovereignly over you; look to the cross and the resurrection, and remember the words of Moses: "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today" (14:13).

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Opening Question

1. How would you describe the relationship between being *saved* and being *safe*?

Questions for Study and Understanding

2. What happened before our passage that helps us understand what's going on here?
3. What words or ideas are repeated in this passage (particularly in ch. 14), that might help us understand what the author is emphasizing?
4. Put yourself in each character's shoes. What do Pharaoh and the Egyptians think is happening? What does Israel think is happening? What is God actually doing?
5. Looking at 14:10-14, why do you think Israel responded the way they did? What does this reveal to us about what they really want out of the situation?
6. How do Moses' words in vv. 13-14 redirect Israel's desires and fears?
7. What does God reveal about both himself and the purpose of his salvation in this chapter?

³ See, e.g., John Piper, *Desiring God* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1986, 1996).

Questions for Reflection and Application

8. Why do you think God puts so much emphasis on his own glory when it comes to salvation?
9. What is your default reaction when faced with a difficult trial? What do you usually ask God for?
10. How might this passage help us broaden our perspective when dealing with trials?
11. Are there specific ways God is ministering to you through this passage?