

“Between a Rock and a Hard Place”

Exodus 14

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Madison, Wisconsin
July 19, 2009



Introduction:

For just a moment, I would like for us to think about what it means to be between a rock and a hard place. Certainly that is an old saying that goes back many years, and most of us understand what it means. Most of us have been there. We understand what it means to be in a predicament—in a difficult place where the options seem to be very limited—where one option is bad and the other is even worse. Perhaps we think about buying a house or a car, and then we lose our job, and maybe then we find ourselves in a position where it seems that there is no good solution. It is like the proverbial man who paints himself into a corner—the options quickly evaporate, and the way of escape seems to disappear. Perhaps you take a new job and then realize that the old job was much better than the new job—a frustrating situation, but maybe it is too late to turn back—and due to circumstances beyond our control it appears that we may be stuck in that situation. Perhaps you are dealing with a family situation where it seems that there is no way out, that there is no good solution. Perhaps you are at a point in your Christian faith where you seem to be stuck—perhaps even at a dead end, and maybe it seems almost impossible to break through that barrier—there is a wall that we just can't get through. The scenarios are endless, but one of the best definitions of a predicament is this: A lawyer who specializes in suing doctors for medical malpractice who suddenly finds himself in desperate need of major surgery—not a good situation, but the options are very limited, and the options do not appear to be very positive!

As we think about some of these situations, and as all of us think about the difficult challenges we are each facing in our own lives, I would like for us to look together this morning at a Biblical passage where God's people were almost literally stuck between a rock and a hard place. I am referring to Moses and the children of Israel as they first left the land of Egypt, and the passage is found in Exodus 14. In our pew Bibles, the Scripture is found on page 110. **»PPT»** It is a story that most of us have heard before, but it bears repeating because nearly 3,500 years later, we as God's people still find ourselves stuck in some very difficult situations. Sometimes the options are extremely limited, and the choices are not always very pleasant. With this in mind, I would like for us to consider Exodus 14 as a pattern, as a blueprint concerning how we are to react as God's people. I would like for us to look

at the problem they faced, I would like for us to then realize (as they did) that God is with us, and then I would like for us to consider how the Lord would have us react.

I. But first of all, please look with me at THE PROBLEM—THE SITUATION THAT CAUSED SUCH PANIC AND FEAR AMONG GOD’S PEOPLE. »PPT»

If you will, please look with me at the first 12 verses of **Exodus 14**. The people have just left Egypt after the final plague, God is leading them towards the Promised Land, and we come to **Exodus 14:1-12**...

- ¹ *Now the LORD spoke to Moses, saying,*
- ² *"Tell the sons of Israel to turn back and camp before Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea; you shall camp in front of Baal-zephon, opposite it, by the sea.*
- ³ *"For Pharaoh will say of the sons of Israel, 'They are wandering aimlessly in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.'*
- ⁴ *"Thus I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will chase after them; and I will be honored through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD." And they did so.*
- ⁵ *When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his servants had a change of heart 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 his chariot ready and took his people with him;*
- ⁷ *and he took six hundred select chariots, and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them.*
- ⁸ *The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh, king of Egypt, and he chased after the sons of Israel as the sons of Israel were going out boldly.*
- ⁹ *Then the Egyptians chased after them with all the horses and chariots of Pharaoh, his horsemen and his army, and they overtook them camping by the sea, beside Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon.*
- ¹⁰ *As Pharaoh drew near, the sons of Israel looked, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they became very frightened; so the sons of Israel cried out to the LORD.*
- ¹¹ *Then they said to Moses, "Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you dealt with us in this way, bringing us out of Egypt?"*
- ¹² *"Is this not the word that we spoke to you in Egypt, saying, '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."*

We remember that the Israelites had been slaves in Egypt now for several hundred years, they were not fighters, there were no soldiers among them, no weapons to speak of, no military training, simply slaves celebrating their freedom—free at last!

And as they start traveling through the wilderness, it is almost like a scary movie where everybody thinks the bad guy or the monster is dead, everybody starts celebrating, and then the monster suddenly jumps back to life, because as the Israelites are rejoicing, someone looks back over their shoulder and notices a tiny cloud of dust on the horizon. In **verse 10**, they see the Egyptians getting closer, and panic sets in. In fact, the Bible tells us that Pharaoh was leading the charge himself—600 of his elite chariots, and all of the other chariots of Egypt—an officer in every one—a force that surely would have required thousands of soldiers and horses—a huge army.

And to make things worse, the Israelites are trapped. **»PPT»** In the previous chapter, we learn that they had not gone straight to the Promised Land because the Philistines had some huge forts along the way, and there was no way the Philistines would allow them to pass through, and the Lord did not want the Israelites to get too discouraged. So to leave Goshen in the Land of Egypt, they actually travel south. So, they have Egypt to south and west, they have Philistines to the north, and they have the Red Sea to the east—totally trapped—almost literally, between a rock and a hard place. **»PPT»**

And so the Israelites were terrified. They panicked, because by human reasoning they did not stand a chance. It has been said that FEAR is **“False Evidence Appearing Real,”** F-E-A-R, **“False Evidence Appearing Real.”** And the evidence did appear to be very real. The Egyptians were coming in from the west, the Red Sea was ahead of them to the east, and as far as the people were concerned, Moses had completely failed as a leader. As they saw it, Moses had put them between a rock and a hard place, and there was no way of escape. And so in their panic and fear, the people complained. They turned on their leader, because their freedom had turned to certain death. And so at that point, they turned to bitter sarcasm, **“Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?”** Egypt was the land of the pyramids—of course Egypt had graves! Egypt was full of graves! And yet they forgot what the Lord had already done. They forgot how God had arranged for Joseph to be second in command to Pharaoh. They forgot how God had arranged for Jacob and his sons to be rescued from the famine. They forgot that God had remembered their cries for help in the past. They forgot the ten plagues—the plagues that had allowed them to leave Egypt in the first place. But before we are too tough on the Israelites here, we look to ourselves. We know from our own experience that when we are in a tough spot, it is also hard to remember all of the good things that God has done for us. This passage, then, is a reminder—a reminder (in our fear and panic) to look back at all of what God has done. In the tough spot of the moment, let us look back at the many other times God has helped us—just as the Israelites should have done.

What the Israelites had failed to realize is that God had led them into this specific situation. If you will, please look back at the first few verses of this chapter, **“...the Lord spoke to Moses,”** and the Lord directed them into this situation for a reason. The Lord had a master plan. The Lord had orchestrated a set up. According to **verse 4**, the Lord had a plan that He would be honored through Pharaoh, and because of what God was about to do, the Egyptians would know that God is the Lord. When we

face our tough situations, then, let us at least see this as a possibility. It is possible that we are in some kind of tough situation as a lesson to outsiders—as a bold statement to the world that this is how Christians react when faced with difficulty. We are not to be afraid, we are not to panic, we are not to get discouraged by the **“False Evidence Appearing Real.”** We find, first of all, therefore, that the Israelites had a problem—they appeared to be stuck between a rock and a hard place—the fear set in, and the people panicked.

II. As we look back at Exodus 14, we move ahead to what the people were told to do—THEY WERE TO REALIZE THAT GOD IS WITH US AND THAT GOD WAS THE SOLUTION TO THEIR PROBLEM. **▶▶PPT▶▶**

Please look with me at verses 13-18...

- ¹³ *But Moses said to the people, "Do not fear! Stand by and see the salvation of the LORD which He will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you have seen today, you will never see them again forever.*
- ¹⁴ *"The LORD will fight for you while you keep silent."*
- ¹⁵ *Then the LORD said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to Me? Tell the sons of Israel to go forward.*
- ¹⁶ *"As for you, lift up your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, and the sons of Israel shall go through the midst of the sea on dry land.*
- ¹⁷ *"As for Me, behold, I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them; and I will be honored through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen.*
- ¹⁸ *"Then the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD, when I am honored through Pharaoh, through his chariots and his horsemen."*

As a leader, Moses could have lashed out. He could have become very angry. He could have taken a vote, **“All in favor of returning to Egypt, raise your hands. All in favor of swimming, say Aye. All in favor of surrendering, raise your own white flag. All in favor of hiding under a rock, crouch low.”** Moses did not take a vote, but we find in verse 13 that Moses directed their attention to the Lord! In a difficult situation, Moses said, **“Do not fear! Stand by and see the salvation of the Lord which He will accomplish for you today.... The Lord will fight for you while you keep silent.”** A godly leader will point people to the Lord. A godly leader will reassure people that God’s way is the best way.

Moses knew that the people were scared to death, and so he told them to calm down, to stand by and watch. As he says in verse 13, **“Do not fear!”** These were the same words spoken by the angel to Mary when she discovered that she was pregnant with the Lord, **“Do not fear!”** These were the same words spoken by Jesus to the disciples when they were out on the Sea of Galilee during the storm, **“Do not fear!”** These were the same words spoken by the angel to Mary Magdalene as she was

worried about the Lord's body being missing from the tomb on Sunday morning, ***"Do not fear!"*** When God tells us not to fear, something amazing is about to happen! And so Moses says, ***"Do not fear!"*** but ***"Stand by and watch..."*** Prepare to be amazed! Moses directed their attention to the Lord.

And it is in this paragraph where God tells Moses what is about to happen. In **verse 16**, the Lord says to Moses, ***"As for you, lift up your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, and the sons of Israel shall go through the midst of the sea on dry land."*** In their wildest dreams, no one could have imagined traveling through the Red Sea on dry land. If they had had a brainstorming session, the idea of traveling through the Red Sea would have never come up, and yet that is exactly the one solution that God did offer. And we know from our own experience that this is exactly how God works. The Lord offers solutions that we would never think of on our own. In response to a life of sin, the Bible says in **Romans 5:8** that, ***"...God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us."*** Who would have ever thought of that solution—that God would offer His only Son as a sacrifice for our sins? In response to a life of sin, the Bible says in **Acts 2:38**, ***"Repent, and each of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins."*** Who could have ever come up with repentance and baptism as a solution for sin? The people, then, were to realize that God was the answer to their problem—just as God is also the answer to our problems today.

You know, if they had started out looking at this situation through eyes of faith instead of whining, this whole experience could have been a lot different. If they had remembered the plagues of Egypt, they could have said, ***"All right! Mountains on the right, Philistine forts on the left, Pharaoh's elite Egyptian soldiers behind us, and the Red Sea in front of us—this is gonna be great!"*** They could have looked at this situation with anticipation. But as it was, they needed a reminder from Moses that God was the solution to their problem.

III. As we continue by looking at the last paragraph in this chapter, we come to the practical application, we come to the "So what?" section as we find that the people are told to GET MOVING! »PPT»

If you will, please look with me at **Exodus 14:19-31**...

¹⁹ ***The angel of God, who had been going before the camp of Israel, moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them.***

²⁰ ***So it came between the camp of Egypt and the camp of Israel; and there was the cloud along with the darkness, yet it gave light at night. Thus the one did not come near the other all night.***

²¹ ***Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the LORD swept the sea back by a strong east wind all night and turned the sea into dry land, so the waters were divided.***

- ²² *The sons of Israel went through the midst of the sea on the dry land, and the waters were like a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.*
- ²³ *Then the Egyptians took up the pursuit, and all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots and his horsemen went in after them into the midst of the sea.*
- ²⁴ *At the morning watch, the LORD looked down on the army of the Egyptians through the pillar of fire and cloud and brought the army of the Egyptians into confusion.*
- ²⁵ *He caused their chariot wheels to swerve, and He made them drive with difficulty; so the Egyptians said, "Let us flee from Israel, for the LORD is fighting for them against the Egyptians."*
- ²⁶ *Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may come back over the Egyptians, over their chariots and their horsemen."*
- ²⁷ *So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its normal state at daybreak, while the Egyptians were fleeing right into it; then the LORD overthrew the Egyptians in the midst of the sea.*
- ²⁸ *The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen, even Pharaoh's entire army that had gone into the sea after them; not even one of them remained.*
- ²⁹ *But the sons of Israel walked on dry land through the midst of the sea, and the waters were like a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.*
- ³⁰ *Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.*
- ³¹ *When Israel saw the great power which the LORD had used against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in His servant Moses.*

As we think about what the Israelites actually did, I would invite you to look back with me at **verse 15**, where the Lord said to Moses, ***"Why are you crying out to Me? Tell the sons of Israel to go forward."*** As I understand it, the Hebrew word here that is translated as ***"go forward"*** is a word literally meaning, ***"to pull up,"*** and it goes back to the idea of pulling up the tent stakes. As I said earlier, our family will be camping this week, and the thing my wife will probably be looking forward to most is pulling up those tent stakes. Pulling up those tent stakes means that we are closing up camp, that we are moving forward, that we will be getting back to warm showers and soft beds. By the way, the word in Hebrew is ***"NASA."*** I have no idea if our own NASA had this in mind, but the word came to be defined as going on a journey or going on an adventure. It refers to pulling up the tent stakes and moving on. And so the sons of Israel were told to get moving! Pull up those tent stakes and go!

It is interesting to me that on their journey they were given a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night—not a compass or a GPS unit, but a cloud! How comforting that cloud must have been in the desert, and how comforting that pillar of fire must have

been at night. And we find in this paragraph that the pillar stood between the Israelites and the Egyptians. As we learned last week from **Psalm 16**, the Lord is our *“refuge.”* The Lord is our shield, our rock—the safe place where we can hide in a time of trouble. The Lord was their protection. The angel of the Lord who had been leading them now moved to the back, and the pillar of God also protected them at the rear. Moses stretched out his hand, the sea divided, and the Israelites traveled through the sea on dry ground with a wall of water on both sides.

At this point, some people try to dismiss all of this as some kind of natural occurrence, **“Well, this was not really the Red Sea, but it must have been some kind of marshy area, and really, the water in that area is only ankle deep.”** No! Because then we get to **verse 28** and we find that God drowned the Egyptian soldiers in the depths of the sea! I guess the real miracle here, then, would be that God drowned thousands of soldiers in only six inches water! In reality, according to **verse 29**, ***“...the waters were like a wall to them on their right hand and on their left.”***

Others have suggested that this was merely a mirage, that it was just a huge misunderstanding—nothing but a myth, a natural occurrence. And yet we remember the words of Rahab the prostitute more than 40 years later. She was explaining the fear of those who lived in Jericho, one of the most fortified cities of the ancient world. In **Joshua 2:9-11**, she said to the spies, ***“I know that the LORD has given you the land, and that the terror of you has fallen on us, and that all the inhabitants of the land have melted away before you. For we have heard how the LORD dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt... When we heard it, our hearts melted and no courage remained in any man any longer because of you; for the LORD your God, He is God in heaven above and on earth beneath.”*** This was no mirage, this was not a natural occurrence, but it was an established fact of history, and even forty years later it continued to terrify the inhabitants of Canaan—these pagan people were scared to death by the power of the one true God.

As we apply all of this to those of us in the church today, it seems that God’s basic message has remained the same, and that is, we must pull up the tent stakes and go forward!

- If we have been burdened down with some kind of lousy attitude toward our fellow Christians, and if that attitude has put us between a rock and a hard place, the Lord is saying to us this morning, **“Go forward!”**
- If we have been camped out in a place of bitterness, or laziness, or anger, the Lord is saying to us this morning, **“Pull up the tent stakes and go forward!”**
- If you have not been very involved in the past, do not stay there, but move! Get in touch with Patsy or Juanita and offer to reach out to the poor in this community with the upcoming clothing give away—step out of your comfort zone and do it—**pull up the tent stakes and go forward!**
- Spiritually speaking, if we seem to be stuck in a rut and maybe we have stopped growing as we should, the Lord is saying to us this morning, **“Get moving! Start doing something about it!”**

The Lord is ready to take us on an amazing journey, but the first step is up to us—there is a time to stop crying out to God, there is a time to pull up the tent stakes and move it!

One of my favorite verses from the Old Testament is **Exodus 14:30**, ***“Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore.”*** What a fitting end for Pharaoh and the Egyptian army. Do you remember how Moses first came on the scene? According to Exodus 1, Pharaoh had commanded the midwives to take all of the newborn male babies and throw them into the Nile River to drown. That was 80 years ago, and now Pharaoh himself is drowned in the Red Sea. As Paul said in **Galatians 6:7**, ***“Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, this he will also reap.”*** What a memorable picture that must have been (especially for the children)—to watch all of those dead Egyptians washing up on the seashore! And what a powerful reminder for those of us here in Madison, Wisconsin—that God will provide a way to get the job done, if we will only have the courage to move it.

Conclusion:

As we close our lesson this morning, I would invite all of us to think about our own struggles. What are we facing right now? Have we experienced God’s help in the past? And if we have, can God do it again? This morning we have considered the fear that overwhelms us when it seems that there is no way out—**FEAR—False Evidence Appearing Real**. We have considered the fact that God is the answer to every problem, ***“Stand by and see the salvation of the LORD which He will accomplish for you today.”*** And we have also considered the bottom line, that we are to pull up the tent stakes and move it. We are to actually take that first step as we do what God has told us to do in the Scriptures.

If you are facing a Red Sea problem, we would be glad to pray about that together. Write it down, pass it forward during our next song, and we will pray about it together. But on the other hand, perhaps you are not yet a Christian. As we close this morning, I would invite you to turn with me briefly to **1 Corinthians 10:1-2**. In our pew Bibles, the passage is found on **page 1793**. In **1 Corinthians 10:1-2**, the apostle Paul said, ***“For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea.”*** Here is a great message going back to **Exodus 14**. What the Israelites did there was parallel to baptism today—they were on dry land, but there was water on all sides and the pillar of cloud was above them. It was a clean break with the past life of sin and slavery. The Israelites would have died in Egypt if they had not had the faith to follow Moses through the Red Sea, and so the Bible says that they were baptized into Moses.

In a similar way, we must also follow Jesus through the waters of baptism. Jesus led the way by dying on the cross, by being buried in the tomb, and by rising up on the third day. In the same way, we die to sin, we are buried in water for the forgiveness of our sins, and we are raised up to live the Christian life. If you have any questions,

we would love to talk with you. But if you are ready to obey the good news right now, if you are ready to walk through the waters of baptism, you can let us know by coming to the front as we sing this next song. Let's all stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: church@fourlakescoc.org