

7 Rescue – Enemy Judged

Most of us have fears and phobias. Here are some of the more unusual;

Coulrophobia – Which is a fear of clowns. Actually, I've never been too keen on them myself. There's just something a little too creepy about them – sorry clowns.

Ergasiophobia – Now, that is a fear of work and even the hardiest of you might suffer from that on a Friday afternoon.

Now we get into the tricky to pronounce section;

Paraskavedekatriaphobia – Now that is fear of Friday the 13th – I presume the day, rather than just the film.

And then bizarrely there is Pteronophobia – which is a fear of being tickled by feathers. Really I think that is just having a phobia if you can't think of any other phobia.

And lastly, why not go for the all inclusive package; Panphobia – no, not a fear kitchens and cooking, but the fear of absolutely everything!

Now, often those fears are totally ungrounded, it is unlikely that we will ever fall victim to them, but in our reading from Exodus the Israelites have a perfectly rational fear – the Egyptians, or to be more precise; the Egyptian king and his army. They are afraid of slavery and death.

And this morning I want us to recognise, that actually we share that fear, but that we need to see two import things in Exodus 14:1-15:3; that God saves when it seems impossible and that he defeats the enemy completely. In addition to that we are going to see how our news at the moment vividly illustrates all that is going on in these verses.

Now, remember that the Israelites have escaped slavery in Egypt after the final plague sent by God – the death of the firstborn.

When God's judgement against the rebellion of the Pharaoh "passed over" the land the Israelites were saved (not by anything they had done, they were just as guilty of sin, but) because of the blood of a lamb shed on their behalf. And we drew parallels with Jesus, the lamb of God dying for our sins in our place.

After this, Pharaoh finally releases the nation of slaves but in chapter 14:5 he and his officials have a light bulb moment and realise that as the leaders of the Egyptians they have made a terrible mistake, "What have we done?" They say, "We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services!" in other words, "Now we are going to have to do all the hard work!" So Pharaoh sets off in hot pursuit with six hundred of his best chariots plus as many others as he can find.

This is exactly like Bahrain calling in a thousand Saudi-Arabian soldiers to crush the uprising there; you can expect this overwhelming military force to kill the ringleaders, terrorise the rest of the people and crush their spirits so that they are once more subject to their rulers.

The Israelites are terrified, they turn on Moses and say, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"

Perhaps that is how some of the protesters in Libya are feeling;

that suffering under Ghadaffi was better than dying in the desert at the hands of his military forces simply because they have dared to hope for freedom.

But in Exodus God's people seemed to have forgotten something very important – they are God's people! They round on Moses accusing him of dragging them out of Egypt to an early grave in the desert, but they have completely forgotten that it was God's mighty hand which compelled Pharaoh to release them. It was God who was acting to free his people in response to their crying out to him in their misery.

Funny isn't it, how when the chips are down we suddenly forget God – it suddenly becomes all about us; how can we dig ourselves out of this mess? But isn't that a huge mistake, especially when the mess we are in is as great as that in which the Israelites find themselves?

Well, you see, Pharaoh has pulled off a military strike by cutting off the fleeing Israelites, leaving them with their backs against the sea and facing him – there is no way out for them, they're trapped. But remember, they are God's people and God saves when it seems impossible.

And that is precisely what happens, Moses' reply to the people was not to rally them with a great war speech or even to chastise them for their lack of faith, he simply instructs them "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still."

Now, there are parallels here with us; we have a strong enemy in sin. How many times have you found yourself overwhelmed by it? You look at the choices and temptations ahead and it seems that there is no escape.

Add to that the reality that sin has cut us off from freedom, cut us off from God and that it drags to the grave we find that we are in exactly the same situation as the Israelites.

Perhaps we should try to save ourselves, but again what can we do? Time and again in the New Testament Paul uses the language that people are slaves to sin and just as the Egyptians refused to release their Israelite slaves sin will not let us go either.

But remember, God saves when it seems impossible. All the Israelites could see was the overwhelming force of the Egyptian army but Moses wanted them to see that God was supreme and likewise we need to be still, we need to allow God to fight for us. We need to trust him to be able to defeat our sin. Can we do that?

It's hard isn't? We like to be doing, taking charge, sorting out our own mess, but sometimes we need help from outside and when the odds against us are insurmountably great then we need not despair, but instead turn to God.

So what happens for the Israelites and for us? Well, God defeats the enemy completely.

It is a momentous event; God (not Moses, not anything magical in Moses' staff, but God alone) drives back the waters of the sea (probably a stretch of water at the northern end of the Suez gulf) so that his people can escape.

Now I don't want you to get distracted by those who say, "Oh, well, it wasn't really the Red Sea, so it wasn't really a miracle because they could have waded across." because clearly waters were parted and waters closed.

The Israelites were cut off from the promised land, from their future with God by enough water to mean that whole families could not escape the wrath of their slave masters.

But through that water God opens a way for them to come in safety through his great power. In order to keep the soldiers at bay, the angel of God and the pillar of cloud move to the rear so that the Israelites are protected as they flee, but then when the opportunity arises, Pharaoh acts totally irrationally and pursues them. Such is the consuming wrath of Satan against us – even in the face of God’s might and majesty he too is so desperate to destroy what God loves that he will pursue us at all costs.

But see what God does. God saves his people and defeats his enemy – completely. It doesn’t matter if it was a reed sea, we have seen in the last ten days what a wall of water can do even across dry land; how it can wash away everything in its path and snuff out all human life.

Don’t get me wrong; I am in no way equating the Tsunami in Japan with God’s just wrath against Pharaoh and the Egyptian army in Exodus 14. The point is that it doesn’t matter if it was a great sea like in the Prince of Egypt movie or a reed sea, the released waves would have been powerful enough to totally destroy the Egyptians and reveal God’s glory.

And, you see, God is glorified because he has also defeated our sin. On the Cross (as we will be reminded at Easter) Jesus cried out, “It is finished!” – what was finished? Not him, but God’s victory over sin and death; our strong enemy has been humbled and defeated by God.

Hebrews 2:14-15 puts it like this, “Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—

that is, the devil— and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.” Isn’t that great news? Our greatest fear has been done away with at the cross of Christ.

If that’s really true (and I believe that it is) then surely we should respond with love and gratitude and worship just like the Israelites did who recognised that they had been rescued by God. They praise him at the beginning of Exodus chapter 15 where we read, “Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD:

I will sing to the LORD, for he is highly exalted. The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.

The LORD is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. He is my God, and I will praise him, my father’s God, and I will exalt him.

The LORD is a warrior; the LORD is his name.”

So, the events of the Exodus, the flight from Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea all remind us of how God saves us when it seems impossible to be saved. Can I rescue myself from my sin or its consequences; death? No. Is my enemy too great for me? Too frightening? Too powerful? Yes. But the LORD is my strength and my song; through Jesus’ death and resurrection he has become my salvation – by his grace, his power, his mercy he has opened up a way for me to come to him in safety and he has defeated my greatest enemy and slave master - Satan.

“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” (1 Cor 15:55-57)

And so God is my God and I will praise him and I will exalt him!

I hope you feel the same too and if you don't know that freedom from the slavery of sin then cry out to God for him to rescue you and then praise him for his mighty hand, his mighty grace and his mighty love. For our God is a great God who rescues those who have no hope and who leads us through death to new life.

Amen.