



# The Trinity Pulpit



## Egyptians on the Beach Exodus 14:14-31

Dr. Jeff Roberts  
August 2, 2009

He displayed it like it was a priceless collectible. It was a jar behind his desk and in it was a gall stone. It was very large and just looking at it could only produce psychosomatic symptoms. When I asked him why he kept it in the first place and why, in the second place, he kept it in a jar in his office he said "It is evidence of God's activity in my life." He went on to tell me a story of how that gall stone had caused a severe gall bladder attack that had sent him to the emergency room in pain. However, it was the rest of the story that was most moving. When they found the gall stone, they also found another very serious condition that would have gone undetected and could have taken his life in a moment. They were able not only to relieve him from the giant gall stone but do surgery to repair the other more serious situation. It had, in his opinion, saved his life. To my friend, this gall stone was a sign of God's grace, not affliction. To him, this odd thing on display behind his desk was a reminder that God's activity is sometimes experienced in the strangest of ways. It was his reminder that God's thoughts and ways are higher than our thoughts and ways.

Many of us have stories of ways we have witnessed God's activity in our lives. Many of us have scars on our bodies from moments when God spared our lives in an accident or through surgery, which enabled us to heal and continue to be healthy. It is interesting how scars of some things are many times the very sign of God's goodness and grace not only of a difficult moment.

We are surprised to hear that after Jesus' resurrection his body has scars. He tells the disciples "Behold the nail prints and the scar on my side from the spear." (John 20:29) Those nail-scarred hands and spear-scarred side are reminders of a tragic moment that also has become the moment that epitomizes God's activity in our world.

In our text there is another strange sight that is a reminder of God's activity. The sight is that of dead Egyptian soldiers on the shore. This sight is a reminder that God had defeated Pharaoh's army and

the Israelites had walked across the Red Sea bed on dry ground. It was a reminder that at the time when there was no hope and no way out, God provided a way out. Those dead Egyptians on the shore were the final sign of God's activity in that moment. The people of God had been saved and God was in control.

The Egyptians on the shore is the ending of the story of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea on dry ground. Most of us hear this story and we quickly picture Charlton Heston, as Moses from *The Ten Commandments*, and the amazing special effect of the Red Sea parting and heaping up on each side and the Israelites crossing over on dry ground. Not that the movie got it all wrong, but let's try and put that picture out of our minds and read the Bible for what it says and does not say about this great moment of deliverance.

After Moses had returned to Egypt, he had demanded that Pharaoh release the nation of Israel from their captivity. After the 10 plagues – the final one being the death of the first-born in the families of Egypt – Pharaoh finally relents and lets the people go. However, as the Israelites boldly march from Egypt with all the confidence in the world and in their God, Pharaoh had a change of heart. What we fail to understand was that the whole Red Sea crossing was God, once and for all, revealing his power to Egypt. In fact, we are told the whole thing was orchestrated by God.

When the Israelites left Egypt, they did not go the shortest route because that would have been through Philistine country. God did not want the Israelites to face war and be disheartened at the very beginning of their journey, so they went a longer route. Then, God told Moses for the people to backtrack to where they would be encamped at the Red Sea. God told Moses his plan was for it to appear that the Israelites were wandering and lost and thus cause Pharaoh to change his mind about pursuing the Israelites. That is exactly what happened. When Pharaoh heard

that the Israelites were encamped by the Red Sea, he comes to the following conclusion: “What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and we have lost their services.” The conclusion was not only Pharaoh’s but his officials’ as well. The text is written to suggest that everyone agreed it was wrong to let the Israelites go. So, Pharaoh has his chariot readied and, with his people and his army, he pursues the Israelites. Pharaoh personally goes himself; however, when he discovers he cannot attack right away, he returns to let his army do his bidding.

The Israelites find themselves in a precarious situation. They are facing the Red Sea and in hot pursuit of them is Egypt’s army. The thought of being trapped is too much for the Israelites. They cry out to Moses in fear in verses 10-12:

As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, ‘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!’

Then Moses responded in verses 13-14:

Moses answered the people, ‘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.’

It is in that moment that God begins to exact his plan. First, there is a pillar of cloud that stands between the two camps, which is the very presence of God. It is the picture of God’s protection that keeps the Egyptians from attacking the Israelites. As the Egyptian army has to wait, God begins to open the door for the Israelites. Moses lifts his staff over the Red Sea and something miraculous happens: a great East Wind comes and blows back the Sea. The East Wind was always seen as a destructive wind, but not in this case – it was a productive wind. We are told that the waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and their left.

This is an important description. There are many that suggest that what happened is that the Red Sea crossing was not quite this eventful. Many scholars suggest that the crossing was at the Sea of Reeds which would have been more of a marsh; water was swept away by the

wind, dried up, and the people crossed over. I am not here to dismiss the work of many scholars whom I respect; I am only here to tell you what the Bible says. The Bible says that it was a wall of water. The word for “wall” in the text is the word for “a city wall”, not a small stone wall; it is a picture of water that is high and piled up. Also, the use of the word “sea” indicates “a deep area”, not a marsh area. In fact, there is a separate word to describe a marsh-like area; however, in this instance the word used describes the very deep.

Anyway, it was a marvelous moment. So, all night the wind blew, the waters were divided, and the people crossed over. It was night! It was in the dark moment that Israel began their journey across the Red Sea.

Then early in the morning, in the last watch of the night, the Egyptians began to pursue them. However, God looked down and caused the Egyptians great confusion. First, their chariots became bogged down in the sea bed; our text says that the chariots’ wheels came off. The literal translation is “their wheels turned.” The picture is that of heavy chariots trying to cross a dry sea bed that was soft and unable to support chariots. Therefore, the chariots become bogged down and unable to be controlled. Then in the final act, Moses holds his staff up again at day break; the sea went back into its place. All of the army is drowned in that moment. It was on that day the Israelites saw the fullness of God’s activity. It was witnessed, in all things, by them seeing the dead Egyptian soldiers washing up onto the shore. It was a strange, horrible, and odd sight; nonetheless, at that moment God’s people were sure of God’s activity.

I think most of us would love to be able to witness God’s power like the Israelites did that day. Not that we want to have harm come to others, but we would like to be able to recognize God’s activity and be sure that God is in control, just like they witnessed. We are reminded that all along God was in control – he orchestrated the whole episode in the Israelites’ journey to teach them of his power and protection. Yet, from the perspective of the Israelites, the fullness of God’s activity and plan was not evident until it was all over.

Questions for us today are “How do we witness the activity of God in our lives? How do we recognize it? How do we experience it? Are there some steps we can take so that we, too, can realize God’s power, protection, and work in our lives?” I think the answer is “Yes.” I have noted three steps we can take to witness God’s activity in our lives.

The first is obedience. Obedience to God’s will is the step we can take when we don’t know what to do that will reveal God to us. How do we follow God’s will?

We follow God's word. If we would just become obedient to the commands of God we find in Scripture and if we would only pattern our lives after Jesus – who is the focus of the Bible, we would prepare our lives for God's activity.

In our text there are two responses that the Israelites could have made. The first was to go back to Egypt. The army had not come to annihilate the Israelites; they had come to take them back. Some of them wanted to do just that. Some of them, when the moment became tense, difficult, and God's plan did not seem to be working, came to the conclusion "We should have never followed God to begin with." They had a skewed memory of Egypt in that moment. They thought "Things were not that bad. It was bearable. Moses, you should have left us alone."

In verse 15 the Lord says to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on." The term "move on" meant "get ready to go." This meant for the people to break camp, gather their animals, get organized and prepare for God's deliverance. I want us to have a full appreciation for this moment. The sea was still on one side and Egypt's army on the other side. Nothing had changed. Not one drop of water had changed direction in the Red Sea. Yet when everything was still the same, God tells the people to move on. God essentially tells them to do what they know to do. They were not told to start walking into the sea; they were simply instructed, in that moment, to get ready. They were to prepare for God's activity.

Our first response – really our only response – to God, if we want to witness God's activity in our lives, is obedience. We have to do what we know to do. We have to take the steps to place ourselves in the middle of God's activity. The way we do that is obedience. It is our daily obedience to God, and by that I mean doing what we already know to do, which will create the moment and the opportunity for God's activity to be witnessed in our lives.

What do we know we are to do everyday in obedience to God? We know we are to put God first. I think that will mean we need to spend time praying, reading the Bible for instructions, and throughout the day and in all the moments of our lives we seek to think about what God would have us do. How should we respond to those who are around us? How should we respond to the hurting friend, the needy neighbor? What should be our response to a difficult person at work or in our family? Obedience has to do with how we view our sins. Are we to accept them as the norm of our culture and everyone does it? Are we to decide we are too weak to ever change? Or are we to seek to change hab-

its, thoughts, and ways by asking God's help? How are we to react in moments of crisis? Is it with fear or with faith? Obedience is the step we know to take. The truth is that much in our lives would be changed if we would simply be obedient to what we already know God expects of our lives.

Elizabeth Elliot, whose husband and his companions were murdered by the Indians in Peru when they attempted to take the gospel to them, tells of her despair in those moments and the time that would follow. She speaks of a time when she did not know what to do. She would pray for direction from God and none would come. She would wonder what she was to do because all of her plans had been so radically changed with the death of Jim. Then she came to this great conclusion: in the moment when you don't know what to do next, God's will is for you to do the next thing. Whatever the next thing is, you just remain faithful and obedient. It is obedience, as a first response, that is demanded of the Israelites to experience all of God's activity.

The second response is like the first, but it is something a little deeper than an act of obedience; it is trust. I would like to define trust using Eugene Peterson's description as a "long obedience in the same direction." We can be obedient in this moment and that moment, but obedience over a period of time creates deep trust of God. That is the next step the Israelites took that day. They not only were obedient by getting going but they also were learning trust. They had experienced the plagues and the deliverance of God, now God had something else in store for them. God was teaching them trust.

We find it in the words of Moses to the worried Israelites. Moses said in verses 13-14, "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."

This speech by Moses is interesting because it is a reassuring speech at a very difficult time. They are not to fear, they are to stand firm – that is, not run away. They are to stay right where they are and wait on God. "The Lord is going to fight for you; you only need to be still." We know that being still is not being void of activity, because God is going to tell them to get moving. The word "be still" has more to do with the absence of fear, striving, worry, and trying to solve the problem themselves. The phrase "the Egyptians you see today you will never see again" is the reminder that God has orchestrated this whole thing.

In fact, Douglass Stuart says that this is literally saying

“Be glad you see the Egyptian army come at you; because you have seen the Egyptian army, it means that God’s prediction is about to be fulfilled. If you did not see them, then you should worry.” The reality that it is a difficult moment is evidence that God is at work. That is contrary to how we function, but that is what the Bible teaches us over and over again.

Paul would say “When I am weak I am strong.” (2 Corinthians 12:10) James would remind us to rejoice in our moments of difficulty because it is building character. (James 1:2-4) The sight of the Egyptian army was not a reason to fear but just the opposite; it was a reminder that God’s activity was occurring just as God had planned.

Trust must be our response in difficult moments so we might witness God’s activity. Trust is something we gain with moment-to-moment obedience. We do what we know to do in this moment and we remain still, confident, and sure that God is at work. In fact, we interpret the problems of our lives not as “God has forgotten us”, but as “God has a plan for us.” That is trust.

Now, I don’t want us to forget that the whole event of the sea parting and crossing occurs at night; it was during the last watch of the night that the Egyptians pursued the Israelites in the river bed. The wind blew all night long. It was a long night of trust. That is usually how we would describe our darkest moments, and it is in those moments when God asks us to trust him. God asks us to trust him when the way is not clear, when there is only one way to go and one option, and when there is nothing left to do but take a step into the depth of the sea and go the only way we can go in that moment.

Many believe that what caused the plane wreck of John F. Kennedy, Jr. was spatial disorientation. This occurs when there is no discernible horizon such as when flying in clouds, hazy conditions, or on moonless nights. All pilots are vulnerable to this condition; it is indeed a challenge to ignore and hold suspect our usually accurate inner senses and instead “trust the gauges.” What are we going to trust in the end, in the darkness, in the moment when we are left with the only choices of turn-

ing away or turning to God? It is obedience and trust that place us right in the middle of God’s activity even when we are still unaware of it.

The last thing I want to mention to you is that when you see God’s activity, give God the glory. This whole event was about God’s glory and honor. God was going to show the Israelites and the Egyptians, once and for all, who was in control. The evidence comes at daybreak. In the morning light everything is revealed. The Egyptians bog down and the waters cover them. The Israelites see the Egyptians on the shore as the daylight comes. What began with only obedience and trust ends with the knowledge God has been faithful.

What is important for us is to start acknowledging God’s activity when we see it. Too many times we pray in the darkness and then take credit for the outcome in the light. We seek God when we feel trapped only to forget him when we are free. One of the activities that will help us recognize God’s activity in our lives is to name it when we see it.

In the mountains of North Carolina, less than five miles apart, are two tiny hamlets. One is named Trust and the other Luck. Figuratively speaking, everyone lives in one of these two hamlets. We either live by luck or we live by trust. It is not difficult to move from one to the other, but it is a move that makes all the difference in the world.

I am asking us to name God’s activity when we see it, so God will be honored. Let’s move from luck to trust and from trust to praise.

God calls us to be obedient and trust him in the darkness. When we do, we look back in the light of a new day and discover God was working all along. We all could give testimony to a time in our lives when we were not sure what the future held, only to later look back and say “God was surely at work.” Some of us are hoping that is true today. We are in the dark moment when all we have left is obedience and trust. If that describes you, then stand firm, be still, and move on. If you will do this in the darkness, then the day will come when you will see God’s activity in your life. Like strength when there was weakness, like scars of deliverance, like a gall stone in a jar, like Egyptians on the beach . . . everywhere we will see it. God has been faithful. ✨



Trinity Baptist Church • 4815 Six Forks Road • Raleigh, NC 27609 • 919.787.3740

www.tbcraleigh.com • jroberts@tbcraleigh.com