

Pastor Daryl Diddle

Sermon Series: *Looking Up*, No.5

Always a Way, Part 2

February 6, 2022 (Evening Service)

Exodus 14 (NIV)

⁵ When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about them and said, "What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services!" ⁶ So he had his chariot made ready and took his army with him. ⁷ He took six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them.

⁸ The Lord hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, so that he pursued the Israelites, who were marching out boldly. ⁹ The Egyptians – all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, horsemen and troops – pursued the Israelites and overtook them as they camped by the sea near Pi Hahiroth, opposite Baal Zephon.

¹⁰ As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the Lord. ¹¹ 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?" ¹² 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!"

¹³ 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. ¹⁴ The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still."

¹⁵ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. ¹⁶ Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground. ¹⁷ I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. ¹⁸ The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen."

¹⁹ Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, ²⁰ coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long.

²¹ Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, ²² and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

²³ The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. ²⁴ During the last watch of the night the Lord looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. ²⁵ He jammed the wheels of their chariots so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The Lord is fighting for them against Egypt."

²⁶ Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen." ²⁷ Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the Lord swept them into the sea. ²⁸ The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen – the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.

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Back in September, when we restarted Sunday evening worship, we thought we'd do things a little differently. Given how little human connection we'd had as a church that previous year, and given how much we need that, we had the idea of moving all our church socials to the first Sunday evening of each month and then abbreviating our worship time in here so that we could extend it over in the Great Hall, in order to give more time for connecting with one another.

We wanted to do that consistently – every first Sunday, and the reason why is that corporate worship is important, but so is Christian fellowship.

There's a pandemic that we don't really see in these days, and it's one of loneliness and isolation. Culturally speaking, as connected as we are electronically, we're still hitting record levels of depression and suicide and hopelessness, due to the growing spiritual and human disconnection in our culture.

So, we thought we'd try to address that a bit more on these first Sundays. But honestly, between the weather and other schedule changes, we haven't had much success keeping on that track.

We are, however, back to it tonight with our chili social that follows here in just a few minutes. So, even if you didn't bring anything, please do come over to the Great Hall for the sake of connection and fellowship. It's all part of worship.

And, although I'm not trying to tell you what you have to talk about there, I'd encourage you to take your table conversations in directions that feed your spirits. Bring conversations back to the goodness of Christ and not the badness of people, because, you know, real *Christian* fellowship doesn't just happen when people get together and talk. *Real Christian fellowship* happens when God is made the center of our connections and thoughts and conversations.

So, by way of getting that started, I thought I'd return to a couple themes from this morning that did not really fit with the direction of the message, and maybe around your tables, over bowls of chili, you can take them from there.

If you have a Bible, you might want to turn again to Exodus, Chapter 14.

Let me mention, it can be a little intimidating talking about Exodus when you have several Old Testament scholars in the congregation. The good thing, though, is that they should be happy, because, to a large degree, I'm using their books to create my sermons. So, in many ways, they're hearing their own thoughts.

It's like that saying, "People are not really interested in hearing your opinion. They want to hear their opinion coming out of your mouth."

That's not true for our Biblical studies people – at least not all the time.

Anyway, here are two thoughts from Vic Hamilton which I appreciated, but did not have time to mention this morning. [Hold up *Handbook on the Pentateuch and Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary*.]

First, we should notice that God does not tell His people here to fight against Egypt.

The fact is, there's only one place in the Pentateuch where God tells Israel to fight, and that was against the Amalekites in Exodus 17.

God says here in Exodus 14:14, "*The Lord shall fight for you, and you—you will simply observe.*" (paraphrase)

People seem to be fighters by nature. It's almost like we have to be fighting something all the time, and if we run out of common enemies, we fight each other. I know married couples like that: they really only get along when they have someone outside their marriage that they can fight together.

As we are, we tend to fight by nature. That's a consequence of the fall. God didn't originally create us to think like that.

But when you're doing what God wants you to do, what you find 99 times out of 100 in Scripture is that God will take the role of our defender. He will fight for us, as long as we're doing as He says to do. God defends His people, which is an important thing to remember in days where following Him is not always the popular position.

Second, notice Moses' first words to this people when they realize their situation. Moses' first response: "*Don't be afraid.*"

That's a pastoral word—a word that's concerned for their peace and well-being.

How many times through the ages did God's people need to hear those words? And they did hear them, from God, spoken through His king or leader or prophet.

What this lets us know is that the fears we feel and that Moses (and Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and many others) responds to are real and normal. There *is* such a thing as danger, and God does not lie to us about that. He doesn't simply say that the fears we feel are just figments of our imaginations.

But in the face of danger—in the face of legitimate fear—what God does is that He reminds us of who He is. He reminds us that in order for whatever frightening situation to get to us, it first has to get past Him.

He's our defender, you see, who stands between us and those real dangers that come along in life.

God's people find rest, not in the fact that the danger and fear are not real, but in the fact that God is bigger and stronger than the danger and fear.

As long as we're with Him and doing His will, we have no reason to fear.

Now, here are two thoughts on this passage from John Oswalt. [Hold up *Genesis & Exodus: Cornerstone Biblical Commentary, Volume 1*.]

First, on the legitimacy of God punishing Pharaoh and the Egyptian army as He did.

Some people have lots of trouble with this and other things like it that Scripture reports. They suggest that what God did there was somehow unjust or even mean—drowning them there in the sea.

It's important to remember, though, several things that led up to this:

Remember that Pharaoh imprisoned these people against their will and used them as slaves to build his ungodly kingdom.

And, when they pushed back, he used genocide to keep them in line.

And, when they asked that they be allowed to leave, he refused.

And, even after God gave sign after sign and warning after warning, Pharaoh still wound up rejecting God's clear will.

And, when the Hebrews finally did leave, Pharaoh wound up hunting them down, using military might to try to re-capture and punish them.

What God did to Pharaoh and his armies was not just for show.

This was not just an act of power.

This was not done in some whim of vindictiveness.

This was not even done just for the sake of God being known.

This destruction of Pharaoh and his armies was an example of a good, moral God acting to defeat wickedness in the world. This is a situation of right defeating wrong—the triumph of a correct moral order—which we see God doing from time to time in miraculous ways.

God is immensely patient. He's so patient that sometimes we get used to His patience—and the truth is, we can become too used to His patience and even forget that He's not eternally patient.

While it's true that sometimes He bides His time, it's equally true that sometimes He does not! Sometimes He acts against evil, which He has every right to do, and it's not ours to figure out, much less approve, precisely why and when He does and does not.

We give thanks to Him for the times He shows mercy, but we can hardly question His moral authority to defeat wrong whenever and however He determines appropriate.

Also, let me make a couple comments about another moral complaint that's sometimes lodged against God: verse 4 there, and others like it in the Exodus story, that talk about God "hardening Pharaoh's heart."

What this is not is a case of God forcing a person to do something that is against their own will and character.

In Pharaoh, for example, God did not take a kind-hearted, benevolent gentleman and turn him into an evil tyrant. God does not do that.

The text itself tells us that Pharaoh hardened his own heart just as often as God hardened it.

As I mentioned this morning, Pharaoh believed that he was god, and so he believed that he was able to do whatever he wanted, however he wanted to do it. He thought he was truly independent, and frankly all Egypt only encouraged that sentiment in him.

But none of that was true. Pharaoh was a created person, subject to the ways the created order works: one of those ways being the laws of cause and effect, an

example of which is the fact that if a person chooses a course of action long enough, that person eventually discovers that he or she no longer has a choice.

So—was God the ultimate cause of Pharaoh's inability to let the Israelites go? Yes, because God has made a world that works as it does regarding choices and consequences.

But did God personally force Pharaoh to be a tyrant? Not at all.

Pharaoh chose his path, and it was a path that in this world, apart from the desire to be redeemed, leads sooner or later to destruction.

Pharaoh is a powerful reminder that we must consider carefully the paths that we choose in life.

One last thought I'll mention tonight comes from Steve Liversedge, from a comment he made in his devotional thoughts at this past Wednesday night's prayer meeting.

In our journey in trying to understand things, difficult things, like God's treatment of Pharaoh, for example, there is a principle we have to take hold of: a phrase from Hebrews 10, *"a righteous person lives by faith."*

The King James is probably more familiar - *"the just shall live by faith."*

The point the writer of Hebrews was trying to make was that hard things come to life, and we're tempted to question the way God handles them in our lives or in the lives of others, including people we love. And sometimes the answers are easier to discover than they are at other times.

While it's OK to ask God questions, there also must come a time when we stop with our questions and decide to believe and follow in faith—in faith in what we already know about God and His character and His history and His word. God's given us enough to get us to faith, and it then becomes a matter of submission to trust and obey.

This is what the writer challenged the Hebrews to do in light of the questions they had about their own suffering, and he took this principle from the prophet Habakkuk, who was himself complaining to the Lord.

Habakkuk was saying how he didn't understand God and His ways: why God didn't stop the violence in his world and why God didn't do something about the misery and injustice.¹

And God told Him that He was indeed at work, and actually He was working in what would be very surprising ways, but also that what, precisely, He was up to could not be entirely seen just yet.

And that would have to be sufficient for Habakkuk.

God tells Habakkuk, *"Write this down—in big letters—and tell everyone who's asking questions like this, 'I am at work, but what I'm doing won't happen right away. Things seem slow to you, but be patient. Consider the proud, who trust in themselves, yet their lives are crooked. The righteous will live by faith.'"*²

You see, from the time of Habakkuk to the time of the writer of Hebrews and right up to our time today, there are things God is up to that we'll neither know about nor understand.

And when we ask Him, God may or may not explain Himself. But in the end, the fact remains: *"The righteous live by faith."*

In the end, we lean on what we know of God and leave the rest to Him.

Some people have a hard time doing that, but that's really what looking up is all about. That's what a life of faith is, after all: knowing—as we can, and trusting—as we can't.

Where are you demanding answers from God?

Why are you demanding answers from God?

Where do you need to give your questions over—to faith?

Why do you have trouble simply saying, "I don't know, but I trust God with it."

Maybe these can be discussion topics around the tables tonight.

And then maybe, once we're alone with the Lord, it might need to become an area of repentance before Him.

¹ Hebrews 10:38

² Habakkuk 2:3-4