

Beginning the Unstoppable March to Canaan

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 20 October 2024

Preacher: Andrew MacKenzie

[0 : 00] This evening's reading is taken from the book of Exodus, chapter 14, starting at verse 10. It's on page 71 of your church Bibles.

Starting at verse 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. 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.

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. Then the Lord said to Moses, Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. 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.

[1 : 15] 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. The Egyptians will know that I am the Lord, and I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen.

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, coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel.

Throughout the night, the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other, so neither went near the other all night long. 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, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea.

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. He jammed the wheels of their chariots so that they had difficulty driving, and the Egyptians said, Let's get away from the Israelites.

[2 : 34] The Lord is fighting for them against Egypt. 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.

Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing towards it, and the Lord swept them into the sea. 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. But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. That day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore.

And when the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant. Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord.

I will sing to the Lord, for he is highly exalted. Both horse and driver, he is hurled into the sea. The Lord is my strength and my defense. He has become my salvation.

[3 : 48] 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. Pharaoh's chariots and his army, he is hurled into the sea.

The best of Pharaoh's officers are drowned in the Red Sea. This is the word of the Lord. Well, good evening, and thank you for joining with us tonight.

If we've not met before, as David said, my name is Andrew. I'm one of the ministry trainees here at the church. It would be a great help to us all if you could keep your Bibles open at page 71, if your Bible has fallen closed like mine did.

And as we study God's word together, we're actually going to be looking at a bit of the passage that is a bit wider than what we've read. So it would be really helpful to have that open, to be able to look at it together. You should have received a handout on your way in that has some sermon points on there.

Hopefully that will be helpful as we dive into God's word together. But let's pray as we start. Father, we thank you for the great privilege it is to be able to sit here tonight in freedom as we look at your life-giving word together.

[4 : 58] We ask tonight that you would grow our love for you, our understanding of who you are, and our longing to be united with you in a new creation. In Jesus' name we pray.

Amen. I wonder, when do you struggle to believe that God will deliver us from this world into the new creation? When is it hardest to remember that Jesus' resurrection from the dead means that our biggest problem of death has been solved for us?

Are there times when coming to church, when coming and singing praise to God, just feels borderline impossible? And even if you managed to come, well, you wouldn't really feel like you're singing like you mean it.

Sometimes when we're acutely feeling the pressures of a sinful world, it can be so hard to remember all that Jesus has done for us. When family relationships break down and friendships turn sour, when it feels like all the forces of the world are bearing down in us, and you know that if you don't break now, well, it sure feels like you're going to break shortly down the road.

And if that is you tonight, then can I just say, first and foremost, well done for being here. That is a battle in itself. And know that your church family is really glad and encouraged to see you.

[6 : 21] And maybe you're fighting really hard right now for the Lord, for what he says is best. And doing that is making your life much harder. You feel like you're completely surrounded by darkness.

It's all around. And it's just gotten to that point where all you can think about is canning it in and going with the flow, giving up and turning back.

Well, as we look at the crossing of the Red Sea together this evening, we're going to see that the Lord is a warrior who fights for his people and delivers them through opposition towards their promised destination.

And we pick up the story just after the people have celebrated the Passover and Pharaoh has let them go. They're heading out of Egypt after seeing Pharaoh attempt to go toe-to-toe with the Lord, only to get an absolute battering over 10 rounds of plagues.

As a result of Pharaoh's refusal to acknowledge God, his economy, his food, his lifestyle, and his population have all plummeted.

[7 : 31] And the next generation of firstborns has just been wiped out during the night. And so after 400 years of being in Egypt in slavery, God brings his people out just as he promised to Abraham back in Genesis chapter 15.

According to that promise, they should be heading to Canaan, to the promised land. And it's important for us to get tonight that the crossing of the Red Sea is not just the start of the exodus out of Egypt, but it's the beginning of the unstoppable march to Canaan.

But as we'll see in our first point tonight, the departure doesn't seem to go too well for them. Chapter 13, verse 17 to 14, verse 14, our point is they're seemingly weak and wobbly facing water.

Picture the scene if you're an Israelite. It is the middle of the night. There's wailing throughout the whole of Egypt from the death of the firstborns. It's probably woken you up. And you're told that you can go.

You're free. You can leave the land. Only at least five times before, Pharaoh has said you can go, only to change his mind and keep you enslaved.

[8 : 49] Egypt was the only thing you would have known. Apart from some tales passed down from previous generations, you've grown up in Egypt, and you've never been outside of it.

And as this Moses guy has fought to secure your freedom from slavery, often it's just ended up in life becoming harder, in the slavery becoming more brutal.

But over the last wee while, some strange things, some incredible things have happened. Plagues have hit the Egyptians like never before. Egypt has been hit with ten plagues.

Yet, none of these plagues have affected the Israelites there. And things were beginning to look, if slightly uncertain, a bit better.

And as they leave, chapter 13, verse 18, they leave ready for battle. You see, there is no straight line to the promised land with no challenges. No, there are many nations to pass through, nations that might not be very friendly to an army of 600,000 passing through.

[9 : 55] And there's geological features to navigate. And 1317, God knew that his people were sufficiently uncertain as to what was going on, that actually, if they had faced war early on, they might have decided that slavery in Egypt was the better option, that actually just canning it in, giving up, and going back was the easy option.

They're wobbly people, they're low on confidence, anxious about what is to come. But Moses knows what's going on. We see that because in 1319, he takes the bones of Joseph to return them to the land, just as Joseph, who took the Israelites into Egypt on much better terms in the first place, promised his descendants to do, to return them to the land that Abraham speaks of.

And so as Moses leads this fragile, hopeful, yet uncertain nation into the desert, the Lord leads him himself. This was new to me this week, looking at it.

Look at verse 21 a bit closer with me. By day, the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way, and by night, in a pillar of fire to give them light so they could travel by day or night.

It's not just that God gives them a pillar to follow and leads them from a distance, like he's controlling some remote control car or something. No, he is in the pillar himself, showing them the way by his presence.

- [11 : 31] And he gives them light so they can keep going and put as much distance as possible between them and Pharaoh during the night. Now, we don't know exactly where all the places mentioned at the start of chapter 14 are, so the exact movements are unclear.
- But what is super clear is what God says to Moses on why they're turning around. In verses 3 and 4, he says, Pharaoh will think the Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert.
- And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord.
- God is going to gain glory for himself through booting Pharaoh down for good. And not just that, but the Egyptians will learn that he is the covenant God of Israel.
- And if you're a bit unsettled by the chat of God hardening people's hearts, Jonathan spoke at length about this a couple of weeks ago when we looked at the first nine plagues. That's on the website, and it would be a really good thing to go back and listen to.
- [12 : 47] But for now, what I'll say is that Pharaoh has been given time and time again to repent and recognize that God is God, and well, he is not.
- And each time that he rejected that chance, each time he decided not to, he made his heart harder and made himself more resolved to disobey God.
- And there does come a point where God gives people over to their desires, and he hardens their hearts to. This is judgment for one who continually did evil, who brutally enslaved a nation.
- And Pharaoh changes his mind, verse five, and proceeds to take his chariot, 600 of his best chariots, and all the other ones in pursuit of Israel to re-enslave them.
- And do you see how outrageous this is from Pharaoh? He's seen the ten plagues, he's heard the wailing in Egypt like never before, and yet he refuses to back down.
- [13 : 54] He ignores all of that. Hard-heartedness here is ignoring the really obvious truth of who God is, and choosing to live as the opposite.
- As he leaves Egypt, hearing the wailing from the death of the firstborns ringing in his ears. Now, doubtless, there are many factors at play here.
- 600,000 workers leaving the economy would absolutely decimate it. No doubt it would make him feel politically vulnerable, because in Egypt there was only ever one Pharaoh, but there were always lots more who wanted to be Pharaoh.
- And his army may well have made him feel unstoppable. So maybe to some extent we can understand, but when you look at the sheer volume of evidence that Pharaoh has been given, it is still outrageous to behave in such a way.
- to be so blind to the fact that there is something bigger going on. And as these fleets of Egyptian chariots pursued the Israelites in the desert, you can imagine the sand clouds that are thrown up by the wheels and the horses.
- [15 : 11] And the Israelites could look over their shoulder as they fled. And every time they looked over, they would see a sand cloud and it would be a little bit closer than it was last time they looked.
- And let's be clear that the Egyptian army was the most powerful force in the world at that time. It was fearsome and revered, highly skilled and very well equipped.
- And so as the people see this cloud of sand get closer, verse 10, their terror is on the one hand very understandable. There's a massive fearsome army on one side and there's the Red Sea on the others.
- How might you respond? On the other hand, the Israelites have seen the wonders performed by God through Moses in Egypt. They know his power and his promises.

They've seen God revealing himself through his works. But when the world's largest army is bearing down on them, they're blinded by panic and it's just too hard to remember all that God has done for them.

[16 : 21] What's right in front of them clouds their minds from remembering what God has done before. And the only thing they can think of is what they see.

And what's really tempting is to can it all in to give up and take the easy route back to Egypt. They cry out to the Lord then turn on Moses, verse 11.

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 the desert? 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. It seems like the march to Canaan isn't off to a great start.

The people seem trapped and they have already turned on their God-appointed leader. As an aside, as we continue our series in Exodus, it's worth paying attention to Moses' relationship with God's people.

[17 : 28] It will become important. So to the people's complaints, Moses says, do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today.

The Lord will fight for you. You only need to be still. Moses says, stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring.

And so, when we feel like the world's forces are bearing down on us, when it seems just too hard to look beyond what our eyes see and our hearts feel, the parting of the Red Sea shows us that we can have real confidence that God's deliverance is true and real, even when it doesn't feel like it.

Even when it feels like darkness is all around, we know that there is light coming and God will fight for us while we wait. So let us turn to look at how God fights for his people.

Our second point is God's glorious gales of war. Chapter 14 verses 15 to 31. God tells Moses to raise his staff and stretch out his hands over the sea to divide the water so that his people can escape.

[18 : 53] To the Israelites, they looked cornered, they looked done for. But from God's perspective, this was the prime position for them to be in. A chance to make his name known, not just to his people, but to the Egyptians and the wider world.

Again, he tells Moses that he'll harden Pharaoh's heart and gain glory through defeating him. He will deliver his people, destroy his enemies, and gain glory for himself.

The Lord here reveals himself to be a mighty warrior who fights for his people. This passage is full of military language.

Verse 19, he moves himself in the pillar of cloud and the angel of God behind the armies of not just Egypt but Israel as well.

And throughout the night, he sovereignly prevents Egypt from reaching Israel. He keeps them at bay. He is the defensive line that cannot be breached. He provides light for the Israelites to cross the Red Sea at an eastern wind to drive the water back to part the sea.

[20 : 07] The Lord is the supreme agent in this passage. He leads the people, he hardens hearts, he instructs Moses, he provides light and darkness.

And shortly we'll see him destroy the Egyptians and save his people. There is no doubt that this miraculous escape is won done by the Lord alone.

He alone is delivering his people. And these are glorious gales that make that path. Just imagine walking through the Red Sea on completely dry ground with verse 22 sheer walls of water on both sides.

Imagine seeing the water part in front of your very eyes. Imagine if God parted the Clyde and we walked through on completely dry ground.

And we apart from all the filth and shopping trolleys and goodness knows what else we might find. We would be in complete awe, wouldn't we? The sound of the torrential wind flying past us to keep the water at bay, yet somehow keeping us bone dry.

[21 : 19] It may well have been deafening. And what God said to Moses would happen is exactly what does. Verse 23, the Egyptians pursued them and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea.

Apparently, even seeing God split open the sea to make a path isn't enough to make them recognize the futility of their plans. Though instead they charge straight in, all of them do, all of Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen.

And from the top of the pillar of cloud and fire, the Lord looks down on the world's greatest army and throws it into utter confusion.

He jams or removes the wheels of their chariots. And it's at that point that the Egyptians realize the folly of what they've done, the point at which they're trapped in the middle of the sea.

As they struggle to drive their best weapons, they shout through the sound of the rushing gales, let's get away from the Israelites, the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt.

[22 : 36] They've realized that they've gone up against the sovereign covenant God of Israel who controls the whole world. God's fighting against them.

They have no chance. And we see God gaining glory from the Egyptians, just as he said he would. Now you might have noticed we've had a lot of chariot chat tonight.

Ten times they're mentioned overall. And chariots in the Bible are a symbol of human or worldly power. And so amassing vast fleets of them is portrayed as relying on their power, the power of this world, for security and safety.

The implication being that if you're amassing vast amount of chariots, you're doing that instead of relying on God for security and safety. Now there's more that I could say on that.

I could love to chat to you after that, after the service, about how we might see that play out in the Bible and other places. But what's important for us to understand tonight is that in the destruction of Pharaoh's hundreds, if not thousands, of chariots, is that God is showing himself to be far more powerful than the best of the human weaponry.

[23 : 56] The best that the world can offer, the most it can muster, is worth nothing compared to having God on your side. For the Egyptians, yes, they had realized who God is, only they'd already gone too far.

The chances to repent and to let them go were many before they pursued them into the sea. And now God saves his people through the judgment of their oppressors.

Moses holds out his hands from the other bank and the water comes crashing back down on top of them, all of the Egyptian army. And verse 28, not one of them survived.

read from verse 29 with me. But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. That day the Lord saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore.

And when the Israelites saw the mighty hand of the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses, his servant.

[25 : 09] The judgment of the Egyptians is also the deliverance of the Israelites. And having seen the glorious gales of God, how God fought for them and worked miraculously to save them, they respond with rightful fear of the Lord and renewed trust in the Lord and in Moses.

They've seen the wiping out of the most feared army in the world. And it is starting to look like the march to Canaan might just be unstoppable, as long as they have God fighting for them.

And do you see that all over this story are examples of God keeping his word? We've had the people leaving after 400 years. Twice God has told Moses how something will happen, and twice that's exactly what has happened.

the Lord has fought for Israel, God has gained glory, he's defeated the Egyptians, and he's saved his people. And so, for the people who Moses wrote this for, who are on the verge of the promised land, separated only by the river Jordan, they were not the people who crossed the Red Sea.

So this account is a great encouragement and confidence builder for them. not just that God can split waterways and let his people pass through, albeit that is important, but also that as they seek to take the land that God will fight for them, that God is more powerful than the seemingly impressive armies in Canaan, that God keeps his word and is sovereign to carry out his promises.

[26 : 53] all the way back in the promise to Abraham, God promised that he would deliver his people into the land as a way of judging the inhabitants for their sin.

And here, God has delivered his people as a way of judging the Egyptians for their hard-heartedness. So as Joshua leads into the land, if they trust God and listen to him, they have a far better warrior than all the chariots that the world can offer.

And that might seem like fighting in some odd ways. I don't know, maybe marching around a city wall seven times and trusting that will cause it to fall.

But where they trust God, they know he will fight for them. And here, in 21st century Scotland, we can know that God will keep his word to us.

That as he delivered the Israelites towards and into the promised land through the judgment of the inhabitants for their sin, he too will deliver us into the new creation through the judgment of the sins of this world.

[28 : 06] Moses led his people to the banks of a sea. Joshua led his people around Jericho's walls seven times. And Jesus leads us through his death and resurrection towards the new creation.

And while they may all seem unlikely and odd, we know that it has more power than this world can ever muster. And that brings us to a final and briefer point in closing.

Singing of Successful Salvation, chapter 15, verses 1 to 21. In the aftermath of a great victory, we all love to sing about it.

The Scottish National Anthem still sings of a victory that Robert the Bruce won over King Edward hundreds of years ago. Football fans sing on their way home after a rousing performance.

And many of the Psalms sing of the victories won by God, including the crossing of the Red Sea. And here is no different. It is a great way to respond to God.

[29 : 13] The Israelites, led by Moses, burst into song on the opposite coast of the Red Sea. They have been utterly transformed by what they've seen and filled with confidence.

So they turn to joyful worship of the Lord for who he is and what he has done. Up to verse 11, they sing of all that God has done for them before returning to the further salvation he will deliver as they continue their march to Canaan.

As the Egyptians approached the start of chapter 14, the Israelites clearly thought they had no chance of defeating Pharaoh's army. But Moses told them that the Lord would fight for them and now they are singing verse 3.

The Lord is a warrior. The Lord is his name. Pharaoh's chariots and his army he has hurled into the sea. They understand now that the Lord fights for his people.

And when he does that, verse 9 and 10, no matter what Pharaoh or anyone else might plan, victory is assured. Pharaoh schemed and plotted to pursue, overtake, guard and destroy.

[30 : 29] But the Lord just blew with his breath and wiped out the greatest army in the world. I mean, it's just glorious, isn't it?

What an incredible God to have on our side. For verse 11, who among the gods is like you, Lord? Who is like you? Majestic in holiness, awesome in glory, working wonders.

He is unique. Only the Lord is God. Only Yahweh is awesome in glory. And long may he continue to gain glory for himself through his people today as he continues to fight for us.

These Israelites have begun their unstoppable march to Canaan, but they have a long way to go. And the wonders that God has done at the Red Sea bring glory to his name well beyond Egypt.

When verse 14, the people of Philistia, the Edomites, and the Moabites hear, they will tremble that the Israelites are coming their way. Anguish, terror, trembling will cause them to be still as stone and give safe passage to Israel as the Lord brings them into the land where he will dwell with them on the mountain and sanctuary that God establishes.

[31 : 49] So long may we, his people, continue to sing together about all the great victories that he has won for us. For when the world is bearing down in us and it feels too hard to sing to God or stand firm, and all we can think about is canning it in, of giving up, going with the flow, turning around, we can trust that the sovereign Lord will deliver us through opposition into the glorious new creation.

Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we praise you that you are the greatest warrior this world has ever known, that nothing comes close to your power and might.

We ask that you will continue to gain glory for yourself in Scotland as you fight for us and cause people to realize who you are. Help us to continue to trust in you to deliver us from this world to the new creation through the saving power of Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.

Amen.