

## **The Lord leads us to see his salvation**

**by Scott Grant**

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### **A magnificent sunrise**

The road to the crater of the volcano on the island of Maui is long and winding. It is anything but direct. But taking the road, with all its hairpin turns and switch backs, has its reward: a magnificent view of the crater being filled with color by the rising sun. The road that the Lord takes us on seems long, winding and confusing at times, but he leads us to see something more magnificent than the most beautiful sunrise: his salvation. The Lord leads us in ways that seem strange to us so that we might see and appreciate his powerful salvation.

Exodus 11:1-13:16 records Israel's liberation from Egypt by means of the 10th plague, the plague of the first-born. Free from Egypt, Israel begins its journey to meet the Lord in the wilderness, with the Lord leading the way. But the manner of the Lord's leading strikes them, and us, as strange.

### **The strange leading of the Lord (13:17-14:14)**

#### *Ponderous leading (13:17-22)*

The Lord doesn't lead them along the quickest route, which is the way of the land of the Philistines. The Lord leads them to take the long way around, because they were not ready for war and the way of the Philistines was heavily guarded by Egyptian garrisons.

As God leads Israel by a different route, it marches in martial array. It marches as an army. It will fight one day, but not today. For now, it's an army in training. God will lead Israel into battle when its ready for battle. This army in training still has one more important training exercise by the shores of the Red Sea, where it will learn that the battle belongs to the Lord.

Our culture worships at the altar of efficiency. The quicker the better. Fast food. Fast computers. Faster computers. Having to wait in a line seems downright un-American. God, on the other hand, is not in a hurry. The quickest way isn't always the best way. As we course our way through life, it may seem obvious to us what the next step should be. We don't like where we are, and we see where we want to be, and the closest distance between two points is a straight line. Only the straight line never happens. We want a job; we want marriage; we want a family; we want to have more impact. But the next step doesn't come. Perhaps we're not ready for the next step. Perhaps if the Lord permitted us to take the next step, it would be a disaster, just as it would have been for the Israelites. The Lord knows what we're ready for, and he doesn't give us what we're not ready for.

The faith of one man, Joseph, sustained an entire nation for more than 400 years. Joseph believed God's promises to bring the people back to the land of Canaan. His bones, which he instructed to be carried into the promised land once the Lord fulfilled his promise, served as a constant reminder of God's promise. It is poetic indeed that Moses, God's answer to Joseph's faith, who would lead the people out of Egypt to the brink of the promised land, is the one who carries the bones of Joseph. The faith of one person can have a huge impact. Our faith can bless others in mighty ways.

The Lord leads the people by means of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. This is clear, unmistakable leading. The text is clear that the Lord "did not take away the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night." The fact that his leading is clear confirms that it is from him. This strange leading is clearly

from him. To the people, it probably just seems clearly strange.

#### *Aimless leading (14:1-4)*

The Lord, after leading them away from the quickest way, now has the people wander in what seems like an aimless manner. He even has them turn back into Egyptian territory. Then he has them camp by the sea - a dead end. This was so that their wandering would appear aimless to Pharaoh. No doubt it also appears aimless to the Israelites.

For us, life may seem filled with aimless wandering and dead-end streets. We can't seem to lay hold of any direction in life. What we want never comes to pass, if we can ever figure out what we want. What we try ends up failing. And we're left to wonder, "Where is the Lord? Is he really leading my life?" Sometimes, the leading of the Lord seems aimless.

#### *Disastrous leading (14:5-5-12)*

Pharaoh is obsessive about control, and he forgets all the misery that trying to hold onto the Israelites brought him, and he chases after them. This is the move of a desperate man, who has no ability to let go of something that he incorrectly deems crucial to life. He would profit by letting Israel go, but he chooses the self-destructive way, because holding onto Israel is all he knows. We, too, know about obsessiveness, chasing after wild horses that we think we must tame - broncos that would destroy us if we ever really managed to corral them.

In hardening Pharaoh's heart, the Lord, once again, is simply giving Pharaoh what he wants, for it was Pharaoh who had "a change of heart toward the people" and decided to pursue them.

As Pharaoh's army draws near, the people are overtaken by fear. Pharaoh has marshaled the best of his forces, and he has the people pinned against the sea. The people blame Moses for their predicament. If he had never led them out of Egypt, they wouldn't be on the verge of death.

We look for people to blame for our predicaments, because we're afraid to face the pain in our own lives, afraid to face the truth of our responsibility or afraid to face the hard questions about God's leading us into such predicaments. It's much easier to blame someone. But it always backfires, because however dire our predicament, it isn't as dire as the bitterness we experience as we blame our predicaments on others.

The people now think that it would have been better if Moses had simply left them alone, in bondage to the Egyptians, a sentiment they had expressed earlier (5:21). This is not exactly in the spirit of Patrick Henry's "Give me liberty or give me death." They'd rather be slaves than dead.

The correspondence for us is the slavery to sin we are more comfortable with, especially in the face of the fear that freedom inspires. Sin is comfortable, non-threatening, non-challenging. It requires no risks. Because real relationships are so threatening, we're more comfortable in fantasy relationships. And when we do move toward real relationships and find them terrifying, we wonder why we ever tried in the first place, and we want to head back to the fantasy world. Back to the romance novels. Back to pornography. Back to some romanticized version of the way relationships used to be. Back to the fantasy world where our every relational and sexual desire is gratified. To leave the fantasy world behind seems like death in the wilderness, because in the wilderness, we feel the world closing in on us, and we no longer determine how our needs are met but must trust God to meet them. So we prefer sin's slavery to freedom's perceived death.

Here's how much we love our fantasy worlds: Recently Erica Kane of Pine Valley overdosed and entered the Betty Ford Center in Rancho Mirage. Erica Kane is not a real person. She is a character on the soap opera "All My Children." Yet after the episode aired, the Betty Ford Center began receiving calls and offers of flowers for Erica Kane. Clinical director Nancy Waite-O'Brien tried to be polite while explaining, "It's only a television character!" Yet folks are so drawn to the safety of fantasy that they begin thinking fantasy is the real thing.

#### *Outrageous leading (14:15)*

The fact that the Lord has led them to be hemmed in by the Egyptians is cause for the people to question Moses' leadership, which is really questioning the leadership of the Lord, who is directing Moses. But now the Lord leads in a way that the people must see as outrageous. The Lord tells Moses to tell the people to "go forward." Go forward. What do the Israelites see when they look forward? Nothing but water. The Red Sea. God is seemingly commanding them to walk forward into a watery grave.

This is an outrageous proposition. But because they are being pursued by the Egyptians, they are out of options. The Lord has led them to a place where virtually their only option is to trust him. The alternative is death at the hand of the Egyptians. God's alternative is seemingly death by drowning, but at least God's way offers a glimmer of hope. Maybe God will do something.

The Lord will lead us to places where we are seemingly hemmed in, where all our ingenious solutions have failed, and where we finally understand that our best option is to trust him in a way that we ordinarily wouldn't. At such places, we are highly motivated to trust him.

The Lord tells Moses, "Why are you crying out to me?" The pronoun "you" is singular, which would seem to be a reference to Moses. But elsewhere in the narrative the singular has been used to indicate an entire people, and the text has already recorded that the people cried out to the Lord (14:10) without mentioning that Moses cried out, so this is likely a reference to the cry of the people. What are they crying out for? Evidently, they are crying out for the Lord to save them from this dire predicament. Strangely, the Lord tells them to stop crying out. Instead, he tells them to move forward. They want the Lord to make a way for them; the Lord wants them to move forward.

To Israelites and other the ancients, the sea meant chaos. We look out at life, and it looks like chaos. We can't make sense of it. It's confusing. It seems like if we move forward into life - into relationships, into ministry, into a job search - that we'll get swallowed up by the chaos, overwhelmed by rejection.

In the movie "Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid," Butch and Sundance, fleeing from the law, are pinned against a cliff. Outnumbered by lawmen who have taken up their positions, there is no way out. They get ready to shoot it out, but they know it's a suicide mission. Then Butch looks out over the cliff and sees the river below and says, "I know, we'll jump!" Sundance thinks he's crazy. Butch impresses upon him that it's their only hope. Nevertheless, Sundance is reluctant. Butch assures Sundance that the lawmen would never follow them, saying, "Would you make a jump like that you didn't have to?" Sundance: "I have to, and I'm not going to." Finally, Sundance gives the reason for his reluctance: "I can't swim." Butch laughs hysterically and retorts, "Are you kidding? The fall will probably kill you!" But Sundance, because of the predicament, knows he's out of options, and though he can't swim, he jumps. Well, the Lord will lead us into such predicaments as well where the only reasonable thing is to jump and trust the Lord.

So the Lord's leading at times seems ponderous and aimless, and even disastrous and outrageous. What's the reason for it? To see find out, we need to back up a few verses.

#### *Purposeful leading (14:13-14)*

Here's the purpose for the strange leading of the Lord. The people are commanded to "see" the salvation of the Lord. Earlier, the Lord said he would be honored, or glorified, through the Egyptians (14:4). Here is the explanation for how the Lord will be glorified. He will be glorified by his salvation of the Israelites from the hand of the Egyptians, which the Israelites are commanded to "see." Moses says that while the Lord fights on their behalf, the people are to remain silent. Why are they to remain silent? So they can hear.

So they are commanded to watch and listen. Jesus said, "The lamp of your body is your eye; when your eye is clear (healthy), your whole body is full of light, but when it is bad, your body also is full of darkness" (Luke 11:34). In other words, if you see things accurately, you will be spiritually healthy, but if you see things inaccurately, you will be spiritually unhealthy. Jesus said, "He who has ears to hear, let him hear" (Mark 4:9). Watch. Listen.

But we're afraid to watch and listen, because we're afraid of what we might see and hear. So we close

ourselves off. I have noticed that sometimes when I am receiving criticism, I shut down emotionally, and I am overcome by a relaxed, sleepy feeling. It doesn't take a Freud to realize what's happening. I'm afraid of the pain that the incoming information will bring, so I tell my body to resist this information, and I shut down. As I do, I get a distorted picture of reality and remain spiritually unhealthy.

An amazing thing happens when we watch and listen. Yes, we may see and hear painful information. But any painful information is overwhelmed by seeing and hearing the sparkling and resonating salvation of the Lord. The antidote to our fierce tendency to return to the comfortable slavery of Fantasyland is to watch and listen - to accurately perceive reality, beginning with reality of God's word and the reality of its trustworthiness, and therefore his trustworthiness, in this world.

So, why does the Lord lead us to places where we are seemingly hemmed in, where there seems to be no way out? So that we might see his salvation of us. He will lead us to places where we need his salvation and therefore our spiritual receptivity is more keen. The Lord leads us to see his salvation.

"Salvation" is a big word. Although it speaks of the time when we placed our faith in Christ and were saved (Ephesians 2:8), it is not limited to that. It also concerns our sanctification, our ongoing salvation from the things that would destroy us in this world (Philippians 2:12), and our future salvation, when the Lord returns to take us out of this world and bring us to a newly created world (Romans 13:11). The Lord will lead us to heighten our perception and appreciation of any or all of these aspects of salvation. We see what we are saved from as we realize what we were, and what we would have been, without him. Continually, we see what we are being saved from, as he continues to give us new patterns of thought to replace the self-destructive patterns. We see what he will save us from as we learn more and more that this world doesn't have the answers. So more and more, we appreciate our salvation in Jesus Christ. More and more, we appreciate Jesus.

In 14:16-31, the Israelites get the opportunity to see the salvation of the Lord.

### **The powerful salvation of the Lord (14:16-31)**

#### *Purpose of salvation (14:16-18)*

Earlier, we saw how the faith of Joseph sustained an entire nation (13:19). Now we see how the faith of another man, Moses, benefits the nation. As Moses acts in dependence on the Lord, the sea will part and the nation will pass through it. Each person's faith makes a difference in other people's lives.

The Lord keeps promising that the Egyptians will pursue the Israelites, and he keeps speaking of it as if it's good news. Being pursued by an enemy doesn't seem like good news, unless, of course, the enemy is being led right into a trap, which is the case here.

The Egyptians are pursuing, and will ultimately be destroyed, so that the Lord may be honored, or glorified. He is glorified through his salvation of the Israelites from the hand of the Egyptians. Three times in the overall narrative the Lord says he will be glorified. This is the greater purpose that our salvation serves. The Lord saves us, and through that salvation he glorifies himself, and thereby gives others the opportunity to believe in him as well. He wants the Egyptians to know that he is the Lord (14:4 also). The Lord's salvation of us as individuals, then, serves a much greater and grander purpose: the glorification of the Lord.

#### *Protection for salvation (14:19-20)*

As the pillar moves to block the progress of the Egyptians, the God who leads becomes the God who protects. The Egyptians, who were in headlong pursuit, are now stuck. One of the ways we can understand the Egyptians in our own lives is to picture them as demonic agents. Satan and his forces are the enemy. The enemy is in headlong pursuit of us, but he can't touch us (1 John 5:18) - meaning, he can take nothing eternal away from us. So when the spiritual enemy bears down, we have nothing to fear. We're protected.

#### *Victory of salvation (14:21-29)*

Just as he did in the beginning, the Lord divides the waters, and dry land appears (Genesis 1:9-10). In the middle of the chaos of the sea, solid ground appears. In the middle of the chaos of our lives, God creates solid ground. The Israelites walk through the sea on dry land. The sea becomes like a wall on either side, but God does not take away the sea. All he does is give the Israelites some solid ground to walk on in the midst of the sea.

God does not remove the chaos from our lives. There is chaos all around us. We walk right in the midst of it. But God shows us that he is in control of even the chaos and confusion. The chaos then becomes manageable for us, not overwhelming. The Lord doesn't remove the chaos; he just gives us some solid ground to walk on in the midst of the chaos. But the ground is solid, all the way through. And the chaos doesn't overwhelm us.

And one day, there will be no more chaos. When John was given a vision of the new heaven and the new earth, the first thing he was struck by was what wasn't there: "There is no longer any sea" (Revelation 21:1).

In the middle of the sea of chaos, who is it that is confused? Not Israel but the Egyptian army. The Lord confuses the Egyptians as they pursue the Israelites into the sea. The Lord confuses Satan as well. He thought he won a great victory when, by influencing Judas, he sent Jesus to be crucified (John 13:2). But it was in actuality the scene of his greatest defeat, for death could not hold the Savior, whose atoning sacrifice and resurrection from the dead give eternal life to those who believe in him.

Being confused, the Egyptians flee, recognizing that they are in over their heads against the Lord, literally and figuratively. Satan flees when we resist him in the strength of the Lord, for he's in over his head (James 4:7).

The Egyptians are not only confused, they are destroyed. Pharaoh takes his best shot, using his best men and his best chariots, and he's utterly defeated. Similarly, Satan takes his best shot at us, but he is utterly defeated, because he can't take us away from the Lord. First John 3:8: "The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that he might destroy the works of the devil." Similarly, Satan's destruction is sure (Revelation 20:10).

For those of us who believe in Christ, however, the Lord will make a way through the chaos. What's the chaos in your life? Is your financial situation chaotic? The Lord will make a way. Are you looking out at what seems like a chaotic sea of expectations that you have no way of meeting? The Lord will make a way. Are you looking the possibility of a lifetime of singleness and wondering how you are going to make it through the chaos of loneliness? The Lord will make a way. The Lord will make a way through the chaos.

Larry Crabb writes: "We realize there is no code to follow in the arenas we determine to enter. But it also creates a sense of anticipation. As we resolve to speak in darkness, God gives courage: not the sort that stills trembling legs but the kind that helps us move forward on them."

#### *Appreciation of salvation (14:30-31)*

Twice the verb "see" is used in these verses. The people "saw" the dead Egyptians who were washed up on the seashore (14:30). They also "saw" the great power of the Lord (14:31). So they saw the Lord's salvation of them, which was powerful indeed.

If it hadn't been for the Lord's seemingly strange leading of them, they wouldn't have seen the powerful salvation of the Lord. The Lord's leading in our lives may seem similarly strange, but it is only "strange" because he wants to reveal himself to us. If the leading weren't "strange," the salvation wouldn't be powerful.

And seeing the powerful salvation of the Lord, what happened to the people? They "feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord." Because they saw, or because they perceived, they believed. A healthy spiritual faith is based on healthy spiritual eyes that take in and appreciate the salvation of the Lord.

The last time that the text of Exodus reported that they believed was in 4:31, when Moses first returned from the wilderness and announced the Lord's plan to deliver them. But shortly thereafter, all hell broke loose, and the people were despondent because of increasing affliction and the plagues. But as all hell broke loose, as hell took its best shot at God's people, God saved his people. And the people had the tremendous benefit of seeing

God's salvation in the face of hell's best effort. Although they believed earlier, there is even more reason for belief now. There is every opportunity for a deeper faith.

### **A few twists**

The Lord, in his strangely wonderful leading, leads us to the place where we see and appreciate his powerful salvation of us in Jesus Christ - past, the present and future. So, what do you think of Jesus? Isn't it worth a few twists in the road, if the road leads to a better look at him?

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