



God Parts the Red Sea

TEXT: Exodus 13:17 - 14:31

Big Idea:

STUDY

*** Before interacting with this guide, all leaders should study the referenced texts using the HEAR Method. It's also important to encourage your group members to read the text using the HEAR Method. ***

H: Highlight, or take note of, things in the passage that stick out to you as you read.

E: Explain what the passage means by asking simple questions of the text:

- **Why was this written?**
- **To whom was it originally written?**
- **How does it fit with the verses before and after it?**
- **Why did the Holy Spirit include this passage in the book?**
- **What is He intending to communicate through this text?**

A: Apply the text to your life. What does God want you to learn from this text?

R: Respond to God in prayer.



Group Guide

Belong:

Ask about highs and lows since you last met. Take any prayer request.

What's the most seemingly impossible thing that you've ever seen God do?

Believe

God doesn't save us and then leave us to figure out life on our own. No, he gives us redemption and then he guides and leads us through all of life. As Christians, we do not go through life alone. We are led by God into paths that he determines to be best for our good and his glory.

This is humbling and good news. It's humbling because on our best day, we still need God's guidance. We never get to a place in life where we have outgrown our need for God's guidance. It's also good news because it means that we are never alone! On our worst day God is with us and God is for us.

¹⁷ When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, "Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt." ¹⁸ But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle. ¹⁹ Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here." ²⁰ And they moved on from Succoth and encamped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. ²¹ And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. ²² The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.

Exodus 13:17-22



How have you seen God guide your paths?

How do you need God to guide your paths right now?

Become

The story of the Red Sea crossing has one major point: learn to live dependent upon God.

The Israelites are about to learn what it means to live in relationship with God. As we go through life with God guiding us and leading the way, we are meant to live completely dependent upon him.

As the people stared at the Red Sea with the Egyptians gaining fast, they realized that if they were going to make it that it would be because God did something they couldn't.

Thus, Moses says:

Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. ¹⁴ The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to be silent."

[The Holy Bible: English Standard Version](#) (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Ex 14:13–14.

The point cannot be any clearer for us. Live depending on God to do what only God can do. Live EXPECTING God to do what only God can do.

How do you need to be more dependent upon God right now?



Commentary

Tyndale Old Testament Commentary

13:17–22. The Egyptian desert. **17.** *By way of the land of the Philistines:* better ‘by the Philistia road’, i.e. ‘by the road that leads to Philistia’. This was the direct route, but was heavily guarded by Egypt: the commentators give instances of the careful lists, kept by the Egyptian guards, of arrivals and departures at the frontier. The Israelites would certainly have ‘seen war’ (Hebraic for ‘experienced war’) along that route. The later geographical and ethnological name for the area is used quite naturally. The Philistines themselves did not settle there *en masse* until the twelfth century, after Israel’s occupation of Canaan. However, there were certainly isolated Minoan-style trading settlements along the coast from much earlier times (see [G. E. Wright](#), quoted by [Hyatt](#), for the archaeological evidence). If therefore we object to colloquial anachronisms, we can argue along these lines. The area was in any case heavily garrisoned by Egypt long before the arrival of the Philistines.

18. *The way of the wilderness:* ‘the road to the steppes’ would be a better translation, for grazing country is meant. The exact location is uncertain, but it is clearly to the east of the Nile delta. If it is to the north-east of Goshen, then somewhere near Lake Sirbonis (a brackish lagoon on the Mediterranean coast) might be meant. If it is to the south-east of Goshen, then somewhere in the region of the Bitter Lakes would be indicated. As the ancient seabed was not the same as today, exact identification is probably impossible, in spite of the persuasive efforts of local guides, nor indeed is it necessary for faith.

The Red Sea: ‘sea of reeds’ would be an exact translation. The Hebrew *sûp* is probably the Egyptian *ṭwp*, ‘papyrus’, but it seems to be used of many types of water weed and even of seaweed. Any brackish shallow water would seem to suit the description. The Greeks later used the term ‘Red Sea’ to cover the Persian Gulf and both arms of our Red Sea, but this has nothing to do with the text before us, except that it is highly likely on other grounds that Israel crossed a northern extension of one of these two ‘arms’. Broadly speaking, there are only three possible routes for the exodus, either near the Mediterranean coast (which is unlikely, because of the proximity of the Egyptian outposts) or directly across the Sinai peninsula to Kadesh (which not only seems to conflict with the biblical evidence, but would be very difficult from the point of



view of the water supplies), or south to Sinai, and then north to Kadesh (which seems most likely on any score). In either of the latter two cases, a crossing of one of the northern extensions of our Red Sea would be necessary, and that would fit the indication of direction given here. (See Excursus 2: The site of the ‘Red Sea’, pp. 47ff.)

19. *The bones of Joseph*: this links with [Genesis 50:25](#), and the promise made there. Like Jacob his father ([Gen. 49:29](#)), Joseph never looked on Egypt as home, and showed it by his demand for a Canaanite burial ([Heb. 11:22](#)). A generation ago, old-fashioned Chinese of South East Asia were still unwilling to be buried anywhere but in China. The meaning of ‘bones’ is, more properly, Joseph’s mummified body, as can be seen from [Genesis 50:1–3](#). For the fulfilment of Joseph’s wish, see [Joshua 24:32](#) and the tomb at Shechem. But this was more than mere sentiment; this was a last exhibition of faith in the promises of God.

20. *Succoth ... Etham*. The exact locations of these places are unknown, though, as above, we can make a fair guess at Succoth. They are usually marked on biblical atlases, but in totally different places, according to whether a ‘northern route’ or a ‘southern route’ for the exodus is favoured. [Driver](#)’s discussion of location is fullest, but lacks much newer geographical information. In any case the text makes plain that the Israelites were still only on the edge of the steppe country.

21. *A pillar of cloud*. The Hebrew means properly ‘something standing’, and therefore is more ‘column’ than ‘pillar’. It is arguable that a continual presence of God is intended by the ‘standing’ concept. This symbol of God’s presence may either guide and illuminate the way (as here) or protect from enemies ([Exod. 14:19, 20](#)). Sometimes the cloud is described as descending on the meeting-tent, when God speaks to Moses ([Exod. 33:9](#)). Sometimes the cloud is seen as brooding continually over the tent, until it is time for Israel to move on, when it lifts ([Exod. 40:34–38](#)). Cloud and fire are often associated with God as symbols: and so God speaks to Moses from Mount Sinai out of the cloud and fire ([Exod. 19:18](#); cf. [Matt. 17:5](#) and [Acts 1:9](#) for New Testament parallels). The symbolism of fire is plain: the cloud probably symbolizes God’s mystery, like darkness. If we ask ourselves what method God used to produce this effect, we can only hazard guesses, which may be incorrect, without in any way rejecting the interpretation of faith. Either, therefore, this was some purely supernatural manifestation, a vision produced in the minds of men, or it was a natural object used by God as a symbol of his presence. If the latter, it may have been some kind of desert whirlwind (cf. the ‘willy-willy’ of the Australian desert), which can produce rotating columns of fine sand which halt and move over the desert: or perhaps



it may have been the column of smoke that arose in the clear desert air from incense or sacrifice before the meeting-tent, shot through by night with the reflection of the sacrificial fire. Whatever it was, God used it to symbolize his very presence in their midst.

b. Crossing the Sea of Reeds (14:1–31)

14:1–9. The location of the crossing. 2. *By the sea*: the original tellers and hearers of the story knew very well where the ‘Sea of Reeds’ was: to them it was pinpointed by these place names. Some are sites unknown to us (e.g. the good Egyptian name *Pi-ha-hiroth*, ‘region of salt marshes’) while others are ambiguous (several places called *Migdol* or ‘watchtower’ are known). *Baal-zephon*, ‘Baal of the north’ is interesting evidence for the influence of Canaanite religion on Egypt, for it is clearly the temple of a Canaanite god. *Turn back* should mean a reversal of direction. Perhaps it means a sudden swing to the south, instead of a direct march eastwards. In any case, the Egyptians would interpret it as failure to find the direct route to Canaan.

3. *Entangled*: ‘confused’ or ‘lost’ (cf. [Esth. 3:15](#)). Israel seemed to have taken a ‘dead-end’ road, since the sea or salt marshes now barred their way ahead and the desert was a barrier round them on all other sides.

5. *Fled*: better ‘given him the slip’. This does not run counter to pharaoh’s earlier permission to Israel to depart; he now realized what this permission meant. In a system dependent on manual labour by one class or group in the community, the loss of that group is paralysing.

6. *He made ready his chariot*. This is not merely his personal chariot. The meaning is probably ‘his chariotry’, a collective, explained by the next verse.

7. *Six hundred picked chariots*. Such a number was of course more than possible for Egypt. But if we think the number far too large for a mere slave-chase, then we may take it in a symbolic sense, as corresponding to Israel’s ‘six hundred thousand’ of [Exodus 12:37](#). Alternatively the figure ‘six hundred’ may be used loosely for ‘a detachment’. Six hundred appears to have been a common size for a battalion ([2 Sam. 15:18](#)). *All the other chariots*: there is no ‘other’ in Hebrew. The phrase is to be understood in the general sense of [Exodus 9:6](#) (cf. ‘all the king’s horses and all the king’s men’) rather than in any strictly mathematical sense which would be foreign to the Hebrew mind. That a detachment of charioteers was lost in the Sea of Reeds is clear from the Bible; but there is no necessity to assume the loss of the entire



Egyptian army. *With officers*. This term etymologically should mean ‘third men’, perhaps in the chariot. See [Davies](#) for a discussion of the obscure word. ‘Knights’ would be a good if old-fashioned translation (cf. [2 Kgs 7:2](#)). Only the Hittites actually used three-man chariots in war, to our knowledge.

9. *Horsemen*: perhaps used as a loose poetic equivalent for ‘chariots’. Chariots were an early Egyptian military weapon: cavalry was not used by Egypt in war until much later ([Isa. 31:1](#)). However, this was not war so much as a police operation, so perhaps the cavalry were used to scour the desert as scouts, in advance of the chariot column. In later days, the cavalry and chariots of Egypt were proverbial ([Isa. 31:3](#)).

[14:10–20](#). Israel’s cry of terror. 10. Israel may indeed have *cried out* to YHWH for help, but their next reaction (as often in the steppe country; cf. [Exod. 16:3](#), etc.) was to blame Moses. This was very wrong but very human: we recognize ourselves again and again in Israel.

11. *No graves*: a bitter irony, in view of the abnormal preoccupation of the Egyptians with tombs (compare the similar obsession of the Nabataeans of Petra, and the Etruscans of Italy) but it is not likely that Israel meant it so. The situation was too tense for that.

12. *Is not this what we said?* It is futile to argue whether or not the Israelites had actually used these words to Moses in Egypt. They were not in the mood for niceties, and certainly these words express the attitude of [Exodus 5:21](#). ‘Said’ in Hebrew often has the same sense as ‘thought’ (cf. [Ps. 14:1](#), ‘says in his heart’).

13. *Salvation* is used here in its literal sense of saving life, or of victory instead of defeat in war (cf. [1 Sam. 14:45](#)). As the Old Testament moves on, ‘salvation’ will gain a more spiritual and less material sense ([Ps. 51:12](#)), although the Hebrew was not conscious of any sharp contrast between the two.

16. *Divide it*: properly ‘cleave it’ or ‘make a valley in it’. This is not a different view from that of verses [21](#) and [22](#); we must not press the metaphor too far in either case, since both metaphors are describing the same event.

18. *Glory over Pharaoh*. This would be obtained by defeating his forces. The Bible does not state that pharaoh himself died in this ‘border skirmish’, as the drowning of the Egyptians must have seemed to Egypt. It is therefore futile to try to date the exodus by searching for some



pharaoh in history whose ‘mummy’ has not been preserved intact. To Israel, however, this was salvation and redemption and the judgment of God, all in one. She could not overemphasize its importance, and therefore neither can we.

19. *The angel of God.* The general name is used for God, not the peculiarly Israelite name of YHWH. Possibly therefore we should translate the phrase as ‘divine messenger’, in general terms, referring to the column of cloud and fire. This seems to be the sense of the second half of the verse. See [Exodus 23:20–23](#) for another use of the word ‘angel’, almost as a personal representative of God.

20. *The night passed:* the Hebrew says ‘it lit up the night’, but the construction is strange, so most modern commentators follow the Greek rendering as above. See [Noth](#) for a full discussion. The main sense is clear: Israel now needs not guidance but protection, and this God gives to them. [Hyatt](#), perhaps correctly, emends the first clause too, so that the verse reads ‘The cloud grew dark, and they passed the night ...’

14:21–31. Crossing the sea. 21. *Moses stretched out his hand.* There is no contradiction between this statement, seen as the cause of the sea drying up, and the second statement below, that God sent *a strong east wind*. The action of Moses in stretching out his hand was necessary to show that this ‘ebb’ was no chance accident, but an act of God, working in might to save his people. Again, we might see the wonder as being the creator God controlling the natural world that he has made, and which he upholds, making wind and wave serve his purpose ([Matt. 8:27](#)). *East wind.* The same ‘natural’ force had already been used by God in connection with the locusts ([10:13](#)) and also appears in the Jonah story ([Jon. 4:8](#)). From the point of view of Egypt and Canaan, the east wind blows from the desert. Winds and fire are often described poetically in the Bible as almost personified messengers of the God who controls them ([Ps. 104:4](#)).

22. *On dry ground.* If these were reedy salt-marshes, with a soft bottom, connected with the main gulf (of which they would be the northerly extension), then a culmination of ebb tide and strong wind could dry them temporarily, long enough for a light-armed group to scamper across. *The waters being a wall.* This metaphor is no more to be taken literally than when [Ezra 9:9](#) says that God has given him a ‘wall’ (the same word) in Israel. It is a poetic metaphor to explain why the Egyptian chariots could not sweep in to right and left, and cut Israel off; they had to cross by the same ford, directly behind the Israelites.



24. *In the morning watch.* 1 Samuel 11 also mentions this, the last of the three watches, from 2 a.m. to dawn, about 6 a.m. This, the darkest hour before the dawn, was traditionally the time for attack, when men's spirits are at their lowest. *Discomfited*: better 'confused, made to panic'. How, we are not told: Psalm 77:16–20 suggests a thunderstorm, and this may be the meaning of YHWH 'looking down' from the cloud.

25. *Clogging* is the reading of the versions for the difficult 'took off' of the Hebrew text. The sand or mud that allowed free passage to the lightly armed Israelites would 'bog down' the heavy chariots, as the second half of the verse makes plain. This too may be the cause of the confusion mentioned in verse 24. However, broken axles would tend to follow rapidly, as the frightened horses plunged, so the Hebrew text may be correct, since the wheels would then certainly fall off.

27. *Its wonted flow.* Parallels in other Semitic languages (where the word means 'a stream that never dries up') shows this to be a correct translation, rather than the *av* rendering 'strength'. The word stresses the unique nature of the occurrence: this crossing-place was not a ford that was regularly dry, but one that was usually under water. *Routed*. The marginal 'shook off' is the literal meaning, of which 'overthrow' is a free translation (cf. Ps. 136:15 and Neh. 5:13). To the later Hebrew commentators, this verb suggested the 'overthrow' of the builders of Babel's tower in Genesis 11:1–9. The popular etymology of the name Shinar (Babylonia) was from this same verb. The overthrow of pharaoh is implicitly linked, not only with the Babel story, but also with the flood story, by God's use of water in judgment.

30. *Dead upon the sea shore.* This is a very graphic touch, an eye-witness account. The drowned Egyptian soldiers stand for an old way of life in slavery, now gone for ever. Somehow the sight of those dead bodies was the concrete sign that salvation and a new life for Israel were now assured. Perhaps something of this enters into the Christian thought of baptism as symbolizing death as well as life (Rom. 6:1–4). No doubt it is this aspect of finality that gave to the miracle at the Sea of Reeds its position as prime symbol of salvation in the Old Testament (Isa. 51:9–11).



Matthew Henry's Commentary

Verses 17–22

Here is, I. The choice God made of their way, v. 17, 18. He was their guide. Moses gave them direction but as he received it from the Lord. Note, The way of man is not in himself, Jer. 10:23. He may *devise his way*, and design it; but, after all, it is God that *directs his steps*, Prov. 16:9. Man proposes, but God disposes, and in his disposal we must acquiesce, and set ourselves to follow providence. There were two ways from Egypt to Canaan. One was a short cut from the north of Egypt to the south of Canaan, perhaps about four or five days' journey; the other was much further about, through the wilderness, and that was the way in which God chose to lead his people Israel, v. 18. 1. There were many reasons why God led them *through the way of the wilderness of the Red Sea*. The Egyptians were to be drowned in the Red Sea. The Israelites were to be humbled and proved in the wilderness, Deu. 8:2. God had given it to Moses for a sign (ch. 3:12), *You shall serve God in this mountain*. They had again and again told Pharaoh that they must go *three days' journey into the wilderness to do sacrifice*, and therefore it was requisite that they should bend their march that way, else they would justly have been exclaimed against as notorious dissemblers. Before they entered the lists with their enemies, matters must be settled between them and their God, laws must be given, ordinances instituted, covenants sealed, and the original contract ratified, for the doing of which it was necessary that they should retire into the solitudes of a wilderness, the only closet for such a crowd; the high road would be no proper place for these transactions. It is said (Deu. 32:10), *He led them about*, some hundreds of miles about, and yet (Ps. 107:7), *He led them forth by the right way*. God's way is the right way, though it seem *about*. If we think he leads not his people the nearest way, yet we may be sure he leads them the best way, and so it will appear when we come to our journey's end. *Judge nothing before the time*. 2. There was one reason why God did not lead them the nearest way, which would have brought them after a few days' march to *the land of the Philistines* (for it was that part of Canaan that lay next to Egypt), namely, because they were not as yet fit for war, much less for war with the Philistines, v. 17. Their spirits were broken with slavery; it was not easy for them to turn their hands of a sudden from the trowel to the sword. The Philistines were formidable enemies, too fierce to be encountered by raw recruits; it was more suitable that they should begin with the Amalekites, and be prepared for the wars of Canaan by experiencing the



difficulties of the wilderness. Note, God proportions his people's trials to their strength, and will *not suffer them to be tempted above what they are able*, 1 Co. 10:13. That promise, if compared with the foregoing verses, will seem to refer to this event, as an instance of it. *God knows our frame*, and considers our weakness and faintheartedness, and by less trials will prepare us for greater. God is said to bring Israel out of Egypt as the eagle *brings up her young ones* (Deu. 32:11), teaching them by degrees to fly. Orders being thus given which way they should go, we are told, (1.) That they went up themselves, not as a confused rout, but in good order, rank and file: *they went up harnessed*, v. 18. They went up by *five in a rank* (so some), in *five squadrons*, so others. They marched like an army with banners, which added much to their strength and honour. (2.) That they took the *bones of Joseph* along with them (v. 19), and probably the bones of the rest of Jacob's sons, unless (as some think) they had been privately carried to Canaan (Acts 7:16), severally as they died. Joseph had particularly appointed that his bones should be carried up when God should visit them (Gen. 50:25, 26), so that their carrying up his bones was not only a performance of the oath their fathers had sworn to Joseph, but an acknowledgment of the performance of God's promise to them by Joseph that he would visit them and bring them out of the land of Egypt, and an encouragement to their faith and hope that he would fulfil the other part of the promise, which was to bring them to Canaan, in expectation of which they carried these bones with them while they wandered in the desert. They might think, "Joseph's bones must rest at last, and then we shall." Moses is said to take these bones with him. Moses was now a very great man; so had Joseph been in his day, yet he was now but a box full of dry bones; this was all that remained of him in this world, which might serve for a monitor to Moses to remember his mortality. *I have said, You are gods*; it was said so to Moses expressly (ch. 7:1); *but you shall die like men*.

II. Here is the guidance they were blessed with in the way: *The Lord went before them in a pillar*, v. 21, 22. In the first two stages it was enough that God directed Moses whither to march: he knew the country and the road well enough; but now that they had come *to the edge of the wilderness* (v. 20) they would have occasion for a guide; and a very good guide they had, one that was infinitely wise, kind, and faithful: *The Lord went before them*, the *shechinah* (or appearance of the divine Majesty, which was typical of Christ) or a previous manifestation of the eternal Word, which, in the fulness of time, was to be *made flesh*, and *dwell among us*. Christ was with the church in the wilderness, 1 Co. 10:9. Now *their King passed before them, even the Lord on the head of them*, Mic. 2:13. Note, Those whom God brings into a wilderness he will not leave nor lose there, but will take care to lead them through it; we may well think it was a very



great satisfaction to Moses and the pious Israelites to be sure that they were under divine guidance. Those needed not to fear missing their way who were thus led, nor being lost who were thus directed; those needed not to fear being benighted who were thus illuminated, nor being robbed who were thus protected. Those who make the glory of God their end, and the word of God their rule, the Spirit of God the guide of their affections, and the providence of God the guide of their affairs, may be confident that *the Lord goes before them*, as truly as he went before Israel in the wilderness, though not so sensibly; we must live by faith. 1. They had sensible evidences of God's going before them. They all saw an appearance from heaven of a pillar, which in the bright day appeared cloudy, and in the dark night appeared fiery. We commonly see that that which is a flame in the night is a smoke in the day; so was this. God gave them this ocular demonstration of his presence, in compassion to the infirmity of their faith, and in compliance with that infant state of the church, which needed to be thus lisped to in their own language; but blessed are *those that have not seen and yet have believed* God's gracious presence with them, according to his promise. 2. They had sensible effects of God's going before them in this pillar. For, (1.) It led the way in that vast howling wilderness, in which there was no road, no track, no way-mark, of which they had no maps, through which they had no guides. When they marched, this pillar went before them, at the rate that they could follow, and appointed the place of their encampment, as Infinite Wisdom saw fit, which both eased them from care, and secured them from danger, both in moving and in resting. (2.) It sheltered them by day from the heat, which, at some times of the year, was extreme. (3.) It gave them light by night when they had occasion for it, and at all times made their camp pleasant and the wilderness they were in less frightful.

III. These were constant standing miracles (v. 22): He *took not away the pillar of cloud*; no, not when they seemed to have less occasion for it, travelling through inhabited countries, no, not when they murmured and were provoking; it never left them, till it brought them to the borders of Canaan. It was a cloud which the wind could not scatter. This favour is acknowledged with thankfulness long afterwards, Neh. 9:19; Ps. 78:14. There was something spiritual in this pillar of cloud and fire. 1. The children of Israel were baptized unto Moses in this cloud, which, some think, distilled dew upon them, 1 Co. 10:2. By coming under this cloud, they signified their putting themselves under the divine guidance and command by the ministry of Moses. Protection draws allegiance; this cloud was the badge of God's protection, and so became the bond of their allegiance. Thus they were initiated, and admitted under that government, now when they were entering upon the wilderness. 2. Some make this cloud a type of Christ. The cloud of his human



nature was a veil to the light and fire of his divine nature; we find him (Rev. 10:1) *clothed with a cloud, and his feet as pillars of fire*. Christ is our way, the light of our way and the guide of it. 3. It signified the special guidance and protection which the church of Christ is under in this world. God himself is the keeper of Israel, and he *neither slumbers nor sleeps*, Ps. 121:4; Isa. 27:3. There is a defence created, not only on Sion's assemblies, but on every dwelling-place in Sion. See Isa. 4:5, 6. Nay, every Israelite indeed is hidden under the shadow of God's wings (Ps. 17:8); angels, whose ministry was made use of in this cloud, are employed for their good, and pitch their tents about them. *Happy art thou, O Israel! who is like unto thee, O people?*

Chapter 14

The departure of the children of Israel out of Egypt (which was indeed the birth of the Jewish church) is made yet more memorable by further works of wonder, which were wrought immediately upon it. Witness the records of this chapter, the contents whereof, together with a key to it, we have, Heb. 11:29. "They passed through the Red Sea as by dry land, which the Egyptians assaying to do were drowned;" and this they did by faith, which intimates that there was something typical and spiritual in it. Here is, I. The extreme distress and danger that Israel was in at the Red Sea. 1. Notice was given of it to Moses before (v. 1–4). 2. The cause of it was Pharaoh's violent pursuit of them (v. 5–9). 3. Israel was in a great consternation upon it (v. 10–12). 4. Moses endeavours to encourage them (v. 13, 14). II. The wonderful deliverance that God wrought for them out of this distress. 1. Moses is instructed concerning it (v. 15–18). 2. Lines that could not be forced are set between the camp of Israel and Pharaoh's camp (v. 19, 20). 3. By the divine power the Red Sea is divided (v. 31), and is made, (1.) A lane to the Israelites, who marched safely through it (v. 22, 29). But, (2.) To the Egyptians it was made, [1.] An ambush into which they were drawn (v. 23–25). And, [2.] A grave in which they were all buried (v. 26–28). III. The impressions this made upon the Israelites (v. 30, 31).

Verses 1–9

We have here,

I. Instructions given to Moses concerning Israel's motions and encampments, which were so very surprising that if Moses had not express orders about them before they would scarcely have



been persuaded to follow the pillar of cloud and fire. That therefore there might be no scruple nor dissatisfaction about it, Moses is told before, 1. Whither they must go, v. 1, 2. They had got to the edge of the wilderness (ch. 13:20), and a stage or two more would have brought them to Horeb, the place appointed for their serving God; but, instead of going forward, they are ordered to turn short off, on the right hand from Canaan, and to march towards the Red Sea. Where they were, at Etham, there was no sea in their way to obstruct their passage: but God himself orders them into straits, which might give them an assurance that when his purposes were served he would without fail bring them out of those straits. Note, God sometimes raises difficulties in the way of the salvation of his people, that he may have the glory of subduing them, and helping his people over them. 2. What God designed in these strange orders. Moses would have yielded an implicit obedience, though God had given him no reason; but shall he hide from Moses the thing that he does? No, Moses shall know, (1.) That Pharaoh has a design to ruin Israel, v. 3. (2.) That therefore God has a design to ruin Pharaoh, and he takes this way to effect it, v. 4. Pharaoh's sagacity would conclude that Israel was entangled in the wilderness and so would become an easy prey to him; and, that he might be the more apt to think so, God orders them into yet greater entanglements; also, by turning them so much out of their road, he amazes him yet more, and gives him further occasion to suppose that they were in a state of embarrassment and danger. And thus (says God) *I will be honoured upon Pharaoh*. Note, [1.] All men being made for the honour of their Maker, those whom he is not honoured by he will be honoured upon. [2.] What seems to tend to the church's ruin is often overruled to the ruin of the church's enemies, whose pride and malice are fed by Providence, that they may be ripened for destruction.

II. Pharaoh's pursuit of Israel, in which, while he gratifies his own malice and revenge, he is furthering the accomplishment of God's counsels concerning him. *It was told him that the people fled*, v. 5. Such a fright was he in, when he gave them leave to go, that when the fright was a little over he either forgot, or would not own, that they departed with his consent, and therefore was willing that it should be represented to him as a revolt from their allegiance. Thus what may easily be justified is easily condemned, by putting false colours upon it. Now, hereupon,

1. He reflects upon it with regret that he had connived at their departure. He and his servants, though it was with the greatest reason in the world that they had let Israel go, yet were now angry with themselves for it: *Why have we done thus?* (1.) It vexed them that Israel had their liberty, that they had lost the profit of their labours, and the pleasure of chastising them. It is meat and drink to proud persecutors to trample upon the saints of the Most High, and say to their souls,



Bow down, that we may go over; and therefore it vexes them to have their hands tied. Note, The liberty of God's people is a heavy grievance to their enemies, Esth. 5:12, 13; Acts 5:17, 33. (2.) It aggravated the vexation that they themselves had consented to it, thinking now that they might have hindered it, and that they needed not to have yielded, though they had stood it out to the last extremity. Thus God makes men's envy and rage against his people a torment to themselves, Ps. 112:10. It was well done to let Israel go, and what they would have reflected on with comfort if they had done it from an honest principle; but doing it by constraint, they called themselves a thousand fools for doing it, and passionately wished it undone again. Note, It is very common, but very absurd and criminal, for people to repent of their good deeds; their justice and charity, and even their repentance, are repented of. See an instance somewhat like this, Jer. 34:10, 11.

2. He resolves, if possible, either to reduce them or to be revenged on them; in order to this, he levies an army, musters all his force of chariots and horsemen, v. 17, 18 (for, it should seem, he took no foot with him, because the king's business required haste), and thus he doubts not but he shall re-enslave them, v. 6, 7. It is easy to imagine what a rage Pharaoh was now in, roaring like a lion disappointed of his prey, how his proud heart aggravated the affront, swelled with indignation, scorned to be baffled, longed to be revenged: and now all the plagues are as if they had never been. He has quite forgotten the sorrowful funerals of his firstborn, and can think of nothing but making Israel feel his resentments; now he thinks he can be too hard for God himself; for, otherwise, could he have hoped to conquer a people so dear to him? God gave him up to these passions of his own heart, and so hardened it. It is said (v. 8), The children of Israel went out with *a high hand*, that is, with a great deal of courage and bravery, triumphing in their release, and resolved to break through the difficulties that lay in their way. *But the Egyptians (v. 9) pursued after them.* Note, Those that in good earnest set their faces heaven-ward, and will live godly in Christ Jesus, must expect to be set upon by Satan's temptations and terrors. He will not tamely part with any out of his service, nor go out without raging, Mk. 9:26.

Verses 10–14

We have here, I. The fright that the children of Israel were in when they perceived that Pharaoh pursued them, v. 10. They knew very well the strength and rage of the enemy, and their own weakness; numerous indeed they were, but all on foot, unarmed, undisciplined, disquieted by long servitude, and (which was worst of all) now penned up by the situation of their camp, so that they could not make their escape. On the one hand was Pi-hahiroth, a range of craggy rocks



impassable; on the other hand were Migdol and Baalzephon, which, some think were forts and garrisons upon the frontiers of Egypt; before them was the sea; behind them were the Egyptians: so that there was no way open for them but upwards, and thence their deliverance came. Note, We may be in the way of our duty, following God and hastening towards heaven, and yet may be in great straits, *troubled on every side*, 2 Co. 4:8. In this distress, no marvel that the children of Israel were sorely afraid; their father Jacob was so in a like case (Gen. 32:7); when without are fightings, it cannot be otherwise but that within are fears: what therefore was the fruit of this fear? According as that was, the fear was good or evil. 1. Some of them cried out unto the Lord; their fear set them a praying, and that was a good effect of it. God brings us into straits that he may bring us to our knees. 2. Others of them cried out against Moses; their fear set them a murmuring, v. 11, 12. They give up themselves for lost; and as if God's arm were shortened all of a sudden, and he were not as able to work miracles to-day as he was yesterday, they despair of deliverance, and can count upon nothing but *dying in the wilderness*. How inexcusable was their distrust! Did they not see themselves under the guidance and protection of a pillar from heaven? And can almighty power fail them, or infinite goodness be false to them? Yet this was not the worst; they quarrel with Moses for bringing them out of Egypt, and, in quarrelling with him, fly in the face of God himself, and provoke him to wrath whose favour was now the only succour they had to flee to. As the Egyptians were angry with themselves for the best deed they ever did, so the Israelites were angry with God for the greatest kindness that was ever done them; so gross are the absurdities of unbelief. They here express, (1.) A sordid contempt of liberty, preferring servitude before it, only because it was attended with some difficulties. A generous spirit would have said, "If the worst come to the worst," as we say, "It is better to die in the field of honour than to live in the chains of slavery;" nay, under God's conduct, they could not miscarry, and therefore they might say, "Better live God's freemen in the open air of a wilderness than the Egyptians' bondmen in the smoke of the brick-kilns." But because, for the present, they are a little embarrassed, they are angry that they were not left buried alive in their house of bondage. (2.) Base ingratitude to Moses, who had been the faithful instrument of their deliverance. They condemn him, as if he had dealt hardly and unkindly with them, whereas it was evident, beyond dispute, that whatever he did, and however it issued, it was by direction from their God, and with design for their good. What they had said in a former ferment (when they hearkened not to Moses for anguish of spirit), they repeat and justify in this: *We said in Egypt, Let us alone*; and it was ill-said, yet more excusable, because then they had not had so much experience as they had now of God's wonderful appearances in their favour. But they had as soon forgotten the miracles of mercy as the Egyptians had forgotten the miracles of wrath; and they, as well as the Egyptians,



hardened their hearts, at last, to their own ruin; as Egypt after ten plagues, so Israel after ten provocations, of which this was the first (Num. 14:22), were sentenced to die in the wilderness.

II. The seasonable encouragement that Moses gave them in this distress, v. 13, 14. He answered not these fools according to their folly. God bore with the provocation they gave to him, and did not (as he might justly have done) chose their delusions, and bring their fears upon them; and therefore Moses might well afford to pass by the affront they put upon him. Instead of chiding them, he comforts them, and with an admirable presence and composure of mind, not disheartened either by the threatenings of Egypt or the tremblings of Israel, stills their murmuring, with the assurance of a speedy and complete deliverance: *Fear you not*. Note, It is our duty and interest, when we cannot get out of our troubles, yet to get above our fears, so that they may only serve to quicken our prayers and endeavours, but may not prevail to silence our faith and hope. 1. He assures them that God would deliver them, that he would undertake their deliverance, and that he would effect it in the utter ruin of their pursuers: *The Lord shall fight for you*. This Moses was confident of himself, and would have them to be so, though as yet he knew not how or which way it would be brought to pass. God had assured him that Pharaoh and his host should be ruined, and he comforts them with the same comforts wherewith he had been comforted. 2. He directs them to leave it to God, in a silent expectation of the event: *“Stand still, and think not to save yourselves either by fighting or flying; wait God’s orders, and observe them; be not contriving what course to take, but follow your leader; wait God’s appearances, and take notice of them, that you may see how foolish you are to distrust them. Compose yourselves, by an entire confidence in God, into a peaceful prospect of the great salvation God is now about to work for you. Hold your peace; you need not so much as give a shout against the enemy, as Jos. 6:16. The work shall be done without any concurrence of yours.”* Note, (1.) If God himself bring his people into straits, he will himself discover a way to bring them out again. (2.) In times of great difficulty and great expectation, it is our wisdom to keep our spirits calm, quiet, and sedate; for then we are in the best frame both to do our own work and to *consider the work of God*. *Your strength is to sit still* (Isa. 30:7), *for the Egyptians shall help in vain*, and threaten to hurt in vain.

Verses 15–20

We have here,

I. Direction given to Israel’s leader.



1. What he must do himself. He must, for the present, leave off praying, and apply himself to his business (v. 15): *Wherefore cryest thou unto me?* Moses, though he was assured of a good issue to the present distress, yet did not neglect prayer. We read not of one word he said in prayer, but he lifted up to God his heart, the language of which God well understood and took notice of. Moses's silent prayers of faith prevailed more with God than Israel's loud outcries of fear, v. 10. Note, (1.) Praying, if of the right kind, is *crying to God*, which denotes it to be the language both of a natural and of an importunate desire. (2.) To quicken his diligence. Moses had something else to do besides praying; he was to command the hosts of Israel, and it was now requisite that he should be at his post. *Every thing is beautiful in its season.*

2. What he must order Israel to do. *Speak to them, that they go forward.* Some think that Moses had prayed, not so much for their deliverance (he was assured of that) as for the pardon of their murmurings, and that God's ordering them to go forward was an intimation of the pardon. There is no going forward with any comfort but in the sense of our reconciliation to God. Moses had bidden them stand still, and expect orders from God; and now orders are given. They thought they must have been directed either to the right hand or to the left. "No," says God, "speak to them to go forward, directly to the sea-side;" as if there had lain a fleet of transport-ships ready for them to embark in. Note, When we are in the way of our duty, though we met with difficulties, we must go forward, and not stand in mute astonishment; we must mind present work and then leave the even to God, use means and trust him with the issue.

3. What he might expect God to do. Let the children of Israel go as far as they can upon dry ground, and then God will divide the sea, and open a passage for them through it, v. 16–18. God designs, not only to deliver the Israelites, but to destroy the Egyptians; and the plan of his counsels is accordingly. (1.) He will show favour to Israel; the waters shall be divided for them to pass through, v. 16. The same power could have congealed the waters for them to pass over; but Infinite Wisdom chose rather to divide the waters for them to pass through; for that way of salvation is always pitched upon which is most humbling. Thus it is said, with reference to this (Isa. 63:13, 14), *He led them through the deep, as a beast goes down into the valley*, and thus *made himself a glorious name*. (2.) He will get him honour upon Pharaoh. If the due rent of honour be not paid to the great landlord, by and from whom we have and hold our beings and comforts, he will distraint for it, and recover it. God will be a loser by no man. In order to this, it is threatened: *I, behold I, will harden Pharaoh's heart*, v. 17. The manner of expression is observable: *I, behold I, will do it*. "I, that may do it;" so it is the language of his sovereignty. We



may not contribute to the hardening of any man's heart, nor withhold any thing that we can do towards the softening of it; but God's grace is his own, *he hath mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will be hardeneth*. "I, that can do it;" so it is the language of his power; none but the Almighty can make the heart soft (Job 23:16), nor can any other being make it hard. "I, that will do it;" for it is the language of his justice; it is a righteous thing with God to put those under the impressions of his wrath who have long resisted the influences of his grace. It is spoken in a way of triumph over this obstinate and presumptuous rebel: "*I even I*, will take an effectual course to humble him; he shall break that would not bend." It is an expression like that (Isa. 1:24), *Ah, I will ease me of my adversaries*.

II. A guard set upon Israel's camp where it now lay most exposed, which was *in the rear*; v. 19, 20. *The angel of God*, whose ministry was made use of in the pillar of cloud and fire, went from *before the camp of Israel*, where they did not now need a guide (there was no danger of missing their way through the sea, nor needed they any other word of command than to go forward), and it came behind them, where now they needed a guard (the Egyptians being just ready to seize the hindmost of them), and so was a wall of partition between them. There it was of use to the Israelites, not only to protect them, but to light them through the sea, and, at the same time, it confounded the Egyptians, so that they lost sight of their prey just when they were ready to lay hands on it. The word and providence of God have a black and dark side towards sin and sinners, but a bright and pleasant side towards those that are Israelites indeed. That which is a savour of life unto life to some is a savour of death unto death to others. This was not the first time that he who in the beginning divided between light and darkness (Gen. 1:4), and still forms both (Isa. 45:7), had, at the same time, allotted darkness to the Egyptians and light to the Israelites, a specimen of the endless distinction which will be made between the inheritance of the saints in light and that utter darkness which for ever will be the portion of hypocrites. God will separate between the precious and the vile.

Verses 21–31

We have here the history of that work of wonder which is so often mentioned both in the Old and New Testament, the dividing of the Red Sea before the children of Israel. It was the terror of the Canaanites (Jos. 2:9, 10), the praise and triumph of the Israelites, Ps. 114:3; 106:9; 136:13, 14. It was a type of baptism, 1 Co. 10:1, 2. Israel's passage through it was typical of the



conversion of souls (Isa. 11:15), and the Egyptians' perdition in it was typical of the final ruin of all impenitent sinners, Rev. 20:14. Here we have,

I. An instance of God's almighty power in the kingdom of nature, in dividing the sea, and opening a passage through the waters. It was a bay, or gulf, or arm of the sea, two or three leagues over, which was divided, v. 21. The instituted sign made use of was Moses's stretching out his hand over it, to signify that it was done in answer to his prayer, for the confirmation of his mission, and in favour to the people whom he led. The natural sign was a strong east wind, signifying that it was done by the power of God, whom the winds and the seas obey. If there be any passage in the book of Job which has reference to the miracles wrought for Israel's deliverance out of Egypt, it is that in Job 26:12, *He divideth the sea with his power, and by his understanding he smileth through Rahab* (so the word is), that is, Egypt. Note, God can bring his people through the greatest difficulties, and force a way where he does not find it. The God of nature has not tied himself to its laws, but, when he pleases, dispenses with them, and then the fire does not burn, nor the water flow.

II. An instance of his wonderful favour to his Israel. They went through the sea to the opposite shore, for I cannot suppose, with some, that they fetched a compass, and came out again on the same side, v. 22. They *walked upon dry land in the midst of the sea*, v. 29. And the pillar of cloud, *that glory of the Lord*, being their *rearward* (Isa. 58:8), that the Egyptians might not charge them in the flank, the *waters were a wall to them* (it is twice mentioned) *on their right hand and on their left*. Moses and Aaron, it is probable, ventured first into this untrodden path, and then all Israel after them; and this march through the paths of the great waters would make their march afterwards, through the wilderness, less formidable. Those who had followed God through the sea needed not to fear following him whithersoever he led them. This march through the sea was in the night, and not a moon-shiny night, for it was seven days after the full moon, so that they had no light but what they had from the pillar of cloud and fire. This made it the more awful; but where God leads us he will light us; while we follow his conduct, we shall not want his comforts.

This was done, and recorded, in order to encourage God's people in all ages to trust in him in the greatest straits. What cannot he do who did this? What will not he do for those hate fear and love him who did this for these murmuring unbelieving Israelis, who yet were *beloved for their fathers' sake*, and for the sake of a remnant among them? We find the saints, long afterwards, making themselves sharers in the triumphs of this march (Ps. 66:6): *They went through the flood*



on foot; there did we rejoice in him: and see how this work of wonder is improved, Ps. 77:11, 16, 19.

III. An instance of his just and righteous wrath upon his and his people's enemies, the Egyptians. Observe here, 1. How they were infatuated. In the heat of their pursuit, they went after the Israelites *into the midst of the sea*, v. 23. "Why," thought they, "may not we venture where Israel did?" Once or twice the magicians of Egypt had done what Moses did, with their enchantments; Pharaoh remembered this, but forgot how they were nonplussed at last. They were more advantageously provided with chariots and horses, while the Israelites were on foot. Pharaoh had said, *I know not the Lord*; and by this it appeared he did not, else he would not have ventured thus. None so bold as those that are blind. Rage against Israel made them thus daring and inconsiderate: they had long hardened their own hearts; and now God hardened them to their ruin, and hid from their eyes the things that belonged to their peace and safety. *Surely in vain is the net spread in the sight of any bird* (Prov. 1:17); yet so blind were the Egyptians that they *hastened to the snare*, Prov. 7:23. Note, The ruin of sinners is brought on by their own presumption, which hurries them headlong into the pit. They are self-destroyers. 2. How they were troubled and perplexed, v. 24, 25. For some hours they marched through the divided waters as safely and triumphantly as Israel did, not doubting but, that, in a little time, they should gain their point. But, *in the morning watch, the Lord looked upon the host of the Egyptians, and troubled them*. Something or other they saw or heard from the pillar of cloud and fire which put them into great consternation, and gave them an apprehension of their ruin before it was brought upon them. Now it appeared that the *triumphing of the wicked is short*, and that God has ways to frighten sinners into despair, before he plunges them into destruction. *He cuts off the spirit of princes, and is terrible to the kings of the earth*. (1.) They had hectoring and boasted as if the day were their own; but now they were troubled and dismayed, struck with a panic-fear. (2.) They had driven furiously; but now they drove heavily, and found themselves plugged and embarrassed at every step; the way grew deep, their hearts grew sad, their wheels dropped off, and the axle-trees failed. Thus can God check the violence of those that are in pursuit of his people. (3.) They had been flying upon the back of Israel, as the hawk upon the trembling dove; but now they cried, *Let us flee from the face of Israel*, which had become to them *like a torch of fire in a sheaf*, Zec. 12:6. Israel has now, all of a sudden, become as much a terror to them as they had been to Israel. They might have let Israel alone and would not; now they would flee from the face of Israel and cannot. Men will not be convinced, till it is too late, that those who meddle with God's people meddle to their own hurt; when the Lord shall come with ten thousands of his



saints, to execute judgment, the mighty men will in vain seek to shelter themselves under rocks and mountains *from the face of Israel* and Israel's King, Rev. 6:15. Compare with this story, Job 27:20, etc. 3. How they were all drowned. As soon as ever the children of Israel had got safely to the shore, Moses was ordered to *stretch out his hand over the sea*, and thereby give a signal to the waters to close again, as before, upon his word of command, they had *opened to the right and the left*, v. 29. He did so, and immediately the waters returned to their place, and overwhelmed all the host of the Egyptians, v. 27, 28. Pharaoh and his servants, who had hardened one another in sin, now fell together, and not one escaped. An ancient tradition says that Pharaoh's magicians, Jannes and Jambres, perished with the rest, as Balaam with the Midianites whom he had seduced, Num. 31:8. And now, (1.) God avenged upon the Egyptians the blood of the firstborn whom they had drowned: and the principal is repaid with interest, it is recompensed double, full-grown Egyptians for newborn Israelites; thus the Lord is righteous, and precious is his people's blood in his sight, Ps. 72:14. (2.) God reckoned with Pharaoh for all his proud and insolent conduct towards Moses his ambassador. Mocking the messengers of the Lord, and playing the fool with them, bring ruin without remedy. Now God *got him honour upon Pharaoh*, looking upon that proud man, and abasing him, Job. 40:12. Come and see the desolations he made, and write it, not in water, but with an iron pen in the rock for ever. Here lies that bloody tyrant who bade defiance to his Maker, to his demands, threatenings, and judgments; a rebel to God, and a slave to his own barbarous passions; perfectly lost to humanity, virtue, and all true honour; here he lies, buried in the deep, a perpetual monument of divine justice. Here he went down to the pit, though he was the terror of the mighty in the land of the living. This is Pharaoh and all his multitude, Eze. 31:18.

IV. Here is the notice which the Israelites took of this wonderful work which God wrought for them, and the good impressions which it made upon them for the present.

1. They saw the Egyptians dead upon the sands, v. 30. Providence so ordered it that the next tide threw up the dead bodies, (1.) For the greater disgrace of the Egyptians. Now the beasts and birds of prey were called to *eat the flesh of the captains and mighty men*, Rev. 19:17, 18. The Egyptians were very nice and curious in embalming and preserving the bodies of their great men, but here the utmost contempt is poured upon all the grandees of Egypt; see how they lie, heaps upon heaps, as dung upon the face of the earth. (2.) For the greater triumph of the Israelites, and to affect them the more with their deliverance; for the eye affects the heart. See Isa. 66:24, *They shall go forth, and look upon the carcasses of the men that have transgressed against me.*



Probably they stripped the slain and, having borrowed jewels of their neighbours before, which (the Egyptians having by this hostile pursuit of them broken their faith with them) henceforward they were not under any obligation to restore, they now got arms from them, which, some think, they were not before provided with. Thus, when God broke the heads of Leviathan in pieces, *he gave him to be meat to the people inhabiting the wilderness*, Ps. 74:14.

2. The sight of this great work greatly affected them, and now they *feared the Lord, and believed the Lord, and his servant Moses*, v. 31. Now they were ashamed of their distrusts and murmurings, and, in the good mind they were in, they would never again despair of help from Heaven, no, not in the greatest straits; they would never again quarrel with Moses, nor talk of returning to Egypt. They were now baptized unto Moses in the sea, 1 Co. 10:2. This great work which God wrought for them by the ministry of Moses bound them effectually to follow his directions, under God. This confirmed their faith in the promises that were yet to be fulfilled; and, being brought thus triumphantly out of Egypt, they did not doubt that they should be in Canaan shortly, having such a God to trust to, and such a mediator between them and him. O that there had been such a heart in them as now there seemed to be! Sensible mercies, when they are fresh, make sensible impressions; but with many these impressions soon wear off: while they see God's works, and feel the benefit of them, they fear him and trust in him; but they soon forget his works, and then they slight him. How well were it for us if we were always in as good a frame as we are in sometimes!