

Unexpected Miracles • Exodus 14:1–31

“When the going gets tough, the tough get going.” Or so they say.

But what do you do when the going gets tough and you don’t feel you’re tough enough to get going against it? There are times when we all feel that way. Life feels like a boxing match in which you have been pummeled and beaten and punched until you wonder if you can get up for another round.

In Exodus 14, the going got tough, terribly tough, for the Israelites. So much so that the story says they wanted to quit. They wanted to go back to slavery. But they didn’t. Instead, it was there, in that tough-going situation, that they discovered that God is the one who guides through tough times.

His guidance here in Exodus 14 came in two steps. These steps are helpful to us to remember, as well, for our own tough times. The first step is really kind of a surprise. It is that God gets us into tough times.

We usually think of ourselves as creating the difficult situations and God is supposed to get us out of them. However, there are also tough times that are of God’s making. At least that is the way it was for the Israelites when they got stuck between an unbeatable army and an uncrossable sea.

It all started with a change of direction in Exodus 14:1-4.

Then the Lord said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. They are to encamp by the sea, directly opposite Baal Zephon. 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. So the Israelites did this.

If you were to look at a map, you would discover that the Hebrew people were marching southward. They were on the better of the routes from the land of Goshen in the delta region of Egypt to the Promised Land of Canaan or Palestine.

Then God gives them an order to change direction and instead march due north. That was pretty much the way they had come. This clearly gave an impression, both to Pharaoh and to the Egyptian

people, that they were lost.

It seems that if God had not given to them the instruction to go back and they had continued in their southeastward direction and then turned eastward and north as they went across the Sinai, that they would have made it. If God had not told them to change direction, they would not have been boxed in by the sea and the Egyptian army. It was because God gave them that change of orders, and because they went north, that they got trapped. It was because of God’s direction that their tough times came.

I suppose that seems strange to us until we start to compare it with our own lives. When we think it through, we discover that often it is necessary to go backward in order to go forward.

If you’re a chess player, you know that there are times in the strategy of the game when you must

lose some pieces in order to gain some pieces and eventually to win the game.

In the field of medicine, it is sometimes necessary to

make someone sicker before you can make that person better. So if there is a malignancy of the bone marrow, it may be necessary to kill the cells of the bone marrow in order to prepare for a transplant so the person may live. Or it may be necessary to have chemotherapy that will make someone feel a whole lot sicker in order that the person can be a whole lot better. It is going backward in order to go forward.

That change of direction caused the Israelites to get into a tough circumstance that God created for them in order that he could get them where he wanted them to be.

While God led Israel to change direction, he led the Egyptians to change their mind, and that is in verses 5 through 9.

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

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

Although it had been a mighty blow when that tenth plague came and the eldest of each family died, a few hours later Pharaoh realized the decision to let the people go would have severe economic and social consequences upon the Egyptian society. They had released hundred of thousands, perhaps millions, of enslaved Hebrews who had been the lower class of society. They were the ones who had taken care of the sheep. Egyptians didn’t like to take care of sheep. They were the ones who had provided the bricks for all the construction industry, and the Egyptians didn’t want to get out there and get their hands scared and dirty. They wanted the Israelites to do it. The whole society would face potential upheaval because all of these people were gone and all of society would need to be restructured.

So he decided the only thing he could do was to recall them, and so he did. He did it for social and economic reasons, but he also did it because his hardened heart had become harder still because of his choice and because of God’s choice. God wasn’t finished yet with either Pharaoh or the Egyptians. He had something to teach them. He had something to accomplish. He intended that they learn, once and for all, that they could not so mistreat God’s chosen people. God wanted to demonstrate to all the world, and to Israel in particular, who he was and what his glory was all about.

Now there is something for us to understand in all of this. It is that God was not just about accomplishing what he wanted among the Israelites, but also among the Egyptians. In order to affect one, he had to affect the other.

Just as God, in order to accomplish his will in our society, has hundreds of millions of people, with whom he must deal. And it is not just a simple matter of doing what is best and right in your life and mine. All of our lives together are effected in what God seeks to accomplish in all of society and in other individual lives.

Maybe you remember, either when you were a child or as a parent with your own children, those inexpensive little games with little squares that you

move around. Typically each square was numbered, and the goal was to get all the numbers in the correct sequence. The numbers went from 1 to 15 with one black square. And the frustration is that sometimes you can get one through ten in order, but in order to get number 11 where it belongs you have to move all the others around in order to get every piece in place.

Think of the complexities that God has dealing with billions of people. One day we may wake up grateful that our lives are in place. We have our jobs; our health is good. Everything is great. And then we find that God puts his finger on our number and slides us over. Sometimes he slides us all the way to the other end of the board, and we wonder where we’re going.

But, God is not dealing with us alone. He is dealing with us in relationship to other people. It is that combination of bringing everybody into place that many times requires moving all kinds of people in order to get us into the right position.

So it was for the moving of Moses and the Israelites in order to position Pharaoh and the Egyptians. It took a change of direction for the Israelites and a change of mind for Pharaoh and the Egyptian people in order to get Israel where God wanted them.

That change of direction and that change of mind precipitated a change in attitude among the Israelites. We find it in verses 10 through 12.

As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD. They said to Moses, “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians’? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!”

What a change! One minute they’re jubilant, ecstatic. Everything was great. They were free at last after more than 400 years in slavery. They were on their way to the Promised Land. Everything was absolutely wonderful. And the next minute they were miserable.

How characteristic of human experience. “They were terrified,” the Bible says. I can understand that. They thought they were free and they look on the horizon and here comes the Egyptian army. Weapons, chariots, officers, equipment training, and their hearts sank. They panicked. Everything came back

to them. The way things used to be back in the land of Goshen. When their boy babies were drowned in the Nile River. When the taskmasters beat their backs raw. When their hands were gnarled from the pain of working with bricks without the straw to put them together. And all that God had done was all but forgotten.

How they cried out to God. And that is exactly what they should have done. We're not told here what they said as they cried out to God, although there may be a hint in what they next had to say to Moses.

What they next said to Moses was filled with sarcasm. In verse 11 they said, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die?" Egypt was known for its graves. It is today. What do you think of when you think of Egypt? You think of pyramids. Pyramids were just super duper graves. Their cemeteries are called The Cities of the Dead. You can still see them in Egypt. These huge expansive places, some with almost normal size houses by American standards, and these are tombs where people are buried. The Egyptians had a fixation on death and on graves.

So here they are, on the edge of the land, and they turn to Moses and say, "Was it because there are no graves in Egypt?" Of course there were graves in Egypt. And so their lips dripped with sarcasm and criticism. "It would have been better for us to serve Egyptians than to die in the desert." In other words, Moses, you blew it, and God blew it. They were saying, "We told you so. Back before we left Goshen we told you that this is the way things would end up and that we'd be better off back where we used to be." So their attitude was changed.

Has it ever happened to you? Do you find that, when things are going well, your attitude is as pleasant and positive as can be? You are gracious to people, kind in words and warm in relationships. And then the going gets tough. The pressure comes on. And you change the words you speak. Where once you were nice, all of a sudden your words drip with sarcasm and you are filled with criticism and bitterness. Criticism and bitterness that directly reflect upon other people, but indirectly they smack of an attitude toward God.

We need to learn that tough times are no ex-

cuse for wrong attitudes. We need to understand that God is faithful to us in the tough times and the pleasant times of life, and he expects us to be faithful to him when things go poorly as well as when things go well.

So much for step number one. God got them into tough times, stuck between an unconquerable army and an uncrossable sea. But now, in step number two, God gets them out of tough times.

Again there is a mix of ingredients. The first of them is the counsel of a man named Moses. Verses 13 and 14 tell us, "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.'"

Moses' advice is good, simple, to the point, wise. Sit tight; watch God fight. That's fabulous advice. All from a man who knew God exceedingly well, and, therefore, was in a good position to give counsel.

The principle here is that they found the counsel of a wise man of God. That is what we are to do in our tough times. We need people in our lives who

have proved themselves in their walk with God and the soundness of their judgement and the wisdom of their words over the years. The people on my list may be different from the people on your list. But

we all need men and women in our lives who have proved themselves over the months and years to be people who walk with God and know his word. It is from them that we receive the counsel that is the first of God's instruments to get us out of tough times.

That wasn't all. For, in addition to the counsel of the man, Moses, came also the command of God in verses 15 through 18.

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 they will go through the sea on dry ground. 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

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know that I am the LORD when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen.”

God had clearly decided what he was going to do, and he had clearly decided what the Israelites were going to do. Go forward. But there was this large body of water. How were they supposed to do that? What went through the hearts and minds of all those people when they heard, “Forward, march”?

There was a sea to walk into and die in. But Moses had a word from God. He was supposed to take the staff and the staff was going to provide the dry ground. I wonder if that word got out to the rank and file of the people. They did not have the modern means of communication we have today. It seems altogether possible that they did not hear the whole story. At best they heard, “Forward, march!” Perhaps they just saw that they were moving toward the sea. They could figure out what the consequence of that would be.

I suppose that few of us have had parallel experiences. Seldom are we ordered by God to risk our lives for our faith. But are there not times in a business relationship where God has clearly told us to be honest and an employer has clearly told us to be dishonest. You feel that you are boxed in between an unconquerable army and an uncrossable sea. If you obey God and his commands, you’ll lose the job and the consequences may be very far reaching for you and for your family.

Suppose a student wants to do well on an examination. The outcome may affect continuation of school, may affect graduation, may affect a degree, may affect the job, may affect a lifetime, and everyone else is cheating. You know that if you’re honest on the examination, not only will you do worse, everyone else, because of cheating, will do better. And you also are between an unconquerable army and an uncrossable sea.

Maybe we do, after all, often have commands from God that seem result in our marching straight into the drink. It is then that we face the same decision that the Israelites faced. Do we go forward with God in faith or go back to Egypt in slavery?

It took the counsel of a man, the command of God and the circumstances of the situation, in the longest section of this chapter, verses 19 through 29.

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 side; 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 made the wheels of their chariots come off so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, “Let’s get away from the Israelites! The LORD is fighting for them against Egypt.”

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 toward 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 them 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.

The last minute came and God began to perform miracles that day that they never expected. First He moved that pillar of cloud behind them so that it was between the Egyptians and the Hebrews. It made the visibility so low that the Egyptians couldn’t see past that cloud and, therefore, could not see the movement of the Israelites.

Next, Moses raised his staff and God caused the east wind to blow and dry out a path across the sea, and the people were able to march across. But when the Egyptians, once the cloud lifted, pursued them, they got out in the middle of the dry ground with their heavy chariots and they began to bog down in the bed of that sea. When that happened, they must have whipped their horses so that they would lunge forward, but the wheels were so bogged

down that the horses bolted and that started to upset the chariots and break the axles and spin off the wheels. Then all of the horsemen and all of the officers panicked because the water started to come back in upon them, and eventually they all drowned. What an unexpected miracle.

There are details that we need to make note of if we're going to be careful Bible students in analyzing what here is taught. We need to note, first of all, that this was not the Red Sea. That is an unfortunate translation that has crept into some of our Bibles. A correct translation of the Hebrew word is more like the Reed Sea, or the Weed Sea. This area is far to the north of where we see that huge Red Sea on our modern day maps. It is closer to the area of the modern day Suez Canal. It is an area of salt beds and weedy type of swamps. It is an area of salt lakes, all of which has been connected and cut through by the Suez Canal.

We also need to note that the blowing of the east wind was then common and is yet common in those areas of the world. It was the combination, apparently, of the blowing of the east wind, the ebb tide and the motion of God that brought that drying out of the land so that the Israelites could march through. When the Egyptians marched through, the tide reversed, the wind stopped and perhaps a thunderstorm came so that there was a deluge of water that drowned the Egyptians.

Maybe that sounds to you like a very naturalistic explanation of that which seems in the Bible, at least in first reading, to be very supernatural. God seems to have anticipated that this might be an interpretation. He anticipated that the Israelites might also see it that way. In order to prevent that, God instructed Moses to hold out the staff so that there would be an obvious and direct correlation between the action of Moses' obedience to God and the elements of nature, also in obedience to God.

Isn't that typically the way God still works? We ought not think of him as contradicting the nature of the world in which we live, which he created. We need to understand that he is a supernatural God who is sovereignly in control of his creation. We ought to be looking to God to supernaturally use the ordinary things in the world in which we live to accomplish his will.

As we put all of this together, we see how the God who got them into the tough times is the God who is also got them out of the tough times. Through the counsel of a man, through the command of God, through the circumstances of situations, it all led to

the conversion of the people in the final verses of Exodus 14.

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 great power of the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.

When they looked back, they could not help but be impressed. Here God had gotten them through the sea on dry land. More than that, he had taken the whole army that they could not possibly have fought or defeated and drowned them. Their bodies are washing up on the shore. And they believed. The same ones who were sarcastic. The same voices of criticism. Those who had been the cynics were now converted. Now they were believers.

But did you notice the sequence? First they obeyed, and then they believed. It is often that way. God calls upon us first to obey, and then we will see the evidences of his mighty hand. And then we will believe.

Perhaps for you these have been tough times. You may have been blaming other people, but the truth of it may be that God is the one who got you there. Understand that the God who gets us into tough times is also the God who can get us out of tough times. But understand, too, that, in order to get out of the tough times, we must obey God and we must trust him.

Initially, we must trust him for salvation through Jesus Christ who becomes our Savior and Lord. But obedience is not just a matter of salvation; it is a matter of life style on a continuing basis. When we obey him, then we discover the miracles that he performs in our lives. And then, we, too, fully believe.

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Leith Anderson and Wooddale Church
6630 Shady Oak Road
Eden Prairie MN 55344
952-944-6300
www.wooddale.org
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