

The Exodus

Exodus 13:17-18, 20-22; 14:5-31.

What a story! A very familiar one, I suppose, for children and adults alike. We all know pictures, I guess, from children's Bibles: Moses, stretching out his hand, the water of the sea divided into two parts and the Israelites marching safely to the other side.

And the Egyptians, the ruthless Pharaoh and his commanders, were killed in the waves flowing back.

A story of victory over the enemy, an enemy that tried to extinguish a whole people. Antisemitism at its worst. An end has come to a terrible time of slavery.

When I studied the passages for today, a number of things struck me, which I'd like to share with you.

In the first place, there is God's care and provision for his people. That was clear from the first passage we read, Exodus 13:17-18 and 20-22. There we read that God did not let the Israelites take the shortest route. Why not? Because that was the main route from South to North, where there were many military posts, which would of course try to withhold the Israelites. God knew that and led them a safer way.

Then, in verses 20-22, we read that God made provision for protection from the hot sun during the day by a 'pillar of cloud'. But in the night, God provided a pillar of fire so that they could see where they were going. The 'LORD went ahead of them...' He is like a guide holding a light before them and showing them the way. God cares in all the details of the life of his chosen people, as we can see in the rest of the Book of Exodus as well, providing food and water and protection.

And then... panic all over! Pharaoh has realized that he lost economically important workers – slaves who built the enormous pyramids! (verse 5) Can you imagine: he had just lost his firstborn son and so did the other Egyptians, but he soon concentrates on the economy – a modern story in a way, because how many times has money been the leading factor in wars and injustice?!

For the Israelites: panic all around – after being liberated, will they be enslaved again? Was it not better to have stayed in Egypt than die in the desert? How many times in the story of the Israelites in the desert will this complaint be repeated? And the one they complain towards is of course their leader, Moses.

But Moses has learned a lot about God since God spoke to him from the burning bush. It's amazing how strong his faith is: 'Do not be afraid', he says. 'Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today.' 'The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.' (verses 13-14)

That was another thing that struck me in studying this chapter. The deliverance of his people is completely God's work. It is not because the Israelites were such obedient and sincere believers. They were hardly one nation, they were a bundle of people who had just started their journey with God. But: God chose them and through Moses he is going to teach them his ways and his plans for their future.

It is by grace that they were saved from Egypt. It's God's love that comes first. It's God's power that released them, it's by his mighty acts that the victory over Pharaoh will be won. In fact, the battle itself, here in this chapter, and in the previous chapters, is between God, the only God, the Creator of heaven and earth, and the gods of Egypt. In Egypt the sun was worshipped as a god, the god Re, and the Pharaoh was his divine son. Who could conquer him?!

In Exodus 5:2, Pharaoh says to Moses: 'Who is the LORD, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the LORD and I will not let Israel go.'

Well, God showed his power over the Egyptian gods: one of the plagues is the darkness, three days long, when God showed that the sun-god Re was useless...

But Pharaoh hardened his heart and stuck to this harsh statement: 'I do not know – read: I do not want to know - the LORD and I will not let Israel go.'

But...in our chapter, in Exodus 14:18, God says: 'The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen.'

This is not a battle between human beings: this is the God of Israel, the creator of heaven and earth, in a spiritual battle, where He will win and conquer gods who were no gods. He will win and show his power, which saves and makes an end to injustice and misery and death for the Israelites. At daybreak, when the sun comes up, the sea flows back and Pharaoh and his army, drown. At daybreak, the sun-god Re was not able to rescue them, because God is the only God and he directs the sun, the moon and the stars.

In this story it is emphasized that it is God alone who wins this battle. In other passages in the story of Israel in the desert, there are wars when Israel needs to fight as well. But in this story, which is one of the most important events in Israel's history, it is God alone he wins the victory. For the Israelites this showed how great God was, how he 'reigns for ever and ever', as we read in the next chapter (Ex. 15:18). In that next chapter the whole event of Exodus 14 is sung and celebrated and God is praised and worshipped. That is the proper response to God saving us.

When we were saved, when God conquered our often stubborn hearts, it was completely his work, through his Holy Spirit. It's not because we were so strong in our faith. We probably hardly knew how great God is. And we are still on a journey to get to know God more and more, through reading the Bible, through sharing our stories when God saved us, through being in contact with God through prayer...

A few weeks ago, Pieter spoke about God revealing his Name to Moses: I am who I am. That meant that God keeps his promises, he was there for his people, in the past, in the present, in the future.

And Moses saw that God was reliable, because in the end God did lead his people out of slavery in Egypt, as he had promised at the burning bush. And God showed his care and love for his people in all details of the story.

And God showed the Egyptians that he is the 'I am, who I am', the only, true God in the whole universe, the Creator of heaven and earth.

God showed us who he is in Jesus Christ, who is God in human form. He saved us and led us out of slavery that sin brought. He freed us and set us on the path to grow in our trust and faith in him. He travels with us on our journey through life and the Holy Spirit guides us on our journey of faith. This is our God, whose Name we praise forever!