

## **“Between a Rock and a Hard Place”**

### **Exodus 14:19-31**

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor

First Baptist Church

Frankfort, Kentucky

September 24, 2017

Our attention is drawn this morning to one of the most dramatic stories in the Old Testament. It was the theme of one of the most popular movies produced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “The Ten Commandments,” starring Charlton Heston, Anne Baxter and Yule Brynner. This 1956 classic is still aired on television several times each year, especially in the spring during Passover.

Let me share the details of the ancient Hebrews’ departure from Egypt as it is described in our text. I’ll begin by explaining why the Israelites were in Egypt and what led to Pharaoh’s decision to let them leave.

Four hundred thirty years earlier, sometime around 1700 BCE, the Hebrew people migrated to Egypt during a famine. They were welcomed with open arms by Pharaoh and the Egyptians because Joseph, Jacob’s son, lived there and had become one of Pharaoh’s most trusted advisors and administrators.

As time passed, though, Pharaoh died and the new king of Egypt had nothing to do with Joseph. Previous privileges granted to Jacob’s family were revoked, and they became indentured servants.

While the new king was happy to have cheap labor, he grew increasingly concerned about the growing number of Israelites. The king lived in constant fear of the Hebrew people aligning with one of Egypt’s enemies to overthrow him.

As a result, Pharaoh increased the Israelites’ work load to an unrealistic level. His goal was to make them too tired to even think about aligning with another nation to lead a coup.

The straw that broke the camel’s back actually was straw. Pharaoh instructed his foremen to discontinue supplying the straw needed for making bricks. The Israelites were to

secure their own straw while at the same time making the same number of bricks each day. If they did not meet their quota, they were beaten.

When the Israelites were at the breaking point, they appealed to God for help. God heard their prayers and called Moses to leave Midian so he could return to Egypt to lead the Israelites out of Egypt.

Reluctantly, Moses accepted this mission and confronted Pharaoh, demanding the release of the proud people that had been turned into indentured servants. When Pharaoh declined, ten plagues were thrust upon the Egyptians, which finally convinced Pharaoh to let the Hebrew people leave Egypt.

Today's text describes the Israelites' freedom march somewhere near the edge of the Red Sea. All seems to have gone well the first few days of this epic journey, but this quickly changed when the Israelites heard the sounds of Pharaoh's army approaching.

It appears Pharaoh changed his mind about releasing the Israelites after thinking about the cheap labor he would be losing. Pharaoh knew the Red Sea would form a barrier that would trap the Israelites, and his army would encounter little or no resistance in bringing them back to Egypt.

According to our text, something happened which caught Pharaoh and his generals by surprise. The water of the Red Sea parted, allowing the Israelites to cross safely to the other side so they could continue their freedom march. When Pharaoh's army followed them along this parted path, the water flowed again, drowning Pharaoh's army.

The Israelites were safe, at least for the time being. They could continue on this physical and spiritual journey with an emboldened faith and a renewed hope for a better life.

**What do you feel when you read or hear this story?** I must be candid with you and tell you I have conflicting emotions. I rejoice when I read about the liberation of the Hebrew people from oppression. At all times and places, freedom from oppression is to be celebrated.

On the other hand, I grieve over the loss of so many Egyptians in the process, both those who suffered during the plagues and those in Pharaoh's army. The loss of life for any reason is painful, especially when someone dies a violent death.

We are all God's children, and death by violence for any reason is never to be celebrated. Every measure to prevent it should be taken, which could lead to a vigorous discussion about how these deaths could have been avoided.

Let's table this discussion for another time and focus now upon another topic I believe our text addresses, and this is the need to make difficult changes in our lives. I find this passage to be extremely helpful to someone who needs to leave a bad situation in pursuit of a better life, which may be where you are right now.

**Are you in a place from which you need to be liberated?** Are you in an abusive relationship where you are constantly beaten down emotionally and physically?

Are you struggling with a crippling addiction to drugs, alcohol, gambling, pornography, ego or possessions that has robbed you of joy and destroyed your relationships with those who love you most?

Are you running with the wrong crowd and heading down some dangerous roads?

Are you in bondage to a faulty way of thinking that is contributing to low self-esteem, inferiority or depression?

Are you in an unhealthy religious environment that does not offer hope but only condemnation?

Are you experiencing burnout on your job, or are you trapped in the prison of poverty?

**Must you stay where you are forever?** Is change possible, and if so, how can you head in a new direction?

Our text bears testimony to the fact change is possible, even radical change. This was true for the ancient Israelites, and it is also true for us as people of faith. None of us has to live in a prison without bars.

Leaving your Egypt will require, however, human and divine help, just as it did for the Israelites. This is one journey you cannot make alone.

You need family, friends and faith, just as the Hebrew people did. If you could have left your present circumstances by yourself, I suspect you already would have.

Talk to others about your situation and get their advice and support. Allow them to help you sort out your thoughts and lean on them for guidance, courage, strength and confidence.

Develop a plan that leads to a new and better life. Take the first step, which is always the hardest, and walk through doors that will surely open as you continue your journey.

Most of all, though, be prepared for stiff resistance. This may be the most important lesson to be gleaned from this story as you embark on your journey toward hope and healing.

**What kind of resistance will you face?** Based upon our text, people from your old life will try to drag you back, and voices inside you will do their best to convince you that you do not have what it takes to pull this off.

Both of these happened to the Israelites. Pharaoh's soldiers came to retrieve them, and fear of the future paralyzed them as they looked at the Red Sea and wondered how they would safely cross it. Had Moses not been with them, they would have given up and gone back to Egypt.

If you have ever begun a journey toward a new and better life, I think you know what I am talking about. You know what it is like for people who want to control you to undermine your efforts. Their dependence upon you or jealousy of you will compel them to drag you back to hell. Don't let them do it.

"Do not be afraid. Stand firm" Moses told the Israelites while looking over their shoulders at Pharaoh's imposing army. "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 will need only to be still." (Exodus 14:13-14)

Moses repeated two key words in his challenge to the Israelites while sandwiched between Pharaoh's army and the Red Sea: today and Lord. Why did he do this?

In the previous two verses, the Israelites mentioned the Egyptians five times without making any reference to God. All they could see was Pharaoh's army, and all they could think about was how weak they were in comparison.

They were convinced they were no match for this massive, well-equipped army or the imposing Red Sea. Defeat was inevitable and imminent.

This is why Moses had to direct their attention away from their doubts and fears and focus it upon the God who promised to be with them each step of the journey and to supply what they needed every day. On the edge of the Red Sea, Moses wanted the positive and

encouraging voice of faith to drown out the negative and destructive voices of fear, uncertainty, doubt, insecurity, inferiority, despair, cynicism and hopelessness.

The decision to leave your Egypt and to pursue a better life will require a strong commitment on your part. At all times and in all places, you must break free from those who want to sabotage your efforts and refuse to listen to the negative voices that attack you from within.

When the Israelites crossed the Red Sea that day, they did more than move from one shore to another. They moved to a new awareness of God's goodness and faithfulness and to a deeper level of commitment to the God who led them on this freedom march. They decided to trust God more than Pharaoh and to listen to Moses more than their fears.

This was a life-changing decision for them. It can be for us, too, when we stand on a similar shore and face a comparable choice.

**Are you there now?** What dreams for a new and better life beckon you? Have you started on your freedom march and come to a point where you are between a rock and a hard place? Are you trying to decide between returning to Egypt and crossing that river to a new and better life?

**Which will you choose?** Listen to Moses before you make that final decision.