

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MARCH 7

EXODUS 1–4

THE BACKGROUND

The migration of a single family rarely can be considered significant in the overall scheme of human history. However, Terah's move from Ur near the mouth of the Euphrates River to Haran in northern Mesopotamia was different (Gen. 11:31-32). His eldest son did not worship the same gods as the rest of Terah's family and neighbors (Josh. 24:2). Abraham worshiped only the one true God, who had guided this relocation (Acts 7:2-3). The family put down roots in Haran, where Terah died. In time, Abraham completed the migration and settled in Canaan in response to God's call (Gen. 12:1-4). The patriarch became wealthy but the only piece of the promised land to which he held a deed was the cemetery plot where he buried his beloved wife (23:7-20). Nevertheless, God promised him that his family would eventually possess all of Canaan.

Early in his residency in Canaan, Abraham encountered a world civilization that was already old and powerful. Egypt straddled the Nile River in northern Africa. The river's annual flooding deposited rich black soil along its banks. This fertile soil along with the hot desert sun produced an ideal agricultural land. When drought and famine crippled Canaan, its people turned to the grain in Egypt for survival. Famine motivated Abraham to travel to Egypt. Likewise, famine later drove his grandson to seek food there.

Egypt, however, was more than a food supplier. The nation was a major world power. Its political head was a king known by the title Pharaoh. The people of Egypt worshiped so many deities that determining the precise number in their pantheon is virtually impossible. Pharaoh was considered a god and thus possessed virtually absolute power. He commanded an army of professional soldiers equipped with cutting-edge technology. Pharaoh used the power of this military machine to impose his will on his subjects and on neighboring states. However, his will soon would confront Abraham's God over the destiny of Abraham's descendants . . . and the future of all humanity.

1. HE'S ALWAYS AROUND (EXODUS 2:23-25)

Verse 23: *After a long time, the king of Egypt died. The Israelites groaned because of their difficult labor, and they cried*

out; and their cry for help ascended to God because of the difficult labor.

The experience of Moses illustrated the hopeless dilemma of the Hebrew people. He escaped the edict of death only to end up an exile separated from family and community. Frequently a change in the head of state signals a change in government policy. This change also is reflected in different attitudes by the nation's citizens. However, the death of the pharaoh on this occasion failed to bring positive change for the Hebrew people. The persistence of the oppression by the new monarch intensified the Hebrews' despair. The verb translated *groaned* refers to weeping as a result of any sorrow. The verb rendered *cried out* usually denotes the agonized entreaty of persons in acute distress as they seek help and deliverance with emotion-laden utterances. The concept of God as being spatially above humanity is reflected in this verse, and this perspective involved genuine awe of God's being. Therefore cries for help *ascended to God*. To call on God in time of distress honors Him through recognition of His ability to help.

Verses 24-25: *So God heard their groaning, and He remembered His covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God saw the Israelites, and He took notice.*

Verses 24-25 refer to God in human terms. While we know "God is spirit" (John 4:24a), language like that used here shows God is real and intelligible. He is a God who acts. The verbs reveal God's concern for and His personal involvement in the Hebrews' suffering. The verb *heard* verifies that God received Israel's plea for deliverance. The significance of *remembered* is more than mental memory. When used with God as the subject in the context of a covenant relationship, it means that God honors His covenant and acts to ensure its validity. Here it means that God was going to act on the basis of His covenant with Abraham. He had not forgotten His people.

2. HE'LL GET YOUR ATTENTION (EXODUS 3:1-6)

Chapter 3: Verse 1: *Meanwhile Moses was shepherding the flock of his father-in-law Jethro, the priest of Midian. He led the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God.*

In the Hebrew text of this verse the word order is reversed from its normal sequence in order to emphasize the name *Moses*. The previous two chapters serve as background material for what is about to happen to Moses in chapter 3. They

have revealed both the Divine preparation of Israel's deliverer and the need for his leadership.

Even as his people endured the severe hardship of Pharaoh's policies, the fugitive Moses apparently lived in ignorance of their immediate plight. For him the daily routine of a nomadic shepherd occupied both mind and body. "Where can I find fresh grass and still waters?" In the inhospitable climate of the wilderness the answer determined life and death. Moses' quest for survival led him to Horeb [HOH reb], also known as Mount Sinai. Tradition locates the mountain in the south-central region of the Sinai Peninsula.

Verse 2: *Then the Angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire within a bush. As Moses looked, he saw that the bush was on fire but was not consumed.*

The phrase *the Angel of the LORD* also could be rendered "the Angel that is Yahweh." This translation does not imply that Yahweh is an angel. Whenever the Angel of the Lord speaks, His speech is recorded as the words of God in first person. The Angel of the Lord is none other than Yahweh Himself (see Ex. 3:2,4). Because of His omnipresence, God cannot be confined to one place and time. However, in the form of the Angel of the Lord, God could be perceived by humanity, who is confined by time and space. Because of His holiness, God cannot reveal Himself fully to humanity without obliterating humanity, but in the form of the Angel of the Lord, God could be seen without His holiness destroying the one to whom God revealed Himself. Thus the Angel of the Lord gave humanity a visible and audible representation of God that is both real and accurate. Here God revealed Himself in a flame of fire within a bush.

Verse 3: *So Moses thought: I must go over and look at this remarkable sight. Why isn't the bush burning up?*

What made this particular bush unique was the fire's failure to consume the bush. Initially Moses must have witnessed its glowing flames with the fear wildfires generate. But as he gauged its potential for destruction and its danger to his sheep, he became conscious of its constancy. Curiosity compelled him to investigate this amazing phenomenon.

Verse 4: *When the LORD saw that he had gone over to look, God called out to him from the bush, "Moses, Moses!" "Here I am," he answered.*

Having gained Moses' attention through the extraordinary burning bush, God disclosed His presence by speaking to the curious shepherd. God's first words to Moses reveal significant information about God's nature. By addressing

Moses by name, God indicated He knew to whom He was speaking. Furthermore, the usage of Moses' name established that God wanted a personal relationship between Moses and Himself. Repetition of the name was a Semitic means of expressing endearment. Moses was a fugitive felon. Yet God condescended to draw Moses to Himself and reach out in love. Such is God's grace. Moses' reply opened communication between the Lord and himself. It indicated he was receptive to the voice speaking to him. It also anticipated additional revelation from God.

Verse 5: *“Do not come closer,” He said. “Take your sandals off your feet, for the place where you are standing is holy ground.”*

Apparently Moses had continued moving toward the burning bush. But God stopped him from coming closer. Human ability to draw close to God is first dependent on Divine revelation. Likewise it is conditioned on the individual's state of readiness. Moses was not yet ready for further revelation.

In the ancient world, removing one's sandals was a sign of respect for a superior. While God had not yet identified Himself, His explanation for instructing Moses to bare his feet was an unmistakable clue. The ground where Moses stood was *holy*. The term seems to be derived from a verb that means “to separate.” In any case both the noun and the adjective denote belonging to the sphere of the sacred as distinct from the common or profane. Holiness describes the essential nature of God. It emphasizes that God is different from humanity. That distinction includes the reality that He is wholly good and totally without evil. In the context of Exodus 3 the term is related to God's presence. Because of God's presence, the ground around the burning bush had been appropriated for His purpose and so had become holy to Him.

Verse 6: *Then He continued, “I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” Moses hid his face because he was afraid to look at God.*

At last God identified Himself. He did not use a name on this occasion. Rather He distinguished Himself from other so-called gods by His historical activity with the Hebrews. This Divine connection with human history is characteristic of the One True God. He is the God who created everything. He is the God who acted in Egypt to redeem Israel. He is the God who sent His One and Only Son to save humanity by dying on a cross. He is the God who raised that One and Only Son from the dead. He is the God who confirms what He says

by what He does.

The identification with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is not surprising. We have encountered this kind of description elsewhere in the Scriptures. But the initial “I am the God of your father” is unexpected. Yet it is vital to this revelation of God. It indicated that God's work had not ceased with the patriarchs of Israel. He had continued to work in the lives of subsequent generations and was at work in the present generation.

Recognizing the nature of God whom he was encountering, Moses was overcome with fear. He realized his sinful nature was not compatible with God's holiness. Moses obviously understood something of the potential power of God's holiness. Thus he bowed his head in God's presence.

3. HE'LL TAKE ACTION (EXODUS 3:7-10)

Verse 7: *Then the LORD said, “I have observed the misery of My people in Egypt, and have heard them crying out because of their oppressors, and I know about their sufferings.*

The Lord next addressed the reason for His revelation to Moses. He described His response to the Israelites' prayers. He saw, heard, and knew what His people were experiencing. The idea is not that the cries of the Hebrews informed God but rather that God had determined the time had come for Him to act.

Verse 8: *I have come down to rescue them from the power of the Egyptians and to bring them from that land to a good and spacious land, a land flowing with milk and honey—the territory of the Canaanites, Hittites, Amorites, Perizzites, Hivites, and Jebusites.*

The Lord is a God who acts. The verb *come down* suggests the vast differences between a holy God and sinful humanity. God's purpose for such action was to rescue the Hebrews. His deliverance would remove them from Egyptian control and put them in new circumstances.

The promised new situation is described using powerful metaphors. The word *flowing* identifies something so full its contents are oozing out. Dairy products were a significant diet staple during biblical times. Milk was the raw material for making butter, cheese, and curds. The sweet taste of honey made it desirable. Hence, a land flowing with milk and honey depicted a place that would provide the essential diet for survival. The sweet taste of honey suggests it would also yield the extras that give pleasure to life. The Lord identified the land by a list of people groups residing in it, thus

clarifying for Moses precisely what territories He planned to give His people.

Verse 9: *The Israelites' cry for help has come to Me, and I have also seen the way the Egyptians are oppressing them.*

God disclosed that the plight of the Hebrews had not changed significantly since Moses fled Egypt. Abusive treatment of slave labor had not subsided. In their sorrow and torment the people prayed for deliverance. God confirmed He has heard their prayers and was about to act.

Verse 10: *Therefore, go. I am sending you to Pharaoh so that you may lead My people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.”*

God's next announcement was stunning to this shepherd. The instrument of His deliverance would be Moses! If ever what appeared to be an unlikely candidate had been selected, it was Moses. He previously had attempted to aid his people and failed miserably. They had rejected his assistance, and he had been forced to flee as a criminal (see Ex. 2:11-15). As he stood in the presence of the Almighty at the burning bush, Moses was 80 years old. The Hebrew slaves were a critical component of the Egyptian economy and defense. An elderly shepherd simply lacked the political and military influence to force the Egyptians to give up this slave labor resource.

God responded to the Israelites' prayers by acting to rescue them from their oppression and to resettle them in the promised land; consequently, He directed Moses to return to Egypt and lead the Israelites. When we pray for help in dire situations, we can appreciate that God may act on our behalf in unanticipated ways and through unexpected persons.

4. YOU WON'T BELIEVE WHAT HE'LL DO (EXODUS 3:19-20)

Moses was less than thrilled with God's disclosure that he had been chosen to lead the Hebrew slaves out of Egypt. Seeking to avoid the assignment, Moses asked a series of questions designed to show his lack of qualification for the mission. No doubt Moses' question in 3:11 reflected a sincere sense of being unworthy. Honest self-evaluation always concludes in a sense of inadequacy. However, rather than paralyze us into inaction, such a sense of inadequacy should lead to dependence on God. The Lord answered with a simple assertion that He would not abandon Moses. He also made another promise. He assured Moses he would bring the Israelites to this very mountain. At that future time, Moses would have the assurance that God had called him. Many times the only way we can be certain we did what God

wanted us to do is in looking back after we have carried out the assignment.

Moses offered God his second excuse: “I don’t know enough about God.” God responded, “I AM WHO I AM” (3:13-14). The grammar of this statement links God’s promise in the present with His performance in the past. It asserts the unchanging nature of God. Thus God promises to be with His people continuously, to be the same God He always has been. But His presence remains a mystery. God simply is incomprehensible. He called Moses and the Israelites to respond to His assertion “I AM” with faith in Him.

Verse 19: *“However, I know that the king of Egypt will not allow you to go, unless he is forced by a strong hand.”*

The Lord instructed Moses to go to Egypt, assemble the Hebrew leadership, and tell them God had heard their prayers. The time of their liberation was at hand. Then God acknowledged He would have to break the will of Pharaoh before Pharaoh would set the Israelites free. An egotistical king with absolute power would not free his slave-labor force without being compelled to do so.

Verse 20: *I will stretch out My hand and strike Egypt with all My miracles that I will perform in it. After that, he will let you go.*

The Lord would reveal His authority and power to Pharaoh. Pharaoh considered himself a god. He perceived himself as accountable to no one. Therefore God would strike escalating blows against Pharaoh’s dominion until Pharaoh submitted to the Lord’s authority and freed the Hebrews. God’s victory would be so complete Pharaoh’s subjects would generously compensate the slaves before their departure.

Moses made another excuse. He feared the Hebrews would not believe him. This was a legitimate concern. He had been reared in the family of their oppressor. He had vanished after they had accused him of murder.

Therefore God gave Moses some concrete actions to demonstrate the validity of his testimony (Ex. 4:1-9). Moses still hesitated. Either he had some speech disorder or lacked confidence in his eloquence. Whatever the basis of this excuse, God stressed that as Creator, He would enable Moses to speak. Finally Moses simply told God to get someone else. This overt disobedience angered the Lord. God revealed that Moses’ brother, Aaron, was on his way to meet Moses. He would join Moses and compensate for any weakness Moses had in speaking.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MARCH 14

EXODUS 5–10

THE BACKGROUND

The Israelites lived in Goshen, located in the eastern region of the Nile Delta. This location put them on Egypt's north-eastern border. Any invasion from Mesopotamia or from the area of modern Turkey must pass through Goshen before it could reach the more populated Egyptian communities. This fact gave the region strategic importance in Egypt's national defense. Pharaoh had mixed perceptions about the large Israelite population living in the area. Because he feared the Israelites might unite with his enemies, he attempted to limit their population growth. On the other hand, they provided a slave labor force for construction of defensive fortifications along this frontier.

In addition, the large Egyptian military force deployed along the main highway from Canaan and in the northern Sinai Peninsula depended on rations and supplies from Egypt. Hence major supply depots and administrative buildings were constructed in Goshen. Permanent garrisons required barracks and forts as well. These structures were built with sun-dried mud brick. So Pharaoh employed Israelite slaves in both making bricks and in the actual construction of the various buildings.

Pharaoh considered himself to be a god. As such he perceived himself as responsible for maintaining balance in the world. That responsibility included proper devotion to various Egyptian deities. Likewise in the king's mind, it meant he was superior to any god his slaves might worship, especially the God of the detested Israelites.

1. TO WORSHIP (EXODUS 5:1-3)

Verse 1: *Later, Moses and Aaron went in and said to Pharaoh, "This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: Let My people go, so that they may hold a festival for Me in the wilderness."*

The term *later* refers to an indefinite time after Moses had returned to Egypt, met with his brother Aaron and subsequently the Israelite elders, and told the people about the Lord's plan to deliver them. Moses and Aaron received an audience with Pharaoh. The expression *this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says* is a technical formula for prophecy. It indicates the words that follow are not the human speaker's but rather that God is speaking through this individual.

Therefore, the statements that follow are given in first person. Here the role of the human speaker was so eclipsed by the Lord's message that this text does not indicate whether Moses or Aaron did the actual speaking. The identity of the human voice is irrelevant. The real speaker was God.

The prophetic formula frequently occurs in the form *this is what the LORD . . . says*. Here the additional phrase *the God of Israel* is included for clarification and emphasis. The struggle that Moses' appearance in Pharaoh's court unleashed was not just about emancipating Israel from slavery. It would be a battle between Egyptian religion, with its vast pantheon of gods and goddesses, and the one true God. In Egyptian belief Pharaoh was the bridge between the gods and humanity. To his subjects he represented the gods. God's object was not only to liberate His people but also to demonstrate to all people that He alone is God.

God's call for Israel to celebrate a festival in the wilderness must be understood in the light of God's desire that the Egyptians might know that He is God. The Lord's message was not a request. It was a command. Neither was His command an attempt to deceive the Egyptian monarch. Following an accepted and respected style of negotiation used in the ancient Near East, the initial request was deliberately stated in modest terms, although both parties knew that what was really desired was the Israelites complete, permanent departure from Egypt. God was ordering Pharaoh to release the people of Israel. They belonged to Him, not to Pharaoh. The Lord was asserting His authority over both the people of Israel and Egypt.

God's instruction for Israel to celebrate the festival in the wilderness conveyed His demand that His people separate themselves permanently from the false worship of Egyptian idolatry. God's identification of Israel as My people, rather than "Israel," clearly denoted a relationship that was spiritual rather than merely ethnic. Anyone who would accept Him as God could participate.

Verse 2: *But Pharaoh responded, "Who is the LORD that I should obey Him by letting Israel go? I do not know the LORD, and what's more, I will not let Israel go."*

Pharaoh refused to allow the Israelites time for the celebration. Obviously he feared they would not return. Egyptian religion was filled with numerous gods and goddesses. Foreign gods were easily added into this fluid pantheon. However, the notion of exclusivity—a fundamental characteristic of the worship of the Lord, the only true God—was

essentially unacceptable to Egyptian belief at this time in the nation's history. Pharaoh could not grant Moses' request without acknowledging the legitimacy of the Lord's claim of sovereignty over him. And if the Lord was indeed Pharaoh's sovereign, might it not also imply that the Lord alone was God? Pharaoh considered the Lord's demand absurd.

Verse 3: *Then they answered, "The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Please let us go on a three-day trip into the wilderness so that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God, or else He may strike us with plague or sword."*

Everything Moses requested was the direct result of God's intervention in his life. Nevertheless, the words here are presented as those of Moses and Aaron. Both the absence of the prophetic formula and their uncertainty about the consequence of failure suggest this statement is their reiteration of God's demand recorded in verse 1. Instead of the title "the God of Israel" (Ex. 5:1) they used the expression *the God of the Hebrews*. The designation *Hebrews* was a broader, more generic term that included other related ethnic groups. While the use of the broader term was common in the Old Testament, its use here seems accommodating at best. The Egyptians typically viewed the designation as derisive. The term takes on overtures of negotiation rather than the force of God's command in verse 1. The two men seem to be begging favors from a powerful superior. However, this evaluation does not imply Moses and Aaron's words are personal opinion. The bulk of their request is virtually a verbatim quotation of the Lord's instructions in Exodus 3:18.

The designation *three-day trip* could refer to the distance that could be traveled in a period of three days. Since most Israelites would walk and the multitude would include both senior adults and children, 20 miles per day likely would be the maximum distance possible. Thus a *three-day trip* would be a journey of approximately 60 miles. However, a *three-day trip* was also an ancient idiom for an indefinite journey that had significant consequences. Hence, the phrase may imply a permanent migration. It certainly implied a total separation from the jurisdiction of Pharaoh.

Whatever perception the designation *three-day trip* might have created in the mind of Pharaoh, he clearly understood it implied the Lord had authority over him and his kingdom. If Pharaoh would not allow the Israelites to worship the Lord, he most definitely would not permit them to go free. To do so would produce catastrophic economic and military consequences. But if the Lord was God, not to do so could result

in an even more serious situation. Therefore the real issue was not the intention of the Israelites but the willingness of Pharaoh to acknowledge the Lord as the one true God.

Moses told Pharaoh that the Lord wanted His people released so they could hold a festival and offer sacrifices to Him. We affirm the Lord's rightful place in our lives when we join with His people in worshiping Him.

If Moses and Aaron had hoped their plea might persuade Pharaoh, they quickly learned otherwise. Pharaoh concluded that if his slaves could interrupt their labor for a religious festival, they had too much free time. From his perspective, that time could be employed in a more productive means.

Slave labor was used to produce bricks. In the process mud was mixed with water. If the mud lacked sufficient clay content, chopped straw was added to the mud as a binding material to reinforce the finished brick. This mixture was kneaded by trampling with feet until it reached a certain consistency. The wet mud was then shaped in a mold and dried in the sun.

Up to this time Pharaoh had provided straw for use in the brick making process. However, he decreed that henceforth the slaves must supply their own straw, but they were required to maintain the same level of productivity as before. This edict added hours of labor to the slaves' already long workdays.

With the decree, Israelite approval of Moses and Aaron evaporated. Israelite construction groups were organized with Israelite foremen who reported to Egyptian overseers. In the first two days after Moses confronted Pharaoh, the Israelites failed to meet their quota of bricks because of the added demand of gathering straw. Consequently, the Israelite foremen were beaten. A hostile mob confronted Moses and Aaron and charged the two men with murdering innocent slaves. Moses felt devastated and turned to the Lord with his frustrations.

2. TO BELONG (EXODUS 6:6-8)

Moses blamed the Lord for his people's suffering. God had promised to free the people of Israel. Instead Moses' mission had made the slavery even more unbearable. Rather than rebuke His insubordinate messenger, the Lord calmly exhorted Moses to be patient. Not only would Pharaoh eventually consent to emancipation, he would drive the Israelites out of Egypt!

God explicitly connected the unfolding events in Egypt

to promises He had made previously. Four centuries previously God had promised Israel's patriarchs He would give Canaan to their descendants. They had worshiped Him as God Almighty rather than as Yahweh. Nonetheless, He was the same God. He had made a promise and was already in the process of keeping that promise.

Verse 6: *"Therefore tell the Israelites: I am Yahweh, and I will deliver you from the forced labor of the Egyptians and free you from slavery to them. I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and great acts of judgment."*

Moses and Aaron were not the only ones discouraged by recent developments. Initially the people had enthusiastically embraced the hope Moses brought. Like Moses they too needed to learn that hope must be rooted in the Person of their God, not in circumstances or in the latest incident impacting their lives.

When he spoke to the people, Moses was to return to the bold prophetic voice with which he initially had confronted Pharaoh. The words would be the Lord's, not Moses' words.

God identified Himself as Yahweh. This name occurs well over five thousand times in the Old Testament and represents God's personal name. Its occurrence most commonly is denoted in English Bibles by printing either "Lord" or "God" in all upper case type. The name *Yahweh* is more than a label distinguishing God from other false gods. God asserted that His name was a significant revelation of Himself. When Moses encountered God in the burning bush, he asked to know God's name (Ex. 3:13). In response, God said, "I AM WHO I AM." Moses was to tell the Israelites, "I AM has sent me to you" (3:14).

In the original language the grammar of God's statement links God's promise with His performance in the past. God promises to be the same Deity He has always been, but His presence is a mystery. God is incomprehensible. Thus the name is not only a deep theological truth; it is a call to a response of faith.

The phrases *an outstretched arm* and *great acts of judgment* point to the coming plagues. They declare that the previous confrontation with Pharaoh did not convey God's final statement on the matter. Pharaoh arrogantly had denied any knowledge of Yahweh (5:2). The reference to *an outstretched arm* conveys God's decisive use of His power. He is infinitely superior to all other so-called gods. The battle that is about to occur would not be closely contested. The phrase *great acts of judgment* points to the dreadful suffering that would

be involved in this struggle from the perspective of the Egyptians. They would pay a terrible price for rejecting the Lord as God.

Verse 7: *I will take you as My people, and I will be your God. You will know that I am Yahweh your God, who delivered you from the forced labor of the Egyptians.*

God emphatically stated His intention for setting the Israelites free. He wanted to establish a covenant relationship with the people of Israel. The covenant relationship involved exclusive commitment. The nation would belong to Him. He would be the people's God. The objective of this relationship was so that the Israelites would *know* that Yahweh was their God. The Hebrew verb translated *know* in this context implies knowledge gained by experience. The people of Israel would know that Yahweh was their God because they would have experienced His presence and power in the events that were about to unfold.

Verse 8: *I will bring you to the land that I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and I will give it to you as a possession. I am the LORD."*

The Lord again connected what He was doing with His covenant with Abraham. Although the word *covenant* does not occur in this verse, it is implicit in what God stated. He promised Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that He would give the land of Canaan to their descendants (Gen. 15:18; 17:8; 26:3; 35:12). Once more the simple statement, "*I am the LORD*" was sufficient to guarantee the promised results.

The Lord instructed Moses to tell the Israelites He would redeem them so they could live in a covenant relationship with Him. We give evidence of understanding the Lord's redemptive purpose when we declare that belonging to the Lord and living in right relationship with Him are our paramount concerns.

Encouraged by this encounter with the Lord, Moses told the people what God had said. Exhausted and defeated by the hard labor, they refused to listen. Once again Moses felt his own inadequacy. However, God seemed to ignore Moses' self-depreciation and gave him and Aaron further instructions for their next encounter with Pharaoh.

3. TO TESTIFY (EXODUS 7:1-5)

God commanded Moses to return to Pharaoh and demand the people of Israel be released from servitude and permitted to leave Egypt. Moses hesitated. If his own people refused to listen to him, how could he expect the ruler of the world's

greatest superpower at that time to submit to him? The Israelites (6:9) as well as Moses (6:12) needed gracious reassurance the Lord would bring about what He had promised.

The narrative is interrupted with a genealogy of Moses and Aaron. Many Bible scholars view the inclusion of the genealogy at this point as an authentication of Aaron as a worthy colleague of Moses and as the first member of Israel's legitimate priesthood. However, it is also possible to view the inclusion of this genealogical list as demonstrating that God's choice of these two men was not based on their natural advantage or ability. While the genealogy traces their lineage back to Levi, it hardly serves as a pedigree qualifying them for the task before them. Levi and Simeon had annihilated the entire male population of a Canaanite village after their sister was raped. Later, when Jacob blessed his other sons, he harshly condemned both Levi and Simeon (Gen. 49:5-7). So the genealogy affirms Moses' evaluation of himself as inadequate. Thereby human ability becomes immaterial. It will be the Lord, not Moses or Aaron, who liberates the Israelites.

Verse 1: *The LORD answered Moses, "See, I have made you like God to Pharaoh, and Aaron your brother will be your prophet.*

God compared the relationship between Moses and Aaron with the relationship the Lord has with His prophets. The role of the Old Testament prophet was being the Lord's spokesperson. The prophet's preaching was characterized by the words, "This is what the Lord says . . ." The message that followed was not his own but the Lord's message. The prophet delivered the words verbatim, even retaining the first person. They were God's words. Thus the analogy here was that while Aaron spoke, he spoke only what Moses told him to say.

Verse 2: *You must say whatever I command you; then Aaron your brother must declare it to Pharaoh so that he will let the Israelites go from his land.*

The Lord had permitted Aaron to be Moses' spokesperson when Moses complained about his inability to speak. Having allowed the arrangement, God clarified how it was to function. Moses was the man chosen by God. God sent Moses to Pharaoh. God commissioned Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. God's concession to Moses' insecurity in no way relieved Moses of this responsibility. God would continue revealing His words to Moses. Aaron could relay them to Pharaoh, but Moses and Aaron must not modify

them in any way.

Verse 3: *But I will harden Pharaoh's heart and multiply My signs and wonders in the land of Egypt.*

In ancient Hebrew thought, the heart was the center of human volition. This idea came from observing what happens to the cardiovascular system when individuals make decisions that impact their lives. The heart rate increases, blood pressure rises, and they feel pressure in the chest. So the hardening of the heart denotes losing the capacity to make choices. God's statement here must be understood in light of what He previously had said about Pharaoh and what actually happened later. The Lord previously told Moses that Pharaoh would not let Israel go free unless he was forced to do so (see Ex. 4:21; 6:1). God's statement here reaffirms this earlier conclusion.

Initially, Pharaoh hardened his own heart (8:15,32). As events reached their climax, God hardened Pharaoh's heart (9:12; 10:20,27; 11:10). Overlapping these two are some references in which the text simply records that Pharaoh's heart hardened without specifying a Divine or human origin (7:22; 8:19; 9:7,35). Two biblical truths are relevant to understanding this statement. The Lord is sovereign in His dealings with human beings and knows beforehand how we will respond to Him. This fact does not relieve us of responsibility for our decisions. God has given each person free will. Therefore we are accountable to Him for our actions.

Verse 4: *Pharaoh will not listen to you, but I will put My hand on Egypt and bring out the ranks of My people the Israelites, out of the land of Egypt by great acts of judgment.*

People have the freedom to make choices, but human choices cannot overturn the Lord's purposes. Ultimately He is Creator and has final authority over His creation. The ultimate outcome of any confrontation between the Lord and Pharaoh could never be in doubt. The Lord would be victorious. Therefore Israel's release was secure. The nation would be leaving Egypt.

The word *judgment* refers to punishment in the penal sense. In one sense the plagues that God was about to unleash against the Egyptians were Divine punishment for their failure to recognize Him as God. Not only would Moses and Aaron bear witness of the Lord verbally but also the Lord's mighty acts on behalf of the Israelites would testify of Him to the Egyptians. The plagues struck at Egyptian religion and demonstrated the Lord's sovereignty over realms the Egyptians credited to their deities.

Verse 5: *The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I stretch out My hand against Egypt, and bring out the Israelites from among them."*

The Lord's punishment of Egypt was not strictly punitive. He wanted the Egyptians to know that He was God. The plagues would reveal that He, not the Egyptian counterfeits, was the true God. The Lord assured Moses the powerful actions He would take in redeeming the Israelites also would bear witness of Him to the Egyptians. We provide others a powerful witness about the Lord and His purposes when we live as His redeemed people.

Moses and Aaron again confronted Pharaoh. There must have been more than a few smiles as this 80 year old and his 83-year-old spokesman began to order Pharaoh to release his slave-labor force. Pharaoh was the absolute ruler of a world superpower. Yet the interview set the tone for all that was to follow. As the two men stood before the great king, he demanded proof of the Lord's power. Aaron threw the staff on the ground. Miraculously it turned into a snake. Unimpressed, Pharaoh summoned the magicians of his kingdom who through their occult practices imitated Aaron's miracle. However, Aaron's serpent devoured the others. Nevertheless, Pharaoh refused to release the Israelite slaves.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MARCH 21

EXODUS 11–13:16

THE BACKGROUND

The series of plagues had been building in crescendo as the Lord demonstrated His superiority over the so-called Egyptian gods. The roar of God's triumph was overwhelming. After turning the Nile to blood, God sent eight more plagues. Each continued His preparation for deliverance. Each plague or judgment demonstrated the superiority of the Lord over the Egyptian king who believed himself to be a god. The supreme Egyptian god was Amon-Re, associated with the sun. The ninth plague was darkness (10:21-23). Even the most powerful Egyptian god fled from the presence of the Lord.

With the passing of each plague, God separated Himself from the religious status quo of the ancient world. Initially the Egyptian magicians were able to imitate by magical deception or occult practices what Moses and Aaron did by the Lord's power. However, as the struggle unfolded, the Lord demonstrated His absolute sovereignty. He proved His superiority to the Egyptian pantheon. Yahweh was the one true God. The facts were indisputable. Nevertheless Pharaoh remained unrepentant and refused to allow the Israelites to go free.

The events described in Exodus 11:1–13:16 were decisive. The contest between God and Egyptian idolatry had reached its climax. Moses and Pharaoh had met for the last time. God would strike Egypt an irreversible blow on behalf of His people, the Israelites. Those who believed the Lord and obediently painted their doorframes with blood would be spared. However, anyone who feared Pharaoh and ignored Moses' warning would encounter God's judgment.

God's promise of deliverance was so certain that even before it took place, He gave instructions for how subsequent generations should celebrate the event. He also included how to teach the next generation about Divine deliverance.

1. A FRESH START (EXODUS 12:1-5)

Verse 1: *The LORD said to Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt:*

The Israelites remained in bondage. Relief from oppression had not yet come. God's pledge to bring about the deliverance of His people yet remained an unfulfilled promise. So the Lord spoke to both Moses and Aaron. Because Moses

had doubted his own capability, God had provided Aaron to assist Moses (Ex. 4:14-17). Here the reference to Moses and Aaron serves to anticipate the role of the Levites and the priesthood in teaching and enforcing God's laws.

Verse 2: *"This month is to be the beginning of months for you; it is the first month of your year.*

The phrase *the beginning of months* simply means the first month of a new year. The exodus out of Egypt marked the establishment of a new calendar in Israel. The beginning of Israel's existence as a nation was grounded in the Lord's saving act. The celebration of Passover recalled God's salvation of His people from slavery in Egypt.

Verse 3: *Tell the whole community of Israel that on the tenth day of this month they must each select an animal of the flock according to their fathers' households, one animal per household.*

Israel was divided into households. The literal meaning of the Hebrew word is "house." Here the term designates the social unit of people living together within the house. Passover was a family holiday. It was observed at home. At the heart of the celebration was a commemorative meal. Each family was to select a lamb for the observance. The size of the family determined the size of the lamb. The family must be able to eat the entire lamb.

Verse 4: *If the household is too small for a whole animal, that person and the neighbor nearest his house are to select one based on the combined number of people; you should apportion the animal according to what each person will eat.*

If a family was too small to eat an entire lamb, its members were to combine with another family in order to consume the whole animal. This provision recognized variations in family makeup and allowed for flexibility. This flexibility anticipated a future redefining of what constituted family relationships for commemorating the Lord's deliverance. Jesus celebrated the Passover with His disciples, not with His mother and brothers. Under the new covenant people who have experienced deliverance through faith in Christ become His family.

Verse 5: *You must have an unblemished animal, a year-old male; you may take it from either the sheep or the goats.*

A family could not use any lamb. God instituted certain stipulations for a Passover lamb. The lamb was to be unblemished, not crippled or marred by imperfection. The animal was to be a year-old male. It could be either a sheep or a goat. The description implies the lamb was a precious

family asset. It likely was one of the most valuable animals the family owned.

The unblemished lamb pointed to the sinless perfection of Christ (1 Pet. 1:18-19). John the Baptist identified Jesus as the Lamb that takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29). While John did not specify the Passover lamb, the sense remains the same. Paul clearly wrote that Christ our Passover (Lamb) already has been sacrificed (1 Cor. 5:7). Christ died to deliver us.

2. A NIGHT TO REMEMBER (EXODUS 12:6-11)

Verse 6: *You are to keep it until the fourteenth day of this month; then the whole assembly of the community of Israel will slaughter the animals at twilight.*

The lamb was selected on the 10th day of the month (Ex. 12:3). The animal was not slaughtered until the fourteenth day of the month. The delay surely impressed on the family the great cost of their deliverance. On the appointed day the sacrifice was killed at twilight. The identification of a specific time for slaughtering the animals reminded each family the Passover observance was a community event.

Verse 7: *They must take some of the blood and put it on the two doorposts and the lintel of the houses in which they eat them.*

God gave instructions for the lamb's blood. After killing the lamb, the blood was smeared on the doorframe of the family's residence using a hyssop branch. Hyssop probably refers to the Syrian marjoram plant, a small bushy plant common in the region. The blood was to be put on both doorposts and lintel. After the doorframe was marked with the blood, the family ate the Passover meal together inside the house.

Blood represented life (Lev. 17:11). The symbolism was clear. The blood on the doorframe represented a life laid down for those on the inside. It marked them as belonging to God. The Israelites were warned not to leave their houses after the blood had been applied (Ex. 12:22). Going outside of the house took one outside the area of God's protection. The blood of the Passover lamb calls to mind the purifying power of Jesus' shed blood (see 1 John 1:7).

Verses 8-9: *They are to eat the meat that night; they should eat it, roasted over the fire along with unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Do not eat any of it raw or cooked in boiling water, but only roasted over fire—its head as well as its legs and inner organs.*

The menu of the Passover meal likewise was prescribed. The main entree was the Passover lamb. It was to be roasted over the fire. Other methods of cooking were forbidden. The meat was to be eaten that same night. Along with the meat the family ate two side dishes, unleavened bread and bitter herbs. Unleavened bread represented the removal of evil. That night the unleavened bread also had a practical purpose. There would not be time for the bread to sit while the yeast caused the dough to rise. The departure from Egypt would come quickly. The herbs symbolized the bitterness of slavery in Egypt.

Verse 10: *Do not let any of it remain until morning; you must burn up any part of it that does remain until morning.*

The entire Passover meal was to be eaten that night. Nothing was to be left. That which had not been consumed was to be burned with fire. God's preparation of Israel was complete. Israel must therefore completely obey the Lord's instructions in anticipation of His deliverance.

Verse 11: *Here is how you must eat it: dressed for travel, your sandals on your feet, and your staff in your hand. You are to eat it in a hurry; it is the LORD's Passover.*

A sense of urgency dominated God's instructions. The people were to eat the meal dressed for travel. The clothing of that period consisted of a long tunic. Whenever rapid movement was required, the skirt of the tunic was pulled up between the legs and tied to the sash or belt around the waist. This action formed a type of outfit that permitted the legs to move freely. The exodus would demand speed. Therefore, the people could not be hindered by their dress. Furthermore, every person was to wear his or her sandals. The call to depart would require urgent action. No time would be left for preparation! Therefore the meal was to be eaten in a hurry. Whenever God issued the word to depart, the Israelites were to move immediately and swiftly.

3. A GIFT FROM ABOVE (EXODUS 12:12-14)

Verse 12: *"I will pass through the land of Egypt on that night and strike every firstborn male in the land of Egypt, both man and beast. I am the LORD; I will execute judgments against all the gods of Egypt.*

The significance of the designation *Passover* is set forth in verses 12 and 13. God would pass through the land of Egypt. He promised to strike down every firstborn of humans and animals. The reason for such slaughter was stated: "I am the LORD; I will execute judgments against all the gods of Egypt."

Those who died placed their trust in deities that were not real. Toleration of such idols contradicted the very nature of the one true God. He sent nine plagues that undermined the Egyptians' entire religious system, yet they failed to acknowledge that He is God. Therefore the Lord determined to strike one final blow against their gods.

Verse 13: *The blood on the houses where you are staying will be a distinguishing mark for you; when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No plague will be among you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt.*

In contrast to the Egyptians, on this occasion the Israelites heard God's words and obeyed His instructions. The blood was a distinguishing mark for them. It proclaimed their faith in the Lord. When God struck down those who relied on Egyptian gods, He would pass over the houses marked by the blood. Those inside would experience no harm.

God gives us instructions for our salvation. We must trust in the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 16:30-31). There is no other way (Acts 4:12). Some people refuse to accept God's instructions. When He judges humanity, they will find themselves under condemnation. However, those who follow God's instructions need not fear. The blood of Christ, our Passover Lamb, will mark our faith in Him. God's judgment will pass over those who have placed their faith in Him. In John's vision recorded in Revelation 7:14 the apostle saw a vast multitude of believers from every nation. They were distinguished by their robes that had been made white "in the blood of the Lamb."

Verse 14: *"This day is to be a memorial for you, and you must celebrate it as a festival to the LORD. You are to celebrate it throughout your generations as a permanent statute.*

In historical practice, the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were merged into a single celebration, initiated with Passover and followed by the Feast of Unleavened Bread. A *memorial* is an object or act that recalls something or that represents something else. Passover recalls the great historical event of God's deliverance of Israel from slavery in Egypt.

The absence of yeast in the Passover celebration was related to Israel's need for haste in the exodus. However, in verse 15 the punishment for violating this prohibition suggests something far more serious than a need for haste. At its heart the issue was one of faith demonstrated by obedience.

In verse 17, the people of Israel were instructed to "observe" the celebration as a permanent statute. The basic idea

of the verb concerns exercising great care over something. It can be used with the sense "to guard" or "to take care of" something. In verse 17 it has the sense of careful attention to be given to the obligations of the covenant between God and Israel. The people were to carefully commemorate God's deliverance in the exact manner prescribed. We too need to remember and show appreciation for God's deliverance in our lives.

The dates prescribed in Exodus 12:18 were Abib 14-21 on the Hebrew calendar. This month on the ancient calendar falls in March and April of the modern calendar. That month was later identified as Nisan.

BACKGROUND COMMENTARY FOR MARCH 28

EXODUS 13:17–15:21

THE BACKGROUND

The Israelites had been slaves in Egypt since the dynasty that Joseph had served was replaced by a new pharaoh representing a new dynasty (Ex. 1:8). In recent times the oppression of the Egyptian pharaoh had created unbearable suffering for the Hebrew people. In their despair the slaves cried out to God for relief. To their astonishment, a fugitive named Moses returned to Egypt with the seemingly unbelievable assertion that the Lord had sent him in response to the slaves' prayers. Although ethnically an Israelite, Moses had been reared in the Egyptian royal family. When he was about 40 years old (Acts. 7:23-29), Moses attempted to side with the Israelites but his efforts turned sour. He murdered an Egyptian overseer and then fled the country. Forty years passed before he returned to Egypt as a deliverer sent by God (Ex. 7:7). His initial effort at seeking the Israelites' freedom backfired. Instead of releasing the slaves, Pharaoh exacted a heavy price on them by demanding additional work. All hope appeared crushed.

Despite the objection of the Israelites' foremen, Moses persisted. In a series of cataclysmic encounters between Moses and Pharaoh, Egyptian resistance was eventually obliterated. Each encounter was followed by an increasingly devastating plague. With the tenth and final plague, death struck down the firstborn child of every home that did not follow the Lord's instructions to apply blood from a lamb on the doorframe of the house. As the prolonged wailing of grief spread across the land, a grieving Pharaoh expelled the Israelites. The emancipated slaves left Goshen, marching toward the rising sun and freedom.

Despite the joyful anticipation of a new life, the departure did not mark the end of the Israelites' troubles. The promised land was still a long way off. Days would pass before the column of people would cross the border out of Egypt. Between the Israelites and their destination lay miles of inhospitable territory. Completion of the journey would require persevering faith.

1. HEY, BACKSEAT DRIVER! (EXODUS 13:17-18)

Verse 17: *When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them along the road to the land of the Philistines, even*

though it was nearby; for God said, "The people will change their minds and return to Egypt if they face war."

The Scripture makes clear that the exodus was the result of Divine intervention. God alone had subdued Pharaoh's stubborn resistance to the Israelites' departure from Egypt. God continued His providential guidance to bring His people to the promised land. He even selected the specific route they were to travel. We can depend on God's leadership because in His wisdom He knows the best way for us to go.

Verses 17 and 18 have a strong military flavor. The logistics required and problems faced for moving the Israelites varied little from those of moving an army. The road to the land of the Philistines, a way by which God did not lead His people, referred to the southern portion of the major highway from Egypt to Mesopotamia. This main road followed the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. Because the road was the major transportation route into Egypt, the Egyptian army was deployed along this road to defend Egypt from invasion.

A network of forts and way stations had been constructed along this route. Because of Egypt's vulnerability at this point, the garrisons likely would have been the best Egyptian troops available. They certainly were superior to the Israelites' force in equipment, training, and experience. This reality gave the Egyptians a definite psychological edge. The prospect that a chance meeting with Egyptian army units could escalate into pitched battle was undeniable.

If the Israelites had taken *the road to the land of the Philistines* and successfully evaded the Egyptian army, they likely would have encountered Philistine opposition. We know the Philistines had colonies in the region in the time of Abraham. Their population at the time of the exodus is unknown. A substantial migration of the Philistines had taken place by the time the Israelites entered Canaan (Josh. 13:1-4), and the Philistines controlled the coast of Canaan for centuries. Their military superiority to the Israelites was undeniable. The people of Israel were not able to eclipse them until the time of David. If the Philistines attempted to block the route, the Israelites may not have been strong enough to force their way into Canaan. It was not yet the time that God intended for the Israelites to conquer the Philistines.

The Israelites had 600,000 soldiers (see Ex. 12:37). However, despite their massive numbers, these men were ill prepared for battle. They lacked military training and carried only rudimentary arms. Nevertheless at this time the primary frailty of the Israelites was not military weakness but the

people's lack of resolution to finish the trip. In the aftermath of a bloody battle with veteran enemy soldiers, the unprepared former slaves might decide freedom was not worth the cost and return to Egypt. Therefore the Lord guided His people away from potential contact with Philistine armies.

Verse 18: *So He led the people around toward the Red Sea along the road of the wilderness. And the Israelites left the land of Egypt in battle formation.*

The road of the wilderness was a desert road running through the Sinai Peninsula. Moses was familiar with the wilderness area. As a nomadic shepherd for Jethro, he had ranged throughout the peninsula's eastern desert for 40 years. God selected this road for His people to travel out of Egypt.

The Hebrews traveled in battle formation. The use of military formations is reasonable. The movement of large numbers of people over great distances in a specified time demanded detailed logistical organization. In addition armed attacks could be expected during the migration from Egypt to Canaan. In fact war with the Amalekites erupted before the Israelites reached Mount Sinai (Ex. 17:8-16).

Moses ordered the coffin that contained the embalmed body of Joseph to be carried with the people as they left Egypt. Prior to his death Joseph had made his contemporaries take an oath to transport his corpse back to the land God had promised to give to his great grandfather, Abraham (Gen. 50:24-26). The oath had been an affirmation that in time God would fulfill His promise. Moses' transportation of the coffin fulfilled the promise made by his ancestors and it indicated his own faith in God's providential care. In time Joseph's wish to be buried in Canaan was realized. He later was buried at Shechem (Josh. 24:32).

Like other sites listed in the Israelites' exodus, the locations of Succoth and Etham are uncertain (Ex. 13:20). When all factors are considered, it is unlikely that the Israelites traveled more than 40 miles during the first two days. At any rate the text is explicit; they had only reached the edge of the wilderness. Here the people of Israel established camp and prepared to enter the desolate rocky hills of Sinai.

God's leadership guided the Israelites during this period without interruption. His presence with His people was revealed in a pillar, or column, rising into the sky. During the daylight hours this column was a cloud. At night it became fire. Therefore it was visible to the entire camp at all times. Every person could see it. The continuous vision of the pil-

lar consistently reminded the Israelites that God was always present with them.

At this point the Lord revealed His intentions to Moses. God instructed him to turn the Israelites around and move them aimlessly as if they were lost. God's strategy was to make Pharaoh think the wilderness was too much of an obstacle for his former slaves (14:1-3). The sea obviously could not be crossed. The Israelites appeared to have no means of escape. Pharaoh's stubborn refusal to comply with God's emancipation edict would bring one final calamity to Egypt. In its aftermath both the Lord's existence and His superiority would be undeniable.

2. HOW DID I GET HERE? (EXODUS 14:9-14)

Verse 9: *The Egyptians—all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, his horsemen, and his army—chased after them and caught up with them as they camped by the sea beside Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon.*

By the time of the exodus, Egypt possessed a large standing army. Its soldiers were disciplined veterans of repeated campaigns. The well-equipped army utilized the latest military technology. The soldiers' dominant weapon on the battlefield was war chariots. These vehicles gave an army rapid mobility and a stable firing platform. The two-wheeled vehicle was drawn by a team of horses. Each chariot was manned by a driver and a fighter.

Chariots were a vital part of the force that pursued the Israelites. The organization of this force seems to have included an elite group of chariots under the direct command of Pharaoh and a larger force that operated within his chain of command. The troops pursuing the Israelites were a highly mobile, efficient fighting force that knew precisely its objective at the Red Sea. The exact size of the force was not given, but it was more than enough to fulfill its mission of returning the Israelites to slavery.

The Egyptian army located the Israelite or Hebrew camp by the sea. The term *Baal-zephon* means "Baal of the north." Once more the exact location of the site cannot be determined. However the description suggests the encampment may have been near a Canaanite temple.

Verse 10: *As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up and saw the Egyptians coming after them. Then the Israelites were terrified and cried out to the LORD for help.*

When the Israelites first spotted the Egyptian army, it was in battle array and moving steadily toward their campsite.

It must have been a horrifying sight. First they would have seen massive dust clouds the horses' hoofs kicked into the air. Then the chariots would have appeared as indistinct specks evenly spaced beneath the cloud of dust. The people did not need to wait until the vehicles were closer. They quickly realized the danger that was racing toward them.

The Israelite position appeared hopeless. The Israelites' military capability was primitive at best. Their troops had not yet had time for proper training, and they lacked combat experience. Consequently their infantry formations were no match for the superior Egyptian chariot force. The deep waters of the sea behind them made retreat impossible. Israelites always viewed the sea with foreboding. Never had its formidability seemed more obvious than in this instance. The close proximity of the Egyptian army blocked any other movement. The prospect of a violent death loomed before the Israelites. If they survived the attack, their return to slavery seemed certain. Becoming terrified was natural in such desperate circumstances.

The immediate reaction of the trapped Israelites was prayer. They cried out to the LORD for help. Intense pleas for deliverance rose up to the heavens. However, the Israelites' subsequent behavior revealed a lack of faith. With every passing second the distance between the Israelites and the advancing Egyptian army decreased. Yet God provided no indication He would intervene on His people's behalf. Time for deliverance was running out fast. Their doom seemed definite.

Verse 11: *They said to Moses: "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you took us to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt?"*

The next reaction of the Israelites likewise was very human. Their voices turned from prayer to blaming Moses. The sarcasm in their remarks was stinging. The reference to *no graves in Egypt* was ironic. The Egyptian religion was a cult of death. Many of Egypt's outstanding architectural wonders were tombs. Even the lower classes invested time and effort in preparation for their burials.

Ancient Egypt was a narrow strip of fertile soil along the Nile River. In contrast, the colored sand of the desert was known as "the red land" or *the wilderness*.

Verse 12: *Isn't this what we told you in Egypt: Leave us alone so that we may serve the Egyptians? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."*

The people's mood no longer was guided by reason. Emotions such as fear directed their words. Their "Isn't this what we told you" comment was an "I told you so" intended to vindicate their own lack of faith.

The grumbling people no longer attributed their march out of Egypt to the deliverance of God. They assigned Moses responsibility for their plight. The people wrongly reasoned their assumed death was his fault. If he had stayed away, then they would be content building supply cities for Pharaoh. Faced with imminent destruction, the suffering of slavery did not seem nearly as bad (see Ex. 1:8-22).

Verse 13: *But Moses said to the people, "Don't be afraid. Stand firm and see the LORD's salvation He will provide for you today; for the Egyptians you see today, you will never see again.*

Moses responded with an exhortation for the people to trust God. The first step they needed to take was overcoming their fear because fear demoralizes individuals and crowds into paralysis.

The next charge issued by Moses was for the people to stand firm. The Hebrew verb contains more than the idea of simply standing. It has the sense of taking a strong stand in opposition against someone. Here it conveys the idea of stationing oneself firmly as if in a line of battle to resist attack. However, the Israelites were to stand firm not in order to fight, but so they could see what would happen to their enemy!

Today indicates that on that very day God was going to bring about their salvation. In his context the word *salvation* has a literal sense of saving life from death. This fact does not take away the spiritual sense the word also conveys. Moses revealed that God would transform certain defeat into absolute victory before His people's eyes. The people should watch because never again would they see these Egyptians.

Verse 14: *The LORD will fight for you; you must be quiet."*

The basic idea of the verb *be quiet* is noncommunication and may express either not speaking or not hearing. Clearly the context here implies not speaking. In essence Moses summoned his accusers to remain silent. God would speak. The Lord would speak with actions, not empty words. The people of Israel were to overcome their fright, take a fixed position, stop their complaining, and watch God deliver them from the Egyptians.

3. BLINDED BY THE LIGHT (EXODUS 14:15-18)

Verse 15: *The LORD said to Moses, “Why are you crying out to Me? Tell the Israelites to break camp.*

In the narrative only the people cried out to God. Moses’ only words were a marvelous summons to faith in God. Perhaps the essence of God’s question to Moses recorded here is, “Don’t you think the time has come to stop talking and act?” The question was followed by two specific instructions. First Moses was to order the Israelites to break camp. God wanted His people to proceed toward the land He had promised to give to them. Both the sea before them and the enemy behind them were insignificant because of His presence. He would defeat both threats.

Verse 16: *As for you, lift up your staff, stretch out your hand over the sea, and divide it so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground.*

God’s second instruction was for Moses to take his staff, lift it up, and stretch it out over the water. This action relates to God’s instruction for the people to break camp. God’s time had arrived. His way of deliverance was clear, but the people must move forward and claim it. Moses likewise must obey God. God promised that when the people moved toward the sea and Moses held his staff over the water, it would move to each side and provide a dry path to the far shore.

Verse 17: *I am going to harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them, and I will receive glory by means of Pharaoh, all his army, and his chariots and horsemen.*

In the Old Testament God’s glory was the manifestation of His presence and power. It revealed itself in various ways. It might be in His provision of food (Ex. 16:6-8) or in the cloud that led the Israelites (see 16:10). It might show itself in the smoke and fire on Mount Sinai (24:16-17). At the Red Sea the presence and power of the Lord would be revealed in the destruction of troops of the world’s most powerful army. Their defeat would not come in battle nor from some cosmic catastrophe, but by one of the simplest chemical compounds in creation, H₂O, plain ordinary water propelled by one of nature’s most common phenomena, wind. The Book of Exodus reveals the Lord’s absolute sovereignty over His creation. God is free to suspend the laws of nature, as in a bush that burns without being consumed by the fire. He may demonstrate His power over His creation as when the wind parted the water and left dry land in the midst of the sea (14:21). The defeat of the military might of the Egyptians us-

ing the simplest elements of creation—wind and water—revealed God’s glory—His presence and power to the Israelites on that night.

Verse 18: *The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I receive glory through Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen.”*

God’s glorification through the destruction of the Egyptian force was not merely for the Israelites’ benefit. The Lord wanted the Egyptians to know Him as well. It is interesting that with the dating of the exodus in the mid-fifteenth century B.C., within less than a century polytheistic Egypt inexplicably experimented with monotheism—the belief in only one god. While the monotheism of Pharaoh Akhenaten and his Queen Nefertiti certainly was not the worship of Yahweh, one cannot help but wonder if the memory of the exodus events did not have some influence on this later monarch.

The Angel of God relocated so as to stand between the Egyptians and the Israelites (14:19). The flaming pillar moved behind the advancing Israelites and became a barrier to Egyptian pursuit. Its light enabled the Israelites to see as they escaped during the night. Just as God had promised, the sea’s water divided and stood like walls on either side of a dried path across the sea bottom. All through the night the Israelites marched. Men, women, children, and their livestock moved methodically toward the opposite shore and safety. On the other side of the fire column rising into the dark sky, the Egyptian military waited impatiently for an opportunity to race after their prey.

By the next morning the entire population of Israelites was safely across. Just before dawn the pillar moved and the Egyptians were able to continue their pursuit. As they charged across the sea bottom, God created chaos in their ranks. Wheels mired in the mud and sand. Chariots slammed into each other, and drivers fought to control their horses. Their efforts were futile. The Egyptians attempted to retreat, but the walls of water suddenly collapsed. The entire pursuing force was destroyed.

The Bible is explicit, “the LORD saved Israel from the power of the Egyptians” (14:30). The text indicates that God used a strong east wind as an instrument of deliverance (14:21), but God, not the wind, was responsible for His people’s salvation. Furthermore God had dealt Egypt a shattering blow. The Egyptian army had been responsible for the nation’s prestige in the region. Its loyalty to Pharaoh enabled him to exert his will over his subjects and to expand his authority

over foreign territory. However, “the waters came back and covered the chariots and horsemen, the entire army of Pharaoh, that had gone after them into the sea. None of them survived” (14:28). The Lord’s superiority was indisputable to both His people and to His enemies.

As the sun rose high in the eastern sky, the people of Israel surveyed the situation. The bodies of drowned Egyptian soldiers washed up on the seashore. This detail conveys how radically the situation had changed. The previous day these corpses were a powerful army terrifying the lives of men, women, and children. The next day they were lifeless objects tossed ashore by the waves of the sea.

4. I GOTTA WEAR SHADES (EXODUS 14:31)

Verse 31: *When Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and believed in Him and in His servant Moses.*

The Israelites’ army had fought no battles to destroy the pursuing army. Yet in the morning they could gaze on the shining surface of water where hours before they had walked on dry land. The barrier of water separated them from slavery. They finally were free. God, and God alone, was responsible for the dramatic difference in their lives. Surely many worshiped. A person could depend on God who demonstrated such great power. An individual could follow the leadership of His servant.