



## Week 4

### Crossing of the Sea & Entering the Wilderness

#### Day 1 - Exodus 14:5-6, 10-14, 21-27

*<sup>5</sup> When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the minds of Pharaoh and his officials were changed toward the people, and they said, "What have we done, letting Israel leave our service?" <sup>6</sup> So he had his chariot made ready and took his army with him.*

*<sup>10</sup> As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them. In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. <sup>11</sup> They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? <sup>12</sup> Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone so that we can serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness." <sup>13</sup> But Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today, for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. <sup>14</sup> The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still."*

*<sup>21</sup> Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and turned the sea into dry land, and the waters were divided. <sup>22</sup> The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. <sup>23</sup> The Egyptians pursued and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. <sup>24</sup> At the morning watch the Lord, in the pillar of fire and cloud, looked down on the Egyptian army and threw the Egyptian army into a panic. <sup>25</sup> He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt."*

*<sup>26</sup> Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." <sup>27</sup> So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea.*

### **Understanding the passage:**

Can you imagine how Pharaoh felt when he realized that the Hebrews *actually did it*? They had threatened to flee for so long, but they never actually made good on it. They couldn't. There were as many as two million Hebrews, but the Egyptians still outnumbered them. The Egyptians were still stronger. The Egyptians would not let it happen...

...until things got so dire that Pharaoh had no choice but to let them go. Their God had already turned the water source to blood, sent locusts and moths to destroy all of their farmland and agriculture, and scared them to death with three days of utter blackness. And then... their firstborns were gone. What other choice did Pharaoh have? Keeping the Hebrews around was a sure path to destruction.

But it begs the question of how he felt when they were actually gone. Did he look at his ruined country and wonder how he would recover any sort of economy in the face of the loss of the slaves that made up his free labor source? Was he concerned that he would lose face with his people who used to think of him as a god, but saw Pharaoh and all of the Egyptian gods defeated by the Israelites' God?

As soon as he gets his wits about him, he gives chase to the Israelites. They notice that they are being pursued when they are standing at the edge of the Red Sea. With their backs to an uncrossable body of water, they have no escape route. They're just a couple of days out from witnessing the power and might of God, but their first reaction is a complete lack of trust. They look at their physical circumstances (trapped) rather than remembering their spiritual circumstances (saved).

They curse Moses for getting them into that position and claim that they would rather have died as slaves than die in the wilderness as free people. They have quickly forgotten God's provision for them. With the benefit of thousands of years of hindsight, we might be tempted to condemn them for their behavior. But it's likely that you've also struggled to trust God when you are called to leave something familiar for something unknown or hard.

Moses tells the Israelites that God will fight for them, and they see this demonstrated when the Red Sea closes back in on itself as the Egyptians pursue them. On the two-year anniversary of the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, twelve thousand people gathered at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, the headquarters of the Episcopal diocese of New York State, to hear Martin Luther King, Jr. preach a sermon called "The Death of Evil on the Seashore." Using the Exodus story, he drew parallels between the freedom the Israelites felt when they saw that the Egyptians had perished in their pursuit and the freedom that African Americans felt in the wake of the landmark desegregation verdict:

"This story symbolizes something basic about the universe. It symbolizes something much deeper than the drowning of a few men, for no one can rejoice at the death or the defeat of a human person. This story, at bottom, symbolizes the death of evil. It was the death of inhuman oppression and ungodly exploitation. The death of the Egyptians upon the seashore is a glaring symbol of the ultimate doom of evil in its struggle with good."

MLK's sermon picked up on an important theme in the Exodus story. The focus should not be on the deaths of the Egyptians (for, as he said, no one can rejoice at the death of a human) but should be on the ultimate doom of evil in its struggle with good.

### Questions for reflection:

1. When you're called to exodus from the familiar – even if it's painful – into something unknown and potentially dangerous, how do you respond?
2. When you have a "Red Sea" in your life that you need to cross, how does it make you feel?
3. Have you ever experienced God clearing a path for you like God did for the Israelites? How did this feel?

### Day 2 - Chapter 15:1-13, 15:22-25, 17:2-6

*15:1 Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the Lord:*

*"I will sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
horse and rider he has thrown into the sea.*

*<sup>2</sup> The Lord is my strength and my might,  
and he has become my salvation;  
this is my God, and I will praise him;  
my father's God, and I will exalt him.*

*<sup>3</sup> The Lord is a warrior;  
the Lord is his name.*

*<sup>4</sup> Pharaoh's chariots and his army he cast into the sea;  
his elite officers were sunk in the Red Sea.*

*<sup>5</sup> The floods covered them;  
they went down into the depths like a stone.*

*<sup>6</sup> Your right hand, O Lord, glorious in power—  
your right hand, O Lord, shattered the enemy.*

*<sup>7</sup> In the greatness of your majesty you overthrew your adversaries;  
you sent out your fury; it consumed them like stubble.*

*<sup>8</sup> At the blast of your nostrils the waters piled up;  
the floods stood up in a heap;  
the deeps congealed in the heart of the sea.*

*<sup>9</sup> The enemy said, 'I will pursue; I will overtake;  
I will divide the spoil; my desire shall have its fill of them.  
I will draw my sword; my hand shall destroy them.'*

*<sup>10</sup> You blew with your wind; the sea covered them;  
they sank like lead in the mighty waters.*

*<sup>11</sup> Who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?  
Who is like you, majestic in holiness,  
awesome in splendor, doing wonders?*

*<sup>12</sup> You stretched out your right hand;  
the earth swallowed them.*

*<sup>13</sup> In your steadfast love you led the people whom you redeemed;  
you guided them by your strength to your holy abode.*

*<sup>22</sup> Then Moses ordered Israel to set out from the Red Sea, and they went into the wilderness of Shur. They went three days in the wilderness and found no water. <sup>23</sup> When they came to Marah, they could not drink the water of Marah because it was bitter. That is why it was called Marah. <sup>24</sup> And the people complained against Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" <sup>25</sup> He cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood; he threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.*

*<sup>17:2</sup> The people quarreled with Moses and said, "Give us water to drink." Moses said to them, "Why do you quarrel with me? Why do you test the Lord?" <sup>3</sup> But the people thirsted there for water, and the*

*people complained against Moses and said, "Why did you bring us out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and livestock with thirst?"<sup>4</sup> So Moses cried out to the Lord, "What shall I do for this people? They are almost ready to stone me."<sup>5</sup> The Lord said to Moses, "Go on ahead of the people and take some of the elders of Israel with you; take in your hand the staff with which you struck the Nile and go. <sup>6</sup>I will be standing there in front of you on the rock at Horeb. Strike the rock, and water will come out of it, so that the people may drink." Moses did so, in the sight of the elders of Israel.*

### **Understanding the passage:**

This song appears immediately after the crossing of the Red Sea and the defeat of the Egyptians. What must it have been like for them to come to the realization that they were finally free? They made it out of Egypt. The remaining threat – the Egyptians in pursuit of them – have perished. After 430 years, they are truly and finally free.

The first thing they do is praise God. They give God the credit for their victory ("horse and rider he has thrown into the sea"). They grasp that none of the gods in the Egyptian pantheon can stand up to the God of Abraham and Moses ("who is like you, O Lord, among the gods?").

Their praise is surprising, because human nature tends to make people take all the credit for their victories and successes. It is easy to fall into the trap of believing that you have gotten to your current circumstance through nothing more than your own might. It is inclined to ignore the ways God has intervened, providing opportunities and skills.

Shortly thereafter, as they're traveling through the wilderness, they cannot find water that is suitable for drinking. They immediately begin complaining about the bitterness of the water. Chapter 17 recounts a similar incident in which the Israelites quarrel with Moses because they cannot find water to drink.

It's tempting to read these stories from a critical position: *God just saved them and they're already complaining?!* Certainly, there is an aspect of distrust that God would continue to provide for them. But it's worth trying to understand their position. The American Psychological Association conducts a "Stress in America" survey each year. Concerns about housing, health, and job security top the list year after year. Though the Israelites left terrible circumstances of slavery, they were still confronted with stressful and scary circumstances of not knowing where they would live, leaving the only kind of work they've ever known, and watching their health deteriorate with the lack of water. The human body can only go a few days without meaningful hydration, and that timeframe is shortened in the heat or with physical exertion. The Israelites were watching their children and livestock suffer without anything to drink and they were fearful of dying.

Moses' response to the people and his cry to God are focused on the conflict. In contrast to that, God's focus is compassion. God immediately provides water. God does not scold the people or use their distrust as an object lesson. The graciousness and provision of God are on full display. God uses Moses' staff, which brought death to the water of the Nile in the first plague, to bring life to the Israelites in the form of fresh water.

### **Questions for Reflection:**

1. Chapter 15 records the first worship song in the Bible. Which lines stand out to you? Why?
2. What do we learn about the people of Israel from these passages?
3. How do you respond to situations of stress and fear?

### **Day 3 - Exodus 16:1-3, 16:11-20**

*<sup>1</sup> The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. <sup>2</sup> In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. <sup>3</sup> The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the Lord's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."*

*<sup>11</sup> The Lord spoke to Moses, <sup>12</sup> "I have heard the complaining of the Israelites; say to them, 'At twilight you shall eat meat, and in the morning you shall have your fill of bread; then you shall know that I am the Lord your God.'"*

*<sup>13</sup> In the evening quails came up and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. <sup>14</sup> When the layer of dew lifted, there on the surface of the wilderness was a fine flaky substance, as fine as frost on the ground. <sup>15</sup> When the Israelites saw it, they said to one another, "What is it?" For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread that the Lord has given you to eat. <sup>16</sup> This is what the Lord has commanded: Gather as much of it as each of you needs, an omer per person according to the number of persons, all providing for those in their own tents." <sup>17</sup> The Israelites did so, some gathering more, some less. <sup>18</sup> But when they measured it with an omer, those who gathered much had nothing over, and those who gathered little had no shortage; they gathered as much as each of them needed. <sup>19</sup> And Moses said to them, "Let no one leave any of it over until morning." <sup>20</sup> But they did not listen to Moses; some left part of it until morning, and it became wormy and rotten. And Moses was angry with them.*

#### **Understanding the passage:**

There is a common theme to the Israelites' complaints – they are not directed at God. They are, instead, directed at Moses. Unlike their immediate response of praise after crossing the Red Sea, the Israelites do not confess their faith in God when they face new trials.

Still, God hears their cries and provides for them. God does not give them the desires of their heart (they lamented no longer having "pots of meat" and all of the food they wanted), but God provides exactly what they need. This need, though they didn't realize it at the time, was both physical and spiritual.

Physically, God provides sustenance in the form of manna each morning and quail each evening. These were extravagant gifts, especially the quail. Though the Israelites recalled pots of meat, it was truly unusual for the average person to eat meat on a regular basis because it was so costly. God provides meat *every day* for the Israelites. God answers their cries for bread with manna and their cries of thirst with water.

Spiritually, God was teaching them to rely on God. Meeting physical needs is one thing, but learning to trust God is an altogether different – and frankly, harder – thing. God uses the physical sustenance to teach them about God's character and their relationship, but the Israelites don't seem to make the connection. In verse 12, God tells Moses that the bread and quail are coming specifically so the people "shall know that I am the Lord your God."

Though the manna and quail come without fail according to the schedule that God lays out, the Israelites continue to operate from a scarcity mindset rather than one of abundance. Jewish folk wisdom says, "It took 4 days to take Israel out of Egypt. It took 40 years [of wandering] to take Egypt out of Israel." The Israelites had been slaves for more than 400 years. They did not become a free people overnight for they still had the mindset of slaves.

### Questions for reflection:

1. Do you have the mindset of a slave in any part of your life?
2. How do you respond when God answers your prayers differently than you hoped?
3. Do you trust that God will provide even when you can't see God's provision?

### Day 4 - Exodus 17:8-13

*<sup>8</sup> Then Amalek came and fought with Israel at Rephidim. <sup>9</sup> Moses said to Joshua, "Choose some men for us and go out; fight with Amalek. Tomorrow I will stand on the top of the hill with the staff of God in my hand." <sup>10</sup> So Joshua did as Moses told him and fought with Amalek, while Moses, Aaron, and Hur went up to the top of the hill. <sup>11</sup> Whenever Moses held up his hand, Israel prevailed, and whenever he lowered his hand, Amalek prevailed. <sup>12</sup> But Moses's hands grew heavy, so they took a stone and put it under him, and he sat on it. Aaron and Hur held up his hands, one on either side, so his hands were steady until the sun set. <sup>13</sup> And Joshua defeated Amalek and his people with the sword.*

### Understanding the passage:

Not long after the Israelites settled in the wilderness, the Amalekites – surely feeling threatened by the recent influx of a new and unknown tribe of people – attacked the Israelites. Moses sends his trusted lieutenant Joshua out to battle the Amalekites, but there's a second part of Moses' plan to ensure victory. As long as he stands with his staff up, the Israelites will be victorious. When Moses tires and is unable to hold up the staff, the Amalekites prevail in their battle.

This staff, which Moses refers to as the "staff of God", is the same one that God transformed into a snake at the burning bush, that was used to turn the Nile into blood, that initiated several other plagues, that parted the Red Sea, and that brought forth much-needed water from a rock. Holding up the staff that God has so clearly worked through is a symbol of putting his trust in God to sustain and preserve them.

But there comes a point when Moses can no longer hold up the staff under his own strength. His exhaustion causes him to lower it and let his defenses down. There are times when we start out strong in our trust in God. We lift our hands in surrender and keep the faith. But eventually, the power of the situation wears on us. We begin to doubt God or try to manage the situation on our own. We don't have anything left. Those are the times in which we need other folks around us to help us hold on to our faith.

We should be guided by the proverb "Make hay while the sun shines" when considering who will hold our arms up. Moses did not forge a new relationship with Aaron and Hur during battle. Their companionship was deep and well-established. In the same way, we are unlikely to create the kind of relationships needed for support during hard times if we wait until the hard times begin to make the relationships. Being intentional in the present about the people with whom you surround yourself because it will pay dividends in the future.

### Questions for reflection:

1. Who holds up your arms when you are battle-weary?
2. Whose arms are you committed to holding up?
3. Read Isaiah 40:31. What does this passage tell you about being sustained when you're battle-weary?

## **Day 5 - Exodus 18:13-23**

*<sup>13</sup> The next day Moses sat as judge for the people, while the people stood around him from morning until evening. <sup>14</sup> When Moses's father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone, while all the people stand around you from morning until evening?" <sup>15</sup> Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. <sup>16</sup> When they have a dispute, they come to me, and I decide between one person and another, and I make known to them the statutes and instructions of God." <sup>17</sup> Moses's father-in-law said to him, "What you are doing is not good. <sup>18</sup> You will surely wear yourself out, both you and these people with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. <sup>19</sup> Now listen to me. I will give you counsel, and God be with you! You should represent the people before God and bring their cases to God. <sup>20</sup> Teach them the statutes and instructions and make known to them the way they are to go and the things they are to do. <sup>21</sup> You should also look for able men among all the people, men who fear God, are trustworthy, and hate dishonest gain; set them as officers over thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. <sup>22</sup> Let them sit as judges for the people at all times; let them bring every important case to you but decide every minor case themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. <sup>23</sup> If you do this and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their homes in peace."*

### **Understanding the passage:**

"What you are doing is not good."

Jethro does not mince words in his assessment of Moses' approach to leadership. He sees that Moses does not have any systems in place for leading 600,000 people, which is a guaranteed path to wearing oneself out. He advises Moses to create a system – essentially, an org chart – that would delegate leadership of smaller groups.

Jethro's words echo God's words in the creation story in Genesis 2:18: "it is not good for the man to be alone." God did not create humans to flourish in isolation. Rather, humankind was created to need others, to long for connection, and to work alongside other people. Take a moment to consider how you react to that. God intends that reminder about dependence to be a balm, but for many, it causes us to bristle as it is antithetical to our American ethos of self-reliance and independence.

Instead of operating under the principle *if you want a job done right, do it yourself*, consider what may be gained by empowering others and entrusting them with a partnership in the work. Insisting on doing everything by yourself will likely fulfill Jethro's prediction of wearing out you and the people around you. It also prevents other people from discovering, using, and honing the gifts that God gave them.

### **Questions for reflection:**

1. What advice did Jethro give Moses?
2. What are you striving to do on your own strength?
3. Do you need to put a trellis in place to help you manage your life? Take a few minutes to think about what that might look like.

**Video Discussion Questions:**

1. Moses tells the people, "The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still." Is there something you need God to fight for on your behalf right now?
2. Do you find it hard to leave things you know, even if they are not good things?
3. Can you relate to the Israelites longing to go back to slavery when they felt overwhelmed by the unknown?
4. Why were the people tempted to collect more than a day's worth of manna? How might you have responded if you were in their shoes?
5. Do you find yourself "over-collecting" during times of abundance as well as famine?
6. Do you put your trust in the manna or the God who provided it?
7. Why do you think they had to wander in the wilderness rather than going right to the Promised Land?
8. Have the wilderness seasons that you've gone through smoothed out your sharp edges?
9. Who are the people that help you hold your arms up?
10. What is your biggest takeaway from this week?

**Prayer requests and other notes:**