Exodus 13:17-14:31 *Legendary: Red Sea Rescue*

***Legendary***Comic book characters are a big deal right now. Have been for the last 10 years or so. Ever since Marvel studios put out the first Ironman movie there have been 20+ Marvel cinematic universe movies culminating in this years big *Avengers: Endgame.* And, of course, they say that’s just phase 1. There is supposed to be a whole new crop of comic book movies coming out in phase 2.

I have to admit, I’m not a comic book geek. I was familiar with some of the bigger comic book characters—I’d heard of Thor and Captain America and the Incredible Hulk and Spider-Man—but some of the more recent characters are new to me: Black Panther and Captain Marvel and Ant-Man. These are thecharacters that are going to begin Phase 2 and they going to add in others I have never heard of—the Eternals and Shang-Chi. But for people who are comic book fans, some of these characters have stories that they have just been waiting to see played out on the big screen.

And that’s kind of my idea for our summer series of sermons. I want to do a series on heroes from the Old Testament. These are some of the first and greatest adventure stories in the history of the world. Kind of like ancient comic book characters. But instead of focusing on the big names and the big stories that you have probably heard of, I want to do a summer series on some of the stories you might not be as familiar with. Instead of Abraham and David, I want to look at characters like Caleb and Elijah.

So I’ve described the idea behind this series as B-list celebrities from the Bible; or, even, stories you might not have known were in the Bible. I think it is going to be a fun series for the summer, as we go on some of these true story adventures.

But to start us off, I went with a big name and a big story. Because we have just finished VBS, and the main focus of our Bible Stories all week long has been Moses and the Exodus, I thought we’d start with the biggest salvation story in the Old Testament: The Red Sea Rescue. This is the story that Jewish history continues to look back to and remember, and it is the story that sets the stage for the salvation Jesus brings centuries later.

***The Red Sea Rescue***

So, today, I invite you to open your Bibles to Exodus 13. This is the grand-daddy of all adventure stories in the Bible. If you want to think of it in comic book terms, then Moses is like Captain America.

I know this is a familiar story—I could ask most of you to come up here and tell the story and I’m sure you could do a pretty good job with the main plot points—but I want you to notice some of the many interesting details in the text. So we’re going to read through the story, and I’ll make some comments as we go. And, as much as possible, I’d like to encourage you to listen to the story as though you are hearing it for the first time.

**Chapter 13, at verse 17**:

17 When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt." 18 So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt armed for battle.

The people of God—the Israelites—were enslaved in Egypt. At first they went to Egypt for famine relief—and God provided for them through Joseph—but eventually the Egyptians felt threatened by them. They were stuck in ghettos, forced to do slave labor, and even had their male children thrown into the Nile.

But God heard their cries, and sent Moses as a deliverer. Pharaoh was stubborn—he didn’t want to lose his work force—but God unleashed a terrible series of plagues to convince him to release the slaves. That’s where we start, with the people on their way to the Promised Land. This is why this Bible book has the name it does: Exodus. The great exit.

And we start with an interesting detail: there was a shorter, more direct way to the Promised Land. It’s a coastal highway through what is known here as Philistine country—not because the Philistines were living there at this time, but because that is where they will end up. The problem with this route is that it was the main trade route, and would have been heavily fortified by the Egyptians. And God knows: if the people have to fight their way out, they might change their minds and go back. So He sends them on the longer, less used, more difficult path.

**Verses 19-20:**

19 Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the sons of Israel swear an oath. He had said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place."

This is a callback to the end of Genesis. Joseph is the one who saved his family when he rose to become chancellor of Egypt. But he also predicted that they would need God to deliver them someday, and by faith he made his brothers promise to take his bones back to the Promised Land (cf. Genesis 50:25 and Hebrews 11:22). Now it is happening. This story is part of a much larger story. **Verse 20:**

20 After leaving Succoth they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert. 21 By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. 22 Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

The Israelites do not set off into the desert on their own. The LORD goes with them—manifesting Himself as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night. The LORD is both a guard and guide to the Israelites. Guard and guide. He protects them, and He shows them the way.

But it looks like He’s leading them into a trap. **Chapter 14, verse 1**:

1 Then the LORD said to Moses, 2 "Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. They are to encamp by the sea, directly opposite Baal Zephon.

Here’s another interesting detail: God is very intentionally directing the Israelites into a trap. We’re not sure where any of these places are. We’re not even sure what the Bible means by the Red Sea. (Some scholars think it should be translated Reed Sea). We just know that God turns the Israelites around and positions them so that they have Egypt on one side and a large, uncrossable body of water on the other.

But this is actually God’s plan. **Verse 3**, God says:

3 Pharaoh will think, 'The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert.' 4 And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD." So the Israelites did this.

There’s a reason God sent them on the longer route. There’s a reason He’s turning them around and parking them by the water. He’s going to teach the Egyptians a lesson. The Israelites aren’t trapped—God is setting an ambush!

So, picture this in your mind: There are some 2 million Israelites—from the very young to the very old. And they’re carrying all their earthly possessions, driving all their livestock, plus some of the treasures of Egypt. And on one side they have a big, deep body of water, and no boat. And on the other side they have the place from which they are fleeing. **Verse 5**:

5 When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about them and said, "What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services!" 6 So he had his chariot made ready and took his army with him. 7 He took six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them. 8 The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, so that he pursued the Israelites, who were marching out boldly. 9 The Egyptians—all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, horsemen and troops—pursued the Israelites and overtook them as they camped by the sea near Pi Hahiroth, opposite Baal Zephon.

The 10 plagues were bad, but Pharaoh’s heart is hard. The Israelites were a pretty significant slave labor force. And now they’ve walked off the job. And Pharaoh doesn’t feel so good about that.

So he prepares the chariots, puts together the army, and he goes after them.

Now, keep in mind, Egypt was THE world power at this time. I mean, we still talk about ancient Egypt today. We’ve got their artwork in museums, we visit their pyramids, and we make movies about their mummies. These guys were an empire. So when the Bible says Pharaoh brought out six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt, it’s not talking about a little posse. This is the state-of-the-art army of a superpower going out after a rag-tag mob of refugees. And the Israelites know their odds aren’t too good. **Verse 10:**

10 As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD. 11 They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? 12 Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"

Here’s a pattern that’s going to follow Moses to the end of his days. The people are quick to forget God’s blessings and even quicker to complain. Already they prefer the familiarity of slavery to the adventure of following God. And Moses rebukes them for it. **Verse 13**:

13 Moses answered the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. 14 The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still."

Here’s what this story is all about. Deliverance. The LORD is going to deliver His people. He’s going to fight for them. In this battle the Israelites will not be soldiers, but spectators. All they need to do is be still and trust. **Verse 15,** God gives Moses the plan:

15 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. 16 Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground.

Spoken by God, it all sounds so simple. Moses will raise his staff, God will divide the water, and the Israelites will walk across on dry land. We’ve seen the movie with Charlton Heston, so we know this is going to work. But it really is sort of ridiculous. **Verse 17:**

17 I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. 18 The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen."

Way back in Exodus chapter 5, when Moses first demanded that he let the people go, Pharaoh said: “I do not know who the LORD is.” Now, he’s going to know. All of Egypt will know. Everybody is going to know. God is going to gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen. **Verse 19:**

19 Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, 20 coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long.

Here’s another interesting detail: this all took place at night. The pillar of cloud positions itself between the Israelites and the Egyptians (more of a guard now than a guide); and then makes it pitch dark on one side, and light on the other. It’s like the cloud becomes a giant floodlight so the Israelites can see where they are going, even as the Egyptians are kept in the dark. **Verse 21:**

21 Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, 22 and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

This is hard to explain in natural terms, though some have tried. Some scientists have suggested that at low tide portions of the Red Sea can withdraw and leave hard packed sand that appears dry. Combined with a strong wind blowing steadily for 10 to 12 hours, it has been suggested that up to a mile or two of seafloor could be exposed.

The Bible makes no secret of the fact God used wind to accomplish His purpose. So maybe there is a natural explanation in terms of shallow water, low tide and strong winds. But what is remarkable is that all this happened when Moses stretched out his hand, at the precise moment the Israelites needed an escape route.

Clearly, this was the mighty hand of God at work.

My friend Matt calls this “creational warfare.”  God made the water, the wind, and the tides; and He can make it do whatever He wants for His good purposes.

But getting the Israelites across is only half of the miracle. There are still the Egyptians to deal with. **Verse 23**:

23 The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. 24 During the last watch of the night the LORD looked down from the pillar of fire and cloud at the Egyptian army and threw it into confusion. 25 He made the wheels of their chariots come off so that they had difficulty driving. And the Egyptians said, "Let's get away from the Israelites! The LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."

Another detail: the Egyptian wheels start flying off their chariots. It’s like a NASCAR pit crew, only in reverse. Before the water falls back in on them, the Egyptians already know they are in trouble. **Verse 26**:

26 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea so that the waters may flow back over the Egyptians and their chariots and horsemen." 27 Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at daybreak the sea went back to its place. The Egyptians were fleeing toward it, and the LORD swept them into the sea. 28 The water flowed back and covered the chariots and horsemen—the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not one of them survived.

I heard a story once about a teacher who was trying to discredit the Bible. “There’s no way the waters could be pushed back,” she said. “The Israelites must have crossed the Red Sea at a place where the water was particularly shallow.” As she finished her explanation, one little boy in the back shouted, “Praise God for the miracle!” Flustered, the teacher said, “There was no miracle. I just explained that it was only shallow water.” Undaunted the little boy said, “Well then it was a miracle that God drowned the Egyptians in 6 inches of water.”

The Egyptians were hard-hearted and foolish. They were under the judgment of God. They were abusing the people of God, and the LORD punished them for it.

**Verses 29-31** are a summary of the whole story:

29 But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. 30 That day the LORD saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the shore. 31 And when the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.

Total destruction of Egypt.  Total deliverance for Israel. Total victory for YHWH.   
  
Payback for Egypt for throwing Israelite boys into the Nile. Salvation for Israel from the yoke of slavery. All the glory to God.

***Lessons***

Now, let me make 3 observations from this passage.  In verse 13, Moses called this the “LORD’s deliverance.” So I’ll make my observations in terms of Deliverance.

First, I want you to notice that **this deliverance is the work of God alone**.

This is not a revolution. The Israelites are not freedom fighters. We were told at the beginning of the story that they marched out armed for battle (13:18), but when push came to shove and the Egyptians were breathing down their necks, they preferred to go back to the labor fields than to stand and fight. Liberation was not won by Israel, it was given by God. Remember, they were spectators not soldiers.

Moses makes this clear when he responds to the people’s complaints. **Verses 13 and 14**:

13 Moses answered the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. 14 The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still."

“Deliverance the LORD will bring you today.” “The LORD will fight for you.” “You need only to be still.” This is God’s work.

It is God Himself in the pillar of fire who drove back the Egyptians and held them at bay during the night. It is God who created the strong east wind and pushed back the waters. It is God who brought the waves crashing back down on the heads of the Egyptians.

The whole story is designed to show that Israel’s great deliverance was the work of God, and God alone. “Salvation is of the LORD” is a theme throughout the Bible. It’s not something the Israelites earn. It’s not something they can take for themselves. It comes only by God’s royal saving power.

And there is a parallel to our own deliverance there. We are not redeemed from slavery in Egypt, but more significantly we have been released from the work camp of the devil. And our salvation comes only from the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. There is nothing we can do to earn it. Nothing we can do to contribute to it. It is entirely the work of God on our behalf. Salvation is by grace. Only grace.

Second, I want you to notice that **this deliverance calls for a response of faith and fear.**

Look again at Moses’ words in **verse 14:**

14 The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.

What God wants from the Israelites is trust. Their job is to stand still and watch the deliverance that God will bring.

At the beginning of the story, the Israelites did not trust God. He did not send them down the main highway because He knew they were not yet ready to trust Him in battle. But by the end of the story, there has been a change in their attitude, **verse 31:**

31 And when the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant.

The Red Sea Rescue called the Israelites to put their faith in the LORD.  The Egyptians lying dead on the shore were a call to fear the LORD. That means they didn’t take Him lightly or flippantly or for granted. Instead, they stood in awe of Him. They trusted Him.

In the same way, what God wants from us is faith. He wants us to trust in Him. To stop trying to make life work according to our plans and schemes and be still before Him.

The Red Sea Rescue Calls for Faith in and Fear of God.  
  
Are you living in faith and in the fear of the Lord? You can tell by the way that you live your life. What does your life say? What are your circumstances?  Are you going through a hard time?  How are you responding to your circumstances?  
  
In faith?  
  
Are you going through a good time?  Things are going your way?  How are you responding to that?  
  
In the fear of God?

God wants us to be still in Him.

Third, I want you to notice this **deliverance is a demonstration of God’s glory.**

Look at **chapter 14, verse 4**.  This is what the LORD was up to when He laid His trap for Pharaoh.

I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD.”

And again in **v. 17 and 18:**

“I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen.  The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen.”

Do you get a sense of what the LORD values?  “I will gain glory for myself.”

The God of the Bible is the one true God. He is the one truly infinite, holy, eternal, and glorious Being in all the universe. And so, He alone deservers to be worshipped. It is only right that He is recognized for who He is. Anything less than recognizing Him as God is sinful rebellion.

And so, God delivers Israel from Egypt to make a point. He’s sending a message to Egypt and the Israelites and the rest of the world that He’s the only true God.

The only proper response is to worship Him.

This is the deliverance the Lord brings. And the way He acted in Exodus is the same way He acts today. In the Red Sea Rescue we have the pattern by which God saves: He does all the work, for His own glory, so that we will respond in fear and trust of Him.