



**Scripture: Exodus 15:1-3, 19, 22-26**

**Background Scripture: Exodus 1:8-14; 15:1-27**

## Key Verse

When Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and cavalry went into the sea, the LORD brought back the waters of the sea over them. But the Israelites walked through the sea on dry ground. Exodus 15:19 CEB

## Focus

People will often follow a trusted leader even into dangerous places. What inspires such trust? Because Moses had faith in God, the Israelites followed him into the Red Sea, where God saved them from the Egyptians and from drowning.

## Goals

1. to investigate the story of the Israelites' dangerous journey of faith through the Red Sea and into the wilderness.
2. to recognize that faithfulness will not always keep them out of danger, but it will ultimately bring them to safety.
3. to find strategies to remain faithful when times and situations are difficult or perilous.

## Pronunciation Guide

Elim (ee' lim)  
Rameses (ram' uh seez)  
Marah (mair' uh)  
Seti (se' ti)  
Meribah (mer' i bah)  
Shur (shoor)  
Noadiah (noh uh di' uh)  
Thutmose (thyoot' mohs)  
Pithom (pi' thom)

## Understanding the Scripture

### Exodus 1:8

Over time, political realities change in countries. Such was the case with the dynasties in Egypt. Unfortunately, since the pharaohs are not given names in the Pentateuch, it is not possible to know which pharaoh or even which dynasty was in power at this time. Working backward from the date given in 1 Kings 6:1, it is possible that the Eighteenth Dynasty was in power. If so, the pharaoh is probably Thutmose III (1479 B.C.–1425 B.C.). On the other hand, the name of the store cities in Exodus 1:11 leads some scholars to believe that the Nineteenth Dynasty was in power. If so, the pharaoh is probably Seti I (1294 B.C.–1279 B.C.).

## **Exodus 1:9-10**

Unlike the pharaoh who discerned the hand of God on Joseph's life, this pharaoh was unable to see God at work in the faithfulness of the Hebrews. Whereas he saw only a rapidly growing population of resident aliens, the Hebrew people were merely expressing their faithfulness (see Exodus 1:7) to God's creation order to "be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28)—a command God subsequently renewed with Noah (Genesis 9:1) and Jacob (Genesis 35:11).

## **Exodus 1:11**

To counter the perceived threat of the Hebrew people, Pharaoh enslaved them. They were put to work in the Nile Delta erecting buildings at Pithom and Rameses. While the general location of these two "store cities" in the Wadi Tumilat area is certain, their exact location remains unknown.

## **Exodus 1:12-14**

Despite their change in civic status, the Hebrew people continued to be faithful to God's command: "They multiplied and spread" (Exodus 1:12). The inability of the government to break the will or the faithfulness of the Hebrew people frustrated the Egyptians, and they redoubled their efforts to make life miserable for the Hebrews. The Hebrews were forced to work in urban settings as common day laborers ("mortar and brick") and in rural/agricultural settings as farm hands ("field labor").

## **Exodus 15:1**

From its opening words, the song in 15:1-18 is focused on God. It praises God for defeating the mighty Egyptian army that had pursued the fleeing Hebrew people and caught up with them at the Red Sea. For the narration of this event, see Exodus 13:17–14:31. There are at least twenty references to the Red Sea crossing scattered throughout the Old Testament. Most are in Exodus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua but they are also found in other books, such as Psalms (106; 136). The site of the Red Sea crossing is traditionally identified with the northern tip of the Gulf of Suez, although many persons make a case for it being through the "Reed Sea." These persons link the Reed Sea with the Bitter Lakes area (north of the Gulf of Suez, near Lake Timsah) or with Lake Sirbonis, a swampy region near the Mediterranean Sea. Still others, believing Mount Sinai to be in Saudi Arabia, place the crossing through the Gulf of Aqaba.

## **Exodus 15:2-12**

As in Hebrew poetry generally, each verse of this song is a couplet or a pair of couplets. The first line of each couplet states an idea that is then repeated, deepened, or advanced in the second line using different words.

In verse after verse, God is praised for being "a warrior" who came to the defense of the Hebrew people. Mighty Egypt "boasted" of all it would do to the Hebrews (15:9 NIV). But Egypt failed to factor in God, who snorted in derision at its hollow threats. The Egyptian army subsequently disappeared like so much chaff in the wind.

## **Exodus 15:13-18**

In the second half of the song the focus shifts from the strength God exercised on behalf of the Hebrews to the steadfast, "unfailing" (15:13 NIV) love God displayed toward them.

Four of Israel's traditional enemies are named anachronistically in verses 14-15. Philistia, home of the sea people who settled along the Mediterranean coast, was west of Judah. It would eventually give its name to the land of Canaan (Philistine → Palestine). Edom, home of the descendants of Esau (Genesis 25:30; 36:8-9), was south of Judah. Moab, home of the descendants of Lot

(Genesis 19:36-37), was east of the Jordan River. Canaan referred to the land of the people who populated Judah and Israel prior to the arrival of the Hebrews.

## **Exodus 15:19-21**

Moses' sister is mentioned in Exodus 2:4, but this is the only place Miriam is named in the book of Exodus. She was the eldest, Aaron was the second child, and Moses the third. Exodus 7:7 tells us that Aaron was three years older than Moses, but we cannot be sure of Miriam's exact age. She died a few months before they did, just as the wilderness journey was drawing to a close (Numbers 20:1). Like her brother Moses, Miriam was a "prophet" (15:20), one of five female prophets in the Old Testament. The others are Deborah (Judges 4:4), Isaiah's wife (Isaiah 8:3), Hulda (2 Kings 22:14), and Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14).

## **Exodus 15:22-24**

The Desert of Shur, which means "fortress" or "wall," was a wilderness in the (probably northern) Sinai Peninsula, just east of the Egyptian border. Having spent forty years in the general vicinity tending sheep for his father-in-law (Exodus 3:1), Moses would have known the location of watering holes along the roads that traversed the peninsula. Three days after leaving the Red Sea, the Hebrew people arrived at this site ready to replenish their water skins, only to discover that the water was marah, "bitter."

As is often seen during the sojourn in the wilderness, the people "complain," "grumble," or "murmur" (see, for example, Exodus 16:2; 17:3; Numbers 14:2). The Hebrew word used often in connection with the complaints voiced in the wilderness refers not to a negative comment but rather describes a rebellion against God.

## **Exodus 15:25-26**

While the piece of wood that Moses threw into the water may have functioned as a natural filtering device, the point is probably theological (God's providential care of the people), not scientific (how it worked).

For God's testing of the people, see the lesson for December 18. The Hebrew people tested God at Meribah (Exodus 17:1-7), but the psalmist later declared that it was God who tested them at Meribah (Psalm 81:7).

## **Exodus 15:27**

Elim, a lush oasis with multiple springs and palm trees, has traditionally been identified with the Wadi Gharandel, about sixty miles southeast of the Suez.

## **Interpreting the Scripture**

### **The Red Sea Crossing**

For Christians, the biblical salvation story is the story of Jesus' passion and resurrection. We understand Jesus' arrest and beating and subsequent crucifixion as the event when God acted decisively on behalf of human beings to defeat evil. It is not, however, the only salvation story in the Bible.

For Jews, the biblical salvation story is the story of the Exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt. They understand the plagues, the flight from Egypt, and the destruction of Egypt's army at the Red Sea as the events when God acted decisively on their behalf (see Exodus 2:24-25).

While God's salvation is celebrated in Exodus 15, it is in Exodus 13:17–14:31 that the story is told of the Hebrew people's dangerous journey of faith that ultimately led them through the Red Sea. The story is told in six parts.

In part one (Exodus 13:17–14:4), God's master plan is unveiled. Knowing the strengths and weaknesses of both the Hebrews and the Egyptians, God plotted a course designed to protect his people.

In part two (Exodus 14:5-9), Egypt's counterassault against the Hebrews is unveiled. However, nestled in the midst of Egypt's strategy is the statement that God was aware of their intentions and actively working on behalf of the Hebrew people (14:8).

In part three (Exodus 14:10-12), the initial response of the Hebrews is to cry out in great fear. Their relationship with God had not yet matured to the point that they were willing to trust God.

In part four (Exodus 14:13-14), the Hebrews learn that, with God on their side, they need no longer fear. God truly is faithful to "Israel . . . my firstborn son" (Exodus 4:22).

In part five (Exodus 14:15-18), a plan of action is adopted that will (1) rescue the Hebrew people, (2) glorify God, and (3) reveal to Egypt who the one, true God is.

In part six (Exodus 14:19-31), the actual crossing of the Red Sea by the Hebrews and the destruction of the Egyptian army is narrated.

This momentous event is celebrated by Moses in Exodus 15:1-19. There he sings a song of praise for God's amazing deeds that enabled the Hebrew people to escape their oppressors.

## **Faith Development**

Rarely do shortcuts pay off. This is as true of our relationship with God as it is of life generally. Cutting corners is not the way to build vital trust. Nor is there anything about the Christian faith to suggest that our relationship with God secures for us a privileged position free of trouble or heartache. The Hebrew people discovered these facts immediately upon leaving Egypt.

As they marched out of Egypt with the spoils of Egypt under their arms (Exodus 12:36), there were undoubtedly many persons who thought all their problems were solved. Yet only days later, the Hebrews realized they were being pursued by Egypt's army, which caught up with them and pinned them down with their backs to the Red Sea.

No sooner were the Hebrew people miraculously saved from Egypt's army and again on their way to Canaan than they hit a "wall" in the Desert of Shur. (The Hebrew word Shur means "wall.") Then they had nothing to drink. Then they had nothing to eat (Exodus 16:3). Then they were attacked by bands of marauding Amalekites (Exodus 17:8). So it went.

There were, of course, more direct routes that ran between Egypt and Canaan than the one the Hebrew people took. While the northern route that ran along the Mediterranean coast would have seemed very attractive to Hebrew slaves who wanted to move as quickly as possible from point A to point B, it was also heavily fortified by at least twelve Egyptian strongholds. Had they taken this route, they would have been overwhelmed militarily.

As it was, God led them by a circuitous route that did not promise speed; it promised God's providential oversight and protection (see Exodus 14:1-4). Along the way, they then had opportunity after opportunity to learn how God would care for them daily, sustaining them in situations that were beyond them.

Like the Hebrew people who "hit a wall," Jesus faced similar crises in his faith. No sooner was he baptized than he was forced to endure severe temptation that tested his resolve to rely on God

(Matthew 4:1-11; Luke 4:1-13).

We, too, quickly discover that a change in our relationship with God does not magically solve other crises we are facing in life. If anything, the struggles we face tend to intensify in the weeks and months following the faith commitment we enter into with God in Jesus Christ.

We do young Christians a terrible disservice when we suggest that coming to Jesus will solve their problems. We would be more honest if we were to alert them that spiritual attack often follows on the heels of one's conversion.

Yet seeing the Christian faith as a long journey from one faith crisis to the next is only one way to view it. It is much more helpful to exercise humble trust that the same God who sought us out will providentially see us through the situations we face in life. Isn't this the mature witness of the psalmist in Psalm 23?

## **Marah and Faith**

John Wesley liked to say that God's salvation produces in us a relative change before it produces a real change. That was his way of explaining the difference between justification (being made right with God) and sanctification (becoming the holy one God intended each of us to be). When persons are justified, the way they relate to God changes. Whereas previously their relationship with God was marked by enmity and strife, now it is built on love and friendship. When persons are sanctified, they themselves become different. They are no longer the people they once were.

On the far side of the Red Sea, the Hebrew people found themselves the recipients of a new relationship with God. However, they themselves were not yet new people. They still were as they had always been. So when they discovered that the defeat of the Egyptian army was not the last of their problems, they acted as they always had. They quickly grew frustrated and blamed Moses for the bitter situation they now found themselves in (Exodus 14:10-12).

God's response to the lack of gratitude displayed by the Hebrew people was once again gracious yet pointed (Exodus 15:22-26). It was gracious in that God made clear that Yahweh is the God who sees and provides (see Lesson 3; Genesis 22:14). God told Moses that he could fix the problem by throwing a tree limb into the watering hole. It was pointed in that God told the people that they could not stay as they had been. God then "put them to the test" (15:25) with four conditions. Henceforth, according to verse 26, they needed to (1) "listen carefully" to God; (2) do what God deems righteous; (3) heed God's commands; and (4) keep all God's decrees. In short, God told the Hebrew people, "Trust me."

Entering into a saving relationship with God typically has little noticeable effect on the type of situations we find ourselves in. However, it is important to understand that God does not foist bitter, Marah situations on us. We can recognize that in these Marah situations God is faithful to lead us through. The test itself is not the bitter situation; the test is our response to the bitter situation. Shall we or shall we not trust God to see us through?

## **Sharing the Scripture**

### **Preparing Our Hearts**

Explore this week's devotional reading, found in Psalm 77:11-20. As the psalmist remembers God's deeds, he recalls that Moses followed God's directions to lead the Hebrew people safely across the Red Sea. The psalmist describes a furious storm that blew up, allowing a path through the waters to open for the fleeing slaves. When in your life has God made a way when there seemed to be no way? What paths has God cleared for you, when all you could see was a brick wall in front of and behind you? Pray that you and the group will follow leaders whom you believe are acting under the direction of God.

## Preparing Our Minds

Study the background Scripture from Exodus 1:8-14; 15:1-27. The lesson Scripture is found in Exodus 15:1-3, 19, 22-26. Ponder what prompts people to follow a trusted leader even into a dangerous place.

## Leading the Group

- Pray that the group will recognize that our faith journeys sometimes lead us into dangerous places.
- Ask the group to identify characteristics of leaders they can trust. Here are some possible answers: **integrity** (what the leader says and does match); **consistency** (people know what to expect); **courage** (willingness to stand firm in the face of difficult situations and unfair criticism); **motivation** (wanting to serve others, not being out for themselves); **wisdom** (ability to lead with discernment); **credibility** (acting in ways that are authentic and believable); **reliability** (will do what they promise to do when they promise to do it); **communication** (ability to converse well and truthfully with others so that everyone understands); **vision** (ability to see the big picture and lead people in that direction).
- Discuss for a few moments why people who have such characteristics inspire trust.
- Read aloud today's focus statement: **People will often follow a trusted leader even into dangerous places. What inspires such trust? Because Moses had faith in God, the Israelites followed him into the Red Sea, where God saved them from the Egyptians and from drowning.**
- Choose a volunteer to read Exodus 15:1-3, 19.
- Discuss these questions: (1) What do you learn about God? (2) What do you learn about Moses' relationship with God? (3) What new insights do you gain about God's activity on behalf of the people? (4) What questions does this passage raise for you?
- Select another volunteer to read Exodus 15:22-26.
- Read or retell information pertaining to these verses from Understanding the Scripture.
- Consider these questions. Refer to "Marah and Faith" in Interpreting the Scripture to augment the discussion. (1) What do you learn about the Hebrew people? (2) In what ways are we like them? (3) Where do you see evidence of God's grace? (4) What are the four conditions that would allow the people to pass God's test? (See Exodus 15:26.) (5) What will happen if the people pass the test? (They will not face the diseases that came upon the Egyptians.)
- Read paragraphs six through nine from "Faith Development" in Interpreting the Scripture.
- Read again these sentences: **Yet seeing the Christian faith as a long journey from one faith crisis to the next is only one way to view it. It is much more helpful to exercise humble trust that the same God who sought us out will providentially see us through the situations we face in life.**
- Invite the group to talk about times when the God who sought them out also saw them through a challenging situation.
- Ask: **As you listened to these stories, what conclusions can you draw about the relationship of faith to difficult, perhaps dangerous, situations?**
- Provide a few moments of quiet time for the group to reflect on difficult situations that currently confront them or someone dear to them. Suggest that they offer prayer for faith to trust that God will see them through.
- Break the silence by reading today's key verse, Exodus 15:19, which gives us assurance that just as the escaping slaves walked on dry ground to flee their enemies, so too God makes

available a way for us to deal with the Red Sea crises of our own lives.

- Encourage the group to turn to Hebrews 11 in their Bibles and read this chapter silently.
- Encourage participants to comment on reasons why each person is commended. Point out that these figures all faced stressful situations, many of which involved matters of life and death.
- Ask: **Knowing what you do about the individuals we have listed, what do you think enabled them to remain faithful even in death-defying circumstances?**
- Pray that group members will remain faithful even in difficult circumstances.
- Conclude today's session by leading the group in this benediction: **By the power of the Holy Spirit go forth to be a blessing to others even as God through Christ has blessed you.**

Adapted from *The New International Lesson Annual* © 2011 Abingdon Press