“THE LORD WILL FIGHT FOR YOU”

Exodus 13:17–15:21

Key Verse: 14:14

“The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent.”

Do you ever feel defeated, like everything is going the wrong way? It does happen sometimes. We can become surrounded by people way more powerful than us, and we get intimidated. Our life situation can turn bad, when a new problem pops up. Or, our source of defeat might be not in our circumstances, but within us. Without any obvious reason we get depressed, or we fall into our old habit of sin, and we feel so helpless. One of our most crushing experiences is when we’re confronted with the reality of death. Someone we loved or relied on passes unexpectedly, and we’re stunned and find it hard even to function. We also feel defeated when we try to share our faith but people are so resistant and opposed. In today’s passage we find the famous Bible story of God parting the Red Sea for the Israelites. It’s very dramatic and miraculous, but it all can seem so unrelated to our lives today. Moses tells the Israelites, “The LORD will fight for you,” but so often that doesn’t seem to be happening. What’s the meaning of this epic event? What does God want us to learn from it? May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

Let’s begin by looking at the prelude to the event, in 13:17–22. Several things are here. First is how God led the people. Read verses 17–18. Basically God was leading his people not to the easy way, but to a much harder way. Why? God knew their weakness. If they were to go straight into the promised land now, they’d have to fight the Philistines, and they weren’t ready for that. They needed to become stronger spiritually; otherwise, they’d just scurry back to their comfortable slave lives in Egypt. Likewise, God leads us not in what we think is obvious, but according to his wisdom. It may be in a slower, more difficult way, but it’s his love to prepare us for even bigger challenges.

The second thing we see here seems a bit odd. Read verse 19. It’s amazing that the people still remembered Joseph. Who was he? He was one of Jacob’s twelve sons who’d been sold into slavery in Egypt but later became Prime Minister, and whom God used to bring Jacob’s family there during a famine. Through faith Joseph could see God’s greater purpose for his family. Perhaps he’d heard of Abraham’s vision, when God said: “Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for four hundred years. But I will bring judgment on the nation that they serve, and afterward they shall come out with great possessions” (Ge15:13–14). On his deathbed Joseph told his brothers in Egypt, “I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.” Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here” (Ge50:24–25). Joseph’s bones became part of the people’s hope in these promises of God. Centuries passed, but God kept his promises. Now these descendants didn’t forget to keep their promise to Joseph. It tells us two basic things about faith. Faith is still based on the promises of God. Also, faith still involves keeping our promises to God.

And there’s one more detail. Read verses 21–22. It’s fascinating: a pillar of cloud by day, and a pillar of fire by night. It wasn’t just God’s personal leading; it was a collective experience, giving them all a new identity (cf. 1Co10:1–2). It was a very special way of showing these helpless slave people that God was always with them. It also was a part of their new life of training. They were to learn to move only as the pillar moved, and, *whenever* it moved. If the pillar of fire started moving at night, they would have to all get up and move with it. If the pillar of cloud wouldn’t move at all, even in the scorching sun with no water nearby, they’d have to stay there in that place until it moved (40:36–38). As God’s people, we too need to learn how to follow God’s leading very carefully, instead of living by what we think or want. So faith means holding onto God’s promises and following his leading. We all need training to really live like this.

Chapter 14 describes the main event. Read verses 1–4. At first this seems like a really bad strategy. God is telling the people basically to put themselves into a trap. To the Egyptians they’d look like sitting ducks there, like they didn’t know what they were doing. But God in his wisdom had a bigger plan. We’ve seen it before, during all the plagues, and again it’s here. God again says he’s going to “harden” Pharaoh’s heart (4a). The word is repeated in verses 8 and 17. God controls even the hearts of top leaders (cf. Pr21:1), influencing their thoughts and decisions. What’s also repeated here is that God is doing this so that “the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD” (4b,18; 7:5,17; 8:22). People leave God out and think they’re the masters of their own destiny, that they can conquer the universe with their brilliant minds and abilities. What humans can do is indeed impressive, especially when they band together (Ge11:6). But God is still the LORD; he’s sovereign over all his creation and over all peoples, even the most powerful ones. He can demolish everything we think is most clever and secure and strong. He wants us to know and acknowledge him, even if we have to learn this lesson through miserable failures.

Read verse 5. It’s kind of funny. Though they despised them, these Egyptians had a habit on depending on their Hebrew slaves. When reality set in after the slaves were gone, the Egyptians realized they didn’t know how to do anything—not just building grand public works with bricks, but domestic things like cooking, laundry, babysitting, and all the practical chores that have to get done every day. Egyptians liked living in ease and glory at the expense of these hardworking minority people. Sound familiar? It’s always been a part of our fallen human nature to make use of weaker or more vulnerable people. It’s good to fight against it. But only in God’s eternal kingdom will this truly be no more.

Look at verses 6–9. The author is highlighting the six hundred chosen chariots, and the horses and horsemen and officers. In our nuclear age this may seem like nothing, but in their ancient culture it was indeed impressive—the best army in the world, equipped with the fastest and strongest. People still put so much confidence in their wealth and military power and skill. This entire story emphasizes over and over what God does to this Egyptian army, to warn us all not to put our trust in such things. It’s really painful to be put in a situation when our securities, financial, emotional and cultural, are all stripped away from us. But it’s the best time to learn real faith. David was a very talented man and a great fighter, but he learned this lesson and wrote: “For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation. He alone is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be greatly shaken” (Ps61:1–2). This story of crossing the Red Sea is saying to us: what are you trusting in, really?

Look at verses 10–12. This is one of the worst parts of slavery: it leaves its mark on the people who live through it. The Israelites had just escaped physical enslavement in Egypt, but the slavery was still inside them. God had performed mighty wonders through all ten plagues on Egypt and had gotten them out of that impossible situation with his mighty hand. But at the first note of difficulty, they were so quick to complain, turn against Moses and blame him. It says “they feared greatly.” Fear made them complain. The opposite of faith is not doubt but fear. In their fear they even wanted to go back to that miserable life. We’re going to see more of this next week. The book of Exodus has a strong theme that after God saves us, we still need a lot of training. It’s not training to have a stronger character, or to be physically stronger. It’s spiritual training. What is that? It’s to learn to depend on God, especially during hard times. It’s not naturally our reaction, which is why we need the training. When we learn about God during a Bible study, we need to learn to put our faith in him into action, or it’s not real faith (Jas1:22–25; 2:14–26).

Now let’s look at the climax of the story. Read verses 13–14. Moses is speaking as their shepherd. They’re complaining and feel so miserable at the moment, but Moses gives them just the right words. In a sense his words seem comforting. But actually, in the nuance of the original Hebrew, Moses is rebuking them. He’s telling them, “Shut up! Come on, don’t be so scared! Stand firm, and trust God!” There are crucial moments in life when we really need to hear this, and when we really need to say it, too.

The key words are: “The LORD will fight for you.” God was using this situation to teach the Israelites this important lesson. They needed to learn it if they were going to take the promised land someday. This truth that God fights for his people is repeated in the Bible again and again (15:3; Dt1:30; 3:22; 20:4; Jos10:14,42; 23:3,10; 2Ch20:17,29; Ne4:20; Isa31:4–5). But when does God really fight for us? Usually it’s not when we’re bent on doing whatever we want. It’s when we’re doing our best to obey God’s will, and then, when we quiet our minds and hearts, wait on him, and really trust him.

In verses 15–31 we see the dramatic outcome. God gives Moses his mighty words (15–18). Then an angel causes the pillar of cloud to protect Israel from Egypt, and it turns into a pillar of fire at night (19–20). As God said, Moses stretches out his hand, and with a strong east wind all night the Red Sea is divided so that the Israelites can cross on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on either side (21–22). In the morning watch, as the Egyptians pursue them, God clogs the wheels of their prized chariots, and they realize he’s the one fighting for Israel (23–25). At God’s command, Moses stretches out his hand again, and the waters return to cover and drown the Egyptian army; not one of them remains, and their bodies wash up on the seashore (26–30). Read verse 31. The complaining Israelites learned a lesson—for the moment. God still wants us to learn to fear and believe in him, and in his servants.

Chapter 15 begins with Moses’ song of praise. What a moment! Crossing the Red Sea becomes another unforgettable moment of God’s salvation. Ultimately, it points to God’s salvation for us in Jesus. Jesus died and rose again to save us from our worst enemies, our own sins, the power of death, and the devil. The Bible tells us that through his death and resurrection, God makes the impossible happen for us; God gives us the eternal spiritual victory (1Co15:57). 1 John 5:4b–5 says, “And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?” Faith in Jesus may seem like nothing, but it is indeed mighty. He gave us a very precious promise: “Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life. He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (Jn5:24). When we hear the word of Jesus and believe it, we cross our own “Red Sea;” we experience God’s great salvation. We may still have many problems. But we experience spiritual victory now and eternal victory in him forever. God wants us to challenge impossible situations by faith in Jesus. By the power of the Holy Spirit he can make us Jesus’ witnesses, to help even unlikely people receive the good news. We shouldn’t let fear or worry or complaints into our hearts. Let’s read 14:14 again.