

“By Faith the People Crossed”

The Twentieth in a Series on the Epistle to the Hebrews

Texts: Hebrews 11:29-40; Exodus 14:21-31

You would think that if God were going to raise up someone to lead his people to freedom from their bondage under the Pharaoh of Egypt, he would choose someone other than Moses—a man who didn’t speak well in public, and who killed an Egyptian before fleeing across the Red Sea to the Sinai peninsula to go into hiding and remaining there until God summoned him back to Egypt. You would also think that if you were going to list those people most closely associated with the Exodus and conquest of Canaan whose faith stands out as an example for us to follow, you would probably mention Joshua or Caleb. Instead, the only name which appears in Hebrews 11 in connection to the Conquest is that of Rahab, a woman who owned a brothel in the city of Jericho. God does indeed move in mysterious ways, and to accomplish his purposes, he often uses people whom we would never choose nor ever expect him to use.

When we left-off in our series on Hebrews, we were working our way through Hebrews 11, often described as the “hall of faith.” The chapter has been given this label because, as is often taught, the author lists a number of the great saints from the Old Testament and their exploits so that we might emulate their example. “Have faith like Abraham had and do what Abraham did.” But as I have been arguing throughout our time in this chapter, the example these people set for us is secondary to the author’s primary purpose. As I see it, the author’s emphasis falls not so much on the faith of the individuals mentioned here, but on the continuity of God’s covenant promise which progressively unfolds throughout redemptive history as seen by the presence of believers throughout the whole of biblical history. These people believed (or trusted) the same thing—God’s gracious covenant promise. Therefore, the importance of this famous passage is not to be found so much in the example set for us by those listed here, but in the continuity of God’s promise across the ages. And this means that the same gospel was found throughout the Old Testament which has been revealed by Jesus and taught us by the apostles in the New, which is the primary point of Hebrews 11.

As we take up the last part of this chapter (verses 29-40), it is apparent that the author begins to pick up the pace of his discussion, as though he realizes that his exposition of God’s promise throughout the Old Testament could go on and on for an extended number of pages. The author’s concern in presenting this survey of those who believed God’s promise is to remind those in the original audience of the consequence of returning to Judaism after having made a profession of faith in Jesus Christ. This is why his readers/hearers need to be very clear about the fact that God’s covenant promise, which unfolds throughout the pages of the Old Testament, is fulfilled through the person and work of Jesus Christ. There has only been one promise. The Old Testament saints believed it. And those receiving this letter we know as the Book of Hebrews must hold fast to it. It is the same covenant promise after all, now fulfilled in the doing and dying of Jesus.

As the author makes his case for this continuity of God’s promise in Hebrews 11, he begins with the antediluvians (Abel, Enoch, and Noah), and then turns to Abraham and the patriarchs, before moving on to discuss Moses and the Passover. The author now comes to the Exodus (Israel’s deliverance from Egypt) and the Conquest (Israel’s entrance into the promised land of Canaan). Sensing that he’s already

made his point, the author quickens his pace—devoting just one verse to the Exodus (v. 29), and two verses to the destruction of Jericho (vv. 30-31) while not even mentioning Joshua or Caleb. Remarkably, the only person mentioned is Rahab, the Gentile prostitute who hid Israel’s spies when they were scouting Jericho (vv. 30-31). In verse 32, the author laments “*and what more shall I say? For time would fail me*” . . . if I were to tell the whole story. So he quickly wraps up his survey in verses 29-40, knowing that he has already made his primary point to his readers and hearers.

So, we’ll tackle the opening verse of this closing section (v. 29), because the Exodus plays such a large role in subsequent redemptive history. And then we’ll also take up the author’s discussion of the fall of Jericho and the mention of Rahab in verses 30-31. Next time, Lord willing, we’ll wrap up our discussion of Hebrews 11 looking at the others mentioned in this chapter who believed the promise during the time of the judges, and in the united kingdom under David, as well as those alluded to in the closing verses of the chapter. And then in the coming weeks we’ll turn to chapters 12-13, which serve to tie many redemptive-historical loose ends together as the author brings this epistle to a close.

Despite the fact it is but briefly mentioned here by the author, the Exodus serves as a major theological theme throughout Scripture—including the Book of Hebrews. And so I’d like to spend some time unpacking the meaning of the Exodus in other biblical passages and then in Hebrews.

In verse 29, we find the sentence: “*by faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned.*” In this verse, the author very effectively summarizes the events described in Exodus 14, a portion of which we read in our Old Testament lesson. But in Exodus 14:13, before the Israelites crossed through the sea, Moses tells them, “*fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the Lord, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again.*” Looking back upon this event with New Testament hindsight, salvation from sin is graphically illustrated by the fact that during the Exodus, salvation is said to come from the Lord, who will rescue his people from clutches of the Egyptians—a real salvation from a real and powerful foe bent upon destroying the people of God, which in turn points to something much greater, our delivery from the tyranny and bondage of sin by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

In verses 21-31 of Exodus 14, we read the account of how YHWH’s salvation of Israel came to pass in the waters of the Red Sea. “*Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. The Egyptians pursued and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh's horses, his chariots, and his horsemen. And in the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and of cloud looked down on the Egyptian forces and threw the Egyptian forces into a panic, clogging their chariot wheels so that they drove heavily. And the Egyptians said, ‘Let us flee from before Israel, for the Lord fights for them against the Egyptians.’ Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Stretch out your hand over the sea, that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots, and upon their horsemen.’ So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and the sea returned to its normal course when the morning appeared. And as the Egyptians fled into it, the Lord threw the Egyptians into the midst of the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the horsemen; of all the host of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea, not one of them remained. But the people of Israel walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead*

on the seashore. Israel saw the great power that the Lord used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.” According to the author of Hebrews, it was by faith that *the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land.*

Clearly, in the author’s of Hebrew’s extended argument to those in the church receiving this letter who were considering returning to Judaism, his point has been that there is but one gospel throughout all of Scripture, and that gospel is grounded in the eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ—this point will receive further elaboration in chapter 12, having already been spelled out in some detail earlier in chapters 8-10. The specific mention of the Exodus in verse 29 (i.e. the release from Egyptian captivity, which leads to the actual crossing of the sea and the journey through the wilderness) is the natural follow-up to the author’s prior discussion of Moses and the Passover in verses 23-28 of Hebrews 11. The Israelites were delivered from the Destroyer of the firstborn (the angel of death) as recounted in Hebrews 11:28. The wrath of God toward his people has been turned aside through the shedding of the blood of the Passover lamb (which prefigures the death of Jesus) which was applied to the doorposts of the houses in which the Israelites lived. When the angel of death saw the sacrificial blood applied, that household was spared.

But the shedding of the blood of the Passover lamb did much more than provide a means to escape the death of the firstborn. It also provided the means through which God would bring an end to Israel’s bondage in Egypt—of which the bitter herbs to be eaten on the Passover were symbolic. The death of the firstborn son throughout the households of Egypt (including the Pharaoh’s own son) was the final reason why Pharaoh finally relented and allowed the Israelites to leave Egypt—of course, God would harden his heart and then Pharaoh changed his mind and pursued the Israelites when they headed toward the Red Sea with much of the gold and wealth of Egypt and the bones of Joseph in their possession.

The shedding of blood of the Passover lamb is a symbol of the death of Christ redeeming us from the curse. The Exodus is a powerful illustration of the fact that the sacrificial death of the lamb is the means through which sin’s power over us is broken. This is why the Exodus becomes a powerful image of the Christian life, often described as a journey through waters of judgment (baptism) before entering the wilderness of this present evil age after we have been set free from our bondage to sin, and as we make our way toward our own promised land—the heavenly city. According to the Exodus account, having passed safely through the Sea, the Israelites were now free from their bondage in Egypt. The people were to proceed into the wilderness of the Sinai desert where God would make a covenant with them, in which Moses would be mediator (as a type of Christ’s mediatorial office), and in which God would give Moses and the 70 elders his law as the legal and covenantal foundation of the nation of Israel. Therefore, these two things, the Passover and the Exodus from Egypt, are necessarily connected, just as the death of Jesus is the ultimate Passover for us, and as Jesus’ bodily resurrection from the dead likewise begins the ultimate Exodus from bondage to sin and its wages (death), to newness of life in Jesus Christ.

The image of the Exodus reoccurs symbolically throughout Israel’s own subsequent history. The prophet Isaiah sees a parallel between God’s creation of the earth and his lordship over the seas, with God’s power to cause the waters of the Red Sea to open so that the Israelites might pass through on dry ground. In Isaiah 51:9-11, this theme of new creation appears when the prophet states, *“awake, awake, put on strength, O arm of the Lord; awake, as in days of old, the generations of long ago. Was it not you who cut Rahab in pieces, who pierced the dragon? Was it not you who dried up the sea, the waters of the great deep, who made the depths of the sea a way for the redeemed to pass over? And the ransomed of the Lord shall return and come to Zion with singing.”*

Isaiah also uses the Exodus as a metaphor for God's deliverance of Israel from her captivity in Babylon. In Isaiah 44:27, when reminding the Israelites of God's power to restore them and return them to the land, we read that YHWH "*says to the deep, 'be dry; I will dry up your rivers.'*" From the historic event of the Exodus from Egypt, Israel's prophets (notably Isaiah, and Jeremiah) develop the image of salvation from the bondage of sin (as symbolized by Israel's captivity in Egypt under the Pharaoh), new creation (God's sovereign power over the waters of the deep), and Israel's return to Canaan after their time in captivity in Babylon mirroring their deliverance from their captivity in Egypt.

The same holds true throughout the New Testament. One place where the Exodus imagery is explicitly used, this time in connection with baptism, is found in 1 Corinthians 10:1-4, where Paul writes "*for I do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea, and all ate the same spiritual food, and all drank the same spiritual drink. For they drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.*" As Israel was symbolically baptized into Moses, when by faith the people crossed through the sea, so too Christians are said to be baptized into Christ, who is the reality hidden under the events of the Exodus. According to Paul, Israel's exodus from Egypt serves to point us to Christ.

Furthermore, the author to the Hebrews himself will draw on the Exodus account in chapter 12. One of the significant blessings associated with Israel's deliverance from Egypt is the establishment of the tabernacle in the wilderness, where God dwelt with his people during their sojourn through the wilderness. Recall that Moses repeatedly asked Pharaoh for permission for the Israelites to leave Egypt so as to worship YHWH. In Isaiah 63:15-18, the prophet pleads with YHWH, "*look down from heaven and see, from your holy and beautiful habitation [i.e., the temple]. Where are your zeal and your might? The stirring of your inner parts and your compassion are held back from me. For you are our Father, though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us; you, O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name. O Lord, why do you make us wander from your ways and harden our heart, so that we fear you not? Return for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your heritage. Your holy people held possession for a little while; our adversaries have trampled down your sanctuary.*" In Isaiah's prophecy, God looks down from heaven and sees the sorry state of the Jerusalem temple (which had replaced the tabernacle), now desecrated by Israel's unbelief and then by pagan conquerors. Upon Israel's deliverance from Egypt (the Exodus), which led to the building of God's dwelling in the midst of his people (the tabernacle in the wilderness, later followed by the temple in Jerusalem), Israel fell into sin, and God's dwelling among his people was left in ruins. Israel's prophets mention this repeatedly and the Jews in the first century church reading or hearing the Book of Hebrews were very likely familiar with this imagery.

In light of this, the author of Hebrews picks up on this Exodus-temple theme several times, pointing out how Jesus is a greater priest, in a greater tabernacle. As a consequence of the New Exodus (begun in Christ's own death and resurrection), in chapter 6:19-20, the author can write, "*we have this as a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.*" There are several references to this New Exodus theme in Hebrews 9 and 10, and in chapter 12:22-24, we read that the consequence of the New Exodus is that Christians "*have come to Mount Zion [not Mount Sinai] and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator*

of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” God has led us out from our bondage to sin, into the wilderness of this present evil age, where he makes us (through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit) his living temple.

So, although the author summarizes the Exodus in but one verse in chapter 11 (v. 29), the ramifications of this are huge—especially in a church like the one to which he is writing in which many (if not all) of the members are Jewish converts to Christianity, and a number of them had committed the sin of apostasy, or were considering doing so by returning to Judaism. The shed blood of the Passover lamb led to the Exodus from Egypt, which led to Israel’s birth as a nation with the covenant at Mount Sinai and established God’s tabernacle in the wilderness. And this brought Israel to the moment of entrance into Canaan. Yet all of this pointed ahead to a new and greater Exodus, led by Jesus Christ, the great high priest who serves in the heavenly temple (of which the earthly tabernacle and temple are but types). And if this is true, why would then would anyone desire to go back to the types and shadows of Israel’s crossing of the sea without also embracing the redemptive-historical themes which grow out of it, such as salvation from our bondage to sin, the new creation, the return of the captives from exile, and the dwelling of God on earth with his people in the tabernacle and temple, which all pointed ahead to the coming of Jesus Christ and his eternal priesthood in an eternal temple? This is a subtle point to us, but would have been a powerful argument to first century Jews.

In verses 30-31, the author now turns to the conquest of the land of Canaan—also a very brief summation. It is rather remarkable that after mentioning the Exodus, the author skips ahead forty years—omitting any discussion of Israel’s journey through the wilderness—to that time when Israel emerged from the wilderness after coming under God’s judgment for not believing God’s promise to defeat the Canaanites and grant Israel possession of Canaan. No one is singled out for their faith by the author during this period of time—except a Gentile prostitute. As we read in verses 30-31, *“by faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.”*

It is clear from Joshua 6, the people of Israel responded in faith to God’s promise to destroy the city of Jericho because Joshua demonstrated his faith in God’s promise first. That is the point of verse 30 of Hebrews 11, yet Joshua is not mentioned, only the events surrounding the fall of Jericho. In Joshua 6:20 we read, *“so the people shouted, and the trumpets were blown. As soon as the people heard the sound of the trumpet, the people shouted a great shout, and the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they captured the city.”* The fall of Jericho opened the way for Israel to enter Canaan from the across the Jordan River from the east toward the west, a good strategic move which set the stage for Israel’s subsequent defeat of the rest of the Canaanite tribes.

The story of Rahab is found in Joshua 2, and it is important to consider it carefully. *“And Joshua the son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, ‘Go, view the land, especially Jericho.’ And they went and came into the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab and lodged there. And it was told to the king of Jericho, ‘Behold, men of Israel have come here tonight to search out the land.’ Then the king of Jericho sent to Rahab, saying, ‘Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come to search out all the land.’ But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. And she said, ‘True, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from. And when the gate was about to be closed at dark, the men went out. I do not know where the men went. Pursue them quickly, for you will overtake them.’ But she had brought them up to the roof and hid them with the stalks*

of flax that she had laid in order on the roof. So the men pursued after them on the way to the Jordan as far as the fords. And the gate was shut as soon as the pursuers had gone out. Before the men lay down, she came up to them on the roof and said to the men, 'I know that the Lord has given you the land, and that the fear of you has fallen upon us, and that all the inhabitants of the land melt away before you. For we have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea before you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to the two kings of the Amorites who were beyond the Jordan, to Sihon and Og, whom you devoted to destruction. And as soon as we heard it, our hearts melted, and there was no spirit left in any man because of you, for the Lord your God, he is God in the heavens above and on the earth beneath. Now then, please swear to me by the Lord that, as I have dealt kindly with you, you also will deal kindly with my father's house, and give me a sure sign that you will save alive my father and mother, my brothers and sisters, and all who belong to them, and deliver our lives from death.' And the men said to her, 'Our life for yours even to death! If you do not tell this business of ours, then when the Lord gives us the land we will deal kindly and faithfully with you.' Then she let them down by a rope through the window, for her house was built into the city wall, so that she lived in the wall." Rahab's heart was melted, she believed God's promise, she acted to hide the spies, and as a result, she is singled out for her faith in YHWH's promise. Joshua's men will spare her, and according to Joshua 6:25, after the fall of Jericho, she is said to "live among the Israelites" and is numbered among the covenant community.

Although some have been embarrassed by Rahab's occupation, remarkably she is held out in Hebrews 11 as an example of someone who believed God's promise and who then joined the people of God (a sign of repentance). Furthermore, James mentions her (along with Abraham's offering of Isaac) in connection with someone whose faith in the gospel promise manifests itself in good works. James writes, "*in the same way was not also Rahab the prostitute justified by works when she received the messengers and sent them out by another way?"* But the most important mention of Rahab is certainly found in Matthew 1:5 where she is listed as an ancestor of king David, and therefore of our Lord himself. Hiding the spies was the demonstration that even though she was a Gentile, she knew of God's covenant promise and power, and she believed that promise to the point that she risked her own life (as well as that of her family). It is wonderful a comfort to know that God grants sinners faith in his promise, and that he uses sinful people to accomplish his purposes.

Next time, we'll take up the balance of this chapter (vv. 32-40), when the author wraps up his survey of God's people trusting in God's promise as it unfolds throughout the history of Israel.

What, then, should we take with us from this passage?

The Exodus and Conquest are important historical events in their own right. After all, these events gave birth to the nation of Israel, led to the giving of the law at Sinai, and allowed God's people to enter into the promised land. Furthermore, these events fulfilled God's covenant promise to Abraham that he would be the father of a great nation, that he would have so many descendants that they cannot be counted, and that Israel would possess the land of promise (Canaan). But as New Testament writers like Paul and the author of Hebrews tell us, the Passover and Conquest serve as a pattern for God's redemption of his people. Jesus is the true Passover lamb and his death sets us free from the tyranny and bondage of sin, of which Pharaoh and Israel's captivity in Egypt served as an illustration. Jesus' bodily resurrection from the dead is our Exodus—the final conquest of sin and death, when God grants us eternal life. Just as Israel's crossing of the sea led to the people of God entering the land of Canaan in conquest, symbolic of the saints entering heaven (the true promised land) to receive their promised rest and enjoy

the eternal Sabbath.

By faith, the people crossed through the sea. By faith, Rahab hid the spies. By faith, we trust in the death of Jesus to be our Passover lamb who saves us from our Pharaoh—the guilt and tyranny of sin. By faith, we believe that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is our New Exodus, in which we cross through the waters of judgment (in our baptism), and in whom we are brought home to God from our exile in this present evil age, through which we have eternal life, and in which we participate in the New Creation.

By faith, we join the “hall of faith” with Moses, the Israelites, and Rahab, when we too trust in that same covenant promise God has made to his people throughout the Old Testament, but which is now fulfilled in Jesus Christ. By faith the people crossed the sea, just as by faith we enter the waters of baptism. By faith the people believed the walls of Jericho would fall, just as by faith we believe that the city of man will fall when Christ returns to consummate his kingdom. By faith, we embrace all the promises of God along with all the people of God, some of whom we read about in Hebrews 11. Amen.