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Do you remember those hidden picture puzzles you used to play when you were a child? The sort of puzzle where there was, for example, a picture of a girl offering a treat to a dog:

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And then when you looked closely you could see a dog bed, a book, and bowl and other things hidden in the picture?

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In some ways many of the Old Testament stories are like that picture; simple to look at and with an obvious meaning, but when you look closely you see things there that are not obvious at first glance. But like the things in the picture of the girl and the dog, these “hidden pictures” are not really hard to find; it just takes a humble mind and a desire for God to speak to us to hear His voice bringing his word to life.

Today we come to the story of the crossing of the Red Sea by the children of Israel, and we are going to look for the “hidden pictures” within the story. But before we do this let us read portions of Exodus 13:17 – 15:29, and as we read we can note some obvious conclusions.

But first a little background for those of you who were not here last week. The children of Israel have been living in Egypt for about 400 years, and have been slaves for the latter part of this time. God raised up Moses to be the deliverer of His people, and after a series of dramatic confrontations with Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt, God sent the last and most dreadful plague on the Egyptians in which all the first-born children and animals of the Egyptians were killed. The Israelites were spared by the shedding of the blood of the Passover lamb. After this humbling and dreadful plague, Pharaoh finally tells the Israelites to go. We pick up the story in Exodus 13:17

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Exodus 13:17-19

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." 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 first thing we note is that God had his own plans for the Israelites. He did not take them by the shortest and most obvious route, namely the coastal route through the land of the Philistines. This was a well-traveled trade route, but it was also guarded by fortified towns such as Gaza and Ashkelon. So instead of heading east the Lord led the Israelites south, going further away from the Promised Land. The Israelites must have wondered where they were going; perhaps some of them went up to Moses and asked “Do you know where you are going?” But God had His reasons, both to avoid the danger of the coastal route and because He wanted the Israelites to meet Him on Mt. Sinai.

Slide (map)

So they turned south. The exact route followed by the Israelites is unknown because most of the places named in Scripture cannot be identified, since they were often little more than villages or oases, and scholars differ on the route, but this map shows one possible route in red.

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Exodus 13:20 - 22

After leaving Succoth they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert. 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. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

So we note there that God did not leave His people alone; He gave them a visible sign of His presence with them with the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night.

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Exodus 14:1-4

Then the LORD said to Moses, "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. Pharaoh will think, 'The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert.' 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.

Slide (map).

God continues to lead His people in strange directions. If the route on this map is the correct interpretation, then God led the Israelites to a place near where Migdol is shown. In biblical times the Gulf of Suez arm of the Red Sea extended 30 miles north to connect with the Bitter Lakes, so a relatively shallow arm of the Red Sea existed between present day Suez and the Bitter Lakes. God led the Israelites to the edge of this sea, with no way forward because of the sea and no way back except to Egypt and renewed slavery. The Israelites must have thought that God was leading them into a trap!

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Exodus 14:3-9

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!" So he had his chariot made ready and took his army with him. He took six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them. The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, so that he pursued the Israelites, who were marching out boldly. 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.

Pharaoh is what you might call a slow learner; he had just endured ten plagues, culminating in the loss of his first born son – the heir to the throne - because of his refusal to obey God, and yet here he is getting his best troops out to follow the Israelites and bring them back into captivity.

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Exodus 14:10-12

As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD. 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? 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!"

The Israelites too are slow learners! Now they panic! They actually did two things; first they cried out to the Lord, which was the right thing to do, but then they blamed Moses for their situation. "We are going to die here!" is what they were saying "we never wanted to leave Egypt in the first place" We were better off as slaves in Egypt!! Had they forgotten the beatings they endured, the making of bricks without straw, the harsh overseers? And had they forgotten God's power in sending the plagues, and protecting them from the angel of death? What short memories they had!

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Exodus 14:13-14

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

Moses alone of everyone in this story had a firm grasp of who God is and what He could do. How did he come to have such faith? We are not given much detail, but we can be sure that at least a part of the reason is his encounter with God at the burning bush in the desert and seeing God work through him in the plagues. Whenever he was tempted to doubt God he could look back on that experience and tell himself “God spoke to me; God commissioned me; God made promises to me” So Moses is able to give comfort and advice to the Israelites: "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today.”

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Then the LORD said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. 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. 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."

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, 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.

God says to Moses and the people “Why are your crying out to me? Get a move on, and I will work a miracle on your behalf.” And God validates His words with action, by placing his angel between the Egyptians and the Israelites, so that the Egyptians could not attack them.

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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, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

Here we come to the famous crossing of the Red Sea. God used a strong wind to blow back the relatively shallow water of the sea and turn it into dry land. Interestingly scientists at the National Center for Atmospheric Research used computer modeling to show that a wind could do this:

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But of course even if this model is correct the miracle is still there as a miracle of timing, allowing the Israelites to cross the sea

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Slide (text)

The Egyptians pursued them, and all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and horsemen followed them into the sea. 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. 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."

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." 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. 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.

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So here God fulfills His promise to the Israelites that they will never see their former slavemasters again.

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But the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left. That day the LORD saved Israel from the hands of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians lying dead on the

shore. 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.

So the Israelites learned a huge lesson that day; the lesson that they could trust God and also Moses to protect them and bring them through their trials.

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Exodus 15:1-2

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD:

"I will sing to the LORD,

for he is highly exalted.

The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.

The LORD is my strength and my song;

he has become my salvation.

He is my God, and I will praise him,

my father's God, and I will exalt him.

And their reaction to this deliverance was to sing this joyful song of deliverance to the Lord.

So that is the “big picture”; it is what we learn on reading this passage as the historical account that it is.

Slide (girl and dog)

But what we need to do now is to look beyond the simple historical account and look for the truths that God has put in plain sight for us to learn.

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So what are these truths? What are the lessons for our Christian lives? Let me suggest a few.

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1. Our salvation was purchased at great cost.

Just as the Israelites found their freedom from Egypt at the Passover, when the blood of a lamb bought their freedom from death and their release from slavery, so in the same way as Christians we too have been released from the slavery and bondage of sin through Jesus Christ and His death on the cross. His blood was shed for us on the cross; he died that we might live. Just as the firstborn in every Israelite family was protected from death by the blood of a lamb sprinkled on the doorposts and lintel of the house, so our salvation was purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ shed for us on the cross. Because the lamb died, the firstborn lived. Because Jesus the Lamb of God died, you and I can have eternal life. Do you know Jesus as your savior? Have you thanked him recently (like today) for dying for you?

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2. Salvation does not guarantee a life of freedom from temptation.

The Israelites had left Egypt, but they were still threatened by their old masters. In his classic book “The Screwtape Letters” C.S.Lewis imagines that each person has his or her own personal tempter. The tempter of the man in this book is called Wormwood, and as long as the man is not a Christian Wormwood has an easy time of it. But then the man becomes a Christian, and Wormwood has to swing into action to try to reclaim him for His Infernal Majesty. The story is imaginary, but it teaches an important truth; that Christians are not immune to the wiles of the devil.

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As Peter puts it 1 Peter 5:8-9 “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.”

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3. Christians are not immune to difficulties

The Israelites encountered a seemingly impossible situation within days of leaving Egypt. They were stuck with their backs to Egypt and nowhere to go in a forward direction; between a rock and a hard place. They probably

felt as if they had come out of the frying pan into the fire. And this can be true in the Christian life too. In the book *God in the Dock*, Lewis says

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“I didn’t go to religion to make me happy. I always knew a bottle of port would do that. If you want a religion to make you feel really comfortable, I certainly don’t recommend Christianity.”

Millions of Christians around the world will agree with Lewis; just ask Christians in northern Nigeria, where they are targeted and churches have been bombed by Moslem extremists, or ask Christians in North Korea, many of whom are in jail for the crime of being a Christian. Christians in most countries in the Middle East live in constant danger of persecution and death. These are just three examples of Christians who do not have an comfortable life. Thankfully there is as yet little open persecution of Christians in this country, but that does not mean that Christians necessarily have an easy time of it. The elders pray together almost every Wednesday evening, and many of our prayers are for members of this congregation with medical or financial or other needs, because many in this congregation have great needs for themselves or for close family members.

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4. God is in control even when life does not make sense

God had placed the Israelites between the Egyptians bent on recapturing them and the sea, but God was in control of their situation, and He brought them through their difficulties and into a place of rejoicing. It would be great to be able to say that God always rescues His people in this sort of way, but that would not be true to Scripture or to life. In many cases He does rescue us. My secretary Angie, who is a believer, was in an accident while driving to work last Monday. A high school student ran a red light and hit her minivan, flipping it onto its roof. Miraculously Angie and her two passengers all walked away from the accident with no life-threatening injuries. But sometimes God chooses not to rescue us from our situations; Christians do die of cancer and in accidents and suffer in other ways. But the good news is that we are always in God’s good and loving hands.

The apostle Paul knew what it was to suffer for the sake of Jesus Christ, but he writes in his letter to the Romans

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Rom 8:28 And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.

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5. When we are in difficult situations, we need to look to God and not look at the Egyptians

The Israelites and Moses were both stuck in the same place; between the Red Sea and the advancing Egyptian forces. The Israelites panicked, and blamed Moses for getting them into this mess. Moses, on the other hand, was able to say in faith (Exodus 14:13-14) "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. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still." What was the difference? Probably many things, but one key difference was that the Israelites were looking at the difficulties

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Exodus 14:10 “As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them.” Moses however was in communication with God:

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Exodus 14:15 “Then the LORD said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me?"”

It is so easy to look at our circumstances and give way to fear and doubt “My husband (or wife) will never change for the better” “I will never be able to pass organic chemistry” “My life stinks” These circumstances are our Egyptians; they scare us, and we are tempted to focus on them and to ignore God. The man or woman of faith, however, does what Moses did; he or she cries out to God, and God will either provide a way out of your attack by the Egyptians, or He will give you the strength to endure the suffering.

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6. Remember to look back and give thanks

When the Israelites made it across the Red Sea and saw that the Egyptians were no more, they broke into a song of praise and thanksgiving

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Exodus 15:1-2

Then Moses and the Israelites sang this song to the LORD:

"I will sing to the LORD,

for he is highly exalted.

The horse and its rider he has hurled into the sea.

The LORD is my strength and my song;

he has become my salvation.

He is my God, and I will praise him,

my father's God, and I will exalt him.

The Israelites often looked back to the Red Sea experience:

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Ps 106:9

He rebuked the Red Sea, and it dried up;

he led them through the depths as through a desert.

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Neh 9:9

You saw the suffering of our forefathers in Egypt; you heard their cry at the Red Sea.

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Acts 7:35-36

He led them out of Egypt and did wonders and miraculous signs in Egypt, at the Red Sea and for forty years in the desert.

If you are a Christian, you have been rescued from a fate much more terrifying than being captured by the Egyptians; you have been ransomed from hell and eternal judgment and healed and restored and forgiven, all because of the death of Christ on your behalf. Have you thanked Jesus recently? One way to do this is to join fellow believers at 9:00 am in the chapel next Sunday for a special service of remembrance called the Lord's Supper. It is an opportunity to share in thanksgiving with other believers, and to remember what the Lord has done for us.

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6. As you look back and give thanks your faith will grow, just as Moses' did.

Moses had the faith to believe that God would keep his promises, and no doubt this was because he could look back on his meeting with God at the burning bush and on God's mighty acts in bringing the Israelites out of Egypt.

Heb 11:29

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.

Some of you can look back on dramatic conversions, like the apostle Paul or Sandy Young.

Some of you, like me, can look back to a time when God worked a miraculous answer to prayer in your lives
And all of us can look back to the cross, where our Lord paid the ultimate price for our salvation.

May the Lord bless you as you seek to follow Him through whatever wilderness you are in or may be in in the future.

Amen