

Thanks to the wonders of YouTube I was able to re-watch a segment of the 1956 movie, “The Ten Commandments,” where the Red Sea is parted and then the waters come back again. This Hollywood version of the event takes seven minutes and 40 seconds. Watching it I realized that it must have really taken a lot longer. Re-reading Exodus confirmed that God used a “terrific east wind all night long” to move the sea water apart, and to also dry the sea bed. Hours of sustained wind powerful enough to move such a large volume of water and hold it back would have been not just “terrific” but terrifying. And the Pillar of Fire and Cloud that separated the Israelite and Egyptian camps was no small or ho-hum mundane thing either. So I think the movie gets it right when it shows flocks of animals in an uproar as the Israelites desperately try to herd them through the howling wind, past the walls of water, with a column of cloud and fire behind them. Some of the animals run amok and trip people up who are carrying everything they can carry, or get under the wheels of heavy laden carts that aren’t easy to manage as they pitch down into the sea bed and later have to be pushed up out of the sea bed on the other shore. Families are trying to carry small children and those who are too sick or weak to traverse the sea bed in this wind. Everyone is in a panic to move forward as quickly as possible. So it was definitely **not** an orderly and well-mannered procession of confident and faith-filled people!

And at the same time the Egyptians were held back and apart from the Israelites by the Pillar of Fire and Cloud. Their horses had to have grown anxious and uneasy during this long night of wind and darkness. And then there were the sounds of the Israelites moving away, crying out as their animals fearfully bleat and bray – all that noise was carried back to the Egyptians on the wind. And when the Pillar of Fire and Cloud finally began to pull away, the Egyptian army was ordered to follow it into this unnatural valley between the walls of water. Their horses certainly did not want to haul the chariots into that sea bed – but down they went. And as the army committed to crossing the sea bed in pursuit of the Israelites, all that dry ground beneath them started to become muddy. The horses pulled and pulled but they couldn’t keep the chariots moving forward – the wheels became stuck in the mud. And the Egyptians realized that God was fighting on the side of Israel and against them. Yes, it was the EGYPTIANS who acknowledged and confessed that this was the work of God. And just as they realized that God’s power surrounded them – WHOOSH! – all that water came crashing down upon them, drowning the chariots and riders of Pharaoh’s army.

It wasn’t until the wind had stopped blowing, and they saw the dead Egyptians start to wash up on the shore where they were standing, that the ISRAELITES seemed to fully

comprehend the tremendous power of God that was employed to deliver them from the Egyptians. Suddenly they were overcome by reverent awe before God and Moses picked up the song that Miriam and the other women had begun singing: Sing to God – what a victory! He pitched horse and rider into the sea! God is my strength, God is my song, God is my salvation. . . . And so on, and so forth about God dumping Pharaoh’s chariots and army in the Red Sea to drown. How God blew with all God’s might to cover them with the sea, and they sank like a rock. How no one compares with God in power, in holy majesty, in wonder-working! . . . And everyone sang and gave praise to God. They even broke out the tambourines that they had packed and started to dance a victory dance.

And this is where we need to stop and be clear about their reason for celebrating. This was not to be a celebration of what the Israelites had done. They did not part the Red Sea. They did not stop Pharaoh’s army. They were not the victors over Egypt. That was ALL God. This was not a time for the Israelites to gloat over the dead Egyptians – their former masters. This was a time for Israel to give praise and prayers to God. As a matter of fact the Israelites probably should have been kneeling down next to the dead Egyptians who had already acknowledged and confessed this was the work of God. Because no matter who we are – Egyptian, or Israelite, or a citizen of the United States of America – we ALL live and die in God’s presence. And as Paul writes to the Romans:

Eventually, we’re all going to end up kneeling side by side in the place of judgment, facing God. [And our] critical and condescending ways aren’t going to improve [our] position there one bit. (Romans 14:10 *The Message*)

That’s a tough thing for us to remember, isn’t it? We often want to break into our own happy victory dance and point at other people and declare them to be so, so WRONG, WRONG, WRONG! while we see ourselves as being so, so RIGHT, RIGHT, RIGHT! . . . But when we feel that growing desire to do our own victory dance – that is when we need to stop and ask ourselves: **How do we look in the eyes of God?** . . . And I want us to think about that question in two ways. **First** – what does God see when God looks at us savoring our judgmental “rightness” over what we perceive to be someone else’s “wrongness”? What does God see? How do we look in the eyes of God? Do we seem silly and vain? Or sinful and sad? **Secondly** – are we even looking at God when we are so focused on defending our own “rightness” in opposition to someone else’s position? Do we pay ANY attention to God in that moment? Haven’t we taken our eyes off God? Can we actually look into the eyes of God while we are putting someone else down? It’s OK to break out the tambourines to give praise God for God’s faithfulness; but it’s not OK to praise ourselves for being the “right” kind of Christian. It’s OK to sing and dance to give glory to God; but it’s not OK to crow over how “wrong” someone else is, nor to dance on their grave. It’s OK to celebrate God; it’s not OK to put somebody else down while we’re doing that. Amen.