

Are You Stuck In a Rut?

P-18A

Exodus 14:19-31; Matthew 18:21-35

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^{TNK} **Exodus 14:19** The angel of God, who had been going ahead of the Israelite army, now moved and followed behind them; and the pillar of cloud shifted from in front of them and took up a place behind them, ²⁰ and it came between the army of the Egyptians and the army of Israel. Thus there was the cloud with the darkness, and it cast a spell upon the night, so that the one could not come near the other all through the night. ²¹ Then Moses held out his arm over the sea and the LORD drove back the sea with a strong east wind all that night, and turned the sea into dry ground. The waters were split, ²² and the Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ²³ The Egyptians came in pursuit after them into the sea, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and horsemen. ²⁴ At the morning watch, the LORD looked down upon the Egyptian army from a pillar of fire and cloud, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. ²⁵ He locked the wheels of their chariots so that they moved forward with difficulty. And the Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt." ²⁶ Then the LORD said to Moses, "Hold out your arm over the sea, that the waters may come back upon the Egyptians and upon their chariots and upon their horsemen." ²⁷ Moses held out his arm over the sea, and at daybreak the sea returned to its normal state, and the Egyptians fled at its approach. But the LORD hurled the Egyptians into the sea. ²⁸ The waters turned back and covered the chariots and the horsemen -- Pharaoh's entire army that followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. ²⁹ But the Israelites had marched through the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. ³⁰ Thus the LORD delivered Israel that day from the Egyptians. Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the shore of the sea. ³¹ And when Israel saw the wondrous power which the LORD had wielded against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD; they had faith in the LORD and His servant Moses.

^{NLT} **Matthew 18:21** Then Peter came to him and asked, "Lord, how often should I forgive someone who sins against me? Seven times?" ²² "No!" Jesus replied, "seventy times seven!" ²³ "For this reason, the

Kingdom of Heaven can be compared to a king who decided to bring his accounts up to date with servants who had borrowed money from him.²⁴ In the process, one of his debtors was brought in who owed him millions of dollars.²⁵ He couldn't pay, so the king ordered that he, his wife, his children, and everything he had be sold to pay the debt.²⁶ But the man fell down before the king and begged him, 'Oh, sir, be patient with me, and I will pay it all.'²⁷ Then the king was filled with pity for him, and he released him and forgave his debt.²⁸ "But when the man left the king, he went to a fellow servant who owed him a few thousand dollars. He grabbed him by the throat and demanded instant payment.²⁹ His fellow servant fell down before him and begged for a little more time. 'Be patient and I will pay it,' he pleaded.³⁰ But his creditor wouldn't wait. He had the man arrested and jailed until the debt could be paid in full.³¹ "When some of the other servants saw this, they were very upset. They went to the king and told him what had happened.³² Then the king called in the man he had forgiven and said, 'You evil servant! I forgave you that tremendous debt because you pleaded with me.³³ Shouldn't you have mercy on your fellow servant, just as I had mercy on you?'³⁴ Then the angry king sent the man to prison until he had paid every penny.³⁵ "That's what my heavenly Father will do to you if you refuse to forgive your brothers and sisters in your heart."

What a remarkable story in the Old Testament lesson of Exodus! The Egyptians are chasing after the Israelites. They both come to the Red Sea. Both enter the sea with the waters held back. Then notice this phrase, "...*the LORD looked down upon the Egyptian army from a pillar of fire and cloud, and threw the Egyptian army into panic.*²⁵ *He locked the wheels of their chariots so that they moved forward with difficulty. And the Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the LORD is fighting for them against Egypt."* The Egyptians moved forward with difficulty. In other words, they were for all practical purposes **stuck** and their watery doom lurched eerily

over them, while the Israelites passed on through this danger safely. The Egyptians were stuck in a deep rut and they could not get out on their own.

Have you ever been stuck in a rut? Have you ever been so stuck without hope, life just sucked out of you, like a dark whole swirling around and around drawing you ever deeper to a terrible fate? I call this a deadly rut. You know what a rut does to you, don't you? Once you slide into a rut, it is very difficult task to get out of the "rut." In the witness of the Scriptures as we heard them read today, God had seen the deep and deadly rut into which the people of God had fallen – in the bondage to the Egyptians. It was neither a new story nor a new "rut" either. From the time of Abraham to Joseph, and finally to this great story of the Exodus from Egypt, the people of God had experienced time and again what a life threatening "rut" was all about.

A rut is something that you get into and **cannot** get out of very easily by yourself. I can remember my family driving back from northern Virginia in a bad snow storm. When we got to the James City County area and took the exit toward the pottery, we could not tell where the road was. We followed the tracks but we soon ended up in a ditch. It was cold, windy and pretty lonely at that moment. We were stuck with no apparent help in sight. The question that confronted us in the middle of this deep rut to nowhere is

“how do you get out of it?” We couldn’t even begin to get our car out of the deep ditch.

The Israelites were in a rut. The crossing to the Red Sea is one of the most important stories in the Bible for Christians and for Jews about being rescued from this rut. It is the bedrock foundation that tells us that we can trust God to get out – to deliver us from slavery and oppression. We could argue until the cows come home about just how the Israelites gained their freedom from a cruel and harsh Pharaoh. The point is that the Exodus happened, not how it happened. The great work of art that proceeds from here is to respond in faith that it did happen and that God’s compassion and love made it happen. This is the critical point - *God is responsible* for their freedom. Even the Egyptians would compel to say, “*The Lord is fighting for them against Egypt!*” God is responsible.

In the Gospel of Matthew, when Peter asks the difficult question about how many times you or I should forgive another, Jesus is intervening in history to make forgiveness happen as a way of life, just like breathing in and out is a necessity to move forward and to live alive in faith. Forgiveness is not just a one time thing. It is an eternity of grace that will never ever let us go.

Are you stuck in a spiritual rut? I imagine that at one time or another you have been stuck in something, maybe something that is potentially very destructive. Quite frequently what we want to do is to point our finger and say, “It is not my fault.” The power of the rut is to steal away life and hope. We get into this destructive pattern of judging others and then becoming judgmental in our spirit. When we get into that rut of believing that we are always right and the other is wrong, we are in a dangerous self-focused place. The body of Christ is not my opinion or yours alone. When we get self-focused and judgmental, we get into a rut of not smiling, thinking negatively, wanting another not to do well, and imagining the worst. This is a rut of thinking that destroys the family of God. I have seen it too often, when a person harbors a grudge and won’t even look another in the eye, but quietly whispers unfounded suspicions about another, planting seeds of discontent. This can only lead to disaster and broken relationships.

The New Testament story is an example of a superior, self-focused thinking. The servant who is forgiven much cannot forgive another even for a little. This servant is in a rut of wanting for himself what he is not willing to share with another in need. There is no compassion except what one receives. There is no giving, only taking. That is a spiritual rut that demands accountability. Forgiveness received must mean that forgiveness is to be

given and shared just as generously as we have received it. If not, there is going to be no joy and no viable relationship with our Lord.

The Israelites had gotten into many ruts along their journey. Finally ending up in slavery, they could only cry out to God from their misery and ask to get out. Perhaps we may say, God is not so concerned about how the Israelites or we for that matter end up in this deadly rut going nowhere, stuck in a state of hopelessness. God is not so concerned about why the Israelites got into that place. But, just maybe our God is more concerned about getting us out of the dangerous ruts that drain away life's energy and hope. God may just be more concerned about **delivering** the people of God into a safer and better place.

Someone commented on this great story of God's working in our history. "*Part of the power of this event is its demonstration that the God of Israel is also the **God of the Land, Wind, Sea, and Sky**. Every element of the created order -- earth itself (mud), the sky (pillar of cloud and fire), wind (blowing all night), and sea (subdued, controlled, parted, and restored) was brought to bear in this battle between the swiftest and most elite fighting force of its time (the Egyptian army) and the ragtag, impromptu hosts of Israel. YHWH saved Israel that day, **routing** the world's best army and leaving their bodies scattered and dead on the shore (verse 30).*"

The **Psalmists** celebrate this demonstration of God’s power and love for God’s people. *He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle; he put the deeps in storehouses.* (^{NRS} Psalm 33:7) *He turned the sea into dry land; they passed through the river on foot. There we rejoiced in him...* (^{NRS} Psalm 66:6)

Now, all that is ahead of the Israelites is the “**dream**” of a good land of plenty for everyone. It is the dream of paradise restored and a promise fulfilled. Move on out Israelites, your God has acted. This story is told and retold in every age to remind us that God is responsible for getting us out of our ruts. The **prophets** would remind the people over and over again that God conquered the Egyptian army and Pharaoh. God delivered them. The **Passover** feast of last week is the festival that is celebrated every year to call to memory what God can do. But, it is **also a warning**. God requires the people to respond and to live faithfully. The people are warned against false gods and the dangers of idolatry. These are **secular ruts** that are alluring and deadly. If the people of God do not listen and pay attention, slavery and bondage could easily happen again.

Our ruts are very dangerous, in all the churches I have served in 33 years, there has always been a need for support groups for addictions and battered spouses. Today those addictions include over – eating, the

computer, sex, online gambling, and even an addiction of a nation to oil. These addictions get their claws into our head and heart and destroy us bit by bit. I know this rut first hand. My father was addicted to alcohol; so was my grandfather and my uncles and aunts, and my cousins. It is sickness that demands everything from us once we start down that path. We cannot get out by ourselves.

The twelve step program makes us look at what kind of god is controlling us. We must turn to a higher power. Such is the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Jesus. This God alone has the ultimate power to rescue and save us.

Back to my story about our family stuck in a ditch on a snow stormy day. As we sat there in despair and frustration, a neighbor saw our dilemma. In fact he had seen this more than once. This neighbor did a most gracious and kind deed. He left the warmth of his house and came to pull us out of the ditch with his truck. Without his help we would have been stuck for a long and very cold time.

This is the story of Jesus. Jesus demonstrates the power to **extract** us from the rut of our sins. It is a story for Christians to **remember and to live in** faithful response. It is the story of our **baptism**. Our baptism is **God's**

pulling us out of the rut of our sins. Each of us as Christians realizes that the story of God's mighty salvation of the Israelites is **our story** also.

Woven into our songs and prayers, our scriptures and our preaching is this *DNA* of a people who have been in misery and have been saved. This is our God who has cancelled the power of sin and death. This is the Lord who was raised from the dead and causes us to sing, "Christ the Lord is risen today, Alleluia."

*Vain the stone, the watch, the seal, Alleluia!
Christ hath burst the gates of hell, Alleluia!
Death in vain forbids His rise, Alleluia!
Christ hath opened paradise, Alleluia!*

*Lives again our glorious King, Alleluia!
Where, O death, is now thy sting? Alleluia!
Once He died our souls to save, Alleluia!
Where thy victory, O grave? Alleluia!*

I wonder if we could sing this great Easter Hymn that Charles Wesley composed. As we do so, I invite you to open your mind and heart to the one who has the depth of compassion and love to lift us up out of deathly ruts. I invite you to accept this heavenly gift that set us free forever. Amen.

