

# “Deliverance!”

John 12:23-33 <sup>1</sup>

What comes to your mind when you hear or read the word “deliverance”? The first thing I think about is James Dickey’s nightmarish 1972 movie by that same name, and of the “Dueling Banjos” number that it made famous. When the word “deliverance” is used these days, it frequently refers to the activities of fringe religious groups that emphasize unhelpful ideas about spiritual warfare. We actually saw some believers engaged in such activities while we were in Ghana.

Although it’s frequently misunderstood and misapplied, “deliverance” is in fact a biblical concept, and its best-known example is found in the book of Exodus. Exodus 2:23 tells us that “*Years passed, and the king of Egypt died. But the Israelites still groaned beneath their burden of slavery. They cried out for help, and their pleas for deliverance rose up to God.*” It was after this that God called Moses to deliver his people from their bondage, which began with the ten plagues and ended with crossing the Red Sea.

One of the interesting side notes to the Exodus is the comment that “*Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel swear that they would take his bones with them when God led them out of Egypt—as he was sure God would*” (13:19).

Joseph believed that God would keep the promise to return Israel to the Promised Land, even though he had no idea when this would happen—or that it would take 430 years. God’s Time is not our time (2 Peter 3:8). God keeps all of His promises to us, though not necessarily in the time frame we expect. God is far more active in our world than we know, and on those occasions when we become aware of God’s activity, timing is usually a key component of God’s work. Here are some examples . . . .

Ira Sankey was the “George Beverly Shea” for Dwight Moody’s great crusades more than a century ago. You may know him as the composer of the hymns “Faith is the Victory” and “Trusting Jesus,” among others. On one occasion Sankey was traveling on a steamer in the Delaware River, and some of the passengers recognized him. They asked him to sing some of his music, but he chose to sing William Bradbury’s “Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us” instead.

When Sankey finished, a man asked him, “Were you ever in the army, Mr. Sankey?”

“Yes, I joined in 1860.”

“Did you ever do guard duty at night in Maryland, about 1862?”

“Yes, I did.”

“Well, I was in the Confederate Army,” the stranger continued. “I saw you one night at Sharpsburg. I had you in my gun sight as you stood there in the light of the full moon. Just as I was about to pull the trigger, you began to sing. It was the same hymn you just sang. And I couldn’t kill you.”<sup>2</sup> That story gives me goose bumps!

God delivered Ira Sankey from that sniper’s bullet by prompting him to sing. If Sankey had refused the impulse to sing, well, you know what would have happened. Many similar stories have been told about the World Trade Center explosions. One man said to himself, “I think I’ll stop and get a Band-Aid for my foot”—and his life was spared. Spend enough time in

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<sup>1</sup> A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on March 25, 2018. Palm Sunday. See also Genesis 49:10-11; Exodus 14:10-14, 19-22; Zechariah 9:9; John 12:15; 1 Corinthians 10:1-4.

<sup>2</sup> I.M. Anderson, *Moody Monthly*, February, 1986.

conversation with God that you learn to recognize God's Voice. And if the Voice says "Sing," then sing!

Here's another example of timing. Late one night in 2002, a man in Slim Cornett's church was showing Slim around a county airport in rural Mississippi. "This switch lights up the runway," the man said as he flipped it. "If a plane were in distress, I would throw this switch and turn on the search lights."

As the night skies lit up, a small plane materialized out of the darkness and landed. Slim and his friend watched in amazement as Franklin Graham, son of the famous evangelist, stepped off the plane.

The pilot had been flying Franklin back to school in Texas when the electrical system shut down, leaving them stranded in the Mississippi night without lights or radio or any means of guidance. From out of nowhere, the search beam had come on and guided them to the landing strip. As Franklin's mother, Ruth, tells the story, earlier that evening before they left home, Billy Graham had prayed for the Father to protect and guide his son and the pilot.<sup>3</sup>

God's deliverance is not only a matter of timing. It's also a matter of power. Before Israel crossed the Red Sea, they were trapped between the sea and Pharaoh's army, perhaps the most powerful military force in the world at that time.

Do you think that was an accident? Did Moses take a wrong turn? No, that was no accident. God directed Israel into an impossible situation so that they could experience God's power. Look at what happened in verses 15-16:

*"Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Why are you crying out to me? Tell the people to get moving! Use your shepherd's staff—hold it out over the water, and a path will open up before you through the sea. Then all the people of Israel will walk through on dry ground.' . . . Then Moses raised his hand over the sea, and the LORD opened up a path through the water with a strong east wind. The wind blew all that night, turning the seabed into dry land. So the people of Israel walked through the sea on dry ground, with walls of water on each side!" (Exodus 14:15-16, 21-22). Talk about power!*

The fact of the matter is that we don't know just where this miracle occurred. Some think this crossing must have been in marshland rather than in the enormous Red Sea itself. But you know what, **wherever this happened, the width of the crossing was long enough, and the water there was deep enough, to bury one of the greatest armies of the ancient world. This was no small event.**

God directed Israel into an impossible situation so that this demonstration of power would cause the people to trust in and obey Him. As Moses put it in his Song of Victory, "*At the blast of your breath, the waters piled up! The surging waters stood straight like a wall; in the middle of the sea the waters became hard*" (15:8).

Israel's crossing of the Red Sea was pretty incredible, and it has become a global paradigm for deliverance . . . but that was more than 3,000 years ago. Here are some more recent events . . . .

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<sup>3</sup> Joe McKeever, "God Winks," *Leadership Weekly*, 12.18.02.

Hawa, a Muslim student in North Africa, read a Christian tract in her dormitory, decided to become a Christian, and changed her name to Faith. She knew her decision would be costly—but she had no idea of what was about to happen.

When Faith's father and brothers learned of her conversion, they exploded with rage. They stripped her naked, tied her to a metal chair, and tried to electrocute her. Faith felt a strange sense of peace as her father and brothers tried to kill her, and their repeated attempts failed to get electricity to the chair. Finally, her father threw her out into the street in disgust.

Faith ran naked through the streets to a friend's house. People stopped to look at her, but their faces showed curiosity rather than shock. The next morning, when her friend asked the neighbors what they had thought when they saw Faith running naked through the streets, they replied, "What are you talking about? She had a *magnificent* white dress on. We wondered why someone so beautifully clothed was running through the streets."<sup>4</sup> The Bible says, "*All who are victorious will be clothed in white garments so they will not be ashamed of their nakedness*" (Revelation 3:5, 18).

Like Faith, you and I sometimes face challenges we don't expect, and God's deliverance sometimes comes in other surprising ways. Here's another story:

Samuel watched the *Jesus* film in Kabul, Afghanistan on July 15, 2001, and he decided to become a Christian. It wasn't long before the Taliban threw him in jail, where they beat him every day for two weeks with a five-foot steel cable. After one of these terrible beatings, Samuel had a dream in which a luminous man in white clothing led him out of his cell and out of the prison. When Samuel awoke, he found that his cell door was indeed open and unguarded. He walked in silent amazement through the prison to the front gate, which was also unguarded and open. And then he walked out into the night.<sup>5</sup>

As wonderful as God's deliverance is, we need to also consider those soldiers who do get shot in the night, those passengers on planes that do crash, those persons who did die in the World Trade Center, those multiplied thousands who do give their lives for their faith in Jesus. Now of course, because you and I are sinners who live in a fallen world, we're all going to die, and there must be some mechanism by which death will come. But there is more to the question than this.

We misunderstand God's deliverance if we limit it to deliverance from earthly danger and suffering. God's purpose in our lives is not primarily to protect us from danger and suffering. Indeed, **God's greatest purpose in our lives has very little to do with health, wealth, or a long life.**

Yes, Jesus had compassion on the sick, and He healed sick people—lots of them. But beyond compassion, Jesus' displays of miraculous power were signs that validated His power to forgive sin and heal the soul, which is far, far more important.

The famous monk, Brother Lawrence, once noted that "God often sends diseases of the body to cure those of the soul."<sup>6</sup> Swiss physician Paul Tournier used to tell his patients, "I will do all I can to cure your disease, but I will also pray that God does not heal you until you have learned what this disease has to teach you."

<sup>4</sup> Guido Kuwas, *Global Revival News*, December 17, 2001.

<sup>5</sup> Stan Guthrie, "Doors into Islam," *Christianity Today* (September 9, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Brother Lawrence, *Leadership*, vol. 9, no. 1.

My friends, God wants the very best for us, and because God wants the very best for us, God doesn't want us to be satisfied with less than the very best. The deliverance that really matters is not a deliverance from Egypt, from disease, poverty, or physical danger. The deliverance that truly matters is deliverance from the sin that separates us from God's transforming power in our lives, both now and in eternity.

Do you know what God really cares about? God cares about your character. God's purpose in your life and in mine is to shape us into His own character, so that the words "*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control*" (Galatians 5:22-23) describe us nearly as well as they do Jesus.

This shaping is costly. It is frequently painful. And sometimes it costs us our lives. Nor is that always a bad thing. It is sometimes by the faithful and courageous deaths of martyrs that God's Kingdom is most powerfully advanced. And should you or I or persons we love be counted among that number, I hope that we will respond as the early disciples did, "*rejoicing that God had counted them worthy to suffer . . . for the name of Jesus*" (Acts 5:41).

In the Exodus deliverance, Israel had followed Moses out of Egypt and to the shore of the Red Sea. They had made the initial commitment to leave the land of their slavery, but they weren't yet **fully** committed to following God's guidance into an unknown future. But once they had dared to walk between the walls of water, once they had crossed over and the waters had closed once more, they really had "burned their bridges." There was no going back.

The idea of "no going back" also has a lot to do with Palm Sunday. Jesus had entered Jerusalem to shouts and cheers, riding on the back of a donkey's colt, which was both a clear claim to be a king—a king of peace, not of war—and a clear fulfillment of a well-known prophecy about the Messiah.<sup>7</sup> Later that same day, after the crowds had gone home, Jesus told His disciples,

*<sup>23</sup> "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified. <sup>24</sup> Truly I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains by itself. But if it dies, it produces much fruit. <sup>25</sup> The one who loves his life will lose it, and the one who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. <sup>26</sup> If anyone serves me, he must follow me. Where I am, there my servant also will be. If anyone serves me, the Father will honor him.*

***<sup>27</sup> "Now my soul is troubled. What should I say—Father, save me from this hour? But that is why I came to this hour. <sup>28</sup> Father, glorify your name"*** (John 12:23-28).

This is where "the water hits the wheel" for most of us. There are many Christians—perhaps some of us here this morning—who have followed Jesus "out of Egypt" and as far as the shore of the Red Sea. We've made an initial commitment, but we're just not sure that we want to walk through the waters and cross over to the other shore.

We're not sure that we really trust God to get us through the challenges of life, and we want to hedge our bets. To tell the truth, we don't really want all that water between us and the "pleasures of Egypt" we have befriended. We don't want to leave our past totally and completely behind.

Israel wasn't so sure, either . . . until God turned the up the heat by sending Pharaoh's army. That was a severe mercy, but it literally changed the world. God sometimes turns up the heat on us, too, to get us moving; and in such moments we do well to remember that after the

<sup>7</sup> See Genesis 49:10-11; Zechariah 9:9.

crossing was complete, Moses sang, *“The Lord is my strength and my song; he has become my victory. . . . With unfailing love you will lead this people whom you have ransomed. You will guide them in your strength to the place where your holiness dwells”* (Exodus 15:2, 13).

That’s what deliverance looks like. You and I are able to follow Jesus based on a lot more information and experience than Israel had by the Red Sea. We can follow Jesus with unshakeable confidence, into this week, and into every week, knowing that no matter what lies ahead of us, God will deliver us in the ways that really matter, making us more and more like Himself until at last we reach that place where God’s holiness dwells . . . and then we will be finally and forever Home.

As we begin this Holy Week in the year of our Lord, two thousand and eighteen, with dangers and troubles all about us, let us cry out with Jesus, **“Father, glorify your Name!”**