

Fullness of Time
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Page 1 of 8

"What can we do?" Pharoah asked him, his voice dull with his sorrow. "What can we do? Can we make sacrifice to Jehovah?"

The chief priest of Amen shrugged his shoulders. "Amen's people cannot worship a Hebrew god," he said. "The only thing to do is to send the Hebrews out of Egypt. Have them go at once. Tonight."

"Tell them to leave tonight! At once! Tonight!" the people cried when they heard the chief priest speak.

Pharoah heard, and bowed his head lower. The people in the room waited, to see what Pharoah would do.

At that moment the door opened, and a new figure entered. The vizer, whose palace was at some distance from Pharoah's, had been hastily summoned. He had thrown on a mantle of wine-colored cloth and hastened to Pharoah's palace by the light of a flaming torch. Pharoah, broken and uncertain in his grief, turned to him now. "What shall we do?" he asked. The vizer was a man of decision. "I will go tell the Hebrews to leave the city," he said, and turning to a slave, "Have the chariot prepared," he said. The people pressed round him, trying to hear. "He's going to tell them to leave," one woman said, relief and excitement in her voice. And then she turned to the vizer. "Take them this ring," she said, slipping a jewel from her finger. "Only let them take it and go – tonight."

"Do they want gold?" another asked. "Take them this." She had gone to another room and brought back a heavy bag of gold dust.

"Give them these bracelets," another said, pulling from her arms two bands of gold richly crusted with jewels.

Another brought her earrings, and another a single great emerald. The pile of jewels began to mount at the vizer's feet.

Soon the slave who had been sent to the royal stables, brought back the great black horses, quivering and blinking in the light, and these were harnessed to the vizer's chariot. A second chariot also was brought so that the chief steward might bring the treasure of gold and jewels that was to persuade the Hebrews to go quickly.

Down the long avenue the chariots raced, down the dark streets of the city, past the brickyard, past the vineyard, until they came at last to the house where Moses and Aaron lived. A light streamed out into the darkness from the window of the house.

The vizer raised his hand, and knocked on the wooden panel. Inside Moses and the others were standing, their staves in their hands, their shoes on their feet, and their robes drawn round them, as if they were prepared for a journey.

"I have come to urge you to go in haste," the vizer said, his eyes moving about the room and its occupants.

"We are ready to go now," Moses answered, taking up a bundle that lay on a table near him. But then he paused, and looked narrowly at the vizer.

"There is only one thing we ask before we go," he said.

"What is it?" the vizer answered. "Ask anything you will."

"Will you swear that these Hebrews who were slaves, are henceforth free?" Moses asked.

"I will swear anything," the vizer answered. "I swear by Amen. And by

Osiris. And by Ptah. And by the spirit of my father. And by the spirit of my grandfather."

"That is enough," said Moses.

The Egyptians who stood behind the vizer pressed forward offering golden chains, and rings, and bracelets. "Swear it again," they said. "Swear it again. Only tell them to make haste."

Without further words Moses stepped out through the door, thrusting the Egyptians aside. Up and down the streets other doors were opening, and other men and women and children were pouring into the road. More and more they came, pressing up from every forlorn and miserable quarter of the city. There were men and women in little groups bringing their sleepy children, and old men tapping their canes unsteadily as they walked with uncertain steps. Some of the people carried bundles of clothing and others drove donkeys loaded down with bags of grain, or goatskins filled with water. Some carried young lambs in their arms, thinking them not yet strong enough for so long a journey. Others drove flocks of sheep and goats before them, calling to them from time to time to keep them together. But for the most part their voices were quiet. The only sound among them was the slow shuffle of thousands of feet as they moved like a slow drab army out of the city, toward the eastern road that leads into the desert.

When they had finally left the city behind them, the sun came up, lighting the way that they must go. Seeing it, someone near the front of the procession began to chant an old song. And one after another their voices took up the chant until it swelled from thousands of throats, and beat out the time for thousands of shuffling feet:

*The Lord is my light and my salvation;
Whom shall I fear?
The Lord is the strength of my life;*

Of whom shall I be afraid?

So chanting, the Hebrews left Egypt and slavery behind them.

The great mass of people with their animals and baggage moved slowly toward the East, over a dry rocky land. Moses could have lead them a much shorter way to the fertile country that he had planned for them, but he wanted them to go by way of Sinai, to sacrifice at the holy mountain where he had first seen God.

"The journey is a hard one," he said, looking down at a thin tired woman who walked beside her husband and led a little child by the hand.

"True," the woman answered, "we shall be tired. But what does it matter? My husband was a brickmaker for Pharoah, and Reuben and I seldom had enough to eat. It can't be worse than that."

"The land ahead is green and fertile," Moses told her. "There will be food aplenty for us all when we get there. And green pastures for your sheep too, if only you can manage the journey," he said, looking down at her tired face.

She smiled and made no answer, but there was no lagging in her pace.

"Can you keep your flock together, then?" he said to a shepherd who drove his big-tailed sheep before him.

"I can do it," said the shepherd. "But it's not easy. They wander this way and that in search of a green twig or a bit of grass. I follow after them to bring them back. The crowd moves on. And the first thing I know, I've almost lost you... I shouldn't want to keep my flock, and find that I had lost all Israel and was alone in the great desert."

"That wouldn't do," Moses agreed. "Try to keep an eye on the main group."

Although he spoke confidently, the man's words troubled Moses. He looked across at the moving hosts of people with their flocks and their herds, that stretched as far as the eye could see.

"We must find some way of keeping together," he said. "Some kind of guide that all can see, even if they have strayed away a little. Some kind of banner," he said then. "But they couldn't see a banner at night."

He kept thinking about it all day as they plodded on. At last toward evening he thought of a fire as a beacon. "A fire would do," he thought. "If we could make a fire that moved along before us."

They made a fire then, and put it in a big brazier, and the brazier hung on a tall pole, and carried it swinging at the front of the crowd. Now from the brazier the smoke mounted in a soft white column, clear and plain against the sky, and at night the fire blazed up into the darkness with a golden light that could be seen a mile away.

"It makes me feel content to watch it," the tired woman said. "It seems to show the way so plain."

"Come on," the shepherd called, flicking at his sheep with his crook. "Can't you see the fire turning toward the right? You don't want to get separated, do you?"

So in the noonday under the clear blue sky, the white pillar of smoke led them on, and at night, when the dark sky was embroidered with its stars, the fire burned before them.

Three days and nights they journeyed thus, with brief pauses for rest. Then on the third morning they came suddenly to a narrow arm of the Red Sea.

They stopped at the shore to watch the blue water with the sea gulls wheeling over it. On the bank opposite them a mountain with bleak rocky sides rose up sharply, its summit lost in the clouds.

They paused, and putting down their burdens, looked back over the way they had come.

"Look there," said one of them, pointing. "That looks like a puff of smoke back there, just where the earth meets the sky."

"Its smoke or dust," another said.

They watched while the puff of smoke or dust seemed to grow bigger.

"There's movement in it. It looks like a horse," said another.

And then they knew. "They are horses!" they said. It's the Egyptians! It's Pharoah! He's coming after us!"

Pharoah's black horses, three of them harnessed to each chariot, were racing toward them, swift as a light. They were flying over the ground toward the Hebrews like fire racing through a field of stubble, like lightning ready to strike them down.

"It's Pharoah!" the people cried again and again in terror. "Fly! Fly!"

But whither could they fly? Behind them Pharoah was approaching faster and faster. Before them the deep water lay, and the forbidding mountain.

"What can we do?" they cried. "where can we go?" Call Moses!
Moses!

They could see the Egyptians plainly now. The plumes on the horses' heads blew back in the wind. The men stood, their knees braced against the chariots' sides, their golden breastplates gleaming. The chariots swayed from side to side. The chariot wheels threw up a cloud of dust as they spun round and round.

"Moses! Moses!" the people cried in terror.

They were crowded on the narrow strip of sandy beach – sheep and goats, men and women, donkeys and tired children. Before them the waves lapped and the sea gulls flew over with a moaning cry. The mountain on the opposite shore stood bleak and forbidding, its summit wrapped in the cloud.

"And if we die, it is Moses that has brought us here," someone cried out.

"Were there not graves enough in Egypt, that you must bring us here to die?" another shouted. "It would have been better to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."

So they turned upon Moses since they did not know what else to do.

"Stand still," Moses answered them quietly. "Take up stones. Take your staffs if you have them. Stand close together. Put the women and children back of you. We are here to fight, if need be, Who talks of graves?"

Quietly the men drew together and waited. Pharoah's six hundred chariots drew nearer.

Just then they heard a rumbling noise. It was deeper and louder far than the rumble of the chariot wheels. It shook the earth. The people on the shore felt the land sway and move beneath their feet. They turned toward the mountain, and saw a stream of fire shoot up through the cloud on its summit. Then, while they watched in fascination, thick darkness settled around them, lighted only by the blaze and burst of fire at the mountain's crest. And the earth rocked and swayed under their feet.

Then suddenly, a wave washed up on the shore. So great a wave it was, that they who had been standing on dry ground found themselves with the water swirling around their knees. And just as suddenly the water seemed to turn and flow in the other direction, washing and swirling as it went. It flowed so fast that it was like a high wall of water moving away from them. Behind the wave the rocks of the sea's floor were bare, for the water had washed away from them, and they were pushed up from the bed of the sea.

The Hebrews standing on the shore with their children and their flocks, were frozen with terror as they watched the strange spectacle. It seemed as if all time had stopped in wonder and awe.

Moses was the first to recover himself. He ran forward, down to the barren path the tidal wave had left. "Come on!" he called to the people behind him, as he began to run through the sea.

The people hesitated uncertainly. Then Aaron followed Moses. "Come on!" Aaron called. "Come on! Come on!" One after another they came. The women and children ran with the men. They hurried the sheep and the goats across. They scrambled up the bank on the opposite shore.

Lord willing, in Fullness of Time this message will continue...