

October 11, 2020

A Bridge Over Path through Troubled Water

Exodus 14

Fear Factor: Exodus 14:1-12

In the TV show *Fear Factor*, "Contestants must decide if they have the guts and determination to face their most primal fears ..." What is your primal fear?

Consider the plight of Moses and Israelites in Exodus 14. Pharaoh has pursued them with his armies and now they are trapped between the advancing forces and the Red Sea. What is the Israelites' fear? Pretty primal. Slavery again? Death?

Notice the Israelites are not facing these perils because they have sinned or done anything wrong. In fact, they are in this dire predicament precisely because they ARE obeying God's will. But that's not how it's supposed to go, is it? When we're obeying God, things ought to go well with us, right? Unfortunately, the truth is that tough times can come to us, God's people, even when we're living God's will. How often do we hear that message? Not exactly ideal for Thanksgiving.

It would be much nicer to say that only good things happen to Christians. This would be much better for Thanksgiving, of course.

But let's be honest with ourselves and other people. The real world isn't like that. And the Bible doesn't say that ...

In the Bible, a lot of people struggle. A lot of ***faithful people of God*** suffer. Moses – young, passionate, visionary, eager to serve the Lord and deliver his people – strikes a blow for God (Exodus 2:11-12); but God has other plans ... including forty years in the wilderness.

In Hebrews 11 we have a list of other great heroes of faith – Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, David, etc. – who all endured times of difficulty. Reread the gospels: Jesus suffered. He often talks about hardships. For instance, He says bluntly, "*Men will hate you because of me*" (Luke 21:17). Reread any of Paul's letters and look at the theme of suffering; Paul suffered – and he anticipates that other faithful servants of God will suffer

In the Bible, it's hard to find a faithful saint who has not suffered. Isn't that annoying? We would love to hear it preached that, if you have faith, God will bless you with wealth, health, and happiness. He may. But the Bible does not give us that guarantee.

Hard times are part of life for all people, even people of God. So let's be honest with ourselves and with other people: bad things do happen to good people. Bad things do happen to people, even those who faithfully serve God. Preaching or teaching that, just because we love God, He will always bless us materially or health-wise is not biblical. In fact, it is harmful. What that theology tells those of us who suffer – and as a person who suffers

with chronic pain, I include myself in that number – is that if we are struggling, we must be bad people. The Bible – thankfully – never sees things so simplistically.

However, there is good news. Difficult experiences often can be instrumental in the process of spiritual growth and maturity. These are times when people grow in their faith, learn lessons like absolute dependence on God, patience, humility, teachability, and perseverance.

"Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy. For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything. God blesses the people who patiently endure testing." (James 1:3-4, 12)

Peter adds, *"These trials are only to test your faith, to show that it is strong and pure. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold – and your faith is far more precious to God than mere gold. So if your faith remains strong after being tried by fiery trials, it will bring you much praise and glory and honor on the day when Jesus Christ is revealed to the whole world."* (1 Peter 1:7) How do you feel about that? Why?

We need a faith that deals with the messy reality of our lives – lives of trouble, testing, and "fiery trials." That's the kind of faith that grows in our lives when, in faith, we walk with God into the wilderness, when we seek God's face, even when we're being chased by Pharaoh, or when we call out to God when we feel trapped by the Red Sea.

There is no neat formula in Scripture that always links our faith with God's material blessing.

The formula that does run through Scripture IS that in each and every moment of our lives – the good times and the hard times – God is with us. This is what Exodus 14 is all about. It's about a ...

~~Bridge-Over~~ Path through Troubled Water: Exodus 14:13-31

Trapped between the devil (Pharaoh) and the deep blue (Red) sea, the Israelites see no way out of their predicament. But God does. God is in control. He has been faithful at the Passover, leading the Israelites out of Egypt (Exodus 12); He led them through the wilderness as a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. And now He works a wonder as Moses stretches out his hand and parted the Red Sea.

Note: God does not build a bridge **over** the troubled water. He leads His people **through** the water. Taking them through the flood, through the risk of death, through the risk of faith, God saves His people and destroys the Egyptian army.

Think about it. The Israelites are walking between massive walls of water. Walls of water that could come crashing down at any second. It's a fearful place to be. But God is with them. His hand is protecting them. And He gets them through.

On the one hand, this story is all about God, and His power. When we keep our eyes on

Him, He gets us through.

On the other hand, this story is also very much about the Israelites. They were in a tough spot. They were not experiencing the blessing they hoped for. They were facing their primal fears. They have to trust God completely. They have to step into the sea, in faith. In faith, they have to walk between walls of water that could come crashing down. Only then can they move forward. They are not saved by Moses' leadership ability or charismatic personality, nor Aaron's eloquence, nor their own resourcefulness or courage. God saves them. But they do have to step out in faith and "test the waters" (so to speak).

And this is a story about us. We may find ourselves in tight spots. We may not experience the blessing we hope for. We may face our primal fears. We may have to trust God completely. We may feel like we have to step into the sea, in faith, and walk between walls of water that could come crashing down.

For the Israelites, the result of this experience was their fear turned to wonder, awe, and worship. Their faith in God grew by leaps and bounds.

For us, we may grow spiritually best when we go through the toughest times, too. Deep spiritual growth happens when we are trapped against the Red Seas of our lives. We can either panic, try it on our own, or truly depend on God. When we trust God, we discover – miracle of miracles – He can get us through the deep waters

God and Us: Learning the Lesson

I have never been caught between a hostile army and the ocean. Chances are, neither have you! As I mentioned, I do, however, live with chronic pain. Others of us struggle with cancer. With family problems. With financial challenges. The Red Seas we face may be different, but they are no less real.

What can we learn from this story? What do we learn during those times when we feel afraid, trapped, or facing overwhelming challenges?

1. **You need not be afraid** (time and again God tells us, "*Don't be afraid ...*" "*fear not ...*"). God is with you. His promise is He is always with us, and He will always get us through, and help us learn more of His power, glory, will, and ways.
2. **Your problems are not punishment.** God does not guarantee physical health and wealth as a reward for goodness; neither are tough times a sign of His displeasure. Hard times happen. They can be opportunities God can use to shape our character. We can actually grow through our "Red Sea" experiences.
3. **Keep growing, through the good and bad times.** It can actually be harder to keep our relationship with God alive and vital during the good times. Hopefully you have experienced God's power and presence during your struggles in the past. Once we experience the wonder and power of God in our lives, we can turn back from going

any further. God delivers us, we have a spiritual high, but then we become wrapped up in our own little worlds again and forget all about Him.

4. **Keep at it.** God led the Israelites out of Egypt; they had to keep on trusting and following Him. Looking ahead, it would take 40 years in the wilderness to get the land "*flowing with milk and honey*." When they get there, the walls of Jericho fell down – to make clear God's presence and power. But that never happened again. There would be more years of intelligent planning and hard work. Living with chronic pain for almost 30 years now, I know what it's like to keep at it. On the one hand, of course I'd love to be healed. But on the other hand, my experience with chronic pain reminds me that I need God, every moment of every day. And so, in my better moments, my pain motivates me to pray more, to be more humble, to depend more on God. My (small) suffering reminds me that I really do need God – always.

What are you thankful for? At Thanksgiving, we wish God promised us a *literal* land "*flowing with milk and honey*" – prosperity and good health. And we may, in fact, be blessed with good health, financial security, and material blessing. If that is your situation – praise God. Thank Him. And be generous in your love for others.

God does promise us a life *spiritually* "*flowing with milk and honey*." It may actually be a materially hard life. It may feel like Pharaoh's army is chasing you. It may be a battle with cancer or the sudden loss of a loved one. It may feel like you're trapped on the shores of the Red Sea. You feel trapped in a lifetime of chronic pain or disability. It may feel like your threading a path between waters that could come crashing down on you. There are family challenges. There are tough financial times.

But when we step into the swirling, troubled sea of life with God, we discover the certain hope of always being in His hand, now and forever. We find His peace which passes all understanding. We stumble upon the joy of loving and being loved by God and those around us. We are empowered by His strength. We celebrate His love which comforts us. We live from hearts that love God and flow with His life to the world around us, despite our circumstances.

Can you find God's presence in and through the tough times of life? God's promise is not a bridge *over* troubled water, but His presence on the path *through* the troubled water ... Even when we face our primal fears, He is always with us. Thank Him for His promise that He is with us always, even to the end of the age (Matthew 28:20).

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