

Sunday May 14th 2023 – Praying for breakthrough - Tom Yacomeni

This is now the third week in our series 'Journey to the promised land' following the story of God's people in the opening books of the Old Testament. We started off with God's call to Abram to leave behind the safe surroundings of his father's house and set out towards an unknown destination. The call came with the promise that Abram's descendants would become a great nation, despite the fact that his wife Sarai was barren and unable to conceive. But Abram believed God and so he became the father of faith and a celebrated patriarch because of his obedience.

Fast forward 4 centuries or so to Exodus and we discover that after the birth of his son Isaac, the following generations of Abraham's descendants had indeed multiplied so much so that the Egyptian regime decided to enslave them in order to control their growing power. Ruth spoke last week about Moses, the reluctant leader, an exiled murderer called by God to challenge Pharaoh to let the Israelite people go or face God's judgement. But Pharaoh's hard heart and arrogance meant that a series of increasingly devastating plagues were unleashed upon Egypt, until finally he capitulated. Pharaoh told Moses and the Israelites to get out, saying 'Up, leave my people, you and the Israelites! Go, worship the LORD as you have requested.' So after hundreds of years of slavery and oppression, 600,000 Israelites fled in a hurry, driving their livestock with them, grabbing unleavened bread to eat, and thrusting into their pockets offerings and jewellery given by ordinary Egyptians hoping for peace and blessings from this mighty God of Israel. It should have been the end of the story for Pharaoh and the Egyptians as they needed to regroup and rethink their economic strategy. But Pharaoh wouldn't let it go. He saw all his slaves walking away and regretted his decision. So he instructed the army to pursue them until the point came where the Israelites were trapped between the sea on one side and the desert on the other. And that is where we pick up the story today.

Have you ever felt trapped in a situation, cornered by circumstances without an obvious solution? Well this is exactly where Moses and the Israelites found themselves very soon after the initial euphoria of their liberation. And it was not as if Moses had simply taken a wrong turn – God himself had led them into the wilderness and instructed them to camp by the sea. You could say that they had entered the 'desert of discipleship', because for those who follow God and obey his promptings, soon enough begins the painful process of shaping your character and stretching your faith. James 2 says 'Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, ³ because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. ⁴ Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.'

Faith is like a muscle that only gets stronger through exercise and pressure. Now some people love the discipline of getting fit and working out, but if you are anything like me, call me lazy, but sometimes I would rather sit on the sofa and stay cosy rather than go out and get fit.

God loves us exactly as we are, but he loves us too much to allow us simply to remain the same. He had the Israelites and the Egyptians exactly where he wanted them and from the Israelites perspective, it wasn't looking good. But crisis moments force us to pray for breakthrough and that is precisely the time we can experience God's power.

Let's read the story from Exodus chapter 14v10-22 to see what happened.

Exodus 14: Passing through the Red Sea

¹⁰As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD. ¹¹They said to Moses, 'Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? ¹²Didn't we say to you in Egypt, "Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians"? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!'

¹³Moses answered the people, 'Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. ¹⁴The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.'

¹⁵Then the LORD said to Moses, 'Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. ¹⁶Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground. ¹⁷I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. ¹⁸The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen.' ¹⁹Then the angel of God, who had been travelling in front of Israel's army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, ²⁰coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other; so neither went near the other all night long. ²¹Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the LORD drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, ²²and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.

The story of the Israelites passing through the Red sea has to be one of the most graphic and iconic narrative images in the bible.

It's a Hollywood favourite.

Here's Moses portrayed by Christian Bale...



Here's Charlton Heston some years ago:



And of course here's Bruce and the parting of the red soup!

Can I recommend the Prince of Egypt:



But are we to assume that the drying out of the red sea was simply a Hollywood myth or even a natural phenomenon that favoured the Israelites or was it actually as dramatic as portrayed in the movies?

As events happened over 3000 years ago it is impossible to examine with certainty where and how this amazing incident took place.

There is general agreement among scholars today that the Hebrew name 'Yam Suph' which has been traditionally translated *Red Sea*, actually means "Sea of reeds." You can see that in the footnotes of the NIV. Whilst this was perhaps most likely located in an area above the Gulf of Suez, where the Suez Canal now connects the Mediterranean to the Arabian ocean, there is evidence to suggest that in Ancient times this term could have equally referred to the Gulf of

Aqaba on the right hand side above the Red Sea as it's known today. The truth is no one knows the precise locations of the places mentioned in the Exodus account. The location of Migdol and Baal Zephon on the opposite side could have been at several locations around the Sinai peninsula.



A couple of years ago the BBC and various newspapers reported that scientists from the National Center for Atmospheric Research in Colorado conducted a computer simulation which indicated that 60 mile an hour winds for 8 hours near Port Said at the top of the Nile Delta could have produced a temporary land bridge across to the Sinai desert. But no-one really knows, and I'm not going to speculate further, except to say that the biblical narrative makes it clear that the crossing was a spectacular miracle and not simply due to a dried-out reed bed, as some have suggested.

But the Israelites were trapped, and they saw the elite forces of the Egyptians bearing down on them and it's fascinating to see their two responses to the threat: Fear or Faith.

When we face tough circumstances how do we react? Is it with fear or is it with faith? Well I think this passage can help us to learn to respond with the same faith that landed Moses his position in the 'hall of faith' in Hebrews 11. But first we need to see what not to do. Firstly, don't panic like the people did!



Focussing on our fears leads us down into the valley of despair. The people became fatalistic and overwhelmed by the worst case scenario.

I love the way they quickly descended into biting sarcasm:

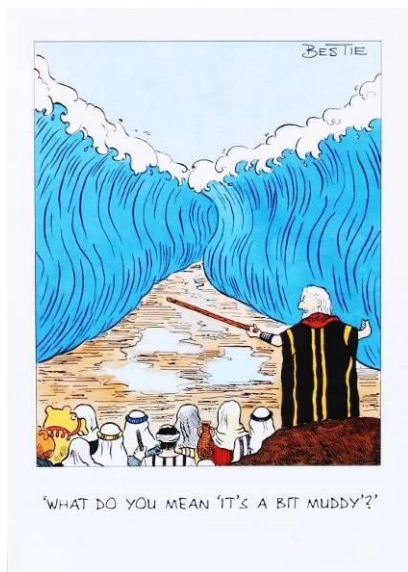
'Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die?... ' It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!'

This moment of crisis on the journey to the promised land is an important metaphor for our own journey of discipleship. Life is punctuated by defining moments, where we can choose to look forward towards transformation, or regress towards the past and enslavement. The first

words Jesus preached where ‘repent, for the Kingdom of God is at hand!’ In other words, be prepared to have your whole mindset changed! Salvation is not just a one-time decision to follow Christ – it is the daily working out of that salvation as we allow our thinking to be transformed. Are we turning our face towards the expanding horizon of God’s loving grace, or are we actually looking backwards? Is our perception of God actually shrinking as we focus on the world with all its challenges and temptations?

It is easier to fuel fear than it is to stand firm in faith, and we have to be so careful who we listen to. What you listen to, what you watch and what you read can seriously affect your mindset. Don’t side with the mockers and fatalists, however bleak the future may seem to you at the time.

There are always those who love to complain!



Through all his trials with Pharaoh, Moses was beginning to learn how to respond in faith. In verses 13 and 14, He tells the Israelites to do 4 things to help them change their mindset:

¹³ Moses answered the people, ‘Do not be afraid. Stand firm and see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. ¹⁴ The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still.’

- 1) Fear not
- 2) Stand firm
- 3) See the Lord
- 4) Be Still

Moses told the people ‘Don’t be afraid’ – one of the resounding themes that winds its way through the entire Bible, culminating in Revelation where Jesus says “Do not be afraid. I am the

First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and now look, I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.”

If God is for us then who can be against us? Jesus lived and died and rose again to open a way beyond the fear of death. A few years ago, in the week before she died of lung cancer, a friend of mine called Sandra said to me ‘I know where I’m going, so I don’t fear death in that way – it’s just the transition I don’t fancy!’ And of course, she’s right – no one looks forward to dying. But we don’t need to fear. The Lord is there even in the transition.

At the age of 24 Ian McCormack was travelling on the Island of Mauritius when he was stung by 5 box Jellyfish – just one sting can prove to be fatal. He was an Atheist at the time but as he lay dying he cried out to God and saw a vision of his mother who was a Christian and had been praying for him. During the next 20 minutes as paramedics tried to resuscitate him without success, he found himself in a struggle between darkness and light. Finally he found himself in the presence of awesome light and power, being filled with what he described as ‘liquid love’ and he saw a vision of a man talking to him, asking him if he wished to return. As he saw the beauty around him he wanted nothing more than to stay, but for the sake of his family and those around him he chose to return. He said ‘God then spoke to me and said, "If I wished to return - I must see things in a new light." I understood that to mean that I must begin to see through his eyes of Love, Peace, Joy, Forgiveness, from His Heavenly perspective, not my temporary earthly perspective.’

He woke up just as a doctor in the hospital morgue was pricking his foot and startled the life out of him. By the end of the day he walked out of the hospital a completely changed man, and he shares his story of how he met Jesus wherever he goes.

Secondly Moses then told the Israelites ‘Stand firm’.

This means reminding ourselves of the truth of the gospel, that we are the Lord’s children but also his soldiers in a spiritual battle. ‘Resist the devil he will flee from you.’ Says James. Even if it’s your own fault that you have got yourself in trouble, you can still repent, stand firm in your forgiveness and ask God to deliver you from the fear of the future.

We have to be ready to resist the enemy by standing firm and doing what Paul suggests in Ephesians 6:

¹³ Therefore put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. ¹⁴ Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, ¹⁵ and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. ¹⁶ In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one.

The Israelites were about to pass through the sea on firm ground.

Next Moses then told the Israelites '**See the salvation of the LORD**'. The original Hebrew is striking: *Ra'ah Yeshua Yahweh*. See the Yeshua of the LORD. Yeshua is the Hebrew basis for the name Jesus. Look at Jesus.

Even in the tightest spot or the most life-threatening situation, Jesus is there with you. Sometimes in my mind's eye, I just imagine him sat or stood with me in the room.

If you are fearful, go back to the stories of Jesus. Read the gospels and let the love of Christ wash over you. How did Jesus react?

Jesus said 'I will be with you always'. As we call upon him we can have our eyes opened to the salvation of the Lord.

So the response of faith is:

- 1) Don't be afraid
- 2) Stand firm
- 3) Look to Jesus

And finally Moses told them to '**be still**' because the Lord will fight for you. Now initially I thought the word would be the same as David used when he wrote '*Be still and know that I am God*' in Psalm 46, as though we need to still our thoughts to focus on the Lord.

However the word is different. It is the word *Charash* which literally means 'be dumb and deaf' in other words, keep silent and block your ears to the sound of disaster. But *Charash* also has a second meaning which is *Plough on* – keep going straight: Plough on! In Luke 9v62 Jesus said "No one who puts a hand to the plough and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God."

Keep on keeping on – don't let fear and despondency distract you from ploughing on in faith.

Instead of focussing on the fear – look straight ahead to the Lord. Proverbs 4v23 'above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life... let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you. Make level paths for your feet and take only ways that are firm. Do not swerve to the right or to the left; keep your foot from evil.'

So the response of faith that sees a display of God's power is this:

- 1) Don't be afraid
- 2) Stand firm
- 3) See Jesus
- 4) Be still

And as they did these things they saw the miraculous breakthrough and deliverance of the Lord. The Lord commanded Moses 'Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground',

As Moses taught the people to respond in faith, so their faith was stretched and the enemy was consumed behind them.

Bit by bit they were no longer slaves to fear, but knew they were chosen children of God. And that is what the Lord wants for us today.