

Fearless Obedience

Gospel Gleanings, "...especially the parchments"

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And he led them on safely, so that they feared not: but the sea overwhelmed their enemies. (Ps 78:53)

This psalm narrates God's rich care of His people in their escape from Egypt and their wilderness wanderings. In the last chapter we considered the valid role of fear in one of God's children when they do not obey God. This lesson provides the counterpoint. When we obey God and follow Him, we have no reason to fear.

Consider the setting of the Israelites as they prepared to leave Egypt. Despite several miraculous demonstrations of God's power, the Egyptians stubbornly refused to release Israel from slavery. Finally after God's severe judgment against all the firstborn of Egypt, the pharaoh sent them away, but shortly thereafter sent his army to bring them back or destroy them. Various Bible scholars have estimated that the nation of Israel numbered around two and a half million people, including men, women, and children, at the time of their exit. Despite the significant number, they were wholly unprepared for a military confrontation with the most powerful nation on the earth at that time. Their people had lived in slavery for over four hundred years.

In the context of this verse (Ps 78:52) we read that God led the people as a shepherd leads his flock safely to green pastures. Slaves, however numerous, were no match for Egypt's army, *but Egypt's army was no match for Israel's God*. Ex 14 records this incredible deliverance. God supernaturally parted the Red Sea, dried up the mud, and allowed sufficient time for His people to cross over. As the Egyptians approached the sea and observed the miracle, they foolishly plunged into the chasm, expecting to cross as Israel did, but, as soon as they went into the opening, the sea collapsed and drowned them. Exodus and Numbers record the wilderness wanderings that the poet surveys in Ps 78. We see one danger after another to the people, but God provided deliverance for His people from each of them in turn. Israel witnessed all those miracles in Egypt, the parting of the sea, and the ongoing miracles of God, providing daily food and water in the desert for two and a half million people, defeating their enemies one after another. Yet with almost every new danger we see these same people doubting, questioning God, and recoiling in fear at the next appearance of danger or deprivation.

Sometimes we criticize the Israelites for their callous failure to learn the powerful lesson of God's secure provisions and protection, but we often sadly imitate them. My wife and I are working to transition from an active secular career into retirement, at least semi-retirement. I have to tell you that the threat of financial loss is a struggle. Almost daily I need to remind myself that my security is not in my retirement funds and investments, but in God. Together Sandra and I have lived through the normal cycles of growing together, raising three daughters, two significant health crises, and any number of lesser setbacks. At each point of test along the way, we have witnessed God's gracious care. Sufficient grace and provision often surprised and blessed us. Yet we struggle as we face this new challenge. Ah, yes, we each in our own little worlds are far more like these ancient Israelites in their wilderness wanderings than different.

And he led them on safely.... When God leads His people, the course may appear difficult, but God ensures that the path is safe. In Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, we find Pilgrim on one occasion recoiling in fear as he sees a fierce lion near the path that he must take. He struggles with fear, but in the end trusts his God and advances on the path. As he nears the lion, he discovers that the lion is securely tethered so that it cannot reach him so long as he stays firmly on the path assigned. What a powerful lesson for us. We occasionally encounter dangers and painful difficulties, but often, if we would but

examine our choices, we would discover that we had left the divinely assigned path and its assured safety. God promises safety as we stay on His path. He will not extend that safety when we choose our own way and leave His.

And he led them on safely, so that they feared not. At least for the moment on the safe side of the Red Sea, Israel could look back and see God's powerful deliverance. The fear that had driven the adrenaline in their veins before the hand of God opened the sea for them vanished. Instead of dreading their fate with Egypt's army, they stood on the safe side of the sea and sang a delightful song of deliverance. They had witnessed the hand of the Lord destroying the horse and his rider in the sea. Near helpless slaves saw a formidable army drowned in the sea. The very sea that had been their deliverance became the snare that destroyed their enemy. God's surprising deliverance would be repeated many times during the next forty years.

What lessons can we learn for our lives from this experience? We live in a nation that is often far more characterized by pride than by humble dependence on anyone. We pride ourselves in being the only surviving "super power" left on the globe, but our success is bitter-sweet, to say the least. Not only does pride tarnish our national mood, it often characterizes people who claim to live by faith in Christ. We stubbornly resist the idea of confessing our sins to anyone. We refuse to consider that we personally may need the aide and exhortation of our brothers and sisters in the faith. Anything less than perfection for us and our loved ones is simply not acceptable. And if we appear—as we certainly are—less than perfect, we quickly point the finger of blame at someone or something else rather than looking at ourselves. We have received countless blessings of deliverance, no less amazing in their own right than God's deliverance of His people out of Egypt, though perhaps less dramatic. Yet at the appearance of each new trial we recoil with the same pride, fear, and unbelief that these people demonstrated in the wilderness.

We resist the basic premise of Biblical Christianity, that our weakness is necessary to demonstrate God's power and goodness. In 2Co 12 Paul describes a painful setback that invaded his life. Three times he begged God to remove it from him. Three times the problem remained. In the end the Lord reminded Paul that His grace was sufficient to enable Paul to live with the problem. Rather than celebrating the defeated problem, in this case Paul celebrated the residual problem! Only as Paul's personal weakness appeared could God's sufficient grace shine. Ah, too many Christians in our time have become intoxicated with the forbidden wine of the "health and wealth" gospel that builds on empty promises of utopia and personal luxury rather than on God's sufficient grace for real trials that characterize the most faithful of Christian lives.

None of us can boast of our superior conduct in the face of trials. Isn't that the point of Paul's lesson? This same Paul earlier wrote this same church in Corinth and reminded them that the only legitimate basis for boasting is in God's provision, not in self (1Co 1:31).

Further, in 1Co 10 Paul reminded this same church of the severe judgments of God against His own people in the Old Testament. These events appear in Scripture as a warning to us not to repeat their callous sins. We learn from those old lessons. We see God's sufficient provision clearly demonstrated in their experiences. We even acknowledge that we are like them! Do we also realize that Paul's point is that *we are not to be like them*? That we are to learn from their sins, as well as from God's certain provisions so that we live our lives in the faith, not in our own "wilderness wanderings"?

The point of these lessons in Scripture is not to comfort us in stubborn sin and disobedience to God, but to enlighten us to a better way to live. The path of authentic and at times sacrificial obedience to God always proves to be a safe path, far better than any of the alternatives we might be tempted to choose. Doing what God commands us to do, even when it is difficult—even when it seems impossible—will consistently demonstrate God's goodness, sufficiency, and wisdom in directing our conduct. As long as

we walk in God's way, defined and clearly set forth in Scripture (not mystically "revealed" to us in private esoteric visions; I find it amazing that people who make their private choices to disobey God always claim a higher revelation that contradicts the clear teachings of Scripture.), we may safely walk the path without fear. Obstacles? We shall surely face them. Challenges to the path? Yes, at every junction along the way. Difficulties? Absolutely, incredible difficulties accompany the Christian walk, but God proves Himself superior to every obstacle in our way. *This blessing in Scripture is conditional. We only realize it as we faithfully obey Scripture and follow God in His way, not ours.* Are you ready for fearless obedience?