

Looking Back?

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Scripture: Exodus 15:22-27, 16:1-7

Then Moses led Israel from the Red Sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness and found no water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink the waters of Marah, for they were bitter; therefore it was named Marah. So the people grumbled at Moses, saying, "What shall we drink?" Then he cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a tree; and he threw it into the waters, and the waters became sweet.

There He made for them a statute and regulation, and there He tested them. And He said, "If you will give earnest heed to the voice of the Lord your God, and do what is right in His sight, and give ear to His commandments, and keep all His statutes, I will put none of the diseases on you which I have put on the Egyptians; for I, the Lord, am your healer."

Then they came to Elim where there were twelve springs of water and seventy date palms, and they camped there beside the waters.

Then they set out from Elim, and all the congregation of the sons of Israel came to the wilderness of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after their departure from the land of Egypt. The whole congregation of the sons of Israel grumbled against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness. The sons of Israel said to them, "Would that we had died by the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Then the Lord said to Moses, "Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a day's portion every day, that I may test them, whether or not they will walk in My instruction. On the sixth day, when they prepare what they bring in, it will be twice as much as they gather daily." So Moses and Aaron said to all the sons of Israel, "At evening you will know that the Lord has brought you out of the land of Egypt; and in the morning you will see the glory of the Lord, for He hears your grumbings against the Lord, and what are we, that you grumble against us?"

One can't help reading a passage like this without mixed feelings. On the one hand, you look at this passage and you think to yourself: My goodness! What's wrong with these guys? Don't they even recognize where they have come from? Look at the timeline! It is 45 days since they have left Egypt and they are already grumbling. In the words that are written here, it says, "Would that we had died by the Lord's hand in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger." They were actually saying that they should have stayed in Egypt; at least there they had pots of meat that they could eat rather than this freedom of wandering around in the wilderness, being led by the Almighty God.

I don't know how often you read the passages of the Old Testament. Sometimes we get so caught up in the New Testament and the writings that followed Jesus. But we get a glimpse of God and His wonderful hand of protection and provision and so many other characteristics as we go through the Old Testament writings.

Consider this:

What did God bring the children of Israel out from? He brought them out of 400 years of slavery. For 400 years, they were crying under the oppression of the Egyptians. Gone was the Pharaoh who was so benevolent in his treatment of the children of Israel during the time of Joseph. That was history! Now they had a Pharaoh who just seemed to be giving them more and more work. And when Moses and Aaron landed up there, and asked for them to be released, he gave them even more work and asked them to go and find the straw themselves and make the bricks.

They cried out to the Lord. In Exodus ch. 2, it says that the children of Israel, under the bondage that they were, cried out to the Lord. And then it says: God heard their cry and He answered them. He called Moses and He said, "Moses, I'm going to send you as my emissary to bring the children of Israel out of this bondage," and Moses landed up there and Pharaoh of course said, "No, thank you! I'd rather keep this wonderful workforce that I have, to do all the work that I am doing. They are doing it so well. It is cheap labour." And Moses said, "But we want to take them away, and worship God." But Pharaoh said, "No!" and the ten plagues followed.

1. Water turned to blood. Ex. 7:19. And the Lord spoke to Moses, "Say to Aaron, Take your rod, and stretch out your hand over the waters of Egypt, upon their rivers, upon their streams, upon their ponds and upon all their pools of water, that they may become blood; and there shall be blood throughout all the land of Egypt, both in vessels of wood and in vessels of stone."
There was blood everywhere. Can you picture that? I try imagining that – taking a glass of water and seeing blood. There was no water. But the Egyptians were not worried, because they turned to their magicians who said that they could do that too. And they also turned some water into blood.
But then God wasn't done with them. He sent another plague.
2. Frogs – millions and millions of frogs all over. And the magicians said that it was something they could do as well. And they did. And Pharaoh's heart was still hardened.
3. Lice. Ex. 8:16 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Say unto Aaron, 'Stretch out your staff and strike the dust of the earth, that it may become lice through all the land of Egypt.'" Lice all over the land and this time, they couldn't replicate it. They said, "This is certainly the finger of God."
4. Flies. But Pharaoh remained in the same place with the same hardened heart. And God sent flies. I know how you and I react to flies. If one manages to come close to us, we get a newspaper, roll it up and try chasing it so we can snuff its life out. Think about thousands and thousands of flies sitting on everything.
5. Diseased livestock.

6. Boils on the people.
7. Thunder and hail.
8. Locusts.
9. Darkness over the land. The amazing thing about this plague – it was dark all over Egypt except in Goshen where the children of Israel lived. Can you imagine that? Darkness! They couldn't see each other. And yet, where the children of Israel lived, light was shining. But even that didn't move Pharaoh. He tried to negotiate a little, but it didn't work.
10. And finally, the last plague: the death of every first-born male child in the Egyptian households. And God told the children of Israel: "Make sure that you sacrifice a lamb, eat that lamb, but the blood should be on the doorpost. When the angel of death come, when he sees the blood on the doorpost, he will pass over," which is how the 'Passover' came into being.

Then Pharaoh relented and he let the children of Israel go. And they left, with the Egyptians giving them gold and silver and all kinds of ornaments, clothes. But Pharaoh suddenly realized that he was losing this great workforce of people. So he got his chariots and said, "Let's chase them and bring them back." The children of Israel come up to the Red Sea, and they stop there. There is no way forward, and the chariots are behind. And then, God opens the sea. Those of you who have seen 'The Ten Commandments' know what a brilliant scene that is! The waters just rise up and there's a dry pathway that leads through the Red Sea. And they go through it all the way till the last Israelite has crossed. Pharaoh's army is right behind them in the middle, and the waters come back down, and every last Egyptian who followed, is dead.

Can you imagine standing on the other side of the Red Sea, looking back at the pursuers and saying, "My goodness! What happened to them? They're done!" what kind of a song of praise would have arisen from their mouths? And it did!

Ch. 15 says, *Then Moses and the sons of Israel sang this song to the Lord, and said,*

*I will sing to the Lord, for He is highly exalted;
 The horse and its rider He has hurled into the sea.
 The Lord is my strength and song;
 And He has become my salvation;
 This is my God, and I will praise Him;
 My father's God, and I will extol Him.
 The Lord is a warrior;
 The Lord is His name.
 Pharaoh's chariots and his army He has cast into the sea;
 And the choicest of his officers are drowned in the Red Sea.*

And on and on they go through the whole chapter. And then it says in vs.20, *Miriam the prophetess, Aaron's sister, took the timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dancing. Miriam answered them,*

Sing to the Lord, for He is highly exalted;

The horse and his rider He has hurled into the sea.

And 45 days later, they are grumbling, saying, “Where is our non-veg food?”

I’ve read this so many times and thought: What a hard-hearted people! But the Lord never lets me stay in that place. After I have thought these thoughts, He brings conviction upon me and says, “Really? You’ve never been in that place?” and I have to confess that I have. That we all have. Our memories of all that God has done in our lives are so incredibly short. We so easily forget what an awesome, benevolent, wonderful God has done for each one of us.

So let’s see, maybe fleetingly, what could have led the children of Israel to this place of doubt? Could it have been the things that they had? Egypt was one of the most advanced countries at that time. They had many comfortable things. Could it have been the familiar routine of knowing what they had to do every day – get up in the morning, have your breakfast, go out there, get a few lashes, make bricks, come back, put oil on the lashes, have dinner and go to bed. Could it have been that they had just got used to that routine? Or could it have been that they had no idea how to live by faith, that they were so used to living by sight? That they believed what they could see and this leading in the wilderness just didn’t make sense to any of them – to trust God for everything, including water and food. Or have they just got used to being shackled and forgotten what freedom was all about, what it meant to be free?

We don’t know the answers to these hypothetical questions. But, as we look at them, and then distance ourselves from them, we must ask the question: Is that happening to us? Is that happening to you and me? Even this morning, are you in a place of doubt? Are you looking back to the old familiar things and saying: I preferred being there. This walk of faith is so daunting, so testing. I prefer the same old things that I can go through.

What happens when you are in that place?

- The first thing that happens is that we begin to second-guess the decision behind getting us into that place. We begin to ask the question: Did I really hear from God (if indeed you had followed God)? Did I really hear from Him? Or is that a mistake? Is that something that I was obedient to, or is that something that I’ve just done on my own? That the way we often respond.
- Or sometimes we search for some sin in our lives. We begin to go over and over our lives and say: Is there something that I did that annoyed God? Is God angry with that? Is there some unconfessed sin? While that’s a good thing to introspect on, we often land there at times like these, checking to see whether the things we have done have obscured God or brought in this time of silence.
- Or, and this is the most common, we blame somebody else for our predicament. We look to somebody who was close to us and say, “Actually, I followed you. You said that you were comfortable with this, but now look at what’s happening here.” Sometimes that’s the easiest thing, and then fights break out and relationships take a beating.
- Or we remember only the good things of the past, like the children of Israel. All they remembered was the pot of meat. They forgot all that happened to them in their slavery.

Brenna Kate, who writes for 'Focus on the Family' says this: "When things get rough and disorienting, the predictability of the past starts looking pretty good."

Sara Groves, song writer, worship leader wrote a song and the lyrics go like this:

I don't want to leave here
I don't want to stay
It feels like pinching to me
Either way.
And the places I long for the most
Are the places where I've been
They are calling out to me
Like a long lost friend.

It's not about losing faith
It's not about trust
It's all about comfortable
When you move so much
And the place I was wasn't perfect
But I had found a way to live
And it wasn't milk or honey
But then neither is this

I've been painting pictures of Egypt
Leaving out what it lacks
The future feels so hard
And I want to go back
But the places that used to fit me
Cannot hold the things I've learned
Those roads were closed off to me
While my back was turned.

How true! When we choose to follow God and come out of that place that we were in once, and we walk along. There are teachings along the way that God brings to us that He invites us to be a part of that education. And having learnt those things, we can't go back to where we were. It's like baptism. Romans 6 says: You have become a new creation. When you go into the water and come out of the water, you are a new creation. The old has gone; you are new. Death is over and new life has come. So you cannot go back. You cannot go back to being dead. And it's the same thing here. You can't go back because that's not the place for you. God is leading you forward.

Maybe that's where some of you are this morning. You are saying: I'm really second-guessing what I am doing, where I am, the way I am thinking, the decisions that I am making. I thought God was in it. Is He? And that's the question on your mind.

Well, if it is, let's ask ourselves two questions:

1. What should we do if we are in that place?
2. If you are not in that place, what should we do to prepare for that place?

Let's look at the first question: What should we do if we are in that place?

The first thing I would say to you is to think of some of the things that God has done for you in the past that carried you through a difficult time. Think of how God has come through for you because this will not be the first time that you've taken a decision or followed a new path. Think back to that time in a similar situation and say: God came through for me at that time. Take five seconds and see whether the Holy Spirit places a point in your life where God did come through. Was it a financial gift that came in at just the right time when everything had dried up? Somebody unknown had sent you something, some money, that was what you needed at that time – that reinforces that God takes care of you. Or was it a friend or friendship that came through? A friend just called you up saying, "Hey! How are you doing?" or was it a Bible verse that came to mind as you were reading scripture. God brought it to you to reiterate that He is still involved in your situation.

Philippians 1:6 is the verse that I hold dear in my life, and many times when I have gone through difficult time, questioned decisions, wondered about being faithful and fulfilling the call on my life, God has brought me back to Philippians 1:6 *Faithful is He who began a good work in you and He will carry it on to its completion.* Time and time again, I've landed on Philippians 1:6 and said, "Lord, this is the promise that you have given me." Maybe there's a verse that you are landing on.

The other thing that you can think about is a friend with whom you can share this difficult time. Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 says, *"Two are better than one because they have a good return for their labour. For if either of them falls down, one can pick the other up. But pity anyone who falls and has no one to help him up."* It's good to share; keeping it to yourself is just like something that eats into you. Men find it more difficult to share than women. We'd rather fix the problem by ourselves than call somebody and say, "Hey, can you help me?" Yet, that's something that we need to do.

But, just a rider to that: be sure that you share male-to-male and female-to-female. Be careful that you don't share with people of the opposite gender because it's in times like this that emotional bonds get created and emotional bonds, once created, are extremely difficult to break. And especially for those of you who are married, the emotional bond only needs to be with your spouse, not with anybody else. So be careful. They are easy to make but extremely difficult to break and ought not to be there when you already have your spouse to share it with. So think of these things that can be done.

But maybe you're saying this morning – that's not where I am. I'm in a good place. Well, it always pays to prepare for a time when you could be in this place. When God revealed to Joseph the dream that he had in Egypt, that there would be times of plenty and times of scarcity, Joseph had a plan. He said, "Save for the future. Make sure that you put things in readiness for when you don't have." So, like Joseph, treat the time now to find what you can put aside.

Remember Joshua and the Israelites. They crossed the Jordan River and then set up twelve stones as a reminder of God's faithfulness to them. What is it that you have that will always remind you that God is a faithful God? Are you journaling? Are you writing something down that says: Hey! When I am going through a difficult time, this is where I am going to land. I'm going to go back to my journal and see how God helped me.

Memorize words of His faithfulness while you can, for the time when it needs to come back to you. The Bible is full of wonderful reminders of how faithful God is. Today it could be for various reasons that the ground has been shaken underneath your feet, that you are at a troubled time, you are floundering and wondering: Lord, where are you? It seems like I am alone. Yet, there are promises in God's Word that say – 'Don't believe that. It's a lie.'

So as I bring this to a close, I want to leave with you some wonderful verses that have to do with God's faithfulness. And for those of you who are hurting today, those of you who are in that position of saying, 'Where are you God?' I pray that you would move away from cynicism and let the Word of God reach out and touch you and allow Him to do only what He can do.

Deuteronomy 7:9

Know therefore that the Lord your God is God; He is the faithful God, keeping His covenant and steadfast love with those who love Him and keep His commandments, to a thousand generations.

2 Timothy 2:13

If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.

God can't but be faithful; that is His character. Even when we are faithless, He remains faithful.

Psalms 33:4

For the Word of the Lord is upright, and all His work is done in faithfulness.

Psalms 91:4

He will cover you with His pinions, and under His wings, you may seek refuge; His faithfulness is a shield and bulwark.

If you have ever been out in left field and wondered – I think I'm alone. I don't know what to do. There is nobody with me, the Bible says that He covers you, keeps you safe during this time.

2 Thessalonians 3:3

But the Lord is faithful, and He will establish you and guard you against the evil one.

When you are down, when you are reeling, when you are trying hard to make sense, that's the time the evil one comes. But God is faithful, will establish and guard you.

1 Corinthians 10:13

No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man. God is faithful, and He will not let you be tempted beyond your ability, but with the temptation He will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it.

Psalms 119:90

Your faithfulness endures to all generations; You have established the earth and it stands fast. You don't have to depend on the stories of your parents and your grandparents. God's faithfulness comes down generations, even to you.

1 Corinthians 1:9

God is faithful, by whom you were called into fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

You are in a fellowship with Jesus Christ, God's Son, and He is faithful to those who have been called by His Son and have been redeemed by His Son.

Hebrews 10:23

Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.

Numbers 23:19

God is not man, that He should lie, or a son of man, that He should repent; has He said, and will He not do it? Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?

Lamentations 8:38-39

The Lord's loving kindnesses indeed never cease, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.

Deuteronomy 31:6

Be strong and courageous; do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you. He will never leave you nor forsake you.

Romans 8:38-39

For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus, our Lord.

Beloved, God loves you with an enduring love and He will carry you during this time. All He asks is that you trust Him. To be able to place yourself in His hand and say, "This is the time Lord; I need to live by faith and not by sight. Help me! I'm going to bank on every promise that You have given to me of Your incredible love and amazing faithfulness. Lord, take me through this time. I'm troubled, I'm weary, I'm confused but Lord, You are that shining star that can lead me through it."

Our response, if you are in that place, is to just put up your hands and say, "Lord, I trust You. Nothing in front of me is making any sense. In fact, I'm prone to turn around and go back, but I know that I am in a place that You have called me." Maybe today, you are thinking, "I've made a mistake. What do I do? I'm sure it's a mistake." Even then, God says to you, to me, that even in those times and places, He can make all things work together for good to them that love Him. If you love Him today, then that wrong place that you believe you are in, that you made a mistake, even there He can turn it around and make it into something good.

But the key this morning is – are you willing to place yourself in Him, in those everlasting arms that you can never fall below?

Amen.