

Right Song, Wrong Side



David Wilkerson December 21, 2009

Israel was in a hopeless predicament. They were trapped, with the Red Sea before them and the mountains on their left and right. An angry Pharaoh and his iron chariots were closing in on them from behind.

This is a very familiar story, one you've heard your whole church life. The children of Israel were led by God into a horrible crisis where they were surrounded by a fierce enemy. Incredible as it seems, the Lord had purposely led his people into this precarious spot. I believe it is a story with great importance for the church today, indeed at this moment in history.

Israel was trapped, seemingly helpless. And it caused a panic throughout the camp of Israel. Wives and children wept, huddling around the fathers and grandparents. A group of irate elders descended on their leader Moses, accusing, "Were there not enough graves in Egypt? You dragged us out here to die. We told you in Egypt to leave us alone. Better for us to have been slaves to Pharaoh than to die in this miserable wilderness!"

I wonder if Moses might have had a moment of misgiving in that hour. I picture him falling on his knees, crying, "Lord, what's going on? How is it possible this is your will for us?" Yet it seems God chided Moses when he answered, "Moses, wherefore criest thou unto me?" (Exodus 14:15).

Amazingly, in that dark moment God wrought a miracle of deliverance for Israel. Suddenly the winds were stirred up so powerfully they parted the sea in two. With a miraculous escape route before them, the people walked over the sea on dry ground. Then, when Pharaoh and his army tried to follow, the waves toppled down, drowning them in the raging waters.

"Thus the Lord saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the sea shore. And Israel saw that great work which the Lord did upon the Egyptians: and the people feared the Lord, and believed the Lord, and his servant Moses" (Exodus 14:30–31).

I urge you to note the following words in this passage, for they are the very heart of my message: "(When) Israel saw that great work which the Lord did... *then* sang Moses and the children of Israel this song" (14:31–15:1, my italics).

When the Israelites saw what happened, they broke out their tambourines and began singing a glorious song of praise to God: "The Lord... hath triumphed gloriously... The Lord is my strength and song, and he is become my salvation... I will exalt him.... Who is like unto thee, O Lord, among the gods? Who is like thee... fearful in praises, doing wonders?" (15:1–2, 11).

It was the right song, but God's people sang it on the wrong side.

The Israelites' song of victory was not sung on the right side — that is, *the testing side* — of the Red Sea. Instead, it was sung *after* they saw God's power working — *after* their deliverance came. "*Then* sang Moses and the children of Israel this song unto the Lord" (Exodus 15:1).

Nevertheless, the people said to each other, “What a great testimony! Think of it. This miracle will be spoken of by the heathen and wicked of the world. They’ll know our God is all powerful!” “The people shall hear, and be afraid... Then the dukes of Edom shall be amazed; the mighty men of Moab, trembling shall take hold upon them; all the inhabitants of Canaan shall melt away” (15:14–15).

How secure and powerful God’s people must have felt in that moment. They sang of how they would be feared and respected from then on. It was as if they said, “This is some powerful testimony. We can boast that God brought us out of an absolutely hopeless situation. Everyone will know the Lord is present with us in his awesome power and might.”

Yet this testimony was not the Israelites’. It was God’s alone. The Lord said, “I will get me honour upon Pharaoh, and upon all his host... The Egyptians shall know that I am the Lord” (14:17–18). God made Egypt acknowledge his power. Meanwhile, Israel failed their test. Only Moses had a right to sing on the victory side of their predicament. Simply put, the people were singing *the right song on the wrong side*. They had a testimony of God’s deliverance but no testimony of trust in him.

Do you see? This song — the song of faith — was a song God had yearned to hear from them on the testing side. Anyone can sing after victory comes. Even the worst doubters can offer a joyous song once God has provided a breakthrough. But such a song isn’t a testimony of faith.

The great need of the present hour is Christians who have learned to sing the song of deliverance on the testing side of trouble.

Gideon had only a small army of 300 men, yet he shouted in faith before the battle. How the Lord must have longed for a Gideon to rise up in that frightened camp at the Red Sea and remind everyone of God’s faithfulness to them in the past. You see, as far as the Lord is concerned, the time to stand is in the darkest moment. It is when everything seems hopeless, when there appears no way out, when God alone can save and deliver. Israel’s predicament at the Red Sea was intended by God as a learning experience for them, a moment to build their faith. Faith isn’t being tested otherwise, when everything is going smoothly.

If only Israel had remembered the miracles God had done for them in Egypt. If only they had trusted his word that he would carry them in his arms as a father carries his child. If only a few had begun a worship song, the same song they later sang on the wrong side. If only the people had trusted the Lord, shouting, “He is my strength! My God will triumph. Who is like unto thee, O Lord?” Tell me, what would have happened?

They would have established a strong, abiding faith in God — a faith tested and proven through the fire of their predicament. Their faith would have emerged so unshakable it would have carried them through every hardship of the wilderness journey just ahead. They would have had a foundation of faith upon which to build. And over time they would have learned to confidently praise God in all circumstances, with a faith so strong hell would have shuddered.

But Israel did not sing. Instead, they pouted. They murmured and complained. They accused God of neglect. And they lost all confidence in his love and concern for them.

You may ask, “How can anyone sing of deliverance when they’re hurting as badly as Israel was?”

Some readers may say, “It’s not natural to sing in those circumstances. We’re only human. If we had been in Israel’s shoes, we would have responded the same way they did. We would have cried in fear. It’s only natural to think of your family, your spouse and children, when you’re facing such a trial.”

Let there be no misunderstanding: Our God is a tender, loving Father. There is a time to weep, a time to vent our fears. And right now many in the body of Christ are overcome by fears of the future, fears about how they’re going to make it through. As pastor of a church for more than twenty years, I don’t take this issue lightly. Often I’ve prayed, “Lord, are you demanding that your people rejoice when they’re unemployed and losing their homes? They’re in despair because they’re suffering. They don’t feel like singing. Can’t you cut them some slack?”

Throughout the gospels we see the Lord rebuking his disciples for their unbelief, saying, “Where is your faith?” It is a scene we see played over and over again. Yet I believe the Lord was not rebuking Moses when he said to him, “Why are you crying to me?” Rather, God didn’t take kindly to the people’s insults. They insinuated he was going

to allow their children to be devoured by the enemy. And he was offended by their accusations.

“Moreover your little ones, which ye said should be a prey, and your children, which in that day had no knowledge between good and evil, they shall go in thither, and unto them will I give it, and they shall possess it” (Deuteronomy 1:39).

When we are hurting we are by all means to cry out to the Lord. When we are in anguish over our situation we are to pray, “Lord, help!” We are to bring him all of our hurt and disappointment, for he desires to hear us. Then, after we pour out our heart to him, he desires us to rise up in faith, face our trial and proclaim, “I can do nothing on my own. God is my strength. Therefore, I will not fear. I’m going to stand still and see the salvation of the Lord.”

Israel sang a song of victory after their deliverance. Yet they sang it not in faith but in relief. It was a song without a foundation of trust. That was revealed three days later, when Israel reverted to their old ways of doubt and fear at their next predicament.

Beloved, we have a tender, loving Father who is touched by the feelings of our infirmities. Even Jesus wept in his trying hour; he knows our pain firsthand. And he has sent his Holy Spirit to comfort us, speaking hope and peace to our souls.

The world requires of us a song in the midst of our hardest times.

“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth... saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” (Psalm 137:1–4).

This Psalm is describing Israel’s captivity by the Babylonians. At this point God’s people had lost everything, including their homeland. Now their captors wanted to hear the songs of victory that the Israelites were famous for. “Sing to us! Play us your well-known songs. We’ve heard about the great victory songs you offer to your God. Sing them for us.”

Beloved, the world still demands a song of victory from God’s people. This is meant as a challenge to us. What they really want to know is this, “How are you going to react in this present crisis? We’ve heard about how your God is faithful and all powerful. And right now you’re in a terribly hard place. So, will you stop singing? Or do you trust your God in times like these? Before you got into this situation, you sang of his faithfulness. Was that a lie? Why not now? Has your God changed? Were you singing fables back then? Were your songs of deliverance simply a children’s fantasy? Or does your faith hold up when hard times come?”

I don’t believe this demand was made in mockery alone. I believe the Babylonians wanted to hear a testimony. Their own religion had left them empty, dry, hopeless. We know from God’s Word that there is no peace for the wicked. And the world wants peace just as we do.

A recent magazine cover blared this headline: “New York City — Party Every Night!” Indeed, every weekend night in Times Square you can hardly move because of the masses of people who have come to party. Yet in the deep hours of the night, at 2 or 3 a.m., the wailing begins. Desperate cries rise from the streets revealing those partiers’ true anguish. The sound is haunting and unmistakable: It is the human soul wailing of its emptiness and hopelessness.

As I read this Psalm, I believe the Babylonians were equally desperate. They had heard of the God of Israel, this God who performed miracles, who cared for his people, who was for them a strong tower of safety. These captors wanted that true testimony for themselves. I hear almost a plea from them: “Please, sing us the happy songs you sang in Zion. Show us a God who has the power to supply hope in dark times. If he is your God, why are you weeping now? Where is your peace, your joy? Where is his strength on your behalf?”

The Babylonians needed to see God’s people singing a song of victory in the midst of their bleakest night. They longed to see a testimony that would speak peace to the heart *no matter what*. I picture them saying, “You could show us a miracle but it wouldn’t matter. We don’t care about seeing cripples walk or the blind with sight restored. We only want to see a people whose God is a source of peace when everything else goes wrong. That is the miracle we need.”

“Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee” (Isaiah 26:3). Beloved, this is the same miracle, the supernatural wonder, that the world wants to see right now.

The captive Israelites were a pitiful testimony of God’s faithfulness.

The Israelites who sat in chains in Babylon refused to sing. Evidently they had learned nothing from their experiences. Any testing they had been through was in vain. All the warnings, prophecies and messages of hope from the Lord were wasted on them.

So the Babylonians walked away dismayed. They must have said to themselves, “These Israelites are no different from us. They’re supposed to have a powerful God, but clearly he isn’t able to give them joy in hard times. What’s the use of seeking such a God? There simply is no hope in the earth. When hard times come these Israelites fall into despair just as we do.”

Beloved, this world doesn’t respond to great sermons. Church programs won’t affect them. Even healings have little impact, since they’ve seen so many “miracle medicines” developed in their lifetime. They’ve seen heart bypasses, limbs sewed back on, transplants of hearts, eyes, livers, lungs, healings that indeed God’s wisdom makes possible.

What the world hungers for is the sight of a Christian who is being deeply tested — someone who is in trouble, his back against the wall, with no way out — yet he sings. This Christian rejoices, trusting in his God. He doesn’t complain of his situation. Rather, he sings of the Lord’s faithfulness. He trusts not in man nor in circumstances but in God.

This is the miracle that will win the lost: the miracle of true peace in dark times. Why? The worldly and wicked are also in a hard place, and they want hope.

Our doubts must be dealt a death blow on the testing side, or else we will become confirmed murmurers.

Songs of victory sung *after* victory are not true songs of faith. Why? Our doubts are not dealt a death blow by our experience. You see, when we experience victorious deliverance, we have a temporary flush of thanksgiving. We’re naturally joyful because our God has mercifully acted on our behalf despite our doubts. Yet, what happens to our doubts then? They are only submerged deeper in the heart.

Dear saint, the fact is God has led you to your current situation. You are surrounded by obstacles on all sides, with what seems like an enemy closing in. And like Moses you may be saying, “Lord, you’ve led me faithfully all my life. But I don’t understand what I’m going through. The future looks so bleak.”

Right now we are living in a time of chaos the world has never seen. And Satan is using fear to torment multitudes. In the very midst of this time our Lord is calling his people, saying: “How will you deal with this? Are you going to believe my promises in spite of everything else that takes place around you? Will you trust me in spite of your deepest fears?”

To do this, we have to fix our minds on the Lord. “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee” (Isaiah 26:3). Our will has to be involved in this. No matter how unbelievably dark our situation becomes, something of faith has to rise up in us that says, “No, devil. No, world. I will trust in the One who has faithfully delivered me at all times.”

That is when perfect peace comes. It is supplied by the Lord himself, who is pleased by our trust in him. Then, as chaos reigns all around, our lives will speak the powerful message of his joy. He has given us a song to sing to the world: “The Lord is faithful. He sees his people through!”

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