

The Case for Being Still

Exodus 14:13, 14

A timid bus driver did not know how to react when at one stop, a huge hulk of a man got on. He was 6' 8" and built like a wrestler. He looked right at the driver and said, "Big John doesn't pay!" Then he sat down. The driver was 5' 3" and very thin. He didn't argue with the man, but he became more agitated as the scene was replayed day after day.

Finally, the bus driver signed up for body-building courses, karate, judo and a class on finding your self-esteem. In a few months, he had hulked up and was feeling good about himself. The next time that Big John stepped on the bus and said, "Big John doesn't pay!" the driver stood up, glared at the man and bellowed, "And why not?!"

With a surprised look on his face, Big John replied, "Big John has a bus pass."

Some of the greatest fears we ever encounter turn out to be unwarranted. The source of our fear may prove to be harmless like Big John, but not always. In spiritual realms, the things that stand opposed to God's children are truly terrifying and powerful. But, our fears are unwarranted in such instances because we stand in covenant with a God Who is able to keep us from falling and Who has promised us an eternal home as well as His abiding presence now.

God promised Abraham that He would make His offspring a powerful nation and place them in a Land of Promise. That promise was reiterated to Abraham's son, Isaac, and to his son, Jacob. In each of these men's lives, circumstances and setbacks gave rise to fears, which led God to speak to each of these men, the words, "Do not be afraid ..."

Once, God gave Abraham a fuller glimpse of the future. He told him that his descendants must spend 400 years as slaves in a foreign land. In Jacob's day, a family of seventy moved to Egypt. Over time, this family became the nation of Israel. Egypt worried about the growing numbers of Israelites and forced God's people into slavery. Four centuries later, a nation estimated at as many as two million is preparing to leave its bondage. The background of our text finds Israel trapped between a sea in front of them and the pursuing armies of Egypt behind them. They are afraid and at the brink of panic, but through His servant Moses, God speaks to their fears:

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." – Exodus 14:13, 14

I. Good Reasons for Stillness

A. Our God Is a Wise God

The story of the exodus of the Hebrews out of Egypt begins unpredictably:

¹⁷When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. – Exodus 13:17

To travel as the crow flies from Egypt to the land God had promised to Abraham, one would head due northeast through the land of the Philistines. But, the journey commenced in almost the opposite direction. God led his people south toward the wilderness. After witnessing the miracles and the plagues Moses had called down, the people seem willing to follow him, believing him to be from God. It's easy to trust a rescuer when he appears to be stronger than the oppressor.

It was also hard to question God in all of this when they looked up and saw a huge pillar leading them. By daylight, it was smoke. At night, it became a fire that gave them light to travel. I get the sense that this was a pretty content bunch of folks, at least at this early stage of their deliverance.

God led His people this way because they were in no way ready to enter the Promised Land, much less occupy and hold it. They had neither the skill nor the stomach for battle, and the Philistines they had to get by were a nasty bunch. God knew that they would chicken out and beg to return to Egypt. And, He was right. Later, at the threshold of Canaan, the people whined:

... "If only we had died in Egypt! Or in this desert! ³Why is the LORD bringing us to this land only to let us fall by the sword? Our wives and children will be taken as plunder. Wouldn't it be better for us to go back to Egypt?" ⁴And they said to each other, "We should choose a leader and go back to Egypt." - Numbers 14:2-4

The shortest distance between two points is a straight line, but God seldom leads a man or a community of faith in a straight line. As of yet, the Hebrews didn't know how to fight, how to submit, how to trust or how to obey. How can anyone miss God's Word in all this to our own age? We like straight paths and short waits. That's how we plan our lives and measure our successes, but eventually, we learn to praise God when He ignores our plans. There are so many venues of growth and grace we would miss if God always allowed us to chart our own easy courses. If everything went as we planned, we would never have the occasion to face the end of our strength, to empty ourselves of our pride and to behold the adequacy and sufficiency of God.

B. Our God Is a Faithful God

One vivid example of God faithfulness to His promises is the story of Joseph. The eleventh son of Jacob was the firstborn son of Jacob's favorite wife. Jacob lavished his love on Joseph much to the displeasure of the other sons. Fed up, they sold their little brother to a group of Midianite merchants. After a series of events that included a good job, a false charge of sexual assault and a stint in prison, the passing years find Joseph as an official in Pharaoh's government. He becomes the chief administrator of commodities who guides Egypt through a famine. He also rescues his family from the famine and is tenderly reunited and reconciled with his brothers.

The whole family moved to Egypt, but Joseph knew that one day God would take them back to the land promised to Abraham. He was so sure of this that he gave instructions that no matter how long it took, the Israelites were to carry his bones back to Canaan for burial. It took four centuries, but the dying wish was not forgotten. Moses loaded up Joseph's bones and took off. The very presence of those bones with them was a reminder of God's faithfulness to His promises. That pillar of cloud by day and fire by night only reinforced His faithfulness.

God has divinely recorded and preserved the testimony of His faithfulness in the ancient past. Many of us can testify to His faithfulness in our own lives. Why, then, are we so prone to fear and to brash action when things do not fall in place as we planned them? Why is it so hard for us to simply be still before a God Who has nothing left to prove in terms of His trustworthiness?

C. We Are a Helpless People

Inexplicably, the LORD told Moses to turn this vast migration of people back to the north. No one questioned this at first. The desert before them was barren. The place they moved to was more palatable. However, when Pharaoh heard about this shift in direction, he thought they had lost their bearings and went after them. The horror of the plagues quickly passed as the king of Egypt saw an opportunity to reacquire his slave force. It seemed that Moses had made a strategic blunder when he moved his people into a position where there were mountains on both sides of them and a Sea in front of them. The only way they could move was whence they came, right into Pharaoh's pursuing forces. These people had been slaves for centuries. Now, they were sitting ducks.

Have you ever found yourself in a bind where no option seemed like a good one? You cannot move that way without compromising a little bit ethically. You cannot turn that way without treating someone a bit harshly. It seems like pausing, being still and waiting on the LORD to make a way out would be an attractive thing to a people of faith, but such stillness is seldom our gut instinct. It clearly was not the gut instinct of the hopelessly cornered Israelites.

II. Grave Resistance to Stillness

A. A Tendency toward Cowardice

Waiting on the LORD runs against the grain of every impulse in the natural man. When surrounded on every side, what besides being still is a man prone to do? To the Israelites, surrender must have seemed attractive. Perhaps, if they just refused to put up any fight, Pharaoh might have mercy on them and simply march them back and allow them to resume their role as slaves. I mean, slavery is not so bad as long as you're alive and your oppressors allow you to eat.

How many times does a man battle some secret sin in silence because the cost of overcoming it is too high? Accountability will mar the image he has worked hard to maintain. The struggle and self-discipline required are too demanding. The world invites us to simply surrender to our basest sins and remain slaves. "You have battled this all your life. When are you going to quit beating yourself up and see that it's just a part of who you are and how you're wired?" "It's not sin, it's a sickness." "It's not your fault if you are just a product of bad parenting or a faulty gene pool."

B. A Tendency towards Busyness

When surrounded on every side, what besides being still is a man prone to do? These days, he may do anything that will buffer him from appearing that he's doing nothing. Time is precious, and we are right to not want to waste it. But, is time spent waiting on God to reveal a way the same as time wasted? To some, stillness smacks of idleness or of lacking the courage to act. But, stillness is not "doing nothing." When an occasion calls for stillness, being still is exactly the right thing to do.

Besides, staying busy in the wrong way is a sure way to waste time. It's hard for a big guy with bad knees to get under a kitchen sink, but if I am down there and discover I have the wrong tool, I either have to loose the time going after the right tool or I can stubbornly work with what I have. Of course, the net loss of time when you trudge forward with the wrong tool is usually greater because the repair inevitably takes longer, if in fact, you don't tear something up, which will use up even more time. Being in a hurry around machinery can get you hurt. Haste makes waste. Measure twice, cut once. These observations from the world of labor ring true in the realm of the spirit as well.

“Time is precious, but there are occasions when the best use we can make of it, is to let it run on. If time flies, that is no reason why I am always to fly.” – Charles Spurgeon

C. A Tendency towards Presumption

When surrounded on every side, what besides being still is a man prone to do? If televangelists had been around in Moses’ day, a number of the Israelites would have known exactly what to do. “Expect your miracle!” Of course, they would probably have anticipated the wrong miracle and charged right into the throes of the Egyptian army. After all, not even the most imaginative televangelist could have anticipated what God really had in mind.

I could share many experiences of God bailing me out of tough situations when I was younger. I have become less dependent on such deliverances, not because I doubt what God can do, but because I have become less prone to find myself in the kinds of situations that common sense avoids. I would like to say that it has always just been a matter of maturing gracefully, but I can’t. Sometimes, because God had bailed me out in the past, I presumed He always would. By His grace, I would fall flat on my face. But, it works out. One learns much about grace while on one’s face.

D. A Tendency towards Rebellion

When surrounded on every side, what besides being still is a man prone to do? The Israelites turned on Moses, attacking him with sarcasm: “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die?” (Exodus 14:11). Outside every major city in Egypt was a stately burial ground called a necropolis, or “city of the dead.” Even today, some of the first thoughts of ancient Egypt that come to mind are embalming and tombs and pyramids. Death and graves were big industry in ancient Egypt. After the sarcasm came the old “We told-you-so!” “Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians?’” (Exodus 14:12). When bad things happen, and you have enough good sense to not shake your fist at God, the next best thing is to find someone to blame and turn on them.

Of course, all these tendencies that reflect our human aversion to stillness before God share the same pathology – chronic forgetfulness. Sure, centuries had passed since God uttered His promises to the patriarchs, but only days had passed since the plagues on Egypt that proved God’s devotion to this nation of people. And, by the way, there was still the matter of a miraculous pillar that God was in which hadn’t gone anywhere. These Israelites whined in the very shadow of God’s presence. May we never be so blind to the faithfulness of our God.

III. God’s Revelations in Stillness

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.” – Exodus 14:13, 14

A. His Power to Rescue You

God told Moses to tell the Israelites, “Stop whining and start walking.” In the stillness, God told Moses exactly what He must do. The waiting was over.

¹⁹Then the angel of God, who had been traveling 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 side; 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. – Exodus 14:19-22

B. His Ability to Amaze You

The Egyptians pursued the Israelites into the sea, but after His people had crossed safely to the other side, God released those mighty walls of water and not a single Egyptian that had been sent on that assignment returned. The narrative of the exodus comes to a close with these words:

... ³¹And when the Israelites saw the great power the LORD displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the LORD and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant. – Exodus 14:31

After a crisis, when I have resisted the urge to run off half-cocked and have instead waited on God, it is not unusual for me to be at one and the same time, delighted and shaken at His ways as I think, “God did not behave as I expected. That wasn’t anywhere near what I prayed for. Still, here I am, safe, victorious and a little bit humbled to see that His plan was better than mine.”

C. His Capacity to Treasure You

The Old Testament is filled with the accounts of many wonderful miracles, but the crossing of the Red Sea would be treated in sacred literature as the greatest of them all, because in this mighty act, God showed Himself to be the Deliverer of a people He loved. And, that is why in all of Scripture, the cross is the greatest work of God. For by the work of the cross, Jesus, God Incarnate, showed Himself to be that same kind of Deliverer.

Perhaps, now it will not seem so strange that God does not lead His people in a straight line. He takes things into consideration that His easily-frightened children could never anticipate. He knows that if you charted your own course, you would surely overestimate your ability to resist pride and temptation. As troublesome as the paths He leads you down seem, know that He is only molding you to be what He sees you one day being. Learn to trust that the paths by which He leads you can never be as troublesome as the paths you would choose for yourself. And, learn to trust that through all things, there is nothing to fear, for He walks beside you.

²When you pass through the waters,
I will be with you;
and when you pass through the rivers,
they will not sweep over you.
When you walk through the fire,
you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze.

³For I am the LORD, your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Savior ... – Isaiah 43:2, 3