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GOD-LED INTO A HARD PLACE?

Today's Text: Exodus Chapters 13-14

Extracts:

“And [the children of Israel] took their journey from Succoth, and encamped in Etham, in the edge of the wilderness. And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night. He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people” [Ex. 13:20-22]

“But the Egyptians pursued after them ... and overtook them encamping by the sea” [Ex. 14:9]

*The movie, **The Shawshank Redemption** [1994], is set in a prison where the inmates are serving very long terms, notably life imprisonment, with little chance of parole [conditional release on promise of good behaviour thereafter]. A prisoner in his 50's was paroled after he had served over 30 years in jail. He was shocked by what he saw outside in the first few days of his release: the vehicular traffic, the buildings, pace of life, hostile reception from family and friends, etc. He just could not cope, and he did not want to break his parole by returning to a life of crime. He simply returned to his little, zero-star hotel room and hanged himself.*

That kind of thing can happen to any of us. We are all in one form of long term imprisonment or the other: financial difficulties, unemployment, barrenness, unhappy marriage, illness, etc. When we seek help from family and friends, they may be forthcoming for a season. For example, family and acquaintances abandoned Job when his ordeal got worse [Job 42: 11]. That is why it is always good to turn to God at such times because “when my father and my mother forsake me, then the Lord will take me up” [Ps. 27: 10]. However, to be God-led may not be a paved road. In most cases, we may find ourselves in more hardship than we had imagined. Why should it be so?

In today's lesson, we shall study how God led the children of Israel out of Egypt and brought them to a “dead-end” by the Red Sea. They had been “paroled” after 430 years of “imprisonment” in Egypt. Now, they found themselves in a hard place even when they were God-led. It is a very instructive story!

1. Background

First of all, let us estimate the number of people that Moses led out of Egypt, after Pharaoh had granted them freedom. There were “about six hundred thousand on foot that were men beside children” [Ex. 12:37]. When God asked Moses to count the children of Israel, He specified them to be men “from twenty years and upward, all that are able to go to war in Israel” [Num. 1:2-3]. Therefore, the 600,000 men “on foot” were those qualified to be soldiers (infantry). In a typical population distribution, you would expect children, 0- 20 years of age, to outnumber those over 20 years by 3:1. The women of all ages would certainly outnumber the men-soldiers by 2:1 or better. So, conservatively, we can add about two million children (under 20 years of age) and women (20 and above) to the 600,000 men, and get a little above two-and-a-half million people! It was a “mixed multitude” in deed [Ex. 12:38]!

How was Moses going to lead millions of people to the Promised Land? There was no electric power at that time. So, he could not have spoken to them through loud speakers! The people had not had the privilege to govern themselves when they were in bondage in Egypt. In fact, until his father-in-law, Jethro, came to teach Moses the principle of delegation [much later], he was doing everything by himself, and straining himself to death [Ex. 18:12-27]. Therefore, help had to come from a higher source.

God filled that void by putting a sign in the sky. He would lead the children of Israel by day with a pillar of cloud and by night with a pillar of fire [Ex. 13: 21]. The sign was there all the time. When it moved, the people moved. When it stopped, the people stopped. Now, what was this pillar of cloud/fire that went before the people? We shall come to that later.

In spite of the fact that the children of Israel were so God-led, they found themselves by the Red Sea. In front of them was deep water, and most of them might not have known how to swim. Even if they could, how about the distance? They did not have enough boats to cross. Behind them were Pharaoh’s elite troops, advancing to destroy them. On their right and left were unknown terrain and dangerous people. It was a hard place in deed!

Have you been there? A lukewarm Christian becomes born again, and everything around him/her seems to fall apart. Financial hardship sets in. Neighbours and colleagues avoid them, if they don’t dig dirt on them. Like the children of Israel, we begin to question God and His messengers, “Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness? Wherefore has thou dealt thus with us, to carry us forth out of Egypt?” [Ex. 14:11].

2. Why does God bring us to a hard place?

We get a hint of God’s purpose from the following verse:

And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not through the way of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, lest peradventure the people repent [change their minds] when they see war, and they return to Egypt. But God led the people about, through the way of the wilderness of the Red sea” [Ex. 13:17].

The emphasis is on “when they see war.” God saw the people as recruits into His army! Writing on this subject, Paul says:

Thou therefore endure hardness, as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. No man that warreth entangleth himself with the affairs of this life; that he may please him who hath chosen him to be a soldier [2 Tim. 2: 3-4].

Let us learn something from the way people are converted from civilians to soldiers:

a) *The incentives*

People tend to see military service as an invitation to sure death! That is why some countries practise the draft, a compulsory way to make people accept military service, even if for a brief period. However, under a voluntary system, attractive incentives are used to induce young men and women to enlist. In the United States, for example, young people are lured with free college education in the prestigious military academies [Army, Navy and Air force]. A recent survey shows that these institutions are among the ten toughest schools to get into in the United States, even winning over some Ivy League universities.¹

God promised the children of Israel that He had come down to free them from Pharaoh’s bondage and to bring them to “a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey” [Ex. 3:8; 13:5]. When Peter asked Jesus, “Behold, we have forsaken all, and followed Thee; what shall we have thereof?” Jesus replied:

Ye which have followed Me, in the regeneration when the Son of man shall sit in the throne of His glory, ye also shall sit upon twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel [Matt. 19:27-28].

He brought it down to earth for them in the following paraphrase: material blessings, a hundred fold, plus everlasting life hereafter [v. 29].

¹ “The Ten toughest Schools to Get Into,” <http://encarta.msn.com/college/Articles/TenToughestSchools.asp>

The incentive part is what draws many young believers into the fold. They listen to the “rag-to-riches” sermons of prosperity preachers, and jump to enlist, thinking that they will be made generals in the Lord’s army over night! Wait till you sign the dotted line!

b) *Enlistment*

Military authorities will treat you with courtesies, and shield you away from brash conduct until you sign the documents of enlistment. Once you sign, their countenance will change. You have just signed away your freedom! Your name changes to a number. They dictate when you sleep and when you wake, what and when you eat. Your civilian clothes are gone. In their place, you must wear uniforms that you must learn to keep clean. You must do chores that you hardly do back home. The main aim is to discipline you to accept and carry out orders, without questions!

In Egypt, God shielded the children of Israel away from the plagues that were visited on the Egyptians [**Ex. 9:26**]. However, as soon as they had signed the enlistment papers, by way of the Passover, it was a different ball game! They marched out of Egypt “harnessed”, that is, armed [**Ex. 13:18**]. These were people who had hardly gone to war in their lives. They had to follow a cloud in the sky. Even when they saw themselves being led into a hard place, they had no say in the matter, especially as going back to Egypt was becoming difficult to contemplate.

We are all invited into one kind of wilderness or the other when God calls us as soldiers of Christ. You may be asked to give up your lucrative business or attractive job. You may be required to change location, from a safe and stable place to a war zone. No matter what it is, you have no say in the matter! You either do it as God wants it or you are free to return to your Egypt, which unfortunately may have changed for worse since your departure. God’s purpose is to ensure that you learn to trust Him for all your needs [**Matt. 6: 25-33**].

c) *Weapon training*

After a recruit has been disciplined and thoroughly grounded in military life and culture, the authorities introduce him/her to training in how to use military weapons. The training you receive depends on the kind of enemies you are likely to encounter in battle.

The “weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds” [**2 Cor. 10:4**]. We are not going to fight against human beings but against spiritual dark forces. Therefore, we are required to “put on the whole armour of God, that ye may be able to stand against the wiles of the devil” [**Eph. 6:11-12**].

To prepare the children of Israel for this new kind of spiritual warfare, they had to be baptized by water and the Spirit of God. In **Exodus 14: 19**, we are told, “And the angel of the Lord, which went before the camp of Israel, removed and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud went from before their face, and stood behind them.” Writing on this subject, Paul said, “Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; and were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea” [**1 Cor. 10:1-2**]. In the words of Jesus, “Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” [**Jn 3: 5**]. If the baptism in the sea is analogous to being born of water, then that in the cloud is equivalent to baptism by the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the pillar of cloud/fire was a figure of the Holy Spirit! Those who are led by the Spirit of God are the sons of God [**Rom. 8:14**].

By way of a little digression, let me answer a question that may be bothering you right now. Is water baptism not supposed to precede Holy Spirit baptism? At least, that was what happened to Jesus [**Lk 3: 21-22**]. You are right. However, recall what happened when Peter came to the home of Cornelius. As he was preaching, the Holy Spirit fell on the Gentiles and they started to speak in tongues. Then, Peter asked his followers, “Can any man forbid water, that these should not be baptized, which have received the Holy Ghost as well as we?” Cornelius and his household thereafter received water baptism [**Acts 10:44-48**]. In like manner, the children of Israel had been spiritually "weaponised" to face the challenge of conquering the Promised Land even before they crossed the Red Sea.

3. Lessons

Here are some lessons that readily come to mind:

a) *Focus on the gain, not on the pain*

Can you imagine how difficult it is to get a good education? The long years of learning, first how to read and write, followed by reading and writing, followed by specializing, etc.? Rain or shine, snow or flood, no matter the hardship, you hang in there. Those of your classmates who dropped out in those days are at the bottom of the social ladder. What kept you going? The likelihood is that you focused on your ultimate objective, to acquire the necessary skills or study the profession of your choice. You refused to surrender to the hard circumstances that faced you.

The children of Israel saw Pharaoh behind them and the Red Sea ahead of them, and feared. If they had focused on the glory and power of God who

had destroyed Egypt, the only world power at the time, and on the land flowing with milk and honey ahead of them, they would not have seen a hard but a trying place.

b) *Continue to be Spirit-led*

Imagine the relationship between the light switch and the bulb in your kitchen. Most times, when you turn on the switch, light comes on too. One day, you switch on the light and there is none. What do you do? You check the bulb. If it is bad, you put a new one. What if you do that and there is still no light? Perhaps, it is the switch. That one is okay too. Ah-hah! It must be from the power supply source, the electricity company. You pick up your phone and call them. Their generating plants are working! Therefore, the fault must be the connection between the transmission line and your own house.

In like manner, our link to the Spirit of God can be severed by a number of forces: our sins/backsliding, lack of faith, fear, etc. When we are God-led and then find ourselves in a hard place, we should continue to look on to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith [**Heb. 12:2**]. We should immediately check our connection to God to make sure that we are not disconnected from His Spirit. That way, we can absorb the blows that satanic forces may throw at us during that trying period in our lives.

c) *That hard place is your launch pad to victory!*

God opened the Red Sea and the children of Israel passed through on foot on their way to the Promised Land [**Ex. 14:22**]. However, it also became the grave for their enemies, Pharaoh's troops [**vv. 23-28**]. Therefore, it is only a hard place for our enemies but the gateway to our victory and success!

4. Conclusion

It is a privilege to be God-led. However, every privilege has on its flip side a responsibility. As you enjoy the privilege, bear the pains, which can be only for a season. In fact, you can prolong the hard place by your uncooperative attitude to your pains. The children of Israel spent 40 years in the wilderness where they were to do only 40 days [**Num.14: 34**]. Here is my advice: when God has taken you out of Egypt, allow Him to also take Egypt out of you. If the latter looks like a hard place, so be it!