

Do You Feel Trapped? The Lord Can Help.

a sermon for the Holy Supper by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“And when Pharaoh drew near, the children of Israel lifted their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians marched after them. So they were very afraid, and the children of Israel cried out to the Lord (and to Moses)... And Moses said... ‘Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord.... The Lord will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace.’

And the Lord said to Moses, ‘Why do you cry to Me? Tell the children of Israel to go forward’” (Exodus 14:10, 13-15).

Here’s a great story for our times of discouragement and doubt. The children of Israel, although greatly multiplied over many generations in Egypt, had become slaves to the Pharaoh, and so the Lord had raised up Moses in a miraculous way to lead them out of their captivity, back into their home land. Indeed, to free them from the grip of Pharaoh the Lord had hammered the Egyptians with a whole series of dreadful plagues until he finally agreed to let them go. As mentioned in the children’s lesson they had left in a hurry, before their bread dough had risen, and had come as far as the banks of the Red Sea when suddenly they were filled with new anxiety and fear.

Think about it. There was a sea in front of them, wilderness on either side of them, and now the Lord had hardened the heart of the Pharaoh and he and all his armies were in hot pursuit. The situation certainly did look hopeless.

How often do we feel the same way? If we look back and think about it we can see the power of the Lord’s work both for us and against our enemies. But when we face a NEW challenge we are apt to forget about HIS power and just worry and complain about the current problem. And in fact every element of this story reflects – or represents – some aspect of that situation.

In a good sense the Egyptians represent knowledge, specifically the knowledge of the literal sense of the Word. And Joseph himself in Egypt represents the Lord. This is why the children of Israel went down there in the first place – to represent the fact that members of the church must go down into the Word and learn there what the Lord teaches, lest the famine, or lack of knowledge that affects us causes us to suffer. But, we read, after Joseph died a new king arose in Egypt who did not know him and who, rather than supporting the Hebrew people began to fear and abuse them. So the knowledge of the Word can turn against us if the principles drawn from it, represented by the new Pharaoh, lead us to false conclusions. Then we can become slaves to those false principles. For example, if we read in the Word that Jesus died for our sins, and we don’t understand what this really means (namely, that He suffered and died *because of* our sins), we might think that He died on our behalf, making a substitutionary atonement to God, the Father. Then, laboring under this falsity, we might think there is nothing we can do toward our own salvation, so it’s pointless to try.

Wrong ideas like this can really mess with our minds, and in order to get free of them sometimes drastic measures are needed – represented by the ten plagues (the horrible consequences) visited

upon the Egyptians. Then we can move on, take some responsibility and begin a new life.

Sadly, though, that's not the end of it. Soon we come to the Red Sea, or as the Hebrew has it, the Sea Suph – which probably means the Sea of Reeds or Weeds, which were in fact plentiful in that northern arm of the Arabian Gulph. This is appropriate because it represents the aggregation of falsities that are now apparent in our spiritual lives, and which cause us great discouragement on our journey to spiritual freedom. With this sea in front of us, the falsities of an irresponsible life behind us – in fact marching to overtake us, and a spiritual wilderness on either side of us, what can we do?

The children of Israel responded by complaining. And so we complain. We would be better off as slaves in Egypt, in bondage to our old falsities, than we are having to face these new threats to our spiritual life. Never mind the fact that the Egyptians had been systematically killing all the male Hebrew babies for years, in a representative sense destroying the innocence of our faith in the Lord. Never mind all the miracles that the Lord has performed to get us OUT of Egypt. This is now and right now we feel trapped, fearful and hopeless.

Well, OK, things may not really be that bad right now. But surely all of us have felt like this at times, and as we face new challenges we will again. In any case the influence of the hells is persistent, and anytime we allow the possibility, bad spirits will insinuate doubts and falsities that we receive as if they were true and that effectively paralyze us in a spiritual sense. “You're stupid,” they might say, or “You're no good,” or “You can't do anything right,” and “Guess what: the Lord doesn't care, anyway; He led you here and now you're on your own.”

The issue might be a bad habit or a feeling of resentment that you just can't shake. It might be a warped idea of the nature of God, for example that He's only concerned about the overall laws of order and not the details of your personal life, or that He can't help you because of all the flaws in your character, or because of something that happened to you in the past. Again, it might be a general sense of unworthiness, something we often associate with the holy supper. Or it might be something to do with marriage, or sexuality, or reward... and punishment. There are plenty of teachings in the literal sense of the Word that can be used to confirm wrong ideas, and when we feel threatened by such ideas we are like the children of Israel pursued by the Pharaoh.

But look. What is Moses' response to the people? He says, “Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord.” Calm yourself. Chill. Wait. Think about HIM, not yourself and all your worries. “The Lord will fight for you, and you will hold your peace.” Say it silently to yourselves: “The Lord will fight for you, and you will hold your peace.” “The Lord is good to all, and His tender mercies are over all His works” (Ps. 145:9). “Do not fear, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Luke 12:32). Or as He Himself said, “Be still, and know that I am God” (Ps. 46:10). Not you. Him. As we read in TCR 87, only He has the power to resist the hells and to overcome them in us, which He will gladly do if we just get out of His way.

Then think about what the Lord said to Moses: “Why do you cry to Me? Tell the children of Israel to go forward” (Exodus 14:15).

Surely this seems like an odd command, given the sea of weeds before them, and it seems odd to us, given the sea of falsity confronting us, not to mention the desert – the lack of spiritual support

or sustenance – on either side. But there’s an old saying: “When you’re going through hell... keep going.” Don’t stop and complain about it, or dwell on it, or make yourself miserable. Keep going until you come out the other side.

“The night is darkest before the dawn.” The Lord cannot prevent you from falling into temptations, but He CAN lead you through them to a good and peaceful conclusion. Doubts and temptations often lead to despair, in fact that despair is what usually, finally prompts us to realize that we can’t get through it on our own, and that we have to turn it over to the Lord. Here, then, are two things worth bearing in mind about this:

1. No one is perfect, not even the angels. As we read in the Arcana, “No pure good, or good with which evil is not mingled, exists with anyone. Neither does any pure truth, or truth with which falsity is not mingled, exist with him.... But the evils residing with man are of various kinds. There are evils with which goods cannot be mingled and there are evils with which they can. And the same applies to falsities. If this were not so nobody could ever have been regenerated.” (AC 3993:8). The passage goes on to give specific examples that show how the Lord can work with us even with our flawed affections and misunderstanding.

2. In times of real despair, as in the story of Job, the Lord does not hold us accountable for our lack of faith, for He knows that we are not then really in our right minds, and far from judging us He works to raise us up and free us from that state (see AC 8165:2). Or as we read in our third lesson, “to every falsity the hells inject there is an answer from the Divine. The falsities which are from the hells are injected or flow into the external or natural man, but the answer from the Divine flows into the internal or spiritual man (and brings hope)” (AC 8159).

In the story Moses was told to lift up his rod, and stretch out his hand over the sea, “and divide it” so that Israel could go through it on dry land. And so it was. Again, Moses represents the Lord’s Word with us, and his rod represents the power of the truth in the Word. To raise the rod and stretch out the hand means to recognize the power of the truth in the Word and to let it rule in our lives, which is why the Lord is so often said to “stretch out His hand” against the nations, or to help the needy (see AC 7673). Finally, to divide means to dissipate or disperse, in the case of an enemy weakening it, or in the case of a problem making it manageable. To divide the sea in our minds is to break down the issues into separate parts so that they are not so overwhelming. It is calmly, rationally, from the Word to distinguish one falsity from another until we can see a way through the quagmire.

The application to our states of temptation is clear: when in doubt or despair, don’t panic; don’t do anything rash or reactive. “Stand still, and see the salvation of the Lord.” Breathe. Focus on Him. Take courage from His Word. Go forward. Don’t look back. The only way through the temptation is, well, through it. You can’t get around it; you can’t entirely avoid it; but with the Lord’s help you can get through it. – Which is one reason why we have the holy supper.

For in the supper our attention is drawn to the Lord alone – in a tangible, taste-able, physically receivable way as we remember the incarnation of His love and the life-blood of His wisdom in the Word, and actually take that in symbolically. Do you think it won’t help? Do you think it’s

“just another ritual”? Try it. Let go of your self-consciousness and just come up, focusing on the Lord’s goodness and truth.

Do you think you’re not worthy – or not ready for His help? Why not? What you’re doing right now isn’t likely to be any *more* effective. But if you really let go, and receive what the Lord offers so that you can remember and reflect on it through the coming weeks, He can part of the waters of your concerns, making them easier to bear, and He can walk you through them to a safe and peaceful conclusion.

Amen.

Lessons: Exodus 13 & part of 14
 John 6:31-35 (as part of the sacrament)
 Arcana Caelestia #8159:3