

Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

Exodus 14:19-31

The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night. Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went into the sea after them, all of Pharaoh's horses, chariots, and chariot drivers. At the morning watch the Lord in the pillar of fire and cloud looked down upon the Egyptian army, and threw the Egyptian army into panic. He clogged their chariot wheels so that they turned with difficulty. The Egyptians said, "Let us flee from the Israelites, for the Lord is fighting for them against Egypt." Then the Lord said to Moses, "Stretch out your hand over the sea, so that the water may come back upon the Egyptians, upon their chariots and chariot drivers." So Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and at dawn the sea returned to its normal depth. As the Egyptians fled before it, the Lord tossed the Egyptians into the sea. The waters returned and covered the chariots and the chariot drivers, the entire army of Pharaoh that had followed them into the sea; not one of them remained. But the Israelites walked on dry ground through the sea, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left. Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the Lord did against the Egyptians. So the people feared the Lord and believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses.

Not too many people can say they have literally been between a rock and a hard place.

But when I lived in Denver, I had a chance to meet Aron Ralston, a young man who grew up in the area and was an avid hiker and outdoorsman. And when I say he liked the outdoors, I'm not talking about groomed trails or nature centers. He would park his car as close to the wilderness as possible, then walk, bike, or kayak further into the wild. I met Aron when a bunch of Denver churches got together to have him come speak to their youth groups. Aron came to talk about his faith.

In 2003, he was hiking through Canyonlands National Park when he made a critical error in judgment. He lowered himself off what he thought was a sturdy boulder, but as he leapt, the rock came loose. It fell toward Aron, eventually pinning his right wrist against the canyon wall. Aron was alone, far away from civilization, with no way to move. In the scariest way possible, he was literally stuck between a rock and a hard place.

Of course, Moses and the Israelites had their own moment, where it seemed there were no options left to them. I don't know where the expression 'caught between the devil and the

deep blue sea' originates, but I'm sure Moses and the Israelites surely felt that way. Going forward meant drowning; going back meant slaughter. Honestly, how could any of us, faced with such a decision, move at all. So there they stood, paralyzed by the impossibility of making either choice.

There are countless other stories in the Scripture of people faced with powerful enemies and dangerous situations. Elijah had to run for his life because Queen Jezebel promised to kill him. King David killed Uriah, a good man, because he wanted Uriah's wife, Bathsheba. Prophets were murdered. Stephen was stoned to death. Peter and Paul were executed. Jesus himself was crucified.

One of the questions we desperately want religion to answer for us is "why do bad things happen to good people?" All these Scriptural stories point to the fact that sometimes bad things happen because there are powerful people who do bad things. The Old and New Testaments are filled with stories of people obeying God's will who nevertheless had formidable enemies. Faithfulness to God is no assurance that people will like you, or pay attention to you, or even let you live! In fact, the Bible often seems to indicate just the opposite. And that's a difficult, painful lesson to learn. Even when you know you're doing the will of God, trying your best to be faithful, you will still have to contend with the principalities and powers of this world who are God's enemies, and, therefore, yours as well.

Okay, so bad things happen in life. Sometimes it happens because you are good and faithful, and therefore a threat to someone else, but sometimes it happens for no reason at all. Natural disasters and disease come to mind. But being good and faithful are not immunizations against bad things.

Faithful Christians may still have bad things happen, but we do have something that others don't have. We can be assured, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that God is with us. This was perhaps the hardest lesson the Israelites had to learn. Their whole 40-year hike from Egypt to the Promised Land was one lesson after another to help them realize that God was with them. You might think that after crossing through, and I mean through, the Red Sea, all doubt of God's presence would be removed. But it's barely a few days later when the Israelites start grumbling that they were actually better off as slaves in Egypt!

But the truth is that when we are faithful to God, God is faithful to us. In fact, God is more faithful to us than we are to God. Remember Peter, one of the disciples? Jesus invites him to walk on the water with him. Peter gives it a try, but he starts to sink. But God is with him – fortunately, God is with him in human form as Jesus, and Jesus saves Peter from drowning. The Bible is full of stories of people who experienced God's presence when things looked pretty dire.

Paul and Silas were thrown in jail for preaching about Jesus. Even in chains, they kept singing and preaching to other inmates. Then in the middle of the night, there was a mysterious earthquake – the kind that makes shackles fall off your wrists. And there's Daniel, who prayed to God faithfully, even when he was forced to live in exile and work for the very king who destroyed his people. Then he was thrown into a pit of hungry lions for showing faithfulness to God instead of the king. But God sent an angel to close the mouths of the lions.

Of course, the Bible does tend to tell us the good stories. The stories of people who faced impossible predicaments but were saved by God. What about the hundreds of Christians who were thrown to the lions in the Roman Coliseum? Most of them didn't survive. Where was God then? After a devastating accident, a survivor will often say that God spared or protected them for a reason. That they have a mission and a purpose. Well that's great, but what about the

person who doesn't survive the accident? What about the ones who don't beat cancer? Did God decide they weren't worth protecting?

And here comes another hard lesson. God's presence does not guarantee that everything will work out the way you want or hope. God will help – but sometimes not in ways that you were looking for. Remember Jonah? Swallowed by a great fish, or a whale, for refusing to go preach about God? As you might imagine, while in the belly of the fish, Jonah did a fair bit of praying. God tells the fish to spit him out, but God still insists that Jonah go to Tarshish. Not exactly the level of deliverance Jonah was hoping for.

Remember Aron Ralston, the guy whose arm was trapped in the canyon? He describes feeling God's presence with him, and feeling the prayers of those who were looking for him. But in order to free himself and save his life, Aron had to break his own arm and then cut it off with nothing but a dull pocket knife. It would be easy for him to declare that God did not answer his prayers, but instead he said in an interview, "It was God that spoke to me and gave me the opportunity, and I took the action to be able to get myself out of there. So it was the combined forces of faith and free will."

God is with us, even in our most difficult places, even when we don't get what we pray for. Because sometimes God answers our prayers by being with us as we go through. The Israelites went through the Red Sea. Jonah had to go through with God's assignment. Aron had to cut through his arm. Jesus was crucified, and he had to go through even death. And perhaps that is the most powerful story we have about God's presence.

As Jesus hangs on the cross, he is able to speak a few words to those standing with him. One of the most repeated things is that Jesus called out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Do we take Jesus, God in human form, at his word that God is no longer with

him? Actually, not quite. Instead, we turn to Psalm 22 which begins with the words, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” The whole psalm is a lament, an expression of deep grief and pain. But in the end, it turns toward hope. It ends by praising God, with confidence that God will save in the end. By saying the first line of this psalm, Jesus was calling the whole rest of the psalm to mind. In a culture where people memorized large chunks of Scripture, this would have put the end of the psalm in everyone’s mind. What a perfect Scripture for when you’re between a rock and a hard place. It gives you the space to express your grief and pain, but in the end reminds you that God still is, and God still is present.

So yes, Jesus had hope and comfort in God’s presence, even when hanging on the cross. But God did not intervene to save Jesus’ life. Jesus died. Each of us, one day, will die. It may be more or less tragic, more or less painful, more or less expected. But we don’t have to fear, because just as God was with Jesus on the cross, God was with Jesus through the cross. Through death, and on to eternal life. And Jesus promises to be with us too. In Matthew, he tells the disciples, “remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

And so there isn’t a place where God isn’t. Hear these words from Psalm 139: “Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.” There isn’t a place between a rock and a hard place that is impossible. You may find yourself caught between the Devil and the deep blue sea, but take comfort, because God is stuck right there with you. And though you may not like the short term results, in the long run, we will see that God walks with us through whatever life throws at us. Amen and amen.