

## Red Sea Rule 1:

*Realize that God means for you to be where you are.*

Psalm 71:14-21

June 7, 2009

This morning we begin our study of the little book by Robert Morgan called *The Red Sea Rules*. The subtitle of the book is "10 God-Given Strategies for Difficult Times." As I mentioned last week, we did this exact same study six years ago. A couple of months ago I thought about the difficult economic times that we are now going through, and I asked the elders what they thought about studying *The Red Sea Rules* again. They gave me the go-ahead.

This week I was rereading about Rule #1, and when I got done with it, I said, "Oh, I needed that." I had heard it all before, but I needed to hear it again. I need to be reminded time and again about what it means to trust God. I'm not alone, am I?

Think about your own trials, and then think about the people that you have talked to this week. Think about the variety of struggles that you have heard of just this week. How many of us are worried about money? We've got more bills than we've got cash. Some of us are out of work, or we're worried that we might soon be out of work. We worry about the future. Do you have a strained relationship with some of your friends or with some family member? Is there any parent here who's worried about a child? Any children here worried about a parent? Maybe you have just recently gone through a divorce. What about health problems? Have you just gotten some news about some serious illness? Some of us here today are going through times of transition. Maybe you've just moved here to Bemidji, and you're trying to get established in a new place. Maybe a good friend of yours has just moved away. Or perhaps your children have been talking to you about moving to a retirement home. That's a big transition. Perhaps a loved one has recently died, and you are trying to adjust to that terrible loss. Trials! We all have them, and we all need to learn how to trust God with them.

What does trusting God really involve? The reason I'm so impressed with The Red Sea Rules is that it breaks down faith into ten identifiable segments. The book as a whole summarizes so well some basic Biblical principles about what it means to trust God.

This morning let's think about the first rule: *Realize that God means for you to be where you are*. The trial you are facing is not the result of some colossal cosmic blunder. Your trial has not caught God off guard. This hardship is not something that has occurred outside of God's control or apart from his love. Realize that God means for you to be where you are.

That rule or principle is not something that the author of this book dreamed up by himself. It's a principle of faith that we find throughout God's Word. Think about the account that we find in the Old Testament book of Exodus. The Israelites are standing on the shore of the Red Sea. There in front of them stretches what seems to be an endless and impassable expanse of water. Marching toward them from the rear are the vengeful armies of the Egyptian Pharaoh. The children of God are stuck!

How did they get into that situation? Why are they standing there on the shores of the Red Sea? The Bible tells us that it is God who has led them there. Let's look at what the Bible says about the Israelites in Egypt. The story begins in the book of Genesis.

As the sun was setting, Abram fell into a deep sleep, and a thick and dreadful darkness came over him. Then the LORD said to him, "Know for certain that for four hundred years your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated there. But I will punish the nation they serve as slaves, and afterward they will come out with great possessions. (Gen. 15:12-14)

This is where the story of the Red Sea starts. God told Abraham that his descendants would live in a foreign country. God knew what would happen to them in Egypt. He knew that they would become slaves in that country. But this passage also says that God would punish the Egyptians for the way that

they enslaved his people and that he would rescue them from the bondage of Egypt. There is the story of the Red Sea in a nutshell. God knows what is going on. His people are securely in his hands.

This prophecy made to Abraham, of course, comes true. The Israelites do go to Egypt. At first life is good for them there. But then things take a turn for the worse. The Egyptians get worried about how many Israelites are living among them. They start to oppress the Israelites. They enslave them. They kill their babies. But then God raises up Moses to lead them out of Egypt. By following the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, God leads them right to the shores of the Red Sea.

There they stand scared to death. But it is God who has led them there. It is God who has placed them in such a precarious situation. They are there by God's appointment and for his purposes.

That's the way that God works with his children. The New Testament tells us that we shouldn't be surprised that we have to face trials and go through hard times (1 Peter 4:12). When we feel overwhelmed by our circumstances, we should not think that God has abandoned us or made some mistake. Red Sea Rule #1: Realize that God means for you to be where you are. He has a purpose. He has a plan. The same God who led you *in* will lead you *out*.<sup>1</sup>

The memory verse that I have chosen to go along with this rule is Psalm 71:20. "Though you have made me see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore my life again." Isn't that a remarkable statement? "God, you have made me see troubles." (That's pretty blunt, isn't it?) "But I know, God, that I can count on you. I know that you will restore my life again."

Rule #1: Realize that God means for you to be where you are. The same God who led you *in* will lead you *out*.

#### What the rule does not mean

Let's explore what this rule means. First, let's be sure that we understand what it does not mean. It is possible to misunderstand this rule and to apply it to our lives in a manner that is spiritually harmful. There are three things that this rule does not mean.

First, *it does not mean that everything is good*. It does not mean that you should try to tell yourself that everything that happens to you is wonderful. No, there are evil things that happen in this world, and we should not play some kind of pious mental game and call evil things good.

Think of the familiar story of Joseph that we find in the Old Testament book of Genesis. Joseph's brothers sell him into slavery. That is evil. His brothers are wrong in doing that to Joseph. Joseph becomes a slave. There is nothing good or glorious about that. Then he is falsely accused of attacking his master's wife and is thrown into prison where he rots for at least a couple of years. But God is with Joseph and amazingly raises Joseph up to be the second in command over all of Egypt. When his brothers come to Egypt in search of grain to feed their clan, it is Joseph who takes care of them. He thinks about all that has happened to him and how God has amazingly used him to save those who wanted to get rid of him. The book of Genesis concludes with him saying to his brothers, "It was not you who sent me here, but God" (Gen. 45:8). Joseph was in Egypt by God's appointment and for his purposes even though God used his brothers' evil acts to get him there.

To realize that God means for you to be where you are doesn't mean that you have to pretend that everything is good.

*It also does not mean that everything is pleasant*. That's another way that we can misunderstand Rule #1. If we are where God means for us to be, we could perhaps conclude that we should be enjoying everything that's happening to us. No, that's not what it means.

I think again of Psalm 71:20. "Though you have made me see troubles, *many and bitter*, you will restore my life again." Psalm 71 is blunt. "God, the things I've gone through have not been fun!"

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<sup>1</sup> Robert J. Morgan, *The Red Sea Rules* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), 6.

All through the Old Testament Psalms, we find statements like that. Psalm 44 stands out in my mind as an example of raw emotion being expressed to God.

We have heard it with our ears, O God;  
our ancestors have told us  
what you did in their days,  
in days long ago. (Ps. 44:1)

For the first eight verses of the poem the writer talks about how good God has been to his people.

But now you have rejected and humbled us;  
you no longer go out with our armies. . . .  
All this came upon us,  
though we had not forgotten you  
we had not been false to your covenant. (Ps. 44:9, 17)

Listen to the anguished cry of verse 23:

Awake, O Lord! Why do you sleep?  
Rouse yourself! Do not reject us forever.

Do you feel the emotion there? That's why I love the psalms. The emotions that we all feel from time to time are there on display. (See also Psalm 13, 22, 74, 88, and 89.) God places these psalms in his Word so that you and I can learn from God's children who have gone before us. To realize that God means for you to be where you are does not mean that you have to pretend that everything is good or everything is pleasant.

*It also doesn't mean that everything is clear.* It doesn't mean that you and I will always understand what is going on. Think about Jesus. The disciples pray to God in Acts 4. "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. *They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen*" (Acts 4:27-28 emphasis added; see also Acts 2:22-23). It is not a mistake that Jesus dies on the cross. Jesus is exactly where God means for him to be. The disciples do realize that—*after* Jesus' resurrection. But *before* Jesus' resurrection they don't understand what is happening. All they know is that the man that they had pinned all of their hopes on is dead. They are in total shock at what has happened to their master. They don't understand what God is doing at all!

Don't be surprised when that same thing happens to you. Morgan states the idea well. "*When you are in a difficult place, realize that the Lord either placed you there or allowed you to be there, for reasons perhaps known for now only to Himself.*"<sup>2</sup> God has his reasons, but he doesn't promise to tell us what they are.

Rule #1: Realize that God means for you to be where you are. But remember that this rule does not mean that everything is good or pleasant or clear.

#### What the rule does mean

What does Rule #1 mean? It means that we say to God, "Lord, I don't like what's going on and I don't understand what's going on. But I believe that I am here in this situation by your appointment and for your purposes. I believe that just as you led me into this situation you will lead me out."

Do you know the story of Ruth in the Old Testament? There are only four short chapters in that Old Testament book. Ruth has lost her husband. She's living in a foreign land. She's poor and finds herself in a situation where she can be easily taken advantage of. But she is also right where God wants her to be. God works behind the scenes and provides for her. She has the honor of becoming one of the ancestors of the greatest of Israel's kings, King David. And the New Testament

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

records a greater honor. We know Ruth today as one of the ancestors of Jesus himself (Matt. 1:5). Ruth went through all of her hardship by God's appointment and for God's purposes. The God who led her in also led her out.

Think in the New Testament about Peter. Peter's example is especially important because Peter got himself into such a mess. Peter makes that great boast to Jesus how he is never going to deny Jesus. All of the other disciples may deny him but not Peter! But when the pressure is on, Peter caves in just like all the others. But that doesn't catch God off guard. And it doesn't stop God from fulfilling his purpose for Peter. Jesus says to him, "I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail. And when you have turned back, strengthen your brothers" (Luke 22:32). That's a fascinating comment because apparently Jesus knows what Peter is going to do. He knows that Peter is going to turn away from him. So before he even denies Jesus, Jesus talks to him about what he should do when he turns back. No surprises! Jesus has a purpose for Peter even after Peter miserably fails him.

Maybe you and I have made some colossal mistakes. But God isn't done with us. If we turn back to him, he is more than ready to accomplish his purposes in our lives

Several years ago I read a theology book titled Beyond the Bounds. It explores the question of how our good God works in an evil world. It's over three hundred pages long filled with footnotes and terms like *libertarian freedom* and *compatibilism*. It's a good book but one that's heavy on theology. (Aren't you glad that I've asked you to read The Red Sea Rules instead?) In one of the essays the theologian who writes it gets personal and talks about how his deep theological reflections have made an impact on his own life.

In my case, the tragedy was my own. When I was seventeen, I fell about fifty feet off a Tarzan-like rope swing, breaking my back and becoming paralyzed from the waist down. I spent six months in hospitals. Initially, I had no feeling or movement in my legs and no bowel or bladder control. I dropped from 200 pounds to 145 pounds because I was so nauseated that I couldn't eat. Once my back had stabilized a little and I had regained some movement in my legs, the doctors tried to help me to regain more by having me crawl to breakfast each morning. . . .

I'm now fifty-two. My accident has had several long-term consequences. Walking is increasingly more difficult, although it is important for me to stay on my feet in order to exercise my legs. . . . Physical discomfort is pretty steady. . . . In the last ten years or so, I have sometimes had sleep-robbing leg spasms. And in this last year, I've learned that my inability to walk has depleted the bone-density in my left hip to the place where, if I take a serious fall, it is likely to break.<sup>3</sup>

Here's someone who no doubt has wrestled more than most of us have with trying to understand how God is working in his life. Listen to what he goes on to say.

As odd as it may seem, from the moment it happened, . . . that fall and the physical difficulties stemming from it have always assured me of God's love. . . . This has been especially true when my paralysis spawns new physiological complications.<sup>4</sup>

Isn't that a stunning statement? Here is someone who has learned to live by Red Sea Rule #1: *Realize that God means for you to be where you are.*

Evil things may have happened that have caused you a great deal of misery. You may have all kinds of questions about why it has happened. But rest assured of this: God has not abandoned you or forgotten you. You are where you are by God's appointment and for his purposes. The same God who led you in will lead you out.

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji  
on June 7, 2009 by Dr. Frederic Martin  
expanding on The Red Sea Rules by Robert J. Morgan.

<sup>3</sup> Mark R. Talbot, "True Freedom: The Liberty That Scripture Portrays as Worth Having," in Beyond the Bounds, ed. John Piper, Justin Taylor, and Paul Kjoss Helseth (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), 78-79.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.