

Red Sea Rule 3:

Acknowledge your enemy, but keep your eyes on the Lord.

Matthew 14:22-33; Romans 4:18-21

June 21, 2009

This morning we are continuing our study that is based on Robert Morgan's little book, *The Red Sea Rules: 10 God-Given Strategies for Difficult Times*. I like this little book because it provides us with a Biblical and intensely practical picture of what faith actually looks like.

Over the years I've observed that we Christians often make two mistakes when it comes to trusting God. The first mistake comes about when we allow our circumstances to overwhelm us. We get so wrapped up in all the bad things that are happening around us that we forget to look to the living God and put our problems into his hands. That's the first mistake that we often make, and it is the obvious one.

But there is a second mistake, and I am convinced that this second mistake is just as serious but much more devious. It is the exact opposite of the first mistake.

Do you know what I'm referring to? We will take a look at it in just a few minutes.

Let's think about what Robert Morgan calls Red Sea Rule #3. He puts it this way: *Acknowledge your enemy, but keep your eyes on the Lord*. If I had written this book, I would have reworded this rule just a little. That is not a criticism of the book. After all, it's not the precise wording of these rules that counts. It's the principle behind them. So here is how I would put it: *Face your problem, but fix your eyes on the Lord*.

That is a principle of faith that we find not just in the experience of the Israelites as they wait on the shores of the Red Sea. We find it throughout God's Word. The best example that I know of comes from the life of Abraham. Look at how the New Testament describes Abraham's faith.

¹⁸ Against all hope, Abraham in hope believed and so became the father of many nations, just as it had been said to him, "So shall your offspring be."¹⁹ Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead—since he was about a hundred years old—and that Sarah's womb was also dead.²⁰ Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God,²¹ being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised. (Rom. 4:18-21)

Face Your Problem

What's the first thing that Abraham does as he exercises his faith? First, he faces his problem. "Without weakening in his faith, he faced the fact that his body was as good as dead--since he was about a hundred years old--and that Sarah's womb was also dead" (Rom. 4:19).¹ What does Abraham do? He faces the problem head on. Abraham takes a good hard look at the problems that he faces.

In Genesis chapter 17, God promises this man that he is going to be the father of many nations. He will be the revered ancestor of not just one little Middle Eastern tribe. No, he's

¹ The *King James Version* gives an opposite translation. "¹⁹And being not weak in faith, he considered *not* his own body now dead . . ." (emphasis added). The *New King James Version* and *The Message* unfortunately continue with that incorrect translation. See the *New American Standard Version* and the *English Standard Version*, which agree with the *New International Version's* translation. Consult Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (London: United Bible Societies, 1971), 510. Metzger examines the manuscript evidence and writes, "Paul does not wish to imply that faith means closing one's eyes to reality, but that Abraham was so strong in faith as to be undaunted by every consideration."

going to be the father of many nations. God even goes so far as to change his name. He had been called Abram which means "exalted father," but now God calls him Abraham, "father of many." It is a more prestigious title. "You're not just Abram. Now you are Abraham!" This is a great promise from God.

But there's a problem. In fact, there are three of them. Paul mentions two of those problems here in verse 19. The first problem is that Abraham is a hundred years old! That's not exactly a minor difficulty. How many one hundred year old men do you see walking around with the baby-wipes in one hand and the diaper bag in the other? It strains the imagination a little, doesn't it? That's the first problem. The second one concerns Abraham's bride. Sarah is a mere ninety years old, but she has never borne any children. Add those two factors together. It's hard to believe that this is couple is now going to start a family.

There's one other problem. God has been taking his own sweet time in fulfilling his promise to Abraham. It's in Genesis 17 that God promises Abraham that he will become the father of many nations, but it is in Genesis 15 that God first tells him that he will have a child. Between Genesis 15 and Genesis 17 fourteen years elapse. If God makes this promise of a child, why doesn't he do something to fulfill it? What's taking God so long?

All those things must have been running through Abraham's mind. Verse 18 begins with the words "against all hope." The *New English Bible* translates it "when hope seemed hopeless." That's the idea. Humanly speaking there's no chance that he and Sarah are going to have a child! So what does Abraham do in that situation? First, he honestly faces the facts. He recognizes the difficulty. He faces the problem.

That's the first part of Red Sea Rule #3. Acknowledge your enemy, or, as I prefer to put it, face your problem. Take a good hard look at it. Faith does not mean shutting your eyes to reality. It doesn't mean pretending that the problems aren't there or that they are just going to magically disappear somehow. That's not the kind of faith that God's Word is talking about. Faith means that you and I face the problem.

I want to emphasize that. Have you ever sensed that some Christian friend of yours is using the idea of faith as an excuse for not dealing with a problem? Maybe that friend confides in you about some kind of health problem. You know that he or she should go and see a doctor to find out what the problem is, but your friend says to you that he or she is going to just trust God with it. "I'm leaving this up to God. After all God is greater than any human doctor!"

Is that faith? All the right words are there. So what do you say in response? Most of us stumble over our words at that point. We don't want to give the impression that trusting God is wrong, do we? The thought goes through our brains that maybe this friend is more godly than we are. We would just rush off to the clinic. But we don't want to reveal our lack of spirituality. So we just smile and kind of nod in half-hearted agreement and don't say anything. But in the back of our minds there lingers that suspicion that something isn't quite right here.

That's why I said earlier that this mistake is so devious. It disguises itself as faith. But it's not! Faith must not be confused with denial. Abraham doesn't try to deny the problem. Abraham faces the problem. No wild flights of fantasy. Abraham takes a good hard look at what is against him.

That's what we need to do too. When we are faced with a problem, we take a good hard look at it. We study it. We evaluate how serious it is. Maybe it is something that can be handled fairly quickly. On the other hand, maybe this is a chronic problem that we are facing. Maybe it is a marriage problem, or perhaps you've gotten into some kind of serious financial problem. To solve it God is going to want you to take a lot of different steps. It will take a lot of hard work. We'd rather avoid all that hard work and just say, "Oh, I'll just trust God with it." But

that's not what faith is. Faith is not a pious excuse for irresponsibility. Please don't confuse faith with denial.

I think of a magazine that we just received here at the church. It's a magazine published by our denomination, the Evangelical Free Church of America. It's called *EFCA Today*. The cover story is titled "Hidden Danger: Sexual Addiction among Church Leaders." It doesn't pull any punches and pretend that men in the Free Church including pastors don't ever struggle with sexual addiction. There's also a short article on women who wrestle with sexual addiction. I'm glad that our denomination chose to devote a whole issue to this problem. Because it is a problem!² It needs to be addressed in a straightforward and direct manner. That's the way that genuine faith operates. That's the first part of Red Sea Rule #3. Acknowledge your enemy, or face your problem

One of the worst things that you can do about sexual addiction is to ignore it or deny it. If you or someone you know is wrestling with sexual addiction, put the first part of Red Sea Rule #3 into action. Acknowledge your enemy. Face your problem.

Fix Your Eyes on the Lord

Denial is a serious and devious mistake. But there is that more obvious mistake, and we do need to think about it too. It's not denial; it's distraction. The second half of Red Sea Rule #3 addresses it. *Acknowledge your enemy, but keep your eyes on the Lord.* Face your problem. Take responsibility for what you can do. But remember to fix your eyes on the Lord. Don't get so wrapped up in what your responsibility that you forget about God. And we are prone to doing that, aren't we?

I chose Psalm 141:8 as a memory verse for this rule. "My eyes are fixed on you, O Sovereign LORD; in you I take refuge." There's the idea. "My eyes are fixed on you." Don't let God out of your sight.

Look again at Abraham's example. "Yet he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God, being fully persuaded that God had power to do what he had promised" (Rom. 4:20-21). Abraham faces the problem, but he focuses on the promise that God had made to him. Once Abraham has come to grips with the problem, he doesn't stop and allow himself to sink into depression. Abraham concentrates on the promises of God and views his problems in light of those promises.

When I compare Abraham's example to the way that I so often live, I see how far short of genuine faith I fall. Abraham "did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God." He did not waver. That standard of faith seems so far beyond my ability. In fact, Abraham's example seems impossible to emulate. Does it seem that way to you too? I want to say, "Why even try? This is beyond my ability! I will never be able to trust God the way that Abraham did!"

Think again about what we read in verses 20 and 21. Those verses describe the overall direction of Abraham's life, not his moment-by-moment existence. If you take the time to go back to Genesis and read about Abraham there, you find that Abraham does waver. He does get distracted. Sometimes he does take his eyes off of the Lord. For example, Abraham has a hard time believing that he and Sarah will ever have a child. He doubts whether God can really pull that one off. So he tries to "help" God. He sleeps with Sarah's servant, Hagar, and has a baby by her (Gen. 16:1-4a). Then he asks God and even pleads with God to accept Hagar's son as the fulfillment of the promise that God had made to him (Gen. 17:18). But God says, "Nothing doing. Don't try to manipulate me and force my hand, Abraham. I will fulfill my promise to you in my own way and in my own time."

² This issue of *EFCA Today* can be accessed at: www.efcatoday.org. It is the Summer 2009 issue.

Aren't we often like Abraham? We have a hard time really trusting God, so we try to "help" him. So often we try to find some shortcut to what God wants for us. "Lord, you know that I've got a lot of bills to pay and not a lot of money. So here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to take all the money I've got and go to the casino. Lord, I am going to trust you to lead me to the right slot machine! I'm trusting you, God!" And God says to us exactly what he said to Abraham, "Nothing doing."

Abraham makes a big mistake with Hagar. He does get distracted. But then he learns from that mistake. When the New Testament looks at the overall direction of his life, it says that "he did not waver through unbelief regarding the promise of God, but was strengthened in his faith and gave glory to God." You and I may make a lot of mistakes like Abraham did, but just like Abraham we can come back to God. We may have been distracted for a while. We may have tried to take some shortcuts in order to "help" God, but there comes a time when we recognize our mistake.

What should we do then? We should do the same thing that Abraham does. Go back and remember the promises of God again. Fix your eyes once again on God and his promises to you as a believer in Christ. "The same God who led you *in* will lead you *out*."³ Don't forget that. If you have been distracted for a while, God will let you start over. Come back to God and his promises.

How can we avoid that tendency of ours to get distracted? How do we make a fresh start? There are several things that we can do. First, we should read the Bible day by day. We need that daily reminder of who God is and what he has promised to do for his people. We also need to come to church every week. It is spiritually beneficial and healthy for us to gather with other believers in Christ. Every time we come together to worship we benefit. Here's another way to avoid distraction. Take the memory cards for this Red Sea Rule study. Memorize the Bible verses on them. Meditate on them. Think about them. Put them into your own words. Think about how they apply to your life and the things that you are facing today. Make them a part of your way of daily thinking. Acknowledge your enemy, but keep your eyes on the Lord. Face your problem, but fix your eyes on the Lord.

Conclusion

If there is one story in the Bible that demonstrates Red Sea Rule #3, it's that famous story of Peter out on the Sea of Galilee. Peter sees Jesus walking on the water, and he asks Jesus if he can come to him out on the water. Peter gets out of the boat and starts walking on the water to Jesus. (Of course, we all know how the story ends. But don't underestimate what Peter does do! He does get out of the boat. None of the other disciples do that. They all stay in the safety of their boat! At least, Peter gets out and tries to exercise his faith!) But then we're told that "when he saw the wind, he was afraid" and began to sink (Matt. 14:30). Peter starts off well, but then he gets distracted.

We can all relate to that story, can't we? Maybe there is a storm whipping around you right now. Everyday you feel those hurricane-force winds blowing against you. God doesn't ask you to deny the power and fury of that storm. He doesn't ask you to pretend that you are not having any problems or that they sometimes get you down. But God does ask that in the midst of the storm that you turn your eyes to Jesus again. Acknowledge your enemy, but keep your eyes on the Lord. "My eyes are fixed on you, O Sovereign LORD; in you I take refuge."

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on June 21, 2009 by Dr. Frederic Martin
expanding on The Red Sea Rules by Robert J. Morgan.

³ Robert J. Morgan, *The Red Sea Rules* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), 6.