

Red Sea Rule 4:

Pray!

Philippians 4:6-7; Psalm 107:1-16; 142:1-7

July 5, 2009

This morning we continue our investigation into how God wants us to face hard times. We're using as our guide this little book titled *The Red Sea Rules: 10 God-Given Strategies for Difficult Times*. The author, Robert Morgan, summarizes ten Biblical principles on what it means to trust God. He breaks faith down into identifiable steps.

I find that so helpful. Sometimes our problems appear to be so gargantuan that trusting God with them is beyond our ability. We make an effort to turn the problem over to God, but we soon find ourselves paralyzed with fear and worry all over again. How do you trust God with difficulties that immediately overwhelm you? I'm so grateful that Robert Morgan breaks faith down into distinct steps that can help us walk with God one day at a time through all of life's challenges.

Let's review the rules that we have looked at so far. Red Sea Rule #1: *Realize that God means for you to be where you are*. The problems that you and I face are not the result of some cosmic mistake. We are facing these issues in our lives by God's appointment and for his purpose. We may not have a clue as to what God's purpose in the situation is, but we can rest assured that God has not abandoned us. He has some purpose for us. That realization shapes our attitudes as we face our trials. Realize that God means for you to be where you are.

Rule #2 also addresses our attitude. *Be more concerned for God's glory than for your relief*. When we find ourselves in trying circumstances, the first question that should come to our minds is not "How can I get out of this mess?" That's the question that we all naturally ask. But we need to train ourselves to ask another question instead: "How can I honor God in this situation?" Jesus is our example. He did not try to escape from his death on the cross. Instead he prayed, "Father, glorify your name!" (John 12:28). If you and I are believers in Jesus Christ and want to be his loyal disciples, then we need to take that same attitude into our trials. "How can I honor God in this situation?" Train yourself to ask that question, and your entire perspective will change.

A couple of weeks ago we thought about Rule #3: *Acknowledge your enemy, but keep your eyes on the Lord*. Take a good hard look at your problem. Don't pretend that it is not there. Faith means that you evaluate your problem carefully and think about what God wants you to do in the situation. We need to be sure that we don't confuse faith with denial. But then we also need to be careful that we don't allow ourselves to be so consumed by our problems that we leave God out of the picture. We can make that mistake too. God wants us to face our problems realistically, but he also wants us to look to him and remember that he has promised to guide us through them. "The same God who led you *in* will lead you *out*."¹ So keep your balance. Acknowledge your enemy, but keep your eyes on the Lord.

Now we come to Rule #4. It flows naturally from this idea of keeping our eyes on the Lord, and it is an easy rule to remember because it is only one word: *Pray!* Have you ever heard that instruction before? I hope so. But do you ever need to be reminded of it? If you are like me, you do. It is a lot easier to worry than it is to pray. I need to be reminded of this simple instruction. How about you? Pray!

Do you ever wonder how prayer works? I wonder about that all the time. Why does God answer some prayers and not others? Lately I've found myself making some requests to God and then saying to God, "Come on, God. Come through on this one!" Sometimes he does come through the way that I have requested. Sometimes he doesn't. I wonder why. Can you understand what I'm talking about?

In *The Red Sea Rules*, Robert Morgan makes an intriguing observation. "There's something about praying with another person that intensifies prayer and sends it to heaven with greater velocity."² I think that idea is right. It's good for us to pray together. God wants us to share our needs and join together in presenting our requests to him. There is something about praying with others that God values. But if you ask me exactly how that works, I cannot give you a satisfactory answer. Does God sit up in heaven and tally up the number of people praying for any one particular thing? Then does he

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

² *Ibid.*, 44.

do the things that get the most votes? Is that how prayer works? I'm quite sure that's not the way God operates. But I cannot tell you exactly how he works either.

I have no hesitancy in admitting to you that I can ask more questions about prayer than I can answer. But here is what I do know from God's Word. God invites his children to pray. The God of the universe who knows everything that is happening to every atom in every star in the farthest galaxy wants to hear from you and me. Think of that. If you're a child of God through faith in Christ, then the Lord of all encourages you and me to tell him all of our needs. He wants to hear from us. Your prayers and my prayers are important to God. Therefore, whether you understand how prayer works or not, pray! When you are stuck in a hard spot and feel like giving up, what should you do? Pray! When you face important decisions but don't know what path to follow, pray! When you're filled with worry about the future, pray! Red Sea Rule #4 is so simple but so important. Pray!

Philippians 4:6-7

Let's take a look at a few places in the Bible in which God encourages us to pray. We'll start with one of those great summary statements. Philippians 4:6-7 is the passage I picked as the memory verse that corresponds to Rule #4. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-7).

There is a lot that could be said about those two verses, but I'd like you to think about just two of the words found in those verses. The first one is *anything*. "Do not be anxious about anything." That's a pretty broad statement! Anything! Anything that frightens you or causes you worry is covered by that instruction. And Paul follows it with the word *everything*. ". . . in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."

You and I can talk to God about anything and everything, and he'll listen. It can be a huge problem or a minor irritation. God is ready to hear from you. So pray!

Psalms 107

Let's look at some examples of how we can put that into practice. Psalm 107 is a poem that is very carefully structured. It starts with 3 verses that tell us to give thanks. Then it provides us with four situations in each of which we are told that the people pray and God answers their prayers. The first situation is described in verses 4 through 9.

Some wandered in desert wastelands,
finding no way to a city where they could settle.
They were hungry and thirsty,
and their lives ebbed away.
Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble,
and he delivered them from their distress. (Ps. 107:4-7)

Notice that in this situation, there is no indication that the people had done anything wrong. They were just in a hard spot. So they prayed, or as the writer of the psalm puts it—"they cried out to the Lord." That's emotional language. They were desperate, so "they cried out to the Lord." And God rescued them.

Look at the second situation in verses 10-16.

Some sat in darkness, in utter darkness,
prisoners suffering in iron chains,
because they rebelled against God's commands
and despised the plans of the Most High.
So he subjected them to bitter labor.
they stumbled, and there was no one to help. (Ps. 107:10-12)

Here is a very different kind of situation. These people had rebelled against God. They were suffering the consequences of their disobedience. But did that mean that God didn't care about them? No. Almost the exact same wording is used to describe what happens.

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress. (Ps. 107:13)

Isn't that good news? God listens to our prayers when we are facing trials. Even if the reason we are having such a hard time is that we have made stupid mistakes, God is still willing to listen to us and to work in our lives. Aren't you glad to hear that? I know I am.

Look a little further into this psalm. The third situation is described in verses 17-22. In verse 19 we find the same words being repeated.

Then they cried to the LORD in their trouble,
and he saved them from their distress.

And the writer delivers the same message to us in verses 23 through 32. Here's another trial that God's people faced. Once again we find the same truth being stated in verse 28.

Then they cried out to the LORD in their trouble,
and he brought them out of their distress.

The psalm ends with this conclusion:

Let all who are wise heed these things
and ponder the loving deeds of the LORD. (Ps. 107:43)

If you're smart, the writer is saying, you'll learn from the experiences of God's people that are described in these four situations. Pray! If you're suffering from something natural like a sickness or if you are suffering because of someone else's cruel action, pray! Even if you are suffering the consequences of your own foolish decisions, God is still ready to hear from you. So put Red Sea Rule #4 into practice. Pray!

Psalm 142

Philippians 4 gives us a promise about prayer. Psalm 107 describes various situations in which we can pray. Psalm 142 gives us an example of how we can pray. Here we find David crying out to the Lord. Let's look at what he says and see if we can learn something from his example. Unlike Psalm 107, this psalm is hardly structured at all. There is no refrain that is repeated over and over again. It's hard to find any clear and logical progression of thought.

It's kind of a messy psalm. David seems to jump all over the place in this poem. When I stop to think about it, I have to admit that this is the same way that I usually pray. When I'm facing a trial and am really worried about something, my prayers are usually pretty messy too. I say one thing to God and then I say something else to him and then I go back and repeat what I have already said. I am so glad that Psalm 142 is in God's Word!

Listen as David talks to God and see if you can identify with what he's saying.

I cry aloud to the LORD;
I lift up my voice to the LORD for mercy.
I pour out before him my complaint;
before him I tell my trouble. (Ps. 142:1-2)

Do you hear the emotion in those words? "I cry aloud . . . I lift up my voice . . ." What would be a modern equivalent? "I yell, 'Hey God!'" Or how about "I pour out"? How might we say that today? "I dump everything on God." Those are strong words. It almost sounds like David is angry with God until we read what David says next.

When my spirit grows faint within me,
it is you who watch over my way. (Ps. 142:3a)

That's a positive statement. It's very short, but it is still positive. David is saying that even when he's down and emotionally exhausted—even then he knows that it is God who knows the way out. "God, it is you who know my way." David is confident in God. But as soon as he says that he once again gets swallowed up in his problem.

In the path where I walk
people have hidden a snare for me.
Look and see, there is no one at my right hand;
no one is concerned for me.
I have no refuge;
no one cares for my life. (Ps. 142:3b-4)

Do you hear the despair in his voice? Here is someone who is scared to death. People are out to get him. And he's lonely. He longs for someone—anyone—to come and be his companion in his fear.

But then David tells us what he actually says to God.

I cry to you, LORD;
I say, "You are my refuge,
my portion in the land of the living." (Ps. 142:5)

That's another positive statement. "God, you are my refuge. I believe that God! That's why I'm praying to you. I do believe that you are my refuge." But as soon as he says that he goes back once again to describe the turmoil that churns up within him.

Listen to my cry,
for I am in desperate need;
rescue me from those who pursue me,
for they are too strong for me. (Ps. 142:6)

Here for the first time in the whole psalm he actually asks God for something. "Rescue me." That's the whole request. He doesn't go into great detail. "God, please rescue me!"

In verse 7 he repeats the request, and then he expresses his hope for the future.

Set me free from my prison,
that I may praise your name.
Then the righteous will gather about me
because of your goodness to me. (Ps. 142:7)

David looks to the future and hopes that there will come a time when he can get together with other people who love God. If that happens, he will be glad to tell them about how God has been good to him and rescued him. The poem does end on a note of hope, but in light of what he has said earlier it doesn't come across to me as a real strong and stirring statement of hope.

There's Psalm 142. What a roller coaster ride this guy is on! He goes up and down and up and down. He *is* relying on God. He *does* have hope for the future. That comes across. But you can tell as you read this psalm that even when he declares his faith in God he's still feeling the full force of his worries and his fears.

Conclusion

What do we learn from Philippians 4:6-7 and these two psalms? Pray! Talk to God about what you're thinking and feeling. You can be as emotional as you want with God. Pour out your heart to him. You don't need to hold anything back. Your prayer doesn't have to be eloquent. It's OK to pray messy prayers! Just pray! When you make your requests to God, you don't have to go into great detail. God really does not need our diagnosis of the situation. He knows what's going on. He knows what's best for us. All we really need to say is what David says in Psalm 142. "God, please rescue me."

So pray! That's Red Sea Rule #4. Pray! You can go on at length if you want. God is more than willing to listen. Or you can pray a real short prayer. That's OK too. Just pray. Pray emotionally. Pray honestly. Pray through all your ups and downs. Just be sure to pray.