

Red Sea Rule 5:

Stay calm and confident, and give God time to work.

Psalm 130:1-8

July 26, 2009

Seven weeks ago today I received a phone call from my cousin who lives in Indianapolis. He called to tell me that early that morning his daughter had died. Shelby was a bright and vivacious young woman. She was twenty years old and a junior in college. To all appearances she was in excellent health. There had been no hint of any serious health problem. But early that Sunday morning she died in her sleep from what turned out to be some kind of heart irregularity.

Shelby's story has made me do a lot of thinking. First, it's a reminder that none of us know how long we're going to live. None of us! No matter what age we are at, we need to be prepared for eternity. I need to be direct: Are you prepared to die? Are you trusting in Jesus Christ as your Lord? Are you counting on him and his death and resurrection to make you acceptable to God? Please don't put that decision off. You don't know how long you have to live.

Over the last seven weeks I have been thinking about that a lot. But I have not just been thinking about death and eternity. I've also been thinking about life and faith. How do you go on living when out of the blue your twenty-year-old daughter dies? How do you go on living when that kind of tragedy invades your life?

Life is hard. If we wanted to this morning, I'm sure that we could go around this room and share all kinds of struggles. Each and every one of us is facing some kind of difficulty. Life always presents us with challenges. That's why this summer we are concentrating on how to trust God in difficult times. We're using this little book by Robert Morgan called *The Red Sea Rules*. I find this book so helpful in thinking through what it actually means to live by faith.

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.* Of all the rules, this is the one that people have asked me about the most because it can be so easily misunderstood. It does not mean that everything that happens in life is pleasant or good. That's not the point at all! Evil happens. But even in the midst of horrendous evil, God has not abandoned his people. As strange as it may initially sound, the problems that you and I face have come into our lives by God's appointment and for his purpose. We may not understand God's purpose, but we can be assured that God is still with us. It is with that attitude of that we face our trials and difficulties.

Rule #2: *Be more concerned for God's glory than for your relief.* The first question that should come to our minds is not "How can I get out of this mess?" We need to train ourselves to ask instead: "How can I honor God in this situation?"

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. But be careful that you don't allow yourself to be so consumed by your problem that you forget about God himself.

Rule #4. It's the shortest one. *Pray!*

Now we come to Rule #5: *Stay calm and confident, and give God time to work.*¹

I want you to know that I do not like this rule! I don't like anything about it. *Stay calm.* That does not come naturally to me. I find it much easier to panic! *Stay calm and confident.* Confident? But worry comes rushing in without me even giving it any thought. *And give God time to work.* That's the hardest part of this rule. Why does God need *me* to give *him* any time anyway? Hasn't he been around a lot longer than I have? And after I die, won't he still be around? Doesn't he rule over time and eternity? So why does he want *me* to give *him* time to accomplish his purposes?

I do not like this Rule #5. *Stay calm and confident, and give God time to work.* I don't like it, but I also know that I need to learn this rule and I need to put this rule into practice in my life.

¹ Robert J. Morgan, *The Red Sea Rules* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), 49.

God is Not in a Hurry

You don't need to read very far into God's Word to learn that God is not in a hurry. In Genesis, the first book of the Bible, we read how God promises Abraham and Sarah a baby. But fifteen years pass before they have that baby (Gen. 16:16; 17:1). Fifteen years! What took God so long?

Think about the story of God rescuing the Israelites from their slavery in Egypt and bringing them through the Red Sea. It's an inspiring story of how God parts the waters and leads the people out. But it's also true that the Israelites have been enslaved by Pharaoh for at least eighty years before God has Moses lead them out (Exod. 7:7). Why does God wait that long before he rescues his people?

We find the same thing in the New Testament. Jesus hears that his good friend, Lazarus, is sick. Lazarus's sisters, Mary and Martha, send word to Jesus asking him to come. So what does Jesus do? He stays where he is for two more days, and then he comes. By the time he arrives, Lazarus is dead (John 11:1-6).

We could give other examples as well, but just those three demonstrate that God does not work according to our timetable. He is just not in the same hurry that we are. And sometimes that drives us nuts, doesn't it?

It is a human tendency to be impatient and to want God to hurry up. That's been true for all time, but we, modern Americans, have an even more difficult time accepting this truth than previous generations. We live in an age of fast food and digital cameras and cell phones. We email and text message and twitter. We have learned to expect instantaneous access to what is happening around the world. News is available to us over the internet and on TV twenty-four hours a day seven days a week. We, twenty-first century Americans, are in a hurry like no generation before us. But God hasn't changed. You cannot download a new deity. There is no upgrade for God. God still works according to his own timetable, not ours.

We Need to Learn How to Wait

We need to learn how to wait. Psalm 130:5 says, "I wait for the Lord . . . My soul waits for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning." There's an example that is given to us to follow. Psalm 27:14 puts it in the form of an instruction: "Wait for the LORD; be strong and take heart and wait for the LORD."

Why do we have to do that? Why does God tell us to wait for him? We could explore that question at some length, but let's think of just one reason. There is nothing like waiting that humbles us. When you are waiting for something, there isn't anything that you can do, is there? You're expecting some important package to be delivered to you. What can you do to make it arrive earlier? Nothing. You have to wait. Maybe you can track your package using the latest computer technology. You can find out where it is, but that doesn't make it get to you any sooner. You still have to wait for it to arrive. Waiting humbles us. God makes us wait so that we are forced to grapple with how limited we human beings really are. We like to think of ourselves as "empowered." Isn't that one of the trendy words of our day? "People need to feel empowered!" But God makes us wait so that we realize how little power we really have. God humbles us so that we learn how dependent on him we truly are. So whether we like Rule #5 or not, we'd need to learn to live by it. *Stay calm and confident, and give God time to work.*

How Can We Persevere?

How do you do that? When you and I feel overwhelmed by worry and on the verge of panicking, how can we stay calm and confident while we wait on God to do his work? Let me put it in biblical terminology: How can you and I learn to persevere? The Bible has a lot of things to say about perseverance. Think of the memory verse that goes along with Red Sea Rule #5. "So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised" (Heb. 10:35-36). How can you and I learn to persevere?

Can you think of any examples of perseverance? Whenever I think of perseverance, I think of William Carey. He was the first modern missionary to go to India. He sailed there from England in

1793, and he stayed in India for forty years straight. He never took a furlough to go back to England. While he was there, his five-year-old son died. His wife became mentally deranged. He preached for seven years before even one person was converted. One time a fire swept through his building, and he lost years and years of translation work. Someone asked him what the key to his ministry was. He said, "I can plod. I can persevere in any definite pursuit. To this I owe everything."² There was the key. He could plod. When he felt like giving up, he didn't do anything dramatic. He would just put one foot in front of the other and kept moving in the right direction. He didn't get anywhere quickly, but he always kept moving toward his goal. He could plod. That's what we need to learn to do. Stay calm and confident, and give God time to work. Persevere! Learn to plod!

I will readily admit to you that I have not mastered the practice of perseverance. But here are four things that I've found helpful. Number 1: *Remember God*. Don't let yourself lose sight of God. I know that sounds obvious, but don't you find it easy to forget God as you move through your daily activities? Even as a pastor, I forget God. I can get so wrapped up in the small things that make up church life that I forget about God. That may come as a surprise to you, but it's true.

I find that I have to make a conscious and deliberate effort to read and think about some part of God's Word every day. It doesn't happen automatically. I repeat to myself some Bible promise that I have memorized. I often find myself thinking of what God said to Joshua in the Old Testament. "I will never leave you or forsake you" (Deut. 31:6, 8; Josh. 1:5). In the New Testament that promise is given to all of us who are trusting in Christ. Hebrews 13:5 says, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." It's just one simple sentence, but I need to be reminded of it again and again. "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." Remember God. Make a conscious and deliberate to remember his promises.

Here's a second thing that helps me persevere. *Trust God-- for one hour at a time*. Sometimes I find that it's asking too much for me to trust God with an indefinite amount of time. I know that I should be able to do that, but I can't. Sooner or later I snatch the problem back from God and start to worry about it all over again. So I have to discipline myself. I say to God, "Lord, I'm really finding it hard to trust you with this thing. I'm really having a hard time waiting for your solution to my problem. So here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to turn this problem over to you for the next hour. I think, God, that for the next sixty minutes I can leave this problem to you. So I'm going to put it into your hands, and I'm going to turn my attention to something else." When that hour is up, I try to turn it over to him for another hour.

I'm a real giant of the faith, aren't I? But that's what I do. Try it out yourself. See if it works for you. Trust God--for one hour at a time.

Here's a third suggestion for you. *Thank God*. Remember God. Trust God—for one hour at a time. Now spend some time thanking God. That's hard to do when you're depressed or worried. I know that. That's my experience too. At first nothing comes to mind that you can be thankful for. Nothing! But when you work at it, you can always find something to thank God for. It's OK to start with something really small. "Thank you, God, for the breakfast I ate this morning. It was the same old stuff that I eat every morning, but at least I had something to eat. Thank you, God." Then keep working at it. "Thank you, God, that I've got clothes to wear. They're not fashionable, but they do a pretty good job at hiding the fat."

All of us have things that we can be thankful for. Decide to be thankful. Consciously giving thanks to God even when you don't feel very grateful is one of the most important elements of perseverance. If you train yourself to give thanks, you'll find that you'll be more calm and more confident while you are waiting for God to work.

Remember God—and his promises. Trust God—for one hour at a time. Thank God—even when you don't feel like it. And here's a fourth element to perseverance and waiting upon the Lord. *Obey God*.

² Kellsye M. Finnie, *William Carey: Missionary Pioneer* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1986), 25.

I once heard someone describe sin as trying to find a shortcut to something that is good. I think that's a pretty good description. Sin doesn't necessarily mean that you are actively pursuing something that is bad. You may very well be seeking after something that's good in and of itself. The sin enters in when you try to take hold of that good thing in the wrong way.

Suppose you're looking for a job. You know that it is God's will for you to work and earn a living. Having a job is a good thing, isn't it? But when you find yourself looking and looking and looking still more, you can easily find yourself saying, "Maybe I'll rework my résumé. I'll add just a few things. No, I haven't really done all those things. But I've got to get a job! Other people pad their résumés, so what would be wrong with me doing it too? God will understand!—won't he?" Can you see yourself thinking that way?

What are you doing when you reason with yourself that way? You are after something good, but you're trying to find a shortcut to that good thing. That's where you and I need to be so careful. That's where the sin comes in. Watch out! That is not a sign of staying calm and confident. Make sure that you obey God. Don't take any shortcuts—even when it's tough.

Whenever I think about obedience, I think back to a story that Chuck Colson told in his book titled *Loving God*. In that book he gives an outstanding example of how obedience is a way of demonstrating faith. He tells the story of a Christian girl named Patti who was leading a double life. She went to church and worked with the youth group, but she also smoked dope and slept with the man who lived in the apartment below her. Then she got pregnant.

Being pregnant ripped through the hypocrisy of my double life. I had been meaning to "get right with God," but I kept slipping back. Now I couldn't live a nice clean Christian life like all those church people.

I felt the only answer was to wipe the slate clean. I would get an abortion; no one in the church would ever know.

. . . I was terrified, but my boyfriend was adamant. My sister was furious with me for being so stupid as to get pregnant. . . . My mother called me: "If you don't get an abortion, I don't want to see you while you're pregnant. Your life will be ruined and you'll deserve it."

. . . I was looking out my bedroom window one night when I thought clearly for the first time in weeks. I realized I either believed this Christianity or I didn't believe it. And if I believed in Christ, then I couldn't do this. *God is real*, I thought, *even if I've never lived like He is*.

That decision was a point of no return. I put my faith in the God of the Bible, not the God I had made up in my head. I was still everything I never wanted to be—pregnant, alone, deserted by family, and rejected by the one I had loved. Yet for the first time in my life I was really peaceful, because I knew for the first time I was being obedient.

When I went to an obstetrician and told him of my decision to have the baby and why I had made that choice, he refused to charge me for the pre-natal care and delivery. I confessed my double life to the church, and through the support of Christians was able to move away from my old friends to an apartment of my own. . . .

I had a beautiful baby girl and named her Sarah. She was placed with a childless Christian couple, and we all felt God's hand in the decision.

. . . that's why I praise God . . . I thought in the depths of my despair that my life was ruined, but I knew I had to at least be obedient in taking responsibility for my sin. But today, because of that very despair and obedience, I have . . . what I was searching for so desperately before—peace with God.³

There is Red Sea Rule #5. *Stay calm and confident*. Remember God—and his promises. Trust God—for one hour at a time. Thank God—even when you don't feel like it. Obey God—even when it's tough. Then you will be able to *give God time to work*.

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on July 26, 2009 by Dr. Frederic Martin
expanding on The Red Sea Rules by Robert J. Morgan.

³ Charles Colson, *Loving God*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1983), 138-139.