

## Red Sea Rule 6:

*When unsure, just take the next logical step by faith.*

Ecclesiastes 11:4-6

August 2, 2009

Ever since I first trusted in Jesus as Lord, I have wondered what it looks like to “live by faith.” Have you ever wondered about that? What does it mean to “live by faith”? If you were given the opportunity to follow someone around who genuinely “lived by faith,” what would that person’s life look like? How would she make decisions about to do day-in and day-out? Would he ever put money in a savings account or buy insurance? What does a life of faith look like?

What does it mean to “live by faith”? That really is the question that we are studying this summer. We’re using this little book by Robert Morgan titled *The Red Sea Rules*. The cover of it says that it provides “10 God-given strategies for difficult times.” I think it teaches more than that though. I think that it wonderfully summarizes some Biblical principles that apply to all times, not just difficult ones. This book has a lot to teach us about what it means to “live by faith.”

### Counterfeits for Faith

This morning I want us to start by thinking about two counterfeits for genuine faith. These are ways of approaching life that look a lot like faith, but I am convinced that they are not the genuine article.

The first counterfeit is not as common as the second one, but we do run across it from time to time. So we need to identify it. I should warn you that this counterfeit is often honored and celebrated by Christians. We hear stories about other Christians who live this way, and we often hold those Christians in awe. This first counterfeit is very close to genuine faith. It is! But it is just close enough to be terribly misleading.

I am talking about the counterfeit called *presumption*. You presume that God will do something for you that he has never promised to do for you. Presumption often takes the form of telling God what you want him to do, and then you tell him that you are counting on him and expecting him to fulfill your desires.

A couple of years ago I came across a remarkably frank description of this counterfeit for faith that is called presumption. I have never read anything else that is quite as candid and honest as this. It comes from a book by Tim Stafford that’s titled *Surprised by Jesus*.

For some years I belonged to a Christian group that had a considerable history of taking risks for God. All through the organization you could hear stories, told with a shake-your-head pride, of evangelists who had launched into the unknown, trusting God to provide. One man felt called to preach the gospel in China, but he had no money to get there. What to do? He bought a one-way ticket to Hawaii, which was all he could afford. When he reached Honolulu, he found a way to the Philippines. From there, God provided a plane ride to China, where he had a wonderful time of ministry.

The group took that as its ideal. If you wanted to hold a rally, you rented an auditorium. God would provide the money to pay. You could hire staff, rent offices, plan events, invite speakers and musicians, do almost anything bold and brash for the gospel. God would provide.

In fact, God often did provide. The stories about miracle faith were intoxicating. The group developed a habit of relying on last-minute miracles. They loved the adrenaline rush that came from daring approaches and eleventh-hour rescues. They believed sincerely that they were relying on God. They were not so quick to admit that they relied equally on kindly donors who wouldn’t let well-meaning, enthusiastic young Christians founder.

Eventually those donors tired of bailing out rash plans. So did the evangelists’ families—for all too often children and spouses were left to rely on miracles as well. Family breakdowns and financial meltdowns happened frequently. Miracle faith had an addictive quality. . . .

“Do not put the Lord your God to the test.” [Psalm Deut. 6:16; Matt.4:7.] Ultimatums, fleeces, time limits—they may pose as earnest exercises in prayer, but they are often fueled by ego, not faith. “God, if you are real, heal my mother of cancer.” Such a prayer may be an earnest plea for God to help a beloved parent. Very subtly, however, it may become a test of

whether God is willing to perform in the way we demand. We set the test and expect God to meet it. That puts us in control of God rather than the other way around.<sup>1</sup>

As I said before, this counterfeit called presumption is close to genuine faith. Real faith does involve taking a risks! If nobody ever risked anything for the kingdom of God—if all of us demanded that God tell us precisely how all of our hopes and plans were going to work out, then God’s purposes for this world would never move forward. Of course, there is an element of risk involved in faith! But presuming that you can dream up any idea or take any kind of risk at all and that God will automatically fulfill your desire if you have enough faith, that’s not true. That’s a counterfeit for genuine faith.

Let’s think about a second counterfeit for faith. This one is much more common. Most of us have probably fallen for it more than once. So we need to think about this one at more length. It’s the counterfeit called *paralysis*.

Out of the blue something bad hits us, and we freeze. We don’t know what to do. The problem is just too huge. We’re totally overwhelmed by it, and we don’t have a clue what to do about it. So we don’t do anything. Why should we? The problem is too big! Nothing is going to help. We might as well just wave the white flag and surrender! That is paralysis.

Paralysis can disguise itself so that it does look like faith. Someone is talking to you about making a decision about her future. She says, “Oh, there are too many options out there. I don’t know if I should apply for school or look for a job. My cousin down in Texas thinks that I should move down there and try something entirely new. I don’t know what to do, so I’m just going to wait for God to open up the right door for me. I’m sure that he will make his plans crystal clear for me if I just pray about it enough.” That sounds like faith, doesn’t it? Here is a person who is leaving it all up to God. Isn’t that good?

### Biblical Examples of Faith

Let’s think about some events that occur in the Bible. Think about the Red Sea. God divides the waters of the Red Sea so the Israelites can walk through it and escape from Pharaoh. But in Exodus 14 God also instructs Moses to raise his staff above the water (Exod. 14:16). Only when Moses does that, do the waters part. Obviously the parting of the Red Sea is a miracle that only God can pull off. Yet Moses also has a part to play in it.

Think about another famous story from the Old Testament. The walls of Jericho “come a tumbling down.” Again it is obviously a miracle. But before God performs that miracle, he tells the Israelites that they need to march around the city (Josh. 6:3-4). God performs the miracle, but the Israelites have some things that they need to do too.

Consider one more Old Testament account. This one is not as well known as the Red Sea or the battle of Jericho, but perhaps it is even more instructive. In Nehemiah 4 the Jews are rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem. The nations who live around them, however, don’t want them to make Jerusalem into a strong city again. So they threaten to attack the Jews. Nehemiah says, “But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat” (Neh. 4:9). I love the example of Nehemiah. Nehemiah 4:9 is a simple little verse, but it teaches us an important lesson. They pray to God. They realize that they need his help if they are not going to be wiped out by their enemies, but they also do what they can in the circumstances. They don’t pray to God and then go take a nap! No, they pray to God and post a guard.

There are the Red Sea Rules in action. Rule #4: *Pray!* That’s what Nehemiah has the people do. Rule #5 comes next. *Stay calm and confident, and give God time to work.* But what do you do while you are waiting to see what God is going to do? Red Sea Rule #6: *When unsure, just take the next logical step by faith.*<sup>2</sup> What is the next logical thing for Nehemiah and the people to do? Post a guard. Send out the troops. Don’t be paralyzed by fear. Stay alert and watch out for the enemy.

Sometimes you hear people say, “God helps those who help themselves.” I don’t like that little proverb. Usually when people recite it, what they mean is that God isn’t going to do anything for you so you had better take control of the situation for yourself. That is certainly not a Christian idea. But if you

---

<sup>1</sup> Tim Stafford, *Surprised by Jesus* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2008), 62-63.

<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Morgan, *The Red Sea Rules* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), 57.

take the statement strictly at face value, it does contain a certain element of truth. When you and I are facing difficult times, God does expect us to do what we can do. It is not a lack of faith to work hard at solving your problems. Trusting God does not mean that you do nothing. In fact, just the opposite is true. Trusting God means that you do what you can do believing that God will accomplish his purposes through your actions. Here's another way of putting it: Faith does not reject the *use* of human resources, only *confidence* in them.<sup>3</sup> That is a good summary statement. There is a key difference using human resources and placing your total confidence in them.

Living by faith means that you say, "I'm going to do what I can do, but ultimately my confidence is what God is going to do." Your actions may seem small and insignificant in light of the totality of the problem that you face. You may very well wonder how you can possibly do anything that can change the situation. The problem is so huge why you should try to do anything at all? That's where faith enters in. Do what you can do no matter how small and insignificant it may be, and then trust God that he will take the little that you do and accomplish his purpose through it.

That's what Red Sea Rule #6 is all about. *When unsure, just take the next logical step by faith.*

The Bible verses that I've suggested you memorize to cement this principle in your mind come from Ecclesiastes 11.

Whoever watches the wind will not plant;  
    whoever looks at the clouds will not reap. . . .  
Sow your seed in the morning,  
    and at evening let your hands not be idle.  
for you do not know which will succeed,  
    whether this or that,  
    or whether both will do equally well. (Eccl. 11:4,6)

A farmer never knows what the weather is going to do. Maybe a big windstorm is going to come up and blow all the seed away. Maybe it's going to rain, and the farmer won't be able to get the crops in. A farmer doesn't know what the future holds, so what should that farmer do? Nothing? No! "Sow your seed in the morning, and at evening let your hands not be idle." A modern paraphrase could put it this way: "Go to work in the morning, and don't be a couch potato at night!" Why? Because you don't know how God is going to use your actions. "You do not know which will succeed, whether this or that, or whether both will do equally well." Do what you can do, and leave the results up to God. That's Rule #6: *When unsure, just take the next logical step by faith.*

### The Example of Hudson Taylor

I asked at the beginning of this sermon what "living by faith" looks like. If you could find someone who "lived by faith," what would that person's life look like? If there is one person who demonstrates to me what "living by faith" really means, it is Hudson Taylor. He was the great and famous missionary who started the China Inland Mission. God used him and that mission organization in a mighty way to bring the good news of Christ to China. The reason I pick Hudson Taylor is not because he was a missionary. You don't have to be a missionary to "live by faith." I pick Taylor because he was so human. We should never romanticize our Christian leaders. They all have their weaknesses and their faults. There were people in the China Inland Mission who were relentlessly critical of Hudson Taylor. He went through some severe bouts of discouragement. But Taylor did understand what it means to "live by faith."

One day the missionaries were holding a day of prayer for the needs of the mission, and Hudson Taylor was leading the meeting. In the middle of the meeting a nurse rushed into the room holding a child that she had just stopped breathing. She called to him asking for help. He rushed over to the door where she was standing and took the child. As he was doing that, one of the missionaries said to him, "Don't you think you should pray for the child?" Taylor shouted back, "Yes, pray! While I work!"<sup>4</sup> Taylor believed in the importance of prayer, but he also knew that there was a time to pray and a time to work.

Later on some new missionaries arrived in China, and they started to study the Chinese language so that they could communicate with the people. But they soon discovered that learning Chinese was

---

<sup>3</sup> Ronald Dunn, *The Faith Crisis* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1984), 115.

<sup>4</sup> Roger Steer, *Hudson Taylor: A Man in Christ* (Singapore: Overseas Missionary Fellowship, 1990), 271.

hard and tedious. So they decided to pray and ask God for the gift of speaking in tongues (a God-given ability to speak in a foreign language) so that they could talk to the Chinese. They convinced some other missionaries who were in the middle of their language study to do the same. Hudson Taylor was by this time a wise and experienced missionary. When he heard about what they were suggesting, he immediately dismissed their prayers as a pious fraud. He told them that if he could put the Chinese language into their brains with one wave of his hand, he wouldn't do it. He knew that the hard work of learning Chinese was going to teach them things that they could not learn otherwise.<sup>5</sup>

My favorite story about Hudson Taylor took place here in the United States. He was traveling through the States in order to recruit new missionaries for the China Inland Mission. He was staying with a man named Henry Frost. It came time to plan out the meetings. Frost was curious to see how this godly man would receive guidance from the Lord. This was going to be a wonderful opportunity to learn about how faith works. So he watched every move that the famous missionary made.

First, Taylor suggested that they pray. So they did. Then Hudson Taylor turned to Henry Frost and said, "Do you have any train schedules?" Frost was a little surprised by that request. It didn't sound very spiritual. What's spiritual about train schedules? But he got the train schedules out. Then Taylor asked him if he had any maps. Again Frost was not terribly impressed by that, but he went and got a map. Then the two men sat at the table and used the map to plan out where they should go, and they used the train schedules to plan out how they could make all the connections between the cities.

Frost was at first a little disappointed by the whole experience. He had expected so much more from this great man of God. But later he realized that he had indeed learned a valuable lesson about faith.<sup>6</sup> Faith is not always dramatic. Faith often means that you simply do the next logical thing.

*When unsure, just take the next logical step by faith.*

#### Living by Faith

Apply that principle to your life. You are facing some problem or some decision. You want to exercise your faith and trust God with it. What should you do? Apply the Red Sea Rules. Rule #1: *Realize that God means for you to be where you are.* "OK, God, you have some purpose for me in this trial. I don't understand it, but I'm not going to go around grumbling about it all the time. I believe that I am here by your appointment and for your purpose." Rule #2: *Be more concerned for God's glory than for your relief.* "God, I want to honor you through this thing. Please help me to do that." Rule #3: *Acknowledge your enemy, but keep your eyes on the Lord.* You're not going to pretend that you don't have this problem. You're going to take a good hard look at it and think about what needs to be done. But you're not going to become so consumed with your problem that you forget about God. That's a careful balancing act. Take a good hard look at your problem, but keep your eyes fixed on the Lord. Rule #4: *Pray!* Rule #5: *Stay calm and confident, and give God time to work.* Don't panic. Don't make any rash decisions. And then you come to Rule #6: *When unsure, just take the next logical step by faith.*

If your problem is that you are out of work, you need to go and apply for some jobs. That's not fun, and it doesn't sound terribly spiritual, but that's what you need to do. If you're behind in your school assignments, you need to turn off the TV and hit the books. If you're single and lonely, you need to get your courage up and try out some group activities. If you're married and lonely, maybe you need to go with your spouse to talk to someone about your relationship. If you're sick and worried about your health, you need to go see the doctor. Don't put it off. Go do it! There are no guarantees that any of those things are going to lead the way out of your problem. That's true. But that is still what God wants you to do. *When unsure, just take the next logical step by faith.*

There's old Chinese proverb that goes like this: "The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second best time is now." Don't waste your time regretting the past. Don't allow yourself to become paralyzed by past mistakes. Don't dream about what might happen in the future. Go do what you can do *right now*, and leave the results up to God.

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji on August 2, 2009  
by Dr. Frederic Martin expanding on The Red Sea Rules by Robert J. Morgan.

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 288.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 309-310.