

Red Sea Rule 7:

Envision God's enveloping presence.

Psalm 23

August 9, 2009

One of the best-known and most cherished parts of the whole Bible has got to be Psalm 23. Wouldn't you agree with that? But why is Psalm 23 such a favorite?

I think part of the reason is sentimental. Many of us first became acquainted with Psalm 23 when we were young, and we have heard it recited countless times since then. Maybe you think back to your grandmother's funeral, and—sure enough—the pastor read Psalm 23. This is one of those passages from the Bible that evokes all kinds of memories. That's part of the reason why we know and love Psalm 23.

But there is something more about this psalm than mere sentiment and emotion, isn't there? Psalm 23 is intensely personal.

The LORD is *my* shepherd, *I* lack nothing.
He makes *me* lie down in green pastures,
he leads *me* beside quiet waters,
he refreshes *my* soul. (Ps. 23:1-3a emphasis added)

How could this poem be made any more personal than that? David is obviously expressing his own rich experience with God.

Even though I walk
through the darkest valley,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me (Ps. 23:4ab emphasis added)

That says it all, doesn't it? "For you are with me." That's why I can face anything. When I know, God, that you're with me, that's when I know that I can hang in there and that I can make it. "For you are with me."

There is nothing that is more comforting and more heartening than to know deep within your own soul that God is with you. You may not know anything else. You may not have a clue as to why God is allowing this trial to come into your life. You may not be able in your wildest imagination to conceive of any way that God can bring anything good out of the circumstances in which you find yourself. But if you know that God is with you, it makes all the difference in the world. To have that assurance of God's presence in your life—that's what keeps you going.

I think of a woman who years ago went through some severe trials. Afterwards she made this comment to me: "I understand God less, but I love him more." The trials she had endured still baffled her, but through them she had grown in her experience of God's love.

That experience of God's presence is what we want to think about his morning. We're continuing in our study of the Biblical principles that are summarized so concisely for us in *The Red Sea Rules*. We've covered the first six rules or principles about how to live by faith. This morning we come to Rule #7: *Envision God's enveloping presence*.¹ The memory verse that I chose to go along with it is James 4:8. "Come near to God and he will come near to you." As we seek God's presence, he does make himself known to us. So *envision God's enveloping presence*.

If I had written *The Red Sea Rules*, I think that I would have phrased this rule a little differently. To me the word *envision* connotes the idea of imagining that something is true. If we are believers in Christ, we don't have to pretend that God is with us in difficulties. He really is present! So I think that I would have put it some other way. *Cultivate God's presence*. Or *practice God's presence*. Or I think that maybe I would have put it this way: *Learn to rest in God's*

¹ Robert J. Morgan, *The Red Sea Rules* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), 69.

embrace. It doesn't really make any difference how we phrase it. How would you put it into your own words so that it is meaningful to you? However you choose to express the idea, the challenge comes in learning how to put it into practice. *Envision—cultivate—practice God's enveloping presence*. Learn to rest in God's embrace.

How do we do that? How can we learn to rest and enjoy his presence? The author of *The Red Sea Rules* makes four suggestions, and I also want to give four instructions to you.

Make sure that you are with God

Here is my first one, and it's the most important one. *Make sure that you are with God*. Before we start thinking about whether God is with us or "on our side," we need to make sure that we are "on his side." A lot of people try to use God. In fact, we have probably all done it at one time or another. We get into a tight spot, and we can't see any way out of it. So we turn to God for help. But after he has gotten us through that crisis, we gradually start to neglect him, or maybe we even push him away. In effect, we say to God, "I've gotten what I wanted from you. So you can leave me alone now. When I need you, I know where to find you." No, we would never be so blatant as to put it that way, but it is easy to treat God in that manner.

That is not the kind of faith that we read about in the Bible. That is a counterfeit faith! Genuine Biblical faith means saying to God, "God, I am yours. I am giving up on myself. I'm giving up on trying to make myself acceptable to you. I know that I will never be able to do that. So from now on I'm counting on your Son Jesus to make me acceptable to you. I am counting on him from now on to do for me what I can't do for myself. God, I am surrendering myself to you—not just for the bad times but also for the good times too, God. I'm yours from now on no matter what happens."

Have you ever said that to God? Don't play games with God. Don't try to use God. Before you start looking for some kind of assurance that God is with you, please make sure that you are with him by surrendering yourself to his Son Jesus. When it comes to experiencing God's presence in your life, that is where it all starts.

Remind yourself that God is with you

Let's assume that you have done that. You have trusted in Jesus as your Lord, what do you do next in order to envision God's presence and make his presence something that changes the way you face life? Here's my second instruction. *Remind yourself that God is with you*. I know that sounds simple, but it's crucial that we understand and take this step. Remind yourself that God is with you.

There will be times when you do not feel God's presence. Don't be surprised at that. Don't think that something is wrong with you when that happens to you. If you read through the Old Testament book of Psalms, you will find that there are many times when the writers wonder whether God is with them or not (Ps. 6:3; 10:1; 13:1-2; 22:1-2; 42:1-2; 44:1-26; 74:1; 88:1-18; 89:1-52). So don't be caught off guard when you feel that way. When that happens (and it will sooner or later), that's when you need to take this crucial second step and remind yourself that God truly is with you whether you feel it or not.

It's good to have some Bible verses memorized so that you can repeat them to yourself when you are in doubt about God's presence. Psalm 23 contains a lot of good verses to memorize. "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me" (Ps. 23:4). When I'm spiritually down and wondering if God has abandoned me, I like to repeat that verse. "Hey, Fred, listen up. You may not feel anything, but God says that even if you were facing death itself you wouldn't need to be afraid because he promises to be with you. That is true, Fred, whether you feel it or not." I find that I often need to preach sermons like that to myself. I need to remind myself of what God says is true.

I also find it helpful to think about certain pictures or images that we find in God's Word. The Bible frequently refers to God as a rock. Psalm 18:2 says, "The Lord is my rock, my fortress and my deliverer; my God is my rock, in whom I take refuge." I like to think of God as a rock or as a mountain. What is a mountain but a big rock? Maybe the reason that I like to think of God as a rock is that I'm from Indiana. Indiana is not known for its majestic mountain ranges. We used to

joke that the highest point in Indiana was a highway overpass north of Indianapolis. When I was sixteen, I had the opportunity to spend a month in Colorado, and I loved to just look at the mountains. Storms would roll in and clouds would cover the mountains, so that you couldn't see them. But when the weather cleared, the mountains were still there. I used to imagine people looking at those mountains a hundred or two hundred or three hundred years before I ever laid eyes on them. They saw the same mountains I did. They hadn't changed. There may have been some forest fires that had devoured all the vegetation, but the mountains—those huge rocks—were still there. "My God is my rock in whom I take refuge." He's always there. He doesn't change. I need to be reminded of that Rock (Ps. 18:46).

That's the second step. First, make sure that you are with God. Second remind yourself that God is with you.

Thank God that he is with you

Then as soon as you have done that second step, put into practice a third instruction. *Thank God that he is with you.* The best way to make one of God's truths a part of your daily thinking is to talk to God about it. "God, your Word says that you are with me. So thank you that you are here with me right now." Thank him. You may want to say that you don't feel his presence. Tell God that if you want. But then tell him that you know from his Word that he is with you, and that's why you are thanking him. "Thank you, God, that whether I feel anything at all, you are with me."

First, make sure that you are with God. Surrender your life to Jesus Christ. Then remind yourself that God is with you. As soon as you do that, put into practice the third instruction: Thank God that he is with you.

Pray to the God who is with you

Then there's a fourth instruction that follows logically from that third one. *Pray to the God who is with you.* God is with you, so talk to him. Make it a regular habit of talking to him. Pray short prayers to him. When something good happens, just say, "Thank you, Lord." When something not so good happens, pray another short prayer. "Lord, please help me here." Get into the habit of praying like that.

Here's something else for you to consider. In Psalm 92:2 the writer speaks to God and says that it is good "to proclaim your love in the morning and your faithfulness at night." Do you see what that Psalm is suggesting? When you wake up, proclaim God's love. Start your morning by thanking God that his love is going to get you through the whole day. "Thank you, God, that your love for me is going to remain constant all day long. Thank you, God, that I don't have to worry about your attitude toward me. Thank you that I can rely on your love." You might even want to be more specific and mention some of the things that you're going to face that day. "Thank you, God, that your love will get me through that job interview that I have today. Thank you, God that your love will help me when I have to meet with that person I don't particularly like."

The writer of Psalm 92 also says that it is good "to proclaim . . . your faithfulness at night." After you have turned the light off and you're waiting to fall asleep, thank God for how he has been faithful to you that day. Thank God for all the little things that are easy to overlook. "Thank you, God, that I survived that I got through that job interview without putting my foot in my mouth. Thank you, God, that I've got a warm bed to get into tonight." What better way to fall asleep at night than with thanksgiving going from you to God?

Make sure that you are with God. Remind yourself that God is with you. Thank God that he is with you. Then pray to the God who is with you.

The Story of the Spaffords

I want to tell you a story that starts in Chicago and ends in Jerusalem. One of the major scenes in the story takes place is in the Atlantic Ocean.

If you ever have the opportunity to go to Jerusalem, you will no doubt go to what is called the "Garden Tomb." Every American tourist in Jerusalem goes to the famous "Garden Tomb." You have probably seen pictures of this tomb because the claim is that this is the tomb where Jesus'

body was placed after his crucifixion. (I am sorry to tell you this, but it is probably not the actual place where Jesus was buried. The reason why that claim is made for that tomb is itself an interesting story, but it's not the one that I'm going to tell you today.)

Just south of the Garden Tomb is the impressive wall that circles the Old City of Jerusalem. One of the most famous gates into the old city is right by the Garden Tomb too. It is called the Damascus Gate, and it is one of the most impressive gates into the city. Just inside the Damascus Gate is the Spafford Children's Center. It is a wonderful medical clinic that today serves over 30,000 needy Arab children every year.

I find the story behind the Spafford Children's Center to be something that for a variety of reasons fascinates me. The story begins in the early 1870s with a man named Horatio Spafford. He was living what we would call the good life. He was a lawyer, and he had many real estate investments in the city. He was doing well. But then in 1871 was the Great Chicago Fire. Spafford lost his law office, his valuable library, and most of his real estate investments.

But Horatio and his wife Anna were still thankful. At least, they and their daughters had survived. They had come under the preaching of Dwight L. Moody, and they were thankful for the salvation that they had found in Christ. In 1873 they planned to sail to Europe knowing that Moody was going to be preaching there that fall. At the last minute a business deal required Horatio to stay in Chicago, so he sent his wife and four daughters ahead. But during the voyage the ship that Anna and the girls were on was hit by another ship. Two hundred and twenty-six people lost their lives in that shipwreck. All four daughters of the Spaffords were drowned. Only Anna survived. When Horatio learned about the tragedy, he quickly got on another ship and sailed for Europe to be with his wife and to accompany her back to Chicago.

Horatio and Anna had three more children—two daughters and one son. But in 1879 their son died from scarlet fever. People in their church started to wonder what the Spaffords had done that God would bring such tragedies into their lives. Eventually the Spaffords left the church.

They decided to start a new life. They had come to believe that Jesus was going to return soon to Jerusalem, and they wanted to be there when he arrived. So in 1881 they along with some other Americans moved to Jerusalem to start a Christian commune there. Horatio only lived in Jerusalem for seven years. In 1888 he died from malaria.

The story of the Spafford family is a story of suffering and hardship and disappointment. In many ways it is a tragic story. Yet the Spafford legacy lives on. Over the last 128 years that commune in Jerusalem has gone through lots of changes. Today its legacy is found in the Spafford Children's Center just inside the walls of the Old City of Jerusalem. Horatio Spafford has also left another legacy. He is remembered for a hymn that he wrote. The story is told that while he was sailing to England to join his wife, the captain of the ship pointed out where his daughters had drowned. He then wrote the song we know as "It is Well with My Soul."²

Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

Even in the midst of tragedy, Horatio Spafford knew that God was with him. He certainly didn't understand why God would allow his daughters to be drowned at sea. Yet he knew that God still loved him and was with him.

Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on August 9, 2009 by Dr. Frederic Martin
expanding on *The Red Sea Rules* by Robert J. Morgan.

² The story of Horatio Spafford and "It Is Well with My Soul," has been repeatedly told in Christian literature, but minor inaccuracies have crept into the story. For further reading about the Spaffords, I recommend Elias Anter, "The Story of Bertha Vester," *Saudi Aramco World*, Vol. 18, Numb. 4 (July / August 1967), 24-33. [Go to www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/196704/the_story_of_bertha_vester.htm.] See also "The American Colony in Jerusalem (A Library of Congress Exhibition)" [www.loc.gov/exhibits/americancolony/amcolony-overview.html].