

Red Sea Rule 9:

View your current crisis as a faith builder for the future.

Hebrews 12:7-11

August 30, 2009

Let's begin this morning by listening to a couple of people who have gone through tough times. What can we learn from these people? What can their experiences teach us?

Listen to what a man who suffered in a communist concentration camp says. Alexandr Solzhenitsyn, the great Russian novelist records his experience in his book, *The Gulag Archipelago*:

All the writers who wrote about prison but who did not themselves serve time there considered it their duty to express sympathy for prisoners and to curse prison. I . . . have served enough time there. I nourished my soul there, and I say without hesitation: "*Bless you, prison, for having been in my life.*"¹

Did you hear that? "Bless you, prison, for having been in my life"?

Here are the observations recorded by the author, Flannery O'Connor:

I have never been anywhere but sick. In a sense sickness is a place . . . and it is always a place where there's no company, where nobody can follow. Sickness before death is a very appropriate thing and I think those who don't have it miss one of God's mercies.²

Did she really write that? "Sickness . . . is . . . one of God's mercies"?

What do you think when you hear people say things like that about concentration camps or chronic illnesses? My first reaction is that these people are crazy. Who in the world would say that prison is a good thing or that sickness is one of God's mercies? My first response is to write these people off as religious crackpots.

But then, on second thought, I have to admit that these people have tapped into something truly significant. I make that admission not because they are both famous authors. No, I say that because they are merely stating in their own words what God's Word teaches.

New Testament Teaching

Look at some passages from the New Testament. We'll start with one written by Paul.

. . . we also glory in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. (Rom. 5:3-4)

Now let's think about what the writer to the Hebrews says in his letter.

Endure hardship as discipline . . . No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. (Heb. 12:7, 11)

¹ Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*. Vol. III-IV, 616-617.

² Quoted in Paul W. Nisby, "Faith Is Not an Electric Blanket," *Christianity Today*, 17 May 1985, 24.

Hardship is one of the ways that God makes us into the people that he wants us to be. The writer comes right out and states that it is not pleasant. It is no fun. Don't pretend that it is. But, if we will allow it, it will produce within us both righteousness and peace.

Listen now to another New Testament writer, James, and what he has to say about suffering.

Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. (James 1:2-3)

There is the same idea again. Trials produce good in our lives. When our faith is tested, we grow stronger. We develop that important characteristic of perseverance.

Look at one more passage. This one comes from the apostle Peter's first letter.

In this [salvation that Christ has provided] you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed. (1 Peter 1:6-7)

There is the same teaching. Trials refine and purify our faith.

Think about those four passages. Each one was penned by a different New Testament writer: Paul, the unknown person who wrote the letter to the Hebrews, James, and Peter. But each of those writers teaches the same lesson. It doesn't make any difference which Christian leader does the teaching. Sooner or later that early Christian teacher tells those under his instruction that they will suffer and that their faith will grow and mature through that suffering.

These passages give us a basic principle about the Christian life. This is Christianity 101.

Red Sea Rule #9

We can put it this way: *View your current crisis as a faith builder for the future.* That's the way that Robert Morgan states it in The Red Sea Rules, the book that we've been using this summer. This is Red Sea Rule #9. *View your current crisis as a faith builder for the future.*³

I have a love—hate relationship with this rule. I know that it is true. I know that! There's no question in my mind that it's true. But I don't like it. I don't like it—particularly when I am going through some kind of trial. It doesn't make any difference what the trial is. Whether I am facing some serious medical problem or whether I have just gotten stuck at a stoplight when I'm in a hurry, I don't like this rule. But I do have to admit that it is true. *View your current crisis as a faith builder for the future.*

God is interested in more than our happiness. If you are a believer in Jesus, then God is making you into a person who will live with him for eternity. That's the way that God looks at us, and that's the way that we need to look at ourselves. We are creatures being prepared to live in the heavenly presence of the King of kings and Lord of lords. That doesn't mean that the things of this earth and the events of this life have no value. It doesn't mean that at all. It doesn't mean that happiness on earth is something bad or something that

³ Robert J. Morgan, *The Red Sea Rules* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2001), 95.

should be shunned. God created this world, and we should enjoy God's good creation. But as believers in Jesus Christ, we also have to recognize that God has more in mind for us than our happiness. That's why Red Sea Rule #9 is so important. God is preparing us for eternity with him. Therefore, *view your current crisis as a faith builder for the future.*

Early in my Christian life I read a book that was one of the most influential things that I have ever read. It's titled *Knowing God*, and it's a classic. The author, J.I. Packer, makes an observation in that book that I have come back to time and time again.

God . . . is very gentle with very young Christians, just as mothers are with very young babies. Often the start of their Christian career is marked by great emotional joy, striking providences, remarkable answers to prayer, and immediate fruitfulness in their first acts of witness; thus God encourages them, and establishes them in "the life." But as they grow stronger, and are able to bear more, He exercises them in a tougher school. He exposes them to as much testing . . . as they are able to bear—not more . . . but equally not less . . . Thus he builds our character, strengthens our faith, and prepares us to help others. . . . There is nothing unnatural, therefore, in an increase of temptations, conflicts, and pressures as the Christian goes on with God—indeed something would be wrong if it did not happen. But the Christian who has been told that the normal Christian life is unshadowed and trouble-free can only conclude . . . that he must have lapsed from normal. "Something's gone wrong," he will say, "it isn't working any more!"⁴

Do those words ring true to the Bible and to your own experience? They do to me. Red Sea Rule #9 is a solid biblical principle that we need to hold onto with a firm grasp. *View your current crisis as a faith builder for the future.*

We need to train ourselves to expect hardships and difficulties. Program this principle into your mental software. Don't entertain notions that the Christian life should be trouble free. Expect hardships and difficulties. Don't be surprised at them. You may get the job that you have always dreamed of having, but inevitably it will have some drawbacks. Don't be surprised when that happens. You may marry the person of your dreams, but you can be sure that your marriage will not be one of perfect and unending bliss. There will be struggles. Your children may be cute and cuddly when they are little, but there will be times when you are ready to ship them out of state. You may visit a church for a couple of times and think that you have found the ideal Christian fellowship. Stay around a little longer, and you will learn the truth. Every church has its flaws. Be prepared for those things so that when they do happen, you won't be surprised.

Putting Rule #9 into Practice

How do we put this principle into practice with the hardships that we are already facing? This is where it gets difficult. I have in no way mastered this rule, but here are four steps that I would suggest to you.

First, *identify a trial to work on.* Don't be satisfied with this rule in a general or abstract way. Be specific. Pick out one particular trial that you are going to work on.

Second, *apply Rule #9 specifically to that trial.* Say to yourself, "Self, you need to view your current crisis which is . . . [Here is where you fill in the blank. My current crisis is my strained relationship with my parents. My current crisis is that I'm lonely and have no friends. My current crisis is that I have no money saved for retirement.] Self, you need to

⁴ J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 223-224.

view this trial as a faith builder for the future.” Say that to yourself. Preach it to yourself! Keep on preaching it until it is part of your regular way of thinking.

After you have preached that sermon to yourself, then you need to stop talking to yourself and start talking to God. Here’s the third step. *Tell God how you are going to view that trial.* You say, “God, I want you to know that I am going to look at this current crisis as something that you are going to use to build up my faith and make me more mature in my relationship with you.”

Then I’d suggest a fourth step. You’ve identified a specific trial so that you are not just dealing in generalities. You’ve applied Rule #9 to that trial. You’ve preached to yourself. You’ve told God that you want to view this trial as a faith builder. Then comes the fourth step. *Thank God that he is going to use that trial in your life.* Growing in your faith is good; so thank God that he is going to use this current crisis of yours to refine your faith and make it mature.

It’s this fourth step that we need to be sure that we get to. Don’t be satisfied with just the first three. Keep working on yourself until you get to that fourth one. We haven’t really put Rule #9 into practice until we can thank God for the trial that we are facing. It’s not that the hardship itself is good. I’m not suggesting that you thank God for cancer or automobile accidents. No, you are thanking God that he is going to develop perseverance and character in you through your trial. You are thanking God that through your current crisis he is building you up in your faith and making you fit for eternity.

Those four steps will take time. Don’t be hard on yourself if you can’t immediately zip through them. They take work. They take time. Just be sure that you keep moving in the right direction.

An Example of Rule #9

Listen to the experience of a woman who went through tough times. Her name is Vera Mae Perkins. She and her husband lived in Mississippi. They had little money with which to raise their eight children. Vera saw her family being refused service at motels because of the color of their skin. Her husband, John Perkins, was an evangelist and social activist. During the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s, John was jailed and sometimes beaten in those jails. But here is what she learned from those experiences.

Our struggles were painful, but I grew to expect them and—believe it or not—even appreciate them. Many young couples, especially wives, believe that suffering should be avoided at all costs—that God wouldn’t want them or their children to suffer. Although this is a natural inclination, it is far from the truth. Suffering builds character and faith.⁵

It’s amazing to hear someone say that kind of thing. But it’s true. It’s Red Sea Rule #9. *View your current crisis as a faith builder for the future.*

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
on August 30, 2009 by Dr. Frederic Martin
expanding on The Red Sea Rules by Robert J. Morgan

⁵ Quoted in Steve Halliday, *No Night Too Dark* (Sister, OR: Multnomah Books, 1993), 27.