

Healthy Leadership 11: Leading Under Pressure

Exodus 14

The Road to Healthy Leadership: Studies in Exodus on Moses as Leader

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

Let us pray. We are amazed, gracious God, that we find favor in your eyes; for we often don't find favor in our own eyes. We are amazed that you would be with us in the hard places; for we think that you have left us and we have to go it alone. Now may you speak of your Good News and kindness toward us--that you would be with us in all circumstances, and lead us to new life out of death. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

What do you do when the pressure is on? What happens to you when you are between a rock and a hard place? What happens to your way of thinking and your behavior when you feel caught 'between the Devil and the deep blue sea'?

By God's leading, Moses found himself leading Israel into an apparent trap. They were on their way into the wilderness to escape Pharaoh and Egypt -- seemingly rid of them, when God said to Moses: "I want you to turn back. Go to a place where you will be camped between the sea and cliffs, between the sloping delta, the mouth of the river, and a great body of water. On the one side will be the high place where Egyptians worship one of their gods, Baal-zephon, and on the other will be Migdol, one of the great fortress cities that Egypt has protecting their country." I can just imagine Moses listening to God and saying, "You want me to do what?!? We have just expended all of this energy to get out of Egypt and you want us to turn back?"

And God said, "When Pharaoh hears that you are camped there, he will think that you have lost your way... that you are wandering in circles... and you are vulnerable to his force."

And I can hear Moses saying: "That's exactly right. Why are we doing this?"

God said, "I will, therefore, harden Pharaoh's heart and he will come after you with his whole army."

(And by this time, I think Moses is believing that he has followed the wrong God into the wilderness...)

"But, Moses, I will have Pharaoh just where I want him. He will think he has you trapped, but I know that I will have him trapped. When he tries to do to you what he will do, I will do it to him instead. He will be doomed in the same way that he has decided to doom you. The harder he comes after you, the greater and more complete will be my victory, and my glory." And so God set Israel out on the delta as bait—in order that God might catch the whole Egyptian army and wipe them out in one event. God does to Pharaoh what Pharaoh wanted to do to Israel.

And so God led Moses into that gut-wrenching pressure cooker— to test and develop their strength of character. I believe that God puts you and me in similar places of pressure to test our moral resolve as leaders. Because we all know that, under pressure, either the best or the worst tends to come out of us. In the tension, we will fold... or we will become even more bold. In the stress, we will stand firm... or we will let our instincts take over to fight, or to flee. And if we cannot do either of those, sometimes we will panic like deer in the headlights. Or we might find another way—God's way— to stand firm and see what God's going to do when we've done everything we can do.

Chapter 14 of Exodus is the great and final act of God to liberate Israel from Egypt, once-and-for-all. It is Israel's death and resurrection. It could have been their swan song, but God turns it into their victory hymn. Exodus chapter 14 is all about what God does to lead Israel—finally and completely. And God is good to bring leaders along to share some of the glory. In Chapter 14, the Lord, YHWH, God of Israel, is

both the beginning and the ending. If you begin the chapter, you will note these words:

“The Lord said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites to turn back...”

At the very end of the chapter, you will hear these words:

Thus the Lord saved Israel that day from the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Israel saw the great work that the Lord did. So the people feared the Lord. The people believed the Lord, and in his servant Moses.

It was all about what God only could do. It was all about the leadership of God.

In grace, God also made it, by the way, about the leadership of Moses. As Moses listened to God... as Moses was willing to trust God... as Moses learned to act upon God's direction, Moses became a greater leader. God teaches us to learn to lead under pressure. And sometimes God even leads us into the middle of the pressure—not to destroy us or to make us look bad—but to toughen our resolve to stand firm with God in the face of fire. When we learn that, in all circumstances, especially when things get tough, those are when God shows up... acts... and teaches us how to overcome, with the help of God's presence... so that we don't turn into panic, avoidance, and denial. When we are convinced, in the middle of the difficulty, that God is present, and that God, in fact, intends to accomplish good... and that God will act even when we are beyond action ourselves—that solidifies, somehow, our own leadership resolve, and deepens our leadership commitment.

Just as this was God's greatest mighty act in Exodus, this was also Moses' greatest leadership achievement. The higher the stakes... the greater the pressure... the more stunning the victory... the more glory to God... and the more trust from the people, to the leader. That is: if the leader has learned to walk with God in the midst of all circumstances; to absorb God's nature and character. Because this is all about the leader learning to become more like who God is.

Pharaoh is under a lot of pressure too. He has been acting like God; he thinks he is God. He has no need for a god other than himself. The pressure he feels is about holding on to that title, “god.” If Israel escapes, he loses the title. He loses everything, because all that he has built is upon the false assumption that he, in fact, is 'god.' He is in control. What he wills, will happen; and so he thinks...

But now Pharaoh is feeling the heat. He is losing; and he is angry. He would rather destroy his own army than lose to Israel's God. He would rather sack Egypt of its wealth, than have them find out that he is not, in fact, god... and in control. In order to have Israel as slaves, he will sacrifice his entire nation.

Why is it that when leaders get pushed up against it sometimes... become so self-determined and so self-defined... that we are willing to take a lot of other people down with us to prove our point?

This battle is about two gods; only one can win. Pharaoh is feeling the pressure: he can gain it all, or he can lose it all.

When the Redskins played the Dallas Cowboys this past Sunday, Jason Campbell was feeling some of that pressure, I think. They almost came from behind to win, but not quite. Some, in the newspapers, say that he just folded under the pressure. Joe Gibbs is 67 years old today and I think he is feeling some pressure with the Redskins 5-and-5. He must produce a winning team. But Joe Gibbs is a man of faith in Jesus Christ; and from experience, he knows that God particularly shows up when things are tough in his life. I think Joe Gibbs has learned the art of leadership under pressure.

Moses was feeling the pressure. He had everything to lose at this moment. The people had believed in his word that God would let them out of Egypt; and now they are trapped. From the peoples' perspective, Moses is a poor leader. Why would he put us in harm's way like this? Either God saves them... or Moses and the people lose everything. There is nothing else Moses can do except stand and see what God will do. Either YHWH is God... or Pharaoh is god.

I believe today there is a lot of pressure on our State Department and President Bush this week for the Middle East Summit meeting in Annapolis. Tomorrow through Wednesday, the whole world will be watching to see if there can be any new hope for a two-nation agreement between Israel and Palestine--and a new possibility of peace in the Middle East. Will we see the Peace of Jerusalem in our time?

I don't believe this is just pressure from nations. This is not just pressure from antiquity. This is not just pressure from human leaders who have agendas. This is pressure from the 'gods' that control--from different perspectives--the destiny of human beings. This is the pressure about: "Who is God?" and "Where is God?" This is the pressure about what the God of Scripture really wants to have happen here. This is pressure about: "Who's 'god' is God?" This is a huge religious and political pressure inter-mingled. The stakes are high; and the Living God is being invoked to act in miraculous ways.

Some believe that God wants Israel to exist without Palestine. Some believe God wants Palestine to exist without Israel. Some believe that God wants peace between Israel and Palestine because they both have a right to some holy land. Some believe the land itself is holy; some believe holiness exists in the land because God is there. Some believe that only the God of Peace, in Jesus Christ, can bring peace into a situation where there will be no peace by human ingenuity. Some call their friends, 'enemies.' And some call their enemies, "YHWH" or "Allah." There is great pressure on people meeting this week in Annapolis. But I think this pressure provides a wonderful opportunity for God to show up, and to bring peace on God's terms--and not ours.

Just as God has the first word, God will have the last word in this conversation. It may not be this week; but my prayer is that that last word begins to show up in some definitive ways, so that we can see the miracle of God take place.

When there is no way out and we feel trapped, only God can act. And in the face of this international and historical pressure, God is leading leaders like Moses—who find their center and anchor in the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel. God is looking for leaders who are willing to stand firm for what God desires, and guide people to follow that... and not follow some lesser god. This is not easy. Everything is at stake: world peace... or world war. We need to pray for our Secretary of State and our President--that they might discern, along with other world leaders, the will of God, and the way of peace.

If you are feeling trapped today, only God can intervene to free you from being crushed between-a-rock-and-a-hard-place. If you, as a leader, are trapped, only God can deliver you and your people... as you are willing to know God personally... listen to God... and stand with God in the midst of the difficulty. For the leader must, like Moses, listen for God's quiet voice in the midst of the cacophonous myriad of many other lesser gods yelling and screaming for attention. Have you ever noticed how the lesser gods always seem to be yelling and screaming? And using coercion and force? God never yells. God never intimidates. God never coerces. God uses the natural forces of creation and the quiet voice of the Spirit to speak.

And Moses hears God in the midst of all of the noise. In his relationship with God, he learned to listen in the face of great pressure. And he hears this: "Do not be afraid. Stand firm. See the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today. The Lord will fight for you. And you have only to keep quiet."

And here's the call to leadership for us: Are we able to stand in the midst of the most difficult circumstances... when we do not have the power to change what is going on, and look for what God is going to do to redeem the situation? Don't allow fear to take over. Don't let fear throw you into a panic. Don't give-in to the spirit of chaos. Stand firm. God stands with you in the midst of the trouble. Don't let anger drive you to fight. Don't let fear drive you into flight. Stand in the midst of the turmoil; stand there with God. Stand there and listen to God's quiet voice; and move when God moves.

Watch God do what you cannot make happen as a leader. Lead through God's direction and strength, and not your own. Don't think that you have enough knowledge or wisdom to make it happen the way that you want it to happen. This is the temptation of leadership—to think that I know enough to lead in all circumstances and get us out of all pain and trouble. It's just not true.

I believe this is what God is saying to me about The National Presbyterian Church today:

You find yourself in a tough place: the expectations of people—some who want to go one way, some who want to go another way... the constant need for more money, the large buildings (beautiful, but need upkeep), frustrations over things that are going on. We seem to be wandering aimlessly, according to some feedback.

And I hear God saying, “Say this to the people: I [Gareth Icenogle] stand here alongside God. I am listening to what God is saying, along with the elders. Now, this is very important for you to join me: Don’t let fear control you. Stand firm. Stay together. See the deliverance of God. Watch the Lord fight for you. Listen to God speak; and be quiet in that listening. Wait for God to act, and move when God moves.

And then, at the end of this chapter in the history of our church, I believe we will read these words,

Thus the Lord saved The National Presbyterian Church from its enemies and its troubles. The people saw their troubles die at God’s hand. The people saw the great work that the Lord did. And so the people feared God and believed in God, and the leader God had called to lead them.

When God calls a leader to lead in the midst of pressure... if the leader walks with, and listens to God... God will lead the people through the trouble, and to a better place.

Jesus led under constant pressure. The crowds wanted him to perform miracles and feed them. The disciples wanted him to gather their forces and defeat Rome. The religious leaders wanted him to go away or stop influencing the crowds. The devil tempted him to take leadership of the whole world, on the devil’s terms, ‘as any good Messiah should.’ But Jesus led from seeming weakness and sacrifice. He refused to give-in to others’ demands and expectations. He emptied himself of anything that could resemble being like God; and he led by becoming a criminal, who died scandalously on a cross.

In the end, Jesus seemed like a weak leader. He seemed trapped by his own misfired words and his aimless acts. It seemed as though the enemies, in fact, had won.

But God turned the tables on them. And like Israel, seemingly between-a-rock-and-a-hard place, God did the impossible: God raised this leader and his people from the dead. Jesus stood firm on the cross, with no place to go; and God saved the whole world because of his willingness to suffer and die.

So, if you and I want to be leaders today, or are called to take that responsibility— like Jesus, in the midst of pressure, God invites you and me into an intimate relationship with this Messiah, who laid down his life. to lead people while we’re listening to that very small, quiet Voice; in the midst of all of the loud noise of the myriad of voices around us, we hear that Word today, as Moses heard it: “Peace, be still. See the salvation of God. I will be with you in the midst of pressure.”

Let us pray. O Lord Jesus Christ, you have gone before us and shown us the Way, the Truth and the Life: that there is only one pattern of leadership—and that is leadership that walks with you in the midst of the trouble of life. We ask now, by your power, by your grace, that you might lead us through the difficult times, to accomplish the miracles that you desire for us. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.