

DANGEROUS JOURNEY

Rev. Philip Parker

After Moses met the Lord at the burning bush, he returned to Egypt. There he and his brother Aaron confronted Pharaoh. He told the king that God had commanded him to bring the children of Israel out of Egypt so that they might worship Him. Pharaoh, of course, disagreed and there ensued a struggle that involved Moses and the Lord versus Pharaoh and the false gods of Egypt. That struggle involved ten plagues, the worst being the last, the death of the first born. It also involved the celebration of the Passover. The people of Israel were instructed to sacrifice a lamb and place some of its blood on the door posts of their homes, so that the angel of death would pass over them as he made his way throughout the land of Egypt. A meal of bitter herbs, unleavened bread, and the meat of the sacrificial lamb would remind them of them of the bitterness of slavery, the haste with which they were leaving Egypt and God's protection from that angel of death. In fact, this meal, known as the Passover, would become a celebration for future generations, a reminder of what the Lord had done for them when He freed them from slavery in Egypt.

So the people of Israel left Egypt, and they took along with them the gifts, including gold and silver, that the Egyptians had bestowed upon them. Pharaoh and all of the people of Egypt were anxious to be rid of these slaves whose God had brought such devastation upon them. But that didn't last for long. Pharaoh soon changed his mind for God had hardened his heart. His slaves had gone and he wanted them back. So he mustered his army, including 600 of his best war chariots, and chased after the Israelites.

Instead of heading directly north towards the Promised Land, God led the Israelites out into the desert. He knew that they were not ready to confront the Philistines who lived along coastline of the Mediterranean Sea. Instead, He appeared to them as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, leading them out into the desert beside the Red Sea. It was there that the people of Israel discovered that they had embarked upon a dangerous journey. They were literally between a rock and a hard place. In front of them were the forbidding waters of the Red Sea. Behind them were Pharaoh and all of his army. So how did they respond to this dangerous situation as they began their journey to the mountain of God? Let's take a look at Exodus 14:10-14 and discover what happened.

The Scriptures tell us that when the Israelites saw the Egyptians marching after them, they were terrified. They were scared to death. In spite of all of the

things that God had already done for them, they were filled with fear. They cried out, "Weren't there enough graves in Egypt, that you had to bring us out here in the desert to die? What have you done to us? Why didn't you just leave us alone? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die out here in the desert." The people of Israel were upset, they were angry and they were scared. But don't be too harsh on them. These were slaves who had just been released from slavery. They didn't know a whole lot about the Lord, and they weren't sure that He could save them from this very real and formidable danger as they began their journey to the mountain of God. And to be perfectly honest, how about you and me? How would we have reacted if we had been among that group of Israelites? Perhaps we too would have been shaking in our shoes or should I say our sandals as we faced 600 Egyptian chariots bearing down on us.

In fact, what happens when we as Christians face serious challenges, especially as we are just beginning our journey of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ? That thought came immediately to mind many years ago when I visited with a family whose house had just burned down. The father of that family had recently made a profession of faith and been baptized during our church's fall revival. The entire church family had been praying for him and we were all thrilled that he had made this decision for the Lord. Now not two weeks later his house had nearly burned down. What was he thinking? Was he perhaps saying to himself, "I've accepted Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior and asked Him to watch over me and my family, and look what happens? My house burns down. Maybe I ought to reject all this religious stuff and just go back to living the way I used too." Fortunately that didn't happen, but I couldn't help but wonder if those kinds of thoughts had crossed his mind. When we're facing difficulties and dangers, it's very easy to turn aside from our faith in God and go back to living the way we used to.

That's precisely the problem that Christian faced in John Bunyan's allegorical novel, *Pilgrims Process*. He had been gloriously saved at the foot of the cross. The burden of sin that he had been carrying was removed from his shoulders, and it rolled down the hill of Mount Calvary. He was now free to begin his journey of faith. But there were challenges along the way. He had to face the temptations of friends who tried to lead him astray. He fell into the "slough of despond," otherwise known as despair and depression. He got caught up in Vanity Fair, a place that offered all kinds of worldly pleasures. Over and over again he faced a whole host of difficulties and dangers as he struggled to reach the celestial city, the heavenly home of God.

And the same could be said of us. We too are on a journey of faith, seeking to reach the mountain of God's presence. And along the way many challenges await us. Let me share some of them with you. First, there is the challenge of persecution and rejection. That's what Jesus was talking about in His Sermon on the Mount when he spoke of being persecuted for righteous sake (Matthew 5:1-12). More people have died for their faith in Jesus Christ during the twentieth century than in any other period of time since the birth of Christ. And that unfortunate trend is accelerating in the twenty-first century.

Another challenge that God's people are facing, which in many ways is very similar to persecution, and which is taking place right here in America can best be described as radical secularism. In other words, anything religious, especially if it is Christian, must be removed from the public forum. In fact, this very term, radical secularism, was used by a respected commentator who was describing what is taking place in today's society. To pray in public, to share your faith, to take a Bible to work, or to display any kind of religious art work or imagery in many places is now considered to be unacceptable behavior. It can provoke a response that ranges anywhere from ridicule to loss of employment. It can even involve a civil suit brought by an individual who was offended by your identity as a Christian. In many respects we are living in a day and time similar to what Daniel experienced. He was thrown into the lions' den because he opened the windows of his home and dared to pray in public.

And speaking of Daniel, there is an account in chapter 10 of his book that is most interesting. He is greeted by an angel with a message from God. However, this message, this response to Daniel's prayer has been delayed. This is what the angel says, 'Since the first day that you set your mind to gain understanding and to humble yourself before your God, your words were heard, and I have come in response to them. But the prince of the Persian kingdom resisted me twenty-one days. Then Michael, one of the chief princes came to help me because I was detained there with the king of Persia' (Daniel 10:12-13). What's going on here? It's called spiritual warfare. Behind the scenes, in the realm of the spirit, the forces of good and evil are at war with one another, and what happens there affects what is happening here. Centuries later that's what Paul was speaking about when he said to the church at Ephesus, "For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in heavenly realms" (Ephesians 6:12).

Years ago, a Japanese woman by the name of Sumiko shared this story with my wife. She was now a believer, but this had taken place before she became a Christian or really knew anything about Christianity. During surgery, she had

briefly stopped breathing. During that time she had left her body was taken to a place where she encountered a dark and dangerous being which she described as a demon. He was about to carry her away when a majestic man with a tongue that came forth from his mouth like a sword said to the demonic being, "It is not her time. She is to be returned." And when she woke up she was back in the recovery room at the hospital. Are there spiritual forces struggling with one another behind the scenes of this world in which we live? And can these forces become dangerous adversaries in our journey of faith as the people of God? Sumiko certainly believed that to be true and perhaps we should as well.

A few years ago I read a book by Edwin Lutzer, the pastor of the Moody Church in Chicago. It was entitled *Hitler's Cross*. It described what happened to the Christian Church after Hitler and the Nazis took over Germany. It also documented the source of Hitler's power, his ability to lead that nation into a war that almost destroyed the world. Simply stated, Pastor Lutzer came to this startling conclusion. Hitler's power was derived from the demonic. Hitler and his cronies were obsessed with the occult and with the stories of the old Norse gods and the religions of the East. They believed that there were evil supernatural powers at work in the world, and they sought to align themselves with them. Hitler and the Third Reich were defeated, but I wonder in our own day and time what hidden evil supernatural powers may be at work to lead us astray as individuals, as churches, and even as a nation. Truly Pharaoh and his army of chariots are still out there, and we have every reason to fear them.

That is, unless we know what Moses knew as he spoke to the people of Israel. In the midst of their panicked fear, he told them, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still" (Exodus 14:13-14). He knew what the Lord could do and he had faith that He would do it. The same is true for you and me. The same God who watched over the Israelites is the same one who watches over us. During our journey of faith, even when we are facing difficult, seemingly insurmountable challenges, He will not desert us. Indeed, we have this promise, recorded for us in 1 John 4:4. Speaking about false prophets, spiritual warfare, and even the advent of an antichrist, the writer of this letter declared, "You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world."