

**“Ordering a Permanent Wave”**  
**Exodus 14:10-31**

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Perhaps you’ve heard the story of the man hiking on the rim of a canyon at night. In the dark he loses his footing. As he goes over the edge, he manages to seize and hold onto a limb poking out of the cliff face. Dangling in the dark and seeing no way out of this predicament, he tries something he’s never done before. He prays. “God, if you’re up there,” he shouts, “tell me what to do.” And lo and behold, the Lord replies from heaven, “I am here. Let go.” The man thinks about this for a minute and then says, “Is there anybody else up there?”

After a few minutes, when he can hang on no longer, his grasp slips and he falls ... onto a ledge 2 feet below him. “Thank God for this ledge,” he says. “You’re welcome,” the Voice replies.

Have you ever been in a jam? Ever found yourself in the jaws of a dilemma? Between a rock and a hard place? Have you faced a choice between doing:

What feels good and what’s good for you?

What’s popular and what’s right?

What your boss or your friends say and what your conscience says?

What is safe and comfortable or new and adventurous?

What pleases people and what pleases God?

There are times in life when troubles crash like waves upon you – one after another. Past due notices, unexpected illnesses, parents needing help, children acting out, pressure from work, struggles in school, rejection from friends, arguments with your spouse. A rising tide and a pounding surf relentlessly bear down. Tossed from crest to trough and back again, you finally cry out, “Is there anybody up there?”

Often, in these times, we order God to get to work. A grandmother walked along the beach with her grandson. As they made tracks in the sand, a large wave suddenly rose out of the sea carried away the child. Instantly, the grandmother got down on her knees and prayed for God to bring him back. Miraculously, the next wave deposited the child on the shore, safe and sound. Overjoyed, grandma hugged the boy and checked him all over. Then, with a frown on her face, she looked up to heaven and shouted, “I believe he had a hat on when he left.” When you feel squeezed in a vice or backed into a corner, it’s easy to start telling God what to do. Yet that’s the time to be still and listen.

The children of Israel had a thing or two to tell God and Moses. When Moses and Aaron, two dusty shepherds, marched into mighty Pharaoh’s palace and demanded he let God’s people go, things went from bad to worse.

Pharaoh said, “Who is the Lord, that I should obey him and let Israel go? I do not know the Lord and I will not let Israel go.” Exodus 5:2

‘Make bricks without straw and keep up the quota.’ He gives them an impossible task and then beats them when they can’t do it. The children of Israel cry to Moses. He in turn cries to the Lord. And the Lord replies by humbling Pharaoh.

The only powers Pharaoh respects are the gods of Egypt. So the Lord knocks over these idols one by one like so many dominoes. The sacred Nile is polluted with blood. The Egyptians worship Heqt, the frog goddess, Hathor the cow goddess and Apis the bull god. So the Lord covers the land from end to end with reeking dead frogs and bloated bovine carcasses. They worship the sun. So the Lord plunges them into darkness for three days. After nine plagues, the only god left is Pharaoh himself. And on the night of the Passover, the Lord takes the life of Pharaoh’s first-born son. Pharaoh cries to Moses and Aaron, “Up! Leave my people, you and all the Israelites! Go and worship the Lord.” Exodus 12:31

Now they think all their troubles are over. But for Moses and the Israelites, there is still one more battle in the war with Egypt. The whole nation of Israel, six hundred thousand men plus women, children and even some Egyptians, set out from the Nile delta. But instead of taking the direct route along the Mediterranean to Canaan, they begin to wander aimlessly up and down on the edge of the desert. The elders wonder where Moses is taking them. Finally, they encamp across from Baal Zephon next to the Sea of Reeds. When Pharaoh learns the Israelites are dazed and confused in the desert, he decides to take his revenge. Mounting his golden chariot he leads 600 elite charioteers followed by divisions of chariots, horsemen, officers and soldiers.

The crimson sunset lights up the western sky as the Israelites settle into their tents by the shore of the sea. Suddenly, a wave of panic washes through the camp. Scouts see a growing dark line on the horizon. The thunder of hoof beats vibrates through the earth. Pharaoh is coming! Mothers scream and grab their crying infants. Fathers run about in confusion. The Elders pull Moses out of his tent and shout,

“Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? ... Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians’? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!” Exodus 14:12

At this critical moment, Moses has only two choices. He can rally his people to arms and be massacred or surrender and return to slavery. Running away is not an option. A nation of former slaves cannot move as fast as swift chariots. Besides, there is nowhere to go. The children of Israel are cornered with their backs to the sea. And God is the one who told Moses to camp there. So what does Moses do? He prays. I imagine he says, “Lord, why did you bring us here? We’re trapped. The Egyptians will slaughter us. What do you want me to do?”

“Move on,” says the Lord. “Move on?” asks Moses “You want me to attack the Egyptians?” “No,” replies God, “the other way.” “Into the sea?” “Yes,” says the Lord. “How?” asks Moses. “Raise your staff, stretch out your hand over the sea, and command it to move out of the way. Then I want you to march the Israelites through the sea on dry ground. I am laying a trap for the Egyptians.” Now if I were Moses, I probably would say, “Is there anybody else up there?”

When Moses comes out of his tent, the Elders crowd around him. “Do we fight Moses or flee?” “Neither,” he replies. “God tells us to just be still.” “Be still?!”

“Do not be afraid,” he said. “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

With that, a desert wind picks up and blows a solid dust cloud between Israel and the Egyptian army. Meanwhile, Moses walks to the shore, raises his staff, and stretches out his hand over the sea. A strong east wind drives the water back into two permanent waves on either side of the path. All night long it holds while the whole company of Israelites pass between the walls of water. When the last tribe reaches the far shore, the dust cloud lifts and the Egyptians pour into the gap between the waves. But in the heart of the sea, confusion reigns. Chariot wheels fall off, horses are spooked, soldiers become terrified. “The Lord is fighting for them against Egypt,” they cry. Desperately they try to turn back. But when Moses stretches out his hand over the sea again, the waves cascade down upon the mighty army and they are no more. “When the Israelites saw the great power the Lord displayed against the Egyptians, the people feared the Lord and put their trust in him and in Moses his servant” Exodus 14:31.

What lessons can we learn from the shores of this sea? Sometimes we, like the Egyptians, are working against God. Pharaoh and his people viewed the Israelites as nothing more than servants and slaves. They did not see them as humans – equal to themselves. That’s why they found themselves wrestling with the Almighty. God is not against those who have power, wealth and influence. What He asks is for those who have power, wealth and influence to remove barriers, break chains, open doors and make a way for those who do not. Jesus’ desire is that all people receive His promise of abundant life. This begins by seeing people as people – not as “them” or “those people,” not as less than equal or less than human, not as a label or a slur. Dr. Martin Luther King did not advocate taking up the sword. Nor did he run or shrink from the fight. He said,

Let us be dissatisfied until slums are cast into the junk heaps of history, and every family will live in a decent, sanitary home. Let us be dissatisfied until that day when nobody will shout, ‘White Power!’ when nobody will shout, ‘Black Power,!’ but everybody will talk about God’s power and human power.”<sup>1</sup>

Martin Luther King’s Dream is still not realized. Let’s work with God not against Him.

Sometimes we are like Israel: cornered with our backs to the sea. It’s so tempting to give up, to run back and willingly put on the shackles again. It would be so simple to go back to the old behavior, the old habits and addictions, the old doubts, the old way of life. When faced with a dilemma, it seems only natural to do something, anything, instead of waiting for God. But before you start building the pontoon bridge across the sea or submit again to the old slavery, stop, be still and pray. There may be times when God puts you in a tight squeeze in order to get your attention, to get you to talk with Him, to get you to depend on Him, to get

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther King, “Where Do We Go From Here?” (Annual Report delivered at the 11<sup>th</sup> Convention of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, 1967).

you to let go and let Him fight for you. God may have to take you to the end of yourself before He can start to work through you. Stop, be still, stand firm, and pray. Let God open up a new path where you didn't see a way before.

Finally, there will be moments when you are Moses. People are depending on you, forces are converging on all sides, and God tells you to walk out, raise your staff and stretch out your hand. I imagine, with all the confusion and terror swirling around, with every eye looking to their leader for an answer, Moses probably looked pretty foolish standing on the seashore with his staff in the air and his hand horizontal. What good would that do? Moses had to take a risk, a very costly risk, and trust God to do what He promised. Brothers and sisters, there will come a time in your professional life, your family life, your personal life, when, against all odds, in opposition to what everyone else thinks, despite every inner drive and contrary to popular belief, you do what God wants. It may cost you your job, you may lose a friendship, your family may misunderstand, but in the end, your sacrifice will become the pathway to the Promised Land.

Over a hundred years ago an old farmer lived on a high plain above a Japanese seashore village. One autumn evening, an earthquake rumbled through the village. This was nothing new and the shaken villagers soon returned to their work. But the old man sat on his high perch and looked out to sea. Suddenly, he jumped up and called to his grandson, "Bring me a torch! Make haste!" In the fields behind him his great crop of rice was already piled in stacks and ready for market. It was worth a fortune. Yet once the boy appeared with the torch, the old farmer thrust it into the dry bundles. Instantly they crackled with flame. A big bell in the temple below called the people to action: Fire!

From the beaches, up the steep side of the cliff, came the people of the village. "What is this mad man doing?" they cried as they desperately tried to save the crops of their rich neighbor. As they reached the heights and began to smother the fire, the old man shouted at the top of his voice, "Look!" At the edge of the horizon they saw a long, lean, dim line. It rapidly thickened as the sea rose like a high wall bearing down on them.

Then came a shock, heavier than thunder. The great swell struck the shore with a weight that sent a shudder through the hills and tore their homes to matchsticks. It drew back, roaring. Then it struck again, and again and yet again. Once more it struck and ebbed; then it returned to its place.

No word was spoken. Then the voice of the old man was heard, saying gently, "That is why I set fire to the rice." He stood among them almost as poor as the poorest, for his wealth was gone – but he saved 400 lives by the sacrifice.<sup>2</sup>

"God, if you're up there, tell me what to do." My child, let go, I've got you."

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<sup>2</sup> Lafcadio Hearn, Christian Living.