



WESTMINSTER
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**Questions on the
Mind of God:
Why...?**
Dr. Bruce Lancaster

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Exodus 14:10-18

Our Old Testament story is about the Hebrews standing on the shore of the Red Sea. God has just delivered them from slavery in Egypt, but Pharaoh's army is fast approaching to destroy these former slaves, and verse 14, "In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord!"

Of course they did! Whether it's standing between the devil and the deep blue sea or living in a perfect storm of where life seems to be sinking fast, we know what it is to be afraid.

We know how the story ends...God opens the Red Sea for the Hebrews to escape and then God destroys Pharaoh's army.

The Hebrews in trouble, God saves. And the story repeats itself throughout Scripture.

We can jump all the way to the Sea of Galilee to hear it again. The disciples are in a boat, Jesus is asleep in the stern, a storm comes up that scares even these veteran fishermen.

They cry out to Jesus, "Don't you care if we are perishing." And you know the end of that story, too.

Jesus cries out to them, "Why are you afraid?" Then he stills the storm.

The Hebrews are afraid, split the Red Sea. The disciples are afraid, still the storm.

Or as William Shakespeare said, "All's well that ends well." But is that all there is?

You know, I hope you know, that I'm going to say, "No, there's more to the story than that."

Like most of our reading the Bible, we're so familiar with the story we are Scripture skimmers. We skim across the stories without getting our faith wet in the depths of the story.

Paraphrasing an old theology book title, 'We need to read the Bible again for the first time!'

So getting back into the story, like their time in Egypt, the people cry out to the Lord, as it says in verse 14...

But they channel this cry through Moses, and it takes the form of a complaint, listen again closely beginning in verse 15: *They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, 'Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."*

They blame Moses for bringing them out to the desert to die; try to shame him, they had really wanted to stay in Egypt and serve the Egyptians, but no, Mr. Moses had to have his way.

And look where they are now. Death by Pharaoh is at hand, doesn't God care?

Like the disciples, death by drowning is at hand, doesn't Jesus care?

Questions on the Mind of God: Why...?

Just like the Hebrews, we know the fear of being caught between two seemingly impossible situations; and like the disciples, we know the storms that sweep over us.

And we know that we are creatures in a world where we know we are creatures not really in control of our world. And we know how we often respond like the Hebrews, like the disciples.

Jesus cuts to the heart of our fears when he asks us why we are afraid. Duh, the boat's sinking; the Egyptians are coming, and I'm about to die!

Listen again, though, not 'what' are you afraid of, but "WHY?"

The 'why' is the constant tension in the real world between faith and fear, the distance from God's deliverance from slavery in Egypt to the Egyptian army bearing down on the Hebrews; the distance from where the disciples stand in the storm to where Jesus is – he knows what we're afraid of, he asks us 'why.'

That's also the question that God asks Moses. Did you hear it? *"Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. Take what's in your hand and stretch it out over the sea so that my people can walk through on dry ground."*

I find this to be an odd question from God. But maybe not so odd if I stand on that shore with the Hebrews, in the boat with the disciples.

You see, I realize we often use phrases like, "Remember me, O God," "Hear me now, O Lord," "Look with favor upon

me” which are nice ways of saying ‘what a fine mess I’m in and what are you going to do about it’?

It’s a story that repeats itself often in our lives.

But every question God has asked in these stories over the past few weeks is a story of how God remembers us in the midst of our forgetting, how God hears us when we make the tiniest squeak, how God looks with favor on us even we can’t stand to look at ourselves in the mirror or anyone else for that matter.

So when God asks, “Why”, if we answer the question honestly and faithfully it turns it all around.

Why does God remember us when we are the ones who turn from God? Why does God remember us when we are the ones who forget God? Why does God look with favor on us and hear us even when we can’t stand to look at ourselves in the mirror or at anyone else for that matter?

Let’s get our faith wet and dive back into the story. Just before God’s question of ‘why,’ Moses has responded to the people, not to their complaints, but to the people, *“Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the LORD will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.”*

It is a word of pure gospel:

- Do not be afraid: Jesus said the same thing to the disciples...
- Stand firm: Be ready to see what God is about to do...
- Keep still: It does not mean to sit on your hands; but be silent, look and listen to what God is doing in your midst...

Questions on the Mind of God: Why...?

- See the deliverance...The Lord will fight for you: Paul said it this way, “If God is for us, who can be against us...nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord...”

That’s why God remembers us. That’s why God will never forget us. That’s why God will look with favor on us. That’s why God will never turn away from us.

Moses had stood there with those complaining people, took what was in his hand, and as God’s partner in deliverance, the Red Sea parted and his brothers and sisters, old people and young, babies and families, moved forward on a journey into a new world.

Maybe you’ve heard about “The Stockdale Paradox”. Long story short: James Stockdale was a Prisoner of War in Vietnam and suffered years of torture. Neither he nor the men he was imprisoned with had any control over when they might be rescued or released.

So they came up with a plan: They had to accept their situation, develop a deep and ingrained confidence that they would survive and be rescued one day, and then concentrate only on what they could control.

There is so much about my world today that I cannot control, and to be clear, it’s been that way long before this pandemic.

There are a lot of questions yet to be answered. That is OK.

But then and now, I can only control my response to what is happening and how I decide to move forward.

There's that word from our story; God said to Moses to tell the Hebrews to 'go forward.' We, like the Hebrews between the devil and deep blue sea, are to move forward.

I know I have complete confidence in God, and I have decided that my response is to do faith, to do hope, to do love as the way forward.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.



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