

The God Behind The Miracle **Exodus 14:10-22**

When I was a kid and movies cost 15 cents I went to see a movie called *The Ten Commandments*. It turned out to be one of the most exciting movies I had ever seen. It was directed by Cecil B. DeMille and it had special effects which at that time were revolutionary. My favorite special effect was where Moses parted the waters of the Red Sea. Moses stretched out his staff and a mighty wind came down and swirled the water around until a narrow passageway opened up, stretching across the floor of the sea between two towering walls of water on either side. The walls of water looked like they were about a quarter of a mile high. That image impressed itself on my imagination and I never forgot it. Later on I was reading something by Martin Luther and discovered that the same image—the image of Moses leading the Israelites through the Red Sea with walls of water towering on either side of them—was his favorite image in the bible because it symbolized to him the life of a Christian. A Christian walks between two perilous walls of destruction—God’s law and man’s sin--which are held back only by God. Without God holding back the judgment of the law and taking our sins upon himself, we would drown in our sins.

But though the parting of the red sea was a mighty miracle, it failed to inspire a lasting faith in the hearts of the Israelites. Actually, it didn’t even inspire a temporary faith. Only three days after God parted the waters of a sea, the Israelites began to complain to Moses that he was not providing them with water in the wilderness. So God performed another miracle for them. He had Moses throw a piece of wood into bitter water and it became sweet and drinkable. But fifteen days later they were at it again. This time they were complaining about the food. They started grouching about how they would rather be back in Egypt under the yoke of slavery where they could have meat to eat. So God gave them another miracle: manna and quail to eat. That filled their bellies, but the grumbling and complaining went on and on. It’s no wonder God called them a “stiff-necked people.” Of course we’re not that way, are we? If we saw a miracle like the parting of a sea it would give us faith for the rest of our lives and we’d never doubt God again, would we? Or would we? The fact is, faith doesn’t come from witnessing miracles and faith is not sustained by witnessing miracles. Peter saw our Lord’s glory with his own eyes on the mount of transfiguration and he saw him multiply seven loaves of bread and two fish into enough food to feed five thousand people—yet when push came to shove in the high priest’s courtyard, he denied him three times. The Jews saw Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead yet refused to believe in him and sought to kill him. Even after Jesus’ disciples saw that Jesus had risen from the dead some of them continued to doubt that he was the son of God. Today, unbelievers can be shown prophecies of Jesus’ birth, life, death and resurrection that were written down seven centuries before he was born, yet write it all off as a fairy tale.

Their hearts are so hardened that they make doubting Thomas seem like simple Simon. It's easy to see why Jesus told them the story of the rich man and Lazarus the beggar. After they had both died and the rich man was suffering in hell, he begged Abraham to send Lazarus back from the dead to warn his father and brothers so that they would not end up in the same torment he was in. But Abraham replied, "If they do not listen to Moses and the prophets, they will not be convinced even if someone rises from the dead. "And someone did rise from the dead and they are still not convinced. Why don't miracles bring people to faith? The answer is: they already have a faith; *unbelief is their faith*. We are born unbelievers--we don't have to be taught to "unbelieve"—we take to it like a duck takes to water. We are certified professional unbelievers. And no two-bit or four-bit or even million dollar miracle is going to change our mind. So if miracles don't lead people to faith, what does? Why does anyone believe at all? Where does faith come from? If miracles or evidence or logic or facts or reason won't convince someone to accept Jesus Christ as their Savior what will convince them? The answer is that they can't be *convinced*: they can only be *convicted*—convicted of their sin and of their need for forgiveness. They need to be brought to their knees and forced to give up placing their hopes in themselves. Then the Holy Spirit can create faith in them.

The preacher who converted me was a penitentiary chaplain. No, I wasn't in a penitentiary. This chaplain was temporarily serving a little church up the road in green bay, Wisconsin, while they were searching for a full time Pastor. He was a Lutheran pastor but he preached more like a Baptist. Every Sunday it was one version or another of "believe in Jesus Christ or you're going to end up in hell and it will be too late." I liked him a lot even though I wasn't buying his message. Then one Sunday he said something in a sermon that hit me like a sledgehammer. He said that in his experience as a prison chaplain, the only time a prisoner would come to faith in Jesus Christ was when he had given up on everything else—including himself. It didn't take me long to come to the conclusion that I fit that description. And once I gave up on faith in myself, it wasn't long before God gave me faith in Jesus Christ. Faith is a gift of God. It doesn't necessarily come dramatically--like a tidal wave. It can come secretly and silently into a human heart. As we sing in one of our Christmas carols: "how silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given; so God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven." And this brings us to the real miracle in the parting of the Red Sea. The real miracle doesn't lie in the special effects. It's true that the mighty hand of God is all that holds back the fearful deluge. It's true that if he withdrew his hand, we would drown in the dark waters of our sins. But the real miracle lies in *why* God holds back those waters. *He does it because he loves each one of us as if there were only one of us to love*. The real miracle is the boundless mercy he has toward those he has created. Once we realize this, we can begin to understand the incredible fact that God has chosen to show his infinite power—the power that created the heavens and the earth—in the form

of simple, quiet, life-giving grace. For grace alone robs sin of its power and the law of its fangs.

In the kingdom of God, things are rarely what they seem to be. For the last half year we've all been living in an Egyptian darkness under fear of the virus. Confusion seems to reign everywhere—even among medical professionals as to whether things are going to get better or worse before this thing ends. It is as if towering walls of water were hovering over us and were about to engulf us at any time. But if we look in faith behind the towering walls we can discern a greater power, a power which holds back the deluge and surpasses all other powers as far as the heavens surpass the earth. It's the power that comes to us in the form of an infant in a manger. We can't see this infant with our mortal eyes—we can only see him through the eyes of faith—faith which came to us as a gift from God. Faith which can see where human eyes are blind. We aren't all that different from the Israelites, are we? The Lord works miracles in our lives every day and we grumble and doubt every day. He feeds us, he quenches our thirst, he delivers us from our sins, he keeps us safe and he fills our lives with blessings—and we keep on grumbling and doubting. Like the father of the boy with a demon, we cry out: "Lord, I believe! Help me overcome my unbelief!" We can't overcome our unbelief any more than the Israelites could overcome theirs—but there is one who can: he is the fount of all blessing, the infant of grace who holds back the dark waters of sin and judgment and fill us with faith and hope and love. "Do not fear little flock for it has pleased your father to give you his kingdom."

Cecile b. Demille gave me an image which will last a lifetime, even if the miracle it portrayed didn't keep the Israelites faithful for three days. But the God behind the miracle, the infant of grace, keeps our hearts and minds through faith unto eternal life. So blessed be the God behind the miracle!