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To Laugh While Drowning

[Exodus 14]

Peter Hiett @ The Sanctuary Downtown

January 2nd, 2011

Well, Happy New Year.

This could be the year you meet your wife... the year your business takes off.

Then again, this could be the year that she leaves, and the stock market crashes,

and you sink

beneath

the

waves.

You might die.

Well, think about that as you try to go to sleep tonight.

You know, the harder you try to sleep, the less you do sleep, until it feels like you're drowning I fear, and the very last thing you can do is be still... rest. And so you thrash around like a drowning person looking for anything solid to hold onto.

How do you rest on a sea of chaos?

Psalms 46:10 – "Be still and know that I AM God."

So you try to calm your heart and you look to God... and then you really freak out, because you realize it's He who led you to this place.

The guy on the TV said, "Follow Jesus and stuff will work out."

You followed, now you're drowning, and He's just watching.

And then you hear, "Be still."

About 3,500 years ago, an entire nation of slaves heard just that.

Pharaoh had just released the Israelites from slavery; they had encamped twice on their journey to the Promised Land. But the Scripture makes it clear: They were not taking the normal route; they were taking an erratic route to the banks of the Red Sea. And it's very clear that this was no accident. But Yahweh, through the Angel of Yahweh in a pillar of cloud and fire, was leading them... leading them to a point where they would be completely hemmed in:

To the north lay Egyptian fortifications;

To the south the desert;

To the west, Pharaoh had changed his mind, and God had hardened his heart... so Pharaoh was now bearing down upon Israel with all the army of Egypt – 600 choice chariots.

North, south, west, and east ... directly in front of them, the sea.
In Scripture the sea represents chaos and despair.

If the US decided to declare war upon Rhode Island, this situation would be similar to that of Israel's.

In Exodus 14, it's evening (time to rest), and Israel has been commanded to camp next to the sea.

[Exodus 14:10]

When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them; and they were in great fear. And the people of Israel cried out to the LORD; and they said to Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, in bringing us out of Egypt? Is not this what we said to you I 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."

And Moses said to the people, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work 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 be still."

An entire nation cries out to Moses, "What are you, some sort of sociopathic mortician who ran out of graves in Egypt? Slavery is better than this! Did you lead us here to drown? What's the strategy? What's the game plan, Moses?"

And can you imagine how Moses felt?

It's one thing to screw up your own life, but to drown an entire nation...

He's got to be wondering, "Did I miss something? Am I insane? Who is this Yahweh? Is He drowning us? What's He doing?"

God could have told Moses just what He'd do, but He didn't. Moses and the Israelites receive no explanation. They could see God (or the Angel of God) right there in a pillar of fire, and yet He just watched –at arm's length – as they prepared to drown.

In the words of Kierkegaard, they had no "objective truth" or explanation – only a "subjective encounter" on that deep sea of chaos and despair... just a divine "trust me"... a word ... "Fear not, stand firm, see the salvation of the Lord. He will fight for you and you have only to be still."

Be still.

Yeah right!

When they received that word, the *Ruach* –breath, wind of God that hovered over the face of the waters in Genesis 1 – had not yet begun to blow on the Red Sea. And they had not heard the name Jesus: the One who slept on the sea, calmed the sea, and walked on the sea. Sure, Easter was on its way, but all they knew was Friday... a not-so-good Friday. They had followed Him ... to this?

Ever been there?
With Job on the ash heap...
With Moses by the sea...
With Mary and John on Mt. Calvary?

You followed Him ... to this?

I followed Him to seminary ... at least, as best as I knew how. In order to be ordained as a pastor, the Presbyterian Church required that I take the MMPI: Minnesota Multiphase Personality Inventory. (I told some of you about that a couple of years ago.) I took the test in our apartment late one night, exhausted and in a foul mood.

It had questions like:

“Do you like fire?”

“Do you believe there are people out to get you?”

“Do you believe there’s a devil that hates your soul?”

Yep, yep, yep...

I remember thinking, “Dang, if anyone took this test seriously, and they’d think I was crazy!”

After Christmas break, I went in to see the young psych grad in charge of the test, who would be sending the results to the Presbytery. She interviewed me for a few minutes, then stopped and asked, “Peter, are you an alcoholic?” I said, “I don’t think so.” “Peter, do you beat your wife?” I said no. “Peter, there must be some way you handle anger. Do you like violent sports?” Being an idiot and thinking of football and backpacking, I leaned back and said, “Oh yeah. In fact, the more cuts and bruises I get, the better I feel...”

At that, she stopped and looked me right in the eye. She said, “Peter, you have a serious personality disorder. I don’t know exactly what it is, but trust me, you have it. And if you don’t undergo extensive psychotherapy, your marriage will fail within a year, and your ministry will be a disaster.” When I expressed fear at this, she said, “See? You’re paranoid!” And when I tried to be calm, she said, “See? You’re passive-aggressive!”

She said I couldn’t trust myself, or even the opinions of those close to me, for my very perception of reality was fundamentally flawed. I had no place to look but up, so I looked to God and cried out: “Have you led me to seminary just to watch me drown? What’s the plan? It looks like you’re trying to kill me!”

And I think I heard this answer: “Yes. Yes, Peter, I’m trying to kill that prideful, old, independent you. Did you think I was kidding when I told you that to follow you must pick up a cross? I’m taking away all your supports so you’ll cling only to me, like a drowning man clings to a rock in a torrent. So fear not... stand firm. See? I will fight for you, and you have only to be still.”

A friend paid for me to be re-tested by a more reputable psychiatrist. It turns out that the first text was ruled a misdiagnosis, but it was a perfect prescription ... for I tend to believe I’m my own savior, and that’s stressful as hell. My own savior... and God was showing me that only He is sufficient for that role. That “His grace is sufficient for me and His power is made perfect in weakness.”

See? It's in drowning that we are saved.

Well, when you get through something like that, you tend to think, "Great! I'm done with that lesson!" But that lesson is the only lesson... and that wasn't the end, only the start... my baptism, if you will. For the last 4 years, I've felt pinned against the banks of the sea. But now it's not just me, people are following me.

Three years ago, I took a stand, and many of you took it with me. We took a stand that I believe is a call... a call to bear witness to what I'm calling "The Under-Represented Truths of the Modern American Church."

1. That God is One. He's not one thing, and the opposite of that thing.
So even His wrath is a function of His love.
2. God is Love, and His "Mercy is over all He has made." (Psalms 145:9)
... So God wants to save.
3. God is all-mighty. He wants to save, and He can save.
And so your will to sin is not stronger than God's will to save.
4. God does save. People may languish in Hades and be destroyed by the fire, but salvation is the end of every story. Jesus is the Beginning and End.
5. 1-4 only make sense through Jesus Christ and Him crucified.
"Jesus Christ and Him crucified," is the Revelation of God.
"For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross." (Col. 2:19-20)

And so three years ago, we set out on a journey, and I cannot think of a period in my life in which I've experienced as much supernatural leading. I have folders and files of visions, dreams, and words that people have sent me... some while everything looked nice and rosy.

One man had an amazing, elaborate three-week vision about a landslide burying our old building on the mountain. Another friend had a series of dreams for three years on the same night, one in which a giant black ball landed on me, and I wondered for years, "What's that black ball?" And now I know ... I was "black-balled."

There were many other visions and words at that time, from all sorts of people and all sorts of places, even two different people in two different places in Australia. Many had visions of blood flowing down the mountain into Denver. My Father even appeared to my wife in a vision, saying, "Don't be afraid to drink the cup." And then, unscripted by me, we met, and I preached, in the very spot where I watched him tried and excommunicated. We even had words that led us to the building downtown.

And Isaiah 54, "Don't hold back... expand the place of your tents." I received it many times. And it hasn't just been weird people telling me this stuff. On several occasions, I—as well as others—have felt Jesus ... or angels ... *puffing* on me in worship—totally bizarre. And last week, after the Christmas Eve

service a friend came up to me and said, "Peter, I kept hearing a heartbeat, and it wasn't mine." That Sunday, another friend, who didn't know the first friend, approached my wife and said, "Susan, on Christmas Eve, in worship, I kept hearing a heartbeat. God is with us."

We don't have time for all the other words and freaky little incidents.
But suffice it to say; never in my life have I witnessed leading like this.
I mean, I really think we're supposed to be exactly where we are.
And yet, never in my life have I felt as clueless as to the game plan... or felt so close, so often, to drowning.

If you don't say it, you must think it... "Peter, why are we here, and what's the game plan?"
And believe me, I can come up with game plans, and I do... but if I'm honest, I must tell you, I'm asking the same question. And that would be scary, if I was in charge. But I'm not in charge. I believe He led us to this spot. But trust me, sometimes I feel the waves lapping against my feet, and I don't know the game plan.

Now, I'm just telling you my story ... our story ... but you have an individual story, and if you've followed Jesus for any distance, I bet you've cried out to him, "What are you doing? Are you just gonna watch me drown?"

...

...

Hey! Did you know that I used to be a lifeguard?
And in lifeguard training, they told us that a large person (a person with a lot of self) ... a strong person drowning is particularly difficult to save; for in their strength and fear, as they thrash about, they can drown themselves **and** you.

So the best thing to do ... the most loving thing to do ... is to swim out to them, but remain just at arm's length, out of reach. Tread water, and just watch them drown for a while. Let them exhaust their own strength and their own resources, until entirely weak, you can be their strength... until they have no choice but to trust you. Then you can grab them and swim for them; you can save them.

That's how you save them: you let them drown.
It's the most loving thing to do, but to the person who's drowning, it must not look like love.

Well you know, God can save you whether you're thrashing about in fear or not. Actually, I think He does it all the time. Every heartbeat is a gift, even though you don't believe it. Every moment, you are upheld by grace, even though your heart won't rest in that fact.

God is always saving you, or you would cease to exist. His salvation is objective fact, even if it has not become subjective reality. He is always saving, but you have to know you're drowning in order to know you're saved.

"The Lord is Salvation." He always saves. And yet to be truly saved is to know that you are saved, and to rest in that salvation. It's called Faith. Heaven is resting in the deep knowledge of God's Grace... continually, absolutely, implicitly. Heaven is complete faith in Christ Jesus our Lord... our Lifeguard.

Heaven if faith in the glory and power of “Jesus Christ and Him crucified,” the Lamb standing on the throne, Who fought for you.

[Exodus 14:14]

“The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be still.” The LORD said to Moses, “Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward. Lift up your rod, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the people of Israel may go on dry ground through the sea. And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians, so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen.”

Then the Angel of God ...

The Angel or Messenger of Yahweh is this amazing Old Testament figure. He’s like, fully God and fully man... can you imagine?

Then the Angel of God who went before the host of Israel moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness; and the night passed without one coming near the other all night.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea; and the LORD drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and made the sea dry land, and the waters were divided. And the people of Israel went into the midst of the sea on dry ground, the waters being a wall to them on their right hand and on their left. The Egyptians pursued, and went in after them into the midst of the sea, all Pharaoh’s horses, his chariots, and his horsemen.

Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore. And Israel saw the great work which the LORD did against the Egyptians, and the people feared the LORD; and they believed in the LORD and his servant Moses.

*Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD, saying,
“I will sing to the LORD,
For He has triumphed victoriously;
The horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.
The LORD is my strength and my song,
And He has become my salvation.”*

“The Lord is Salvation.”

This phrase is a name in Hebrew: *Yeh-ho-shoo-ah*.

Joshua in Hebrew.

Jesus in English.

Well, what an experience!

Imagine how they laughed and sang on the western bank of that sea.

You know, they could have laughed and sang just as loud on the eastern bank, if they had had faith in *Ye-ho-shoo-ah*, "The Lord is Salvation." Not a plan, but a person.

Well, after an experience like that, you would tend to think the lesson is over, and that from here on it would be smooth sailing. But was it? You know the story. No, not at all.

Do you realize that none of those Israelites who crossed the Red Sea that day made it all the way to the Promised Land? Except for *Yo-ho-shoo-ah* (Joshua), and maybe Caleb. They all died before they got there... even Moses.

I watched my dad die. He literally drowned. His lungs filled with fluid and He died. We all die. They actually did die in the wilderness. They failed to enter the Promised Rest (Hebrews 4). They drown in their own unfaithfulness and fear. The real sea, which needed parting, was their own unbelief. They sank in that sea. The sea is chaos, unbelief, and fear.

In Numbers 16, some even sank into the deep chaos alive. Numbers 16:32: "The earth swallowed them." It's the same phrase used of the Egyptians in Exodus 15:12: "The earth swallowed them." The sea, the deep, *Tehom*, Sheol, is fear. That is, faithlessness. But faithfulness is the Promised Land.

So you might be thinking, "Great! Just great! Moses didn't have enough faith, Israel didn't have enough faith... maybe Joshua had enough faith, but why would I have enough faith? And hey, maybe I'm an Egyptian, with a heart hardened by God? And maybe this isn't for me, and even if it is for me, why should I trust God to bring me into the Promised Land? He said He'd bring them into the Promised Land, and did He?"

Five times already in Exodus (3:17, 6:8, 12:25, 13:5, and 13:11), God has promised to bring Israel into the Promised Land. And all but Joshua die in the wilderness, and sink into Sheol... often translated "hell." And so preachers say, "For them, there is no hope." But does God keep His promises? Does the Word of God return empty and void? Does the Lord part the sea, or is our hope "clean cut off?"

Listen to Ezekiel 37:11-14

Then he said to me, "Son of man, these bones are the whole house of Israel. Behold, they say, 'Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are clean cut off.' Therefore prophesy, and say to them, 'Thus says the LORD GOD: Behold, I will open our graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will bring you into the land of Israel. And you shall know that I am the LORD when I open your graves and raise you from your graves, O my people. And I will put my Spirit within you (that's a spirit of faithfulness), and you shall live, and I will place you in your own land. Then you shall know that I am the LORD; I have spoken, and I will do it, declares the LORD'."

Jesus is the "Son of Man," Angel of Yahweh, Word of God, and Promise of the Father. And on a Friday, from a Roman cross, He descended into the deep and He led a host of captives free. Matthew 27 – at His death tombs were opened. He is the Faithful One, and He gives to us His Spirit.

You see, the Promised Land is far more than real estate in the Middle East. The Promised Land is real estate in a New Creation, filled with the "knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea," filled with

faithfulness, filled with Jesus, *Ye-ho-shoo-ah*, “The Lord is Salvation.” On the “Day of the Lord,” that salvation is revealed.

And now check out Isaiah 19. Remember God said the Egyptians shall know “I am the Lord.”

[Isaiah 19:28]

And the LORD will make himself known to the Egyptians, and the Egyptians will know the LORD in that day and worship with sacrifice and offering, and they will make vows to the LORD and perform them. And the LORD will strike Egypt, striking and healing, and they will return to the LORD, and he will listen to their pleas for mercy and heal them.

In that day there will be a highway from Egypt to Assyria, and Assyria will come into Egypt, and Egypt into Assyria, and the Egyptians will worship with the Assyrians.

In that day, Israel will be the third with Egypt and Assyria, a blessing in the midst of the earth, whom the LORD of hosts has blessed, saying, “Blessed be Egypt my people, and Assyria the work of my hands, and Israel my inheritance.”

Wow! I think, “The Lord is Salvation,” and not just a little salvation. He keeps His promise, and Jesus is His promise. He even gives faith to the faithless, in the bottom of the sea.

II Timothy 2:13 – “If we are faithless, He remains faithful.”

Romans 3:3-4 – “What if some were unfaithful? Does their faithlessness nullify the faithfulness of God? By no means! Let God be true, though every man be a liar.”

So if you were thinking,

“Hey Peter, this doesn’t apply to me, ‘cause I’ve been unfaithful... untrue...”

“Peter, the Israelites followed the Lord to the sea, but I followed me. I’m unfaithful.”

Well, we’ve all been unfaithful. And in fact, your unfaithfulness is the sea. But when you surrender yourself to the Lord, you can be assured that he’s led you to this point, to face that very sea. “He works all things together for good with those who love him.” All things... even your unfaithfulness.

So, confess your sin – your unfaithfulness – and know you are exactly where you’re supposed to be. And now it’s time to see “The Lord is Salvation” ... see that He is faithful when you are unfaithful, and He gives His faithfulness to you. There can be no greater savior.

Check this out:

I Timothy 4:10 – “*The Living God is the Savior of all people.*”

Wow.

“The Savior of all people ... especially those who believe.”

So maybe, ultimately everyone is saved... and yet heaven is believing you are saved *now*.

Heaven is faith in Grace – completely, absolutely, and implicitly.

Heaven is trust in your Father’s heart.

Heaven is faith in the glory and power of “Jesus Christ and Him crucified.”

Heaven is seeing and believing “The Lord is my salvation,” right here, right now.

So why the journey, and why the crisis at the sea?
Well, it's at the sea that we see Him and learn to trust Him.
It's when we have no direction to look but up...
It's when we finally see that we can't save ourselves that we finally see Him, the Savior.
It's when we face our own faithlessness that He gives us His faithfulness.
It's in our weakness that He is strong.
It's in our failure that we learn to trust Grace.
It's in the drowning that we're saved.

You see, the Promised Land is the Kingdom of Grace.
So unless you trust Grace, you'll never enjoy the Kingdom.

At the start of their journey, Israel was baptized in the sea.
But they don't enter the Promised Land until they follow *Ye-ho-shoo-ah* – Jesus – across the Jordan.
We cross the Jordan when Jesus is fully formed in us... when faith is completed in us...
When we completely trust "The Lord is Salvation."

So, throughout your journey, God in His Mercy will lead you to the edge of the sea.
He'll lead you to defeat in order to know His victory.
He'll show you your faithlessness to show you His Faithfulness.
He'll lead you to despair in order to give you delight.
He'll lead you to the end of yourself in order to see the beginning of Him.
He'll lead you to death so you can live.

It's not murder, it's birth.
It's not contempt, it's love.
It's not bondage, but liberation.
It's not sadism, it's salvation.
"Salvation by grace through faith, and this (this faith) not of yourselves."

"It's when you lose your life," for Jesus' sake and the Gospel...
"It's when you lose your life that you find it."
It's been waiting for you.
It's eternal.
It's Jesus walking to you on the sea.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus said, "Whoever hears my word and believes has eternal life. He does not come into Judgment, and He does not see or taste death 'into the age', but has passed from death into life."

I think that means He doesn't sink into the sea.
He is not trapped by the sea: the Abyss, Tehom, Sheol, Hell...
When his body stops working, that person goes right on home to the Promised Land, for the Promised Land has already come home to him. The Kingdom of God is within Him, and Heaven is at hand.

The summer after I graduated from high school, I worked as a lifeguard at the Green Oaks Community Pool in Littleton. I only saved one person, but I saved him quite a bit. His name was Michael.

Michael was 5 years old, without an ounce of fat on his body. Michael absolutely loved the water, but couldn't swim. Routinely, he'd get this wild look in his eyes, and just run off and jump into the pool. Shallow end or deep end, it didn't matter ... he'd drown in either one.

And so routinely, I'd save him. But what always amazed me was that as I swam to him ... or walked to him in the shallow end ... even as he'd be thrashing about and gasping for air, his eyes would be bright with joy... and Michael would be laughing... always laughing, like he was in heaven, even as he drowned in the sea.

I'd pull him out and give him little talks:
"Michael, don't drown. Michael, you could die... you could die!"
I remember him looking up and saying,
"Does that mean I can't swim anymore?"
And I said, "Yes."

I'd try to get mad at Michael, 'cause he did the dumbest things.
I'd try to get mad at Michael, but I just couldn't... 'cause he'd look at me with those big bright eyes, as if to say, "But peter, why should I be afraid? Whenever I start drowning, you swim for me, and I have only to be still."

Even as his body thrashed about, his heart was resting in me.
He would laugh while drowning, 'cause he knew I was his savior.
He sang the song of salvation in the midst of the sea because of me.

Michael was my favorite.
He laughed while drowning, and that laughter is faith.
And faith is the entire lesson.
Faith is what the Lord, our Savior, longs to see.

I think about Michael all the time.
Michael means "One like God," and Michael is an angel.
I saved Michael, and God is still using Michael to save me.
To laugh while drowning is faith, and when you're full of faith, you're done with the journey.
You're home.

So here's the deal:
I don't know what will happen in 2011.
You could win the lottery, and you could go bankrupt.
You could get married, and you could get divorced.
You could be miraculously healed, or you could get cancer and die.
I don't know what will happen, but I know you can laugh.

And I don't know exactly what will happen with the Sanctuary.
I think we're right where we're supposed to be.
I think God is asking us to "step out."
But I don't know the game plan.
We don't know the game plan, but we know the Player.

We know what Israel did not know that day by the sea: we know “God is Salvation.”
We know Jesus.

Will there be sorrow? Yes. But “Rejoice in the Lord Always.”
And so He wants us to laugh.
That laughter parts the sea.
It’s faith in the midst of the sea.
And faith is the entire lesson.

So here’s the deal:
He is the deal.

Communion

On that night, when the Evil One thought he had everyone pinned against the sea, the Angel of Yahweh – the Word of God, Promise of God, Passover Lamb, the Revelation of God, *Ye-ho-sho-ah*, the Faithful One – took bread, and having given thanks, He broke it, saying, “This is my body given to you. Take and eat.”

And in the same way, He took the cup, saying, “This is the New Covenant in my blood, poured out for the forgiveness of sins. Drink of it, all of you.”

“So fear not. Stand firm. See the salvation of the Lord.
He will fight for you, and you have only to be still.”

This is *Ye-ho-sho-ah*.
Follow Him; be filled with Him, and you, the elect...
You have been called by God to sing the song of Salvation in the midst of the sea.