

FAITH HOLDS ON WHEN YOU FACE DEATH

Seventh in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin on *Living by Faith* from Exodus 12:21-42

“And it will come about when you enter the land which the Lord will give you, as He has promised, that you shall observe this rite.” Exodus 12:25

Nobel laureate Elie Wiesel was a teenager when he and his family as Jews were sent to a Nazi concentration camp. In his acclaimed book, *Night*, he recounts the whole, horrible experience. It begins with a description of his father’s death at the hands of SS guards, and the impact it had upon him. It was at Buchenwald on the night of January 28, 1945: *I remember that night, the most horrendous of my life: “...Eliezer, my son, come here...I want to tell you something...Only to you...Come, don’t leave me alone...Eliezer...” I heard his voice, grasped the meaning of his words and the tragic dimension of the moment, yet I did not move. It had been his last wish to have me next to him in his agony, at the moment when his soul was tearing itself from his lacerated body—yet I did not let him have his wish. I was afraid. Afraid of the blows. That was why I remained deaf to his cries. Instead of sacrificing my miserable life and rushing to his side, taking his hand, reassuring him, showing him that he was not abandoned, that I was near him, that I felt his sorrow, instead of all that, I remained flat on my back, asking God to make my father stop calling my name, to make him stop crying. So afraid was I to incur the wrath of the SS. In fact, my father was no longer conscious. Yet his plaintive, harrowing voice went on piercing the silence and calling me, nobody but me.*

“Well?” The SS had flown into a rage and was striking my father on the head: “Be quiet, old man! Be quiet!” My father no longer felt the club’s blows; I did. And yet I did not react. I let the SS beat my father, I left him alone in the clutches of death. Worse: I was angry with him for having been noisy, for having cried, for provoking the wrath of the SS. “Eliezer! Eliezer! Come, don’t leave me alone...” His voice had reached me from so far away, from so close. But I had not moved. I shall never forgive myself. Nor shall I ever forgive the world for having pushed me against the wall, for having turned me into a stranger, for having awakened in me the basest, most primitive instincts. His last word had been my name. A summons. And I had not responded. (New York, 2006, xi-xii)

The people of Israel were slaves in Egypt. Moses had gone to Pharaoh and demanded that he set God’s people free. Pharaoh had refused. Then, at last, God began to move. The plagues—literally in the Hebrew the word is strokes—began to fall, little by little driving Egypt to its knees. The Nile turned to blood, the land was overrun by frogs, gnats infested the country, then swarms of flies, then a pestilence that struck down the livestock in the fields, then the people were afflicted by boils, and that was followed by a cloud of locusts that denuded the growing things. The locusts were followed a storm unlike any in Egyptian history. Hail tore apart anything the locusts had overlooked. And then, night. Exodus 10:21 describes it as *“darkness which may be felt.”* Thick, utter blackness, frightening, descending like a blanket at midday. Nine plagues in all.

And then, the worst. Exodus 11:4-5 records, *“And Moses said, ‘Thus says the Lord, “About midnight I am going out into the midst of Egypt, and all the first-born in the*

land of Egypt shall die, from the first born of the Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the first born of the slave girl who is behind the millstones; all the first-born of the cattle as well.”” The first-born, heir to the inheritance, future of the family. At midnight there would be death. Turn with me to Exodus chapter 12, verses 21-42 and we shall examine three topics: **1. Escaping Death, 2. Exiting Egypt, and 3. Entering life.**

1. Escaping Death. With the threat of death in the air, Exodus 12:21 says, “*Then Moses called for all the elders of Israel, and said to them, Go and take for yourselves lambs according to your families, and slay the Passover lamb.*” There were more instructions than this, of course, and they had been thoroughly circulated among the families of Israel. The lamb that they killed was to be roasted over the fire. The people should eat this meal dressed in clothes suitable for traveling, their feet wearing hiking shoes. They should eat the meal standing up, awaiting only the call to move out. And they were to bake unleavened bread that they could carry with them, for during the next seven days they would have no time to stop and bake bread in the normal way. The word had been passed, and the Egyptian people themselves had gotten wind of it. A breath of expectation electrified the atmosphere. And now Moses gathered the heads of the clans and gave the signal. The exodus was about to begin. But first, death. Kill the lamb.

Moses continued in verse 22. “*Catch the lamb’s blood in a basin. Take a branch of the hyssop plant and use it like a paint brush to spread the blood on the lintel and doorposts of your front door. Then get inside and huddle with your family—and for goodness sake, stay inside.*” Verse 23: “*For the Lord will pass through to smite the Egyptians; and when He sees the blood on the lintel and on the two doorposts, the Lord will pass over the door and will not allow the destroyer to come in to your houses to smite you.*”

It almost seems silly, doesn’t it, to think that a few smears of lamb’s blood could keep death out of your house? The city of Galveston, Texas sat on an island in the waters of the Gulf of Mexico, just eight feet above sea level at its highest elevation. Galveston was the second richest city in America, figured by per capita income. It was the only deep water port in Texas, and its residents were proud of their city with its grand architecture and sophisticated theater. In 1891 the chief of the United States Weather Bureau in Galveston, a man named Isaac Cline, wrote in the newspaper that there was no need for the city to construct a sea wall to protect itself against hurricanes. The shallow waters of the Gulf would dissipate a storm surge, he argued; and besides, no hurricane had struck the city since its founding in 1839. But on the morning of September 8, 1900 Isaac Cline rode along the beach in a horse cart urging wave-watchers to leave the city. He had received reports from Washington about a hurricane in the Gulf, and that morning the tides were running much higher than usual. Most of the citizens of Galveston remained unfazed, however. The streets often flooded, but the city had never been seriously damaged. But one by one the bridges to the mainland collapsed and everyone on the island was trapped. At 6:30 PM a huge wave submerged the city to a depth of 15 feet. Some fifty people took refuge in Cline’s home and shut and bolted the door to ride out the storm. By 8:00 a number of broken houses had lodged themselves against Cline’s house, and with the pounding of the waves these became a battering ram. At 8:30 Cline’s

house collapsed. Of the fifty inside only 18 survived. Cline's wife was among those who died. In all, over 8000 perished in what is America's greatest natural disaster.

The people of Israel had seen the effects of the plagues on the Egyptians. They had come somewhat belatedly to believe God, and now they believed Moses as God's prophet. Verse 27 says, "*The people bowed low and worshiped.*" That's the first response of faith. When God tells you of danger and when he tells you how you may escape death, you bow and give thanks. Then, verse 28 says, "*The sons of Israel went and did...just as the Lord had commanded Moses and Aaron.*" They killed their lambs. They painted their doorposts red with blood. They gathered their wives and children, their elderly parents, their closest friends, and they went inside, shut and bolted the doors of their houses, and held on through the night that death came knocking.

2. Exiting Egypt. Now the narrative tells us what happened. Verses 29-30 report, "*It came about at midnight that the Lord struck all the first-born in the land of Egypt, from the first-born of Pharaoh who sat on the throne to the first-born of the captive who was in the dungeon, and all the first-born of cattle. And Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his servants and all the Egyptians; and there was a great cry in Egypt, for there was no home where there was not someone dead.*" The Bible says that "*The wages of sin is death.*" (Romans 6:23) Ultimately everyone in Egypt would die. And every one of the Israelites of that generation would die. You and I will one day drink the bitter draught of death, for all of us have sinned against God and one another. Each of us has forfeited the right to life. But what we learn here is that it is God who controls the moment and the manner of our death. That night in Egypt death was very selective. When I was growing up I remember hearing this story and thinking to myself, if I were living in Egypt that night, it would be I who died, for I am a first-born. I'd look over at my younger brother and think, "That rat! He'd still be alive! He'd get all my toys and my baseball card collection!" Every Egyptian home. You can imagine the awful cry of grief that assaulted the night sky. Every block. Every street. No corner of the land where sorrow did not invade the hearts of parents and younger brothers and sisters.

The next verse, verse 31 reveals that in spite of the grief, the government of Egypt was still functioning. Pharaoh summoned Moses and Aaron who were waiting expectantly for the call. When they arrived at the palace, the king said to them, "Get out! Get out! Get out!" Look at verse 33. In the neighborhoods around where the Israelites lived, people came out of their houses and banged on the Israelite doors, and they began pushing them into the streets, urging them to leave Egypt. Or "*we shall all be dead,*" they said. Verse 36 says they began stuffing money, gold and jewelry into the hands of the Israelites, paying them to leave. Verse 36 says, "*Thus they plundered the Egyptians.*" Without a shot. With no show of arms, the Israelites stripped Egypt bare.

I want you to see something fascinating in verse 37. It says there were 600,000 Israelite men in this grand exit procession—plus women and children. There must have been something well over two million people who left that night. Some scholars have scoffed at that number, saying that Israel wasn't in Egypt long enough to have grown to a population of such magnitude. But the answer is only one verse away, in verse 38. "*And*

a mixed multitude also went up with them.” Who were this mixed multitude? Well, probably captives from other nations. And probably quite a lot of Egyptians, Egyptians who had lived alongside the Israelites and had heard from them about the true God who is greater than the gods of Egypt, people who had seen with their own eyes the effects of the plagues. Perhaps they were people who had believed that the blood of a lamb could protect their household through that night of death. Perhaps they’d followed the example of the Israelites and painted their doorposts red and had by that means survived. These were friends and neighbors, perhaps families whose sons or daughters had married an Israelite girl or young man. They had decided to cast their lot with those who were on their way to a long-promised land, a land where righteousness would reign and God would be worshiped. They were people who by faith had chosen life instead of death. Verses 40-41 tell us that there was one very special God-touch that he is so good at. The people of Israel had been in Egypt 430 years, and they left on the exact day of the four hundred thirtieth anniversary of their arrival in that country.

3. Entering life. Back in verses 24-25 God had given the Israelites a commandment concerning the Passover. *“You shall observe this event as an ordinance for you and your children forever. And it will come about when you enter the land which the Lord will give you, as He has promised, that you shall observe this rite.”* Let me return to Elie Wiesel for a moment. I may not have this exactly right, as I’ve received it second or third hand. Wiesel spoke at the Koger Center last week to an overflow crowd. During his talk or in the question and answer period that followed, he related a story about a Frenchman he knew after World War II. Every time they met the Frenchman told Wiesel that he loved Jesus. Wiesel said to him with a touch of cynicism, “I have seen women and children suffer more than Jesus ever did.” Then he closed his book, rose from the table, turned his back, and walked silently away. The man came running after him, put his hand on Wiesel’s shoulder and said, “Elie, wait! We have to talk.” But Elie Wiesel kept going.

In Matthew 26:17-19, the evangelist says, *“Now on the first day of Unleavened Bread the disciples came to Jesus, saying, ‘Where do You want us to prepare for You to eat the Passover?’”* Here it is, something like a thousand four hundred years after the Exodus, and they are still observing the Passover and remembering that night of escape from death and exit from Egypt. *“And [Jesus] said to them, ‘Go into the city to a certain man, and say to him, ‘The Teacher says, ‘My time is at hand. I am to keep the Passover at your house with My disciples.’”’ And the disciples did as Jesus had directed them; and they prepared the Passover.”* In the upper room they gathered, and during the Passover meal, Jesus transformed the meaning of the Passover. *“Jesus took some bread, and after a blessing, He broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat, this is my body.’”* (v 26) Just as the Israelites had eaten the roast lamb they had killed, Jesus was now saying that he was the Passover lamb, the one the Passover lamb had symbolized from the beginning. *“And when He had taken a cup and given thanks, He gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink from it, all of you; for this is My blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for forgiveness of sins.’”* (v 27-28) After the meal, as the Israelites had done so long before, Jesus and his disciples walked out of the city, and

Jesus made the journey not to life, but to death—the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. He was going to paint his blood on the doorway to eternal life—his cross.

It was nearly a year ago that Mittie Hatch died. She was a much beloved member of this church whose life sparkled with life and enthusiasm for eighty-six years. She'd buried one son who had died as a missionary in Latin America. But in her sorrow she kept coming to worship. Then her beloved husband Buck died, leaving her alone in the world. She missed him terribly, but she kept coming to worship, sharing in a women's Bible study group with ladies much younger than she. Then she suffered a blood clot on a long airplane trip, and the doctors had to remove her leg. That trapped her in a wheelchair. I remember her coming only after persistent persuasion to our house for a special dinner. Strong men lifted her chair and carried her up the steps. And then she suffered a stroke, and the use of her good leg was lost. But she remained cheerful and continued to come to worship. Little by little her body was dying, but not her mind and not her faith. I'd go to visit her and she'd tell me, "I don't know why God is keeping me alive. I've told him I'm ready to go to heaven." Then she'd laugh and go on to other things, telling the nurses and her caregivers about Jesus right up to the end. Her funeral here was packed and it was a celebration, for Mittie Hatch knew something many people don't.

It's written by the apostle in I Thessalonians 4:13-18. *"We do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve, as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive, and remain until the coming of the Lord, shall not precede those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel, and with the trumpet of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up to meet the Lord in the air, and thus we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words."*

Do you know Jesus Christ? Have you spread the blood of Christ over the door of your life, over your family? The God who kept his promise to Israel will keep it for you. if you trust in the shed blood of Jesus Christ as all that is necessary to take away your sins. By his grace you will live and not die. You will enter eternal life when life here comes to an end. Do you have friends who need to know this? Are there neighbors you care about who haven't heard? Oh, fellow Christian, it is imperative for their safety that you and I bring them inside where they can live forever under the doorpost painted red by the blood of the lamb, the door that the angel of death will never pass through.

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