

What is God like? Did God make the world, put it in our hands, and then leave us to our own devices? Are people simply subject to the vicissitudes of life while God casually watches from a distance? Is God the “primary cause” as Aquinas says, who created the universe and then left it to be governed by the natural “secondary” causes God set in place? Is God really here?

The book of Exodus answers that question. But it doesn’t answer by a theological treatise; it tells a story of people’s lives; the story gives a profoundly clear answer: God is not inactive nor the least bit remote. God is quite the opposite: God is deeply involved with the world and has a very distinct will for humans. We know the story. It’s the story of *The Ten Commandments*. It’s the story of dangerous adventure, terrible slavery, miracles, and the long journey to the Promised Land.

It’s a story that began with Abraham. Do you remember the promise? God told one barren couple that they would produce a huge nation, so large its people could not be counted. And here it is, 400 years later. How is the promise working out? Let’s listen to the story. READ Ex 1:5-14

It’s most likely the 13th Century BCE. When Joseph and his 11 brothers first settled in Goshen they were seventy strong. They settled in a remote area in the northeastern delta of the Nile, and lived there peacefully for many years. Following generations had a population explosion. God said “be fruitful and multiply” and they did. So now they have a national identity. They are God’s people.

Because they are God’s people this is not your ordinary story, but a spiritually profound story that shapes our faith. It teaches us that God’s involved. Therefore, historical events are not random, but have meaning and purpose. History – specifically, *your own life* – is the arena in which God acts. It’s the arena through which God teaches the next generation and carries faith forward. How’s it going? Where are your children in the faith? Nationally, it’s not going well. But it’s never too late – as long as there is a breath in your body. You are God’s teaching agent, so this story could be your story; your story is just as important.

The Israelites are numerous and Egypt is frightened of them. Scared they will partner with one of their enemies and conquer them. Goshen, because it was undeveloped had become an “alleyway” for foreign tribes to enter Egypt. That’s why Pharaoh, Rameses II, developed the area. He built two cities there. His cities are documented, as is the name Israel. So this is a true story. It really happened, showing that God is not inept or incapable or unwilling to be actively involved with the world God created.

Do you really believe you own your life as a Christian? Do you believe God has a purpose for you? If you ignore God, God becomes a great problem. Egypt ignored God. Eventually it cost them dearly. But if you follow God carefully, seeking to obey God, you will find the power of God working out in your life to achieve God’s plans victoriously. But, as we read, the Israelites were not experiencing victory and blessing, but a crushing trial.

Now, we love stories of people overcoming trials against all odds. I’ll be frank, though, we struggle with suffering and trials; trials cause ambiguity about God.

God sends this family to Egypt so they don't starve to death, it goes well, but then time passes, their goodwill and value is forgotten, and the people who originally extended a hand to them begin to oppress them, for no fault of their own.

Trials often seem to come upon us without cause; as random events, disconnected from our behavior. So we tend to blame God, or have a higher expectation of God, or perhaps even think, *"if I were God I would have done things differently. I would not have sent those people to Egypt just to make them suffer. No, if I had the power of God I would have put a little bubble around them to protect them, bringing them back to the promised land without so much as a sweat."*

Well, perhaps that sounds a little overblown. We don't expect quite that much help from God. But where does one draw the line? Where do our trials begin to cause us to get really cranky toward God and judge God's ways of doing things?

If there is anything we resent, it's trials and suffering. We would simply rather do without them. But the reality is, God allows trials, small and severe.

Once I went on a retreat at a Benedictine Monastery in Valyermo, CA,. I met a monk named Brother Peter, from China. Stooped with age now, Brother Peter's right hand is horribly crippled, caused from torture by the Chinese government when he was imprisoned in the 1950's because he was a Christian. Yet he joyfully served tables at dinner that night, pitcher of water swinging on his broken fingers. Here's what this man has to say about his time of trial:

The adverse circumstances and hard struggles made me discouraged in heart and uncertain of the future, but did not extinguish my raging fire of love for the Lord, nor shake my will to fight to the death. Rather, regardless of success or failure, good or bad fortune, I made up my mind to fight to win or die. In His love, the Lord, in the end, crowned my battle with victory.¹

Trials in God's hands do not diminish us but they bring great fruit..

The Bible is not silent that there will be trials. Some trials in the Bible include:

- The command Jesus gave his disciples to feed the 5000 when they were in the wilderness with no resources. That is still a command for us today.
- The storm on the sea. If Jesus were with you in the boat, wouldn't you think you would be exempt?
- Watching Jesus' crucifixion. It was such a trial all the disciples ran away.
- Later, the disciples experienced beatings and jail as they traveled to share the good news. As a friend says, "I'm supposed to want to do that?"

Trials. We just can't seem to avoid them. But it's through trials that God's power and victory come.

At the same time, the Bible guides us through trials.

¹<http://www.valyermo.com/>, accessed 1/8/10.

- Paul writes in Romans, “We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For … he predestined (us) to be conformed to the image of his Son…” (8:28-29).
- Peter tells us, “There is wonderful joy ahead, even though you have to endure many trials for a little while. These trials will show that your faith is genuine. It is being tested as fire tests and purifies gold-- So when your faith remains strong through many trials, it will bring you praise and glory and honor in the day of Jesus Christ …” (1 Pet 1:6-7).
- Hebrews tells us Jesus was tested as a way to learn obedience to prepare him for his future. He endured the cross, disregarding its shame. Now he is seated in the place of honor beside God's throne. (Heb 12:2-3).

So the Bible never promises an easy road. But it does promise two things: that God is with us and that God's purpose prevails; regardless of who opposes you.

In this case Egypt tried to eliminate Israel, but instead, God made them fruitful. God prevailed over horrendous circumstances, miraculous, considering the threat.

Do you notice the miracles in the midst of your trials?

Let's take our trials at FPCD over the last year. Wouldn't you call our building woes a trial? As one thing after another happened, I began praying, “Okay God, could you let up? Could you give us a break here?” No, it seemed relentless, until I finally said, *What are you doing, God?* But what did we learn during those trials?

- It taught us we care about the church building, and we gave to fix it.
- It taught us we can give more than we think. We are not the worse for it, but better.
- Even with \$30,000 of extra expenses, we actually ended the year, financially in the black. God provided, even though it seemed like things were literally falling down around us. God worked miracles.

The trials tested us. God wondered, how would FPCD respond? It matters what we do, to God. Would we give up? Think we couldn't do it? **We didn't give up, we stepped up.** We learned we could do more than we thought we could. We are stronger now, and more intentioned.

Trials accomplish something. They sharpen our resolve; they give us courage; they help us to focus on what is important. God acts in the midst of trial to bless us, and to accomplish his purposes. When we trust him they let us see the power of God.

Are you trusting God in your trial today? Or do you resist Him?

Let's think about the blessings, the magnificent plans that were accomplished:

- Maundy Thursday service and the big cross we carried out
- The choir's Easter cantata; the Christmas Cantata; the advent skits
- Puppet plays, the children's musical
- hiring a youth pastor and having nine youth confirmed
- Youth mission trip
- Taking sandwiches every month to Austin Street Shelter

- Wonderful powerpoint
- Storytellers telling Bible stories; Excellent liturgists
- Movie Nights, how many dinners did we have?
- The talent show – 42 people shared their talents
- Learning to have Holy Conversations

Do you see the magnificent blessing of God? God made Israel fruitful. Do you see how fruitful God is making you?

Now that we know we can do more than we think we can, we can have the courage necessary to step out this year, extending our vision and our budget; to live confident that God is here, God has power.

It's naïve to expect a "bubble of God's protection" around you just because you are a believer. Life brings trials; but God uses trials and God brings blessing. When trials come, step up to the responsibility. God will make you stronger. That's what faith is all about; trusting God in times of trial. We can count on the fact that God will accomplish God's purpose for us; nothing, NOTHING can stop it. AMEN