

## **Between A Rock And A Hard Place**

*By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land;  
but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.*

*By faith the walls of Jericho fell,  
after the army had marched around them for seven days.*

*Hebrews 11:29-30*

When I was in college, I had to take a class that involved a 12-day wilderness expedition in the Adirondack mountains. My group spent the majority of our trip kayaking through the waters in the mountain range, but before we set off, we did a few “team-building” activities – two ropes courses – high and low, and a rock wall.

The morning that we got to the rock wall, it was overcast, threatening rain. I was the last person in our group to attempt the rock wall, and by the time I got strapped in, it was pouring. The rock face was slippery, hard to hold on to. As I began to climb up, I would find a few footholds, make it a few feet, and then slip back down a foot.

Two steps forward, one step back.

When I finally made it about halfway up the rock face, rain pelting my face, thoroughly soaked, I came to a ledge that I had to find a way around. I tried a few different ways around, under, and over the ledge, but without success. I looked down at my belayer, and asked, “Can I just repel down? I can’t get around this!” My leader looked up at me and smiled before she replied, “You can do it. I’m not letting you quit.” Talk about being stuck between a literal rock and a hard place.

I was stuck. Couldn’t go down, I could only press forward. And that ledge? It wasn’t budging. I had to find a way around the ledge, but I couldn’t see a way around by myself. The rest of my team, soaking wet on the ground below or above me, began to show me things that I couldn’t see myself. “Try putting your foot on that hold about two feet to your left!” they called. “Okay, now put your hand there – yeah, there – and move so that you’re hanging under the ledge. Now you can maneuver around that rock – yeah, there you go – and put your right foot two feet to the right...” They continued to help me get around the ledge, seeing things that I couldn’t, until I finally hoisted my soaking wet self over the top of that rock wall.

It's a beautiful image of what God does with us. Sees things that we can't, giving us ways out when we're stuck between a rock and a hard place – whether literally or figuratively. Because if we admit it to ourselves, we find ourselves between rocks and hard places a lot. And more often than not, like I did on that rock wall, we try to find ways out on our own, when all along we should be placing our faith in and relying on the One who has seen us through every trial, every storm, every rough patch. The One who bore our sins on the cross, died for us, and rose again, preparing a place for us in heaven.

The Israelites were no strangers to rocks and hard places. And both of the stories that we come to next in Hebrews 11 reveal their doubts and complaints against the God who led them out of Egypt, and the sovereignty and power of God, who provides a way out of those rocks and hard places.

### The Red Sea

The last time we studied this story, we focused on the leader, Moses. His great faith in God in the midst of great doubt allowed God's people to be freed from slavery to the Egyptians and to come to the Promised Land. Just like Moses, the Israelites weren't without their own doubts, fears, and complaints. Both of the stories we'll look at today show the great faith of the people that brought about God's work, even in the midst of doubt.

*Read Exodus 14. Yes, I know you read this same chapter when we studied Moses. But this time, read it with the focus on the people's faith. What do you notice about the story when you focus on the people rather than Moses?*

When Moses told the people to turn back and set up camp, they probably didn't have any problem with it. But, then, they didn't know that Pharaoh was pursuing them yet. When they did see that Pharaoh and his army were coming after them, they realized that they were trapped between the oncoming army and the Red Sea. "They said to Moses, 'Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone, let us serve the

Egyptians’? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!” (Exodus 14:11-12, NIV) “We’re trapped!” I would have shouted. “How do you expect us to get out of this one, Moses? Our animals can’t swim that far, and I don’t think I can either. And we’re certainly not prepared to fight – we have nothing. We’re doomed!”

What strikes me most about Moses’ response and the Lord’s words to Moses in verses 13 through 18 is that Moses comforts the Israelites by telling them that the Lord will come through, that He will provide. But then, we learn that Moses (or at least Moses on behalf of the people) had been complaining to God. “Then the Lord said to Moses, “Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the waters so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground.” (Exodus 14:15-16, NIV) As the Israelites walked through the walls of water, I wonder if they looked up and marveled at the greatness of their God. I wonder if they still kept looking over their shoulders, wondering how far the Egyptians would pursue them.

In the midst of fear and doubt, their faith prevailed. Between the Red Sea and Pharaoh’s army, they placed their faith in the God who had rescued them from Egypt and would continue to do so, despite their continued failures.

God provided a miraculous way out of this rock and hard place. And it’s clear in the next chapter of Exodus that the Israelites realized just how miraculous the act of parting the Red Sea was. But even though they saw this miracle, walked across the Red Sea on dry land, and were delivered from slavery to the Egyptians by God, they still found reasons to complain the next time they were between a rock and a hard place – and it doesn’t even take that long! Not even five verses after they finish their song of praise, they grumble to Moses that they can’t drink the water at Marah (Exodus 15:22-24). When God provides water for them, they were grateful, but found reason to complain again in the next chapter when they have no food. “The Israelites said to them, “If only we had died by the Lord’s hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death.”” (Exodus 16:3, NIV) God provides them with bread and quail, daily food to sustain them, before they again complain that they have no water at Rephidim (Exodus 17:1-7). Amazing, isn’t it, how many times, and how quickly the Israelites fall into complaining when they get stuck between rocks and hard places? But God still provides for them. Their faith, even in the midst of doubt, fear, and complaining, prevailed.

## Jericho

The next story we come to in Hebrews 11 is a familiar one to many of us who have grown up in Sunday school or seen Veggie Tales. Now, there were no French peas taunting the Israelites, raining down purple slushies on their heads in the Biblical account, but there probably was taunting, laughing, and name-calling coming from the inhabitants of the city. When we come to this story in Joshua chapter 5, Moses has died, leaving the leadership of the Israelites in the hands of Joshua. Joshua leads the people from the desert, across the Jordan, and into the Promised Land.

*Read Joshua 5:13-6:27*

There is no record of the Israelites complaining about being stuck between the Jordan River and the walls of Jericho, but with their track record, you can bet that there were a few people who probably grumbled a bit. And then Joshua gave them such cryptic instructions that he received from the Lord – march around the city once every day for six days and then on the seventh day march around seven times, give a loud shout, and the walls will fall. Even if they didn't complain, I'd bet they had some questions for Joshua. "What do you mean, walk around the wall? Do you want us to look like fools, Joshua? What are you thinking?"

And yet, the Israelites' faith wins out again over their fears and doubts and questions. God comes through with another miraculous way out, but only after they have followed His instructions by faith.

*Imagine being one of those people, walking around the wall on that seventh day. And then, with a shout, the walls just come crumbling down. What do you think your reaction may have been like?*

The Israelites, despite their doubts, saw God, again, get them out of their rock and hard place. Their faith was bigger than their fears and insecurities, and they are commended for that faith in Hebrews 11.

*When you get stuck between a rock and a hard place, what is your first reaction? Fear? Doubt? Anger? Complaining?*

When I'm stuck between a rock and a hard place, it's easy to fall into patterns of fear, doubt, insecurity, anger, and complaining. It's so much harder to ask God what He is doing in this place, what He is teaching you. Harder to place your faith in the One who you know is faithful – because we want to find a way out on our own, to do it all ourselves.

But placing our faith in Christ, even when we can't see a way out – maybe even especially when – is what we are called to do. Because He will provide a way out, or hold you up under the trial. But He will always be faithful.

This life is not without its fears, doubts, rocks, and hard places. So when you find yourself between one this week, remember the Red Sea, and Jericho. And have faith that He is greater than any rock or hard place we face.