

## LIVING IN THE LIGHT

By Andrew Wilson  
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Exodus 15: 19-25; 16:1-6  
Philippians 4:4-9

How many of you have seen the new *Godzilla*? Darren Kennedy and I caught the late showing at the Academy Theater last Wednesday night. (That's the one where you get a movie ticket, a drink, and a small popcorn swimming in butter flavored oil for \$5.) As we were exiting the theater Darren posed our *Godzilla* discussion question: "OK: Great movie? Or GREATEST MOVIE EVER?!"

The climax of the Exodus story – the part where God parts the sea - is without question, the greatest story in the Old Testament. With pivotal help from God in the form of 10 horrific plagues, Moses convinces Pharaoh to let the Hebrew people go. You may recall, however, that Pharaoh soon repents of his decision. He sends his army – the largest in the world – to chase them down. The army traps God's chosen ones along the shore of a great ocean. But just when the soldiers are about to cut the Hebrews to pieces, the Lord parts the water and leads them through the water to the far shore. Then as the Egyptians are passing through, the Lord releases the walls of water and the entire army is destroyed.

At this point in the story the Hebrews are watching the bodies of their enemies wash up on the beach. And they're feeling like champions. Their march to freedom suddenly seems unstoppable. They sing a victory song that's recorded in Exodus, chapter 15:

"The Lord is a warrior; the Lord is his name;  
Pharaoh's chariots and his army he has hurled into the sea...  
In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed.  
In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling."  
- Exodus 15: 1, 13

That's a wonderfully inspiring story, especially when you consider how it foreshadows the work of Jesus in delivering us from sin and death. But my message today isn't about God's stupendous miracle. It's about what happens just after the miracle. Sadly, the thrill of victory doesn't last for God's people. Within three short days, they experience their first trial in the wilderness. And they immediately start singing the blues.

I'm reading now from Exodus 15, starting at verse 22:

For three days [the Hebrew people] traveled in the desert without finding water. When they came to Marah, they could not drink its water because it was bitter. [Marah means "bitter" in Hebrew.] ...So the people grumbled against Moses, saying, "What are we to drink?"

Then Moses cried out to the Lord, and the Lord showed him a piece of wood. He threw it into the water, and the water became sweet.

- Exodus 15:22-24

Once again, God comes through for Moses. The people show that they still don't trust either Moses or the Lord, but God saves them anyway.

Fast-forward another month. The Israelites have again run out of food and water. This time they seem to be on the edge of despair. They've forgotten all about the mind-blowing miracles God has performed on their behalf. They've stopped thinking about the Promised Land. Things look so awful to them that they've actually started to pine for their old life in Egypt.

They gripe to Moses and Aaron:

"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 into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death."

- Exodus 16:3

It's hard to be sympathetic to the Israelites in this moment because we see the big picture. We know that, as slaves in Egypt, they weren't sitting around pots eating their fill of filet mignon. Instead they were eating tiny rations of mashed grain and were going to bed hungry every night. They're romanticizing their experience in bondage. We also know God is eventually going to give them a wonderful place to call home.

Be that as it may, the Israelites really are in dire straits. They're stuck in a desert wilderness every bit as harsh as our own Mojave Desert. And remember: There are tens of thousands of them struggling to live off the land and they're on the verge of starvation. We have to wonder: What would we have done if we had been stuck out there with them? Would we have behaved any differently? Probably not.

God's response to this second round of whining and complaining speaks volumes about his character. He's patient. He's tolerant. He doesn't lecture them or chastise his children. Instead, he suddenly and miraculously provides them with more than enough to eat.

Obviously the Israelites have a major attitude problem. And it isn't hard to diagnose the situation. Most of them are still thinking and acting like slaves. Their physical chains have been broken, but mentally and spiritually they're still living in bondage. They're still expecting the shoe to drop for them at any minute. They're weighed down by a defeatist mindset that says: "Life has given me way more trouble than I can handle – I'm ticked off about it – and I'm completely entitled to feel that way."

As strange as these ancient stories are, they speak directly to one of the greatest problems plaguing our society. An alarming number of us have become whiney, glass-half-empty people. Like the children of

Israel, we've gotten caught in cycles of negative thinking that affect every aspect of our lives, most importantly our relationship with God. When something good happens we see the glass as half-empty. When something bad happens we assume the situation can only get worse. When things don't go the way we want, we become resentful. And when we fail in our basic responsibilities, we find someone else to blame.

It's easy to account for the downbeat mentality of the wandering Hebrews. The Lord showed his tender compassion in leading them and feeding them. But life for them was relentlessly demanding. For 40 years they drifted from one desolate patch of wilderness to another in search of a homeland. It's harder to understand the wave of whininess that has overtaken us. We live in a land of astonishing opportunity. We're part of the wealthiest society in human history. Most of us have been blessed in ways that were beyond imagining for most people in history. Why then are so many of us so down on life?

There's no easy answer.

For many people, negativity begins in childhood. When they're very young they're wounded by their parents or maybe by a brother or sister or an aunt or uncle. They might be neglected. They might be abused in some way. Regardless of the cause of their pain, they carry it with them into adolescence or adulthood. They feel sad or angry and don't know why. They cry or lash out sometimes for no apparent reason. They can be unpleasant or even cruel. They lack self-confidence. They worry that they have no future.

In short, their struggles with unhappiness are rooted in learned behaviors that they don't fully understand. In most instances, it's hard for those who were neglected or abused as kids to change because they feel they have a right to their negativity. They've learned to cope with trouble by complaining, or by fishing around for sympathy, or by hurting people. Often they'll use passive-aggressive behavior to get what they want. Most of us know people who do this. They gently ask us for some favor or for some form of attention. Then, if they don't get what they want from us, they punish us by acting hurt or by withholding affection from us.

Such behaviors obviously tend to damage friendships and drive people away. But people who carry wounds from childhood are often clueless about relationships. They don't know what a healthy friendship or marriage looks like.

For some negativity begins in early childhood, but for many others it's a more deliberate choice. It's something they pick up from their peers, or from digital media, or as an offshoot of their political ideology. Maybe they start out happy and well-adjusted. But gradually, maybe over the course of many years, they become infected with a spirit of cynicism. They discover a perverse satisfaction in complaining. Their complaining becomes habitual. They carp at their co-workers. They criticize their spouse. They bully their kids. They provide an endless stream of negative feedback to the organizations they're associated with. They begin to think of whining as a form of therapy. It's something they do to relieve stress and help them cope – like jogging, or talking to a counselor. And even now they refuse to

take responsibility for the damage they're doing. In fact, many of them can't see how their negativity is affecting the people around them – how it's poisoning their family life and driving away their friends – if they have any friends.

The whiney virus is found far and wide in our culture. It's easy to catch and it's often really hard to shake. But there's hope for us all. The Lord doesn't want us to go through life with a downcast spirit. He doesn't want us to fixate on all the things that are going wrong. He promises to fill us with his joy and sustain us with his strength. But we have to cooperate with him in the work that he wants to accomplish in us. We have to allow our minds to be guided by his thoughts. We have to allow our hearts to be shaped by his perfect will.

What we're talking about, in plain English, is an attitude adjustment. (After the last service a mom explained that when her kids were toddlers and they were especially whiney she would pick them up and hold them closely upside down. She would tell them, "I'm giving you an attitude adjustment.") We're talking about putting an end to whininess so we can be filled with God's Spirit. To that end, I want us to look now at the Bible's strategy for finding lasting joy and happiness. It's a three-step strategy and to make it easy to follow and remember, I'm going to boil it down to three words: *Remember... Stop... and Start.*

God wanted the ancient Hebrews to remember. He wanted them to remember all the things he had done to demonstrate his awesome power, manifest his fatherly love, and win their freedom. By remembering how God had helped them in the past, his children would gain courage and strength to face each day.

**The Lord also wants us to remember.** The miracles of the Exodus were great, but the miracle of God becoming a man so he could save us was even greater. By remembering Christ's birth, life, death on a cross, resurrection from the dead and glorious ascension to heaven, we Christians gain courage and strength to face all of life's trials. We remember not only that Christ has taken away our sin and set things right between us and God. We remember also that Christ is a living Savior, and that he invites us to continue the work here on earth that he began. That gives meaning and purpose to our lives. It brings excitement and energy to our work. It helps us to muscle on when things are hard knowing that we're on a winning team, and that the work we do for God is never done in vain.

When dark thoughts overtake you and you're tempted to whine and complain, remember what God in Christ has done for you. Rejoice in his goodness. Ask him to still your heart and renew your mind.

**The Lord also wants us to stop.** Stop running through that list of all the reasons you're unhappy. Stop playing the victim to circumstances you created. Stop indulging in the perverse pleasure of criticizing without offering a solution. Stop thinking and talking and acting like a slave in bondage to sin. When we exercise that kind of self-control, we weaken the whiney virus and let in the light.

I want to read you a letter that was written to a well-known psychologist. It's an email by a woman named Stephanie. Probably many of you can relate to her. She explains the amazing changes that occur when we choose to control our thoughts:

I wasn't a huge complainer, but I definitely saw the negative in things too often, which led to complaining. I realized that it started with a negative thought about something or someone in my head and just spiraled from there.

I discovered that if I caught myself in the beginning, and decided to think of all the wonderful things about that person or situation, I stopped the rapid decline toward complaining.

It's not always easy and many times I just plain don't want to do it. But... in time you truly start to see the person or situation in a different light. In turn, you can focus your energy toward your family. A specific example of where this has helped me has been with my husband. The embarrassing part of it is that I realized he is one of the most unselfish, hardworking, easygoing individuals out there. I think I already knew that – but still chose to complain about small things and nitpick. Shame on me.

Some of you grew up on homes that were less than perfect. Some of you maybe are wondering if healing is possible. I want to read you a short note that was written from a patient to her therapist. The writer, a woman named Vani, explains how God freed her to experience happiness without feeling guilty or afraid. Maybe God will use her words to speak to you:

Once I realized I wanted to just BE HAPPY instead of continuing the family pattern I had grown up with, I decided to shut up, DO the right things, and focus on the blessings in my life instead of what was wrong. I believe happiness is a habit – not a circumstance.

The two main things that have helped me make this transition in my life is my faith in God and my fight always to keep a positive attitude no matter what. I have to repeat myself: HAPPINESS IS A HABIT.

If we want to live in the light we first have to remember what our God has done for us. Second, we have to stop giving in to the impulse to criticize, whine and complain. We have to develop new habits of thought, and tune in to the many blessings, large and small, that God is constantly sending our way.

**And finally, we have to make a new start.** We have to start paying more attention to the people around you. Start thinking about how others are hurting and the ways you might be of help to them. Start to make your life less about you and more about others.

The point is that it's not enough to change our patterns of speech and thought. People who live in the light are doers of the word. They step out in new directions. They make deliberate plans and take concrete steps to change their behavior. Their first steps may be small, tentative baby steps. But those

baby steps are crucially important. They signal the moment of lift-off. The key is to get your rocket off the launch pad. For some of us that will mean making a change that's radical and incredibly scary. It will mean climbing out of the dark hole where we've been hiding out and allowing God to take control of our future. But we have to muster the courage to make that new start. Our life depends on it.

I recently read a story that beautifully illustrates what it means to step out of the darkness and into the light. A wise counselor encouraged her to stop moping around and find a way to help others. Trish's new start began with the realization that her life was going nowhere. She writes:

I cannot stress enough the importance of getting "fed up" to make a change! I was single, alone, bored, and feeling like I didn't matter to anyone except my mom and my dog... and they were required to love me.

[My counselor told me one day,] "[I]f you don't like your life... stop whining... change it! Do whatever it takes to make that happen... no matter how difficult... do it."

So I did!

I adopted two at-risk teenage girls and my life has never been fuller; also crazy, hectic, and at times so overwhelming that I can't see straight, but it is definitely full. And I feel like I am making a difference in someone else's life, thinking outside of myself, and learning how to put another human being's needs and feelings above my own. That may sound easy, but for a whiny, spoiled brat, that was hard! To this day, at times, it is still hard – but it is worth it.

I've told you several of stories about people who stepped out to do things that were challenging and scary. I want to end with one from my own life.

Earlier this year I was in the Dominican Republic by myself preparing for our outreach in June. I was driving in my cheesy rental car at a reasonable speed on an excellent highway in a rural area. Suddenly I saw in my rearview mirror that a car was speeding towards me. The driver swerved to the left to go around me, then pulled hard back to the right. He was going at least 100 miles an hour and as he careened ahead of me he started to fishtail. Then he spun around, flipped over, and sailed upside-down into a deep gully. His Hyundai Sonata smacked into a tree that was easily a foot in diameter and the tree immediately fell across the highway.

I pulled over and at that point I was alone. As I approached the car I drew in my breath because the engine was hissing and smoking and some kind of fluid was trickling from the back end. I said a prayer then walked over cautiously to look for signs of life. I could see that the driver was dead, but the car was so crumpled it was hard to tell if anyone else was inside. So I called out, "*Puede escucharme?*" – "Can you hear me?"

As I was looking through the passenger side window people started to arrive. I saw a body. Someone was moving, a man, but there was no way that the few of us standing there were going to be able to get him out.

More people arrived. Soon there were 10 of us. Then 20. And people kept coming. The whole time I was listening for sirens, waiting for a crew of experts to arrive with the jaws of life. But the Dominican guys immediately jumped on top of the smoking heap and started pulling at the doors. I jumped in with them. For maybe 10 minutes more than a dozen of us yanked and stomped on the twisted metal. And suddenly one of the doors gave way. We pulled out the passenger and laid him on the ground. He was breathing. I thought, "He just might make it."

Then I thought, "I'm a pastor – I ought to pray!" When I stepped back to offer a prayer I saw that several women were already praying with outstretched hands.

When I got back in my car and my heart and head stopped racing I thought about what had just happened. I realized that the whole scenario would have unfolded differently if it had happened in the United States. There would have been just as many bystanders. But I don't think the men in the crowd would have gone into motion, as a silent, united team, to rip that car apart. More likely, we would have waited for rescue team to arrive in their helicopter.

We live in a wonderful country. The opportunities that God has made available to us are truly mind-boggling. But many of us – more and more, it seems – are choosing to detach ourselves from other people. We're saying no to the danger and drama of a life lived for others.

It's our calling as Christians to live in the light. It's our joy and our privilege as Jesus followers to continue the work that the Lord began. So let's remember what he has done for us. Let's stop fixating on all the things that are going wrong in our world and in our personal lives. Let's start living like people who've been set free from sin and death are ready to go wherever the Lord leads us.

*God of Love, you have led us out of darkness and into your marvelous light. Forgive us for holding back. Forgive us for allowing the negative voices in our culture to poison our thoughts. Teach us to discipline our minds. Fill our hearts with your joy – the joy that comes from your precious Son, the Lord Christ.*

*Holy Spirit, thank you for your patience. Thank you for abiding with us even when we whine and complain. Strengthen our faith. Restore our hope. Show us how we can be a blessing to the people around us. May it be so for us as individuals and for us as church family. Shine in us, Lord Jesus, now and always. Amen.*