

26 When Obedience Makes Things Worse – Stay the Course

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Last week we looked at Moses in the desert.

The forty years of preparation.

The burning bush.

The shepherd who finally had nothing left to offer but his availability.

This week we pick up right where that story gets harder.

Because obedience didn't make things easier.

It made them worse.

We often misinterpret hardship and difficulty as a sign that God is closing a door, but this weeks article is going to take the opposite approach and encourage you to stay the course.

Moses did what God told him to do.

He went to Pharaoh.

He stood before the most powerful ruler on earth, a man Moses likely lived alongside as a prince of Egypt, and he delivered God's message:

Let my people go.

Pharaoh's response was not negotiation.

It was contempt.

“Who is Yahweh that I should listen to His voice?” (Exodus 5:2, LSB)

Egypt had many gods so hearing about a Hebrew god wouldn't be a surprise but Pharaoh's response is reasonable given the fact he'd never heard about Yahweh before.

Pharaoh must have thought the request was a joke, he was certain his gods were stronger, so he made the Israelites' lives measurably harder to prove a point.

They had been making bricks with straw provided by Egypt.

Pharaoh removed the straw.

Now they had to gather their own straw and still meet the same quota.

Same expectation.

Half the resources.

And when they fell short, **they were beaten.**

The very people Moses came to rescue turned on him.

“you have made us a foul smell in Pharaoh’s sight and in the sight of his servants, to put a sword in their hand to kill us.” (Exodus 5:21, LSB)

Moses had obeyed God completely.

And everything had gotten worse.

Here is what I appreciate about scripture in this moment. It doesn’t try to portray Moses as a man who immediately got everything right after his encounter with God. It portrays Moses much like you and me when difficult circumstances arise after doing something right and we ask why. Moses did not pretend everything was fine. He did not paste a smile on his face and tell the Israelites that God had a plan. He went back to God and said exactly what he felt:

“O Lord, why have You brought harm to this people? Why did You ever send me? Ever since I came to Pharaoh to speak in Your name, he has done harm to this people, and You have not delivered Your people at all.” (Exodus 5:22-23, LSB)

Read that again.

Why did You ever send me?

You have not delivered Your people at all.

This is not a polished prayer.

This is not a faith-filled declaration.

This is a man who obeyed God and then watched everything fall apart, basically saying “you said you would deliver Your people, but you didn’t and now it’s worse.”

A man who thought he knew the mission and understood the outcome.

But God did not rebuke him.

God did not withdraw.

God did not say, “Moses, you need to trust me more.”

God simply said:

“Now you shall see what I will do to Pharaoh.” (Exodus 6:1, LSB)

Now you shall see.

Not a detailed explanation.

Not a revised timeline.

Not an apology for the hardship.

Just: watch.

My pastor said something a few weeks ago that is appropriate here:

“When we follow God, things often get worse before His fulfillment.”

I think this is what Moses would tell you.

Have you ever obeyed God – clearly, deliberately, at real personal cost – and then watched the situation get harder instead of better?

Have you prayed, and felt like the opposite happened?

Has God given you direction, and you pursued it, only to find difficulty and hardship waiting on the other side of your obedience?

If so, you are in good company.

Biblical company, actually.

Because this is not a pattern of failure in Scripture.

It is a pattern of faithfulness.

Read through the lives of the people God used.

Joseph thrown into a pit by his own brothers.

Daniel thrown into a lion’s den for praying.

Paul shipwrecked, beaten, imprisoned.

The disciples scattered after the crucifixion – the moment that looked, from every human angle, like the absolute end of everything they had believed.

Difficulty after obedience is not evidence that you missed God.

It may be evidence that you are exactly where He wants you.

I want to tell you about a woman named Gladys Aylward.

Some of you may know her story. I first encountered it through a book series called *Christian Heroes: Then and Now* – books I read aloud to my children over the years. Of all the remarkable people in that series, Gladys is one who really stands out.

She was a working-class girl from North London in the late 1920’s.

A housemaid.

And she was absolutely certain God had called her to be a missionary to China.

So she applied to the China Inland Mission Bible school to train.

She was dismissed.

The official reason was that she showed no aptitude for learning the Chinese language. She was also in her late twenties – a single woman without sponsorship or credentials – and no missionary organization would take a chance on her.

Man's judgment of who God can use is often wrong – not out of malice, but because we tend to look at the outside of a person while God looks at the heart. (1 Samuel 16:7)

Gladys went back to domestic service and started saving.

Not for a ship ticket – she couldn't afford that.

For a train ticket.

Across Europe.

Through Russia.

All the way to China.

In October 1930 she left London carrying everything she owned – a passport, her Bible, her tickets, and what would amount to a few hundred dollars in today's currency.

She was alone.

And China and Russia were at war.

She boarded the train anyway.

Deep in Siberia, she was told to leave the train. She refused, insisting she had paid her way to China. Finally she had to obey, and walked all night through freezing weather to the next station... alone! There a hotel clerk tried to detain her to send her to the factories, but a friendly girl arranged for her escape and take a ship to Japan, from where she made her way to China.

Let that sink in for a moment.

Rejected by the mission school.

Refused by every organization that could have helped her.

Forced off a train in the middle of Siberia in winter.

Nearly forced into labor at a factory.

At any point along that journey, a western Christian could have looked at those circumstances and concluded: this must not be God's will. If it were, things wouldn't be this hard.

Why do I say “western Christian”? I have known the Lord for over 50 years, and in that time I have attended many different denominations, as well as non-denominational congregations. In my experience, this pattern shows up across nearly all of them.

I believe it is because western culture is steeped in comfort and convenience. We have come to expect ease as the norm, so when hardship arrives, we assume something has gone wrong. But visit the church in most other parts of the world, and you will find a very different posture. Believers who have never known comfort as the norm tend to understand something we often miss: hardship is not evidence of God’s absence. It may be evidence of His presence in the midst of a world that was never promised to be easy.

In future articles I will dig deeper into the phenomenon of the “western Christian”. For now, I am using Moses and Gladys to make a point: adversity and hardship do not always mean stop. Sometimes they mean keep going, in spite of what you face.

Gladys kept going.

And what she accomplished in China was extraordinary.

She mastered the language she had supposedly shown no aptitude for.

She opened an inn where mule drivers heard the gospel.

She befriended the regional Mandarin, a man who held the power of life and death over her. What grew between them instead was trust – trust that opened doors to townships throughout the region. Before she left, he told her plainly: her faith had changed him.

She walked into a prison riot that armed soldiers were afraid to enter – and stopped it.

She led more than one hundred orphans over the mountains to safety through a war zone, wounded and sick herself, personally caring for each of them.

She became one of the greatest missionaries that country has ever seen.

But what if she had stopped?

I have thought about this often.

What if Gladys had decided, somewhere in the middle of Siberia, that the hardship was a sign from God to turn back?

What if she had taken the Bible school dismissal as God closing a door rather than man misreading one?

What if she had stood on that frozen platform in the middle of nowhere, alone, nearly sent off to a labor factory, and concluded:

This must not be God’s will.

The orphans would not have been led to safety.

The inn would not have opened.

The prisoners would not have heard.

We will never know all that was lost in the lives of people who turned back when God was simply asking them to keep going through the hard part.

Do not quit.

My pastor was right.

Things often get worse before God's fulfillment.

Moses stood before Pharaoh and the Israelites' lives got harder... multiple times.

Gladys boarded a train to China and nearly ended up in a Siberian labor factory.

The disciples watched the one they had left everything to follow die on a cross.

And then... then God moved.

Not when things got comfortable.

Not when everything fell into place as expected.

When the people He had called stayed in it anyway.

So if you are pursuing what you believe God has called you to – and it is hard, harder than you expected, harder than seems fair for someone who is trying to do the right thing –

do not quit.

When you get knocked off the horse, get back on.

You may be bruised.

You may even be broken.

But being broken before a God who heals is worlds better than being intact and outside His will entirely.

The burning bush doesn't appear on the easy days.

It appears after forty years in the desert.

The orphans don't get led to safety without someone willing to walk through a war zone to get them there.

And Pharaoh doesn't let the people go until God says:

Now you shall see.

Hold on.

If you know you've been called, but you now face hardship, adversity, difficulty... stay the course.

He is not finished.

If you're struggling:

- Christian Faith-Based Resources: <https://mentalhealthhotline.org/christian-faith-resources/> or call 1-866-903-3787 (24/7)
- Crisis Text Line: Text HOME to 741741
- National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 988 (call or text)

You matter. Whatever hard thing you are walking through right now – stay in it. Please stay.

William James Meyer is the author of “Do You Live in a Castle? Breaking Free from the Walls That Hold You Hostage.” He writes from a Christian perspective as a fellow traveler – someone still learning to trust the “now you shall see” in the middle of the hard parts.

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