

THE WAY OF FAITH, PART 10: LEADERSHIP

Exodus 32 (NASB)

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On January 15, 2009 Captain Chesley Sullenberger took off from New York's LaGuardia Airport in command of US Airways Flight 1549. The aircraft immediately struck a flock of geese. This happens on a regular basis to passenger aircraft and most of the time causes no problem. In fact, jet engines are designed to handle a certain number of bird strikes with no damage. It happens all the time. But this was a bad one. The dual engine Airbus A320 must have flown through the thick of the flock. Both engines were completely disabled. Captain Sullenberger found himself flying an eerily quiet aircraft with no power just a few thousand feet above one of the most populous cities in the whole world.

What happened next is the story of an experienced, highly-trained pilot and leader taking command of a situation which was developing so rapidly that the air traffic controllers could not keep up. Without engine power a commercial jet aircraft descends very rapidly and is very hard to control. Pilots call it flying with a "dead stick." It may be something like when the engine stops in your car and the power steering goes out. Everything becomes heavy and unresponsive. But Captain Sully, as he was nicknamed, did not have the luxury of coasting to a halt on the side of the road as we would do in our cars.

The first option was a return to LaGuardia for an emergency landing. "Unable," the captain says. The controller asks if he would like to try for Teterboro airport just over to the west on the New Jersey side of the Hudson. Sully agrees, and the two traffic controllers set it up. LaGuardia radios Sully with the runway information, and he replies tersely: "We can't do it." Realize that at this moment Sully is wrestling with a dead stick and making command decisions so fast that he cannot say much. The controller asks which runway he would like at Teterboro. The reply: "We're going to be in the Hudson." The controller doesn't understand and offers the option of landing at Newark seven miles away. No answer. Another controller breaks in and says: "I think he said that he was going to be in the Hudson!"

At that moment Sullenberger was busy, to say the least. It was his job to make sure that neither wing tip touch the water and cause the aircraft to cartwheel down the river, break apart, and probably explode. He had also to make sure that the tail touched the water first to prevent a nosedive and a resulting forward flip. And so he did. Amateur video of the landing shows the plane skidding into the water throwing a rooster tail of water, and then settling evenly on the surface. Everyone aboard was saved to live another day thanks to good leadership from Captain Chesley Sullenberger III.

You may wonder what this has to do with you. *I'm not a leader*, you think. If you are now or have ever been a mother you are a leader of children, family, and community. If you are a father you are also a leader of children and family. Every teacher is a leader of students. Many more of us are leaders than think so. Many are surprised to discover that some life situation has thrust us into the role of leaders. However we get there, our calling as believers is to lead according to the way of faith. An episode from the life of Moses gives seven principles for those who lead by faith.

KNOW THE PURPOSES OF GOD

Moses encountered a crucial situation as he led the people of Israel across the desert toward the land of promise. We pick up the story at the beginning of Exodus 32: **"Now when the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people assembled about Aaron and said to him, 'Come, make us a god who will go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' Aaron said to them, 'Tear off the gold rings which are in the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.' Then all the people tore off the gold rings which were in their ears and brought them to Aaron. He took this from their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool and made it into a molten calf; and they said, 'This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt.'"**

"Now when Aaron saw this, he built an altar before it; and Aaron made a proclamation and said, 'Tomorrow shall be a feast to the LORD.' So the next day they rose early and offered burnt offerings, and brought peace offerings; and the people sat down to eat and to drink, and rose up to play. Then the LORD spoke to Moses, 'Go down at once, for your people, whom you brought up from the land of Egypt, have corrupted themselves. They have quickly turned aside from the way which I commanded them. They have made for themselves a molten calf, and have worshiped it and have sacrificed to it and said, "This is your god, O Israel, who brought you up from the land of Egypt!"' The LORD said to Moses, 'I have seen this people, and behold, they are an obstinate people. Now then let Me alone, that My anger may burn against them and that I may destroy them; and I will make of you a great nation'" (Exodus 32:1-10).

The first demand of leadership according to the way of faith is to know the purposes of God. With frightening rapidity the people whom God had just rescued from slavery in Egypt began to turn away from his purposes that they would know him, love him, and worship him to the exclusion of all other gods. Moses was away on the mountain furthering the purposes of God while Aaron and the people were down on the plain departing from those purposes.

It would be as if Captain Sullenberger were to leave the cockpit in order to go to the restroom, and while he is gone the passengers decide they are not going to North Carolina after all, and convince the copilot to turn the plane to a different destination. And, as if the flight plan had never been filed, the copilot changes course for, say, Guam. This is not very unusual for human enterprises of all sorts, including those led by the Lord. The first demand of a leader according to the way of faith is that he or she must know what God's purposes are above every human purpose with the greatest clarity. What does God want and what does he not want? Study the Bible to find out. There will be many temptations to turn aside and any measure of confusion courts spiritual catastrophe.

PRAY PASSIONATELY FOR THE LEADERSHIP NEED OF THE HOUR

The second demand upon the spiritual leader is to pray passionately for the leadership need of the hour. Martin Luther wrote that if believers are busy but not engaged with the need of the hour, we are not really in the spiritual fight. The Lord God was predictably enraged by the people of Israel for their total loss of holy purpose, and Moses immediately began to do business with God on their behalf. The story picks up in verse 11: **"Then Moses entreated the LORD his God, and said, 'O LORD, why does Your anger burn against Your people whom You have brought out from the land of Egypt with great power and with a mighty hand? Why should the Egyptians speak, saying, "With evil**

intent He brought them out to kill them in the mountains and to destroy them from the face of the earth"? Turn from Your burning anger and change Your mind about doing harm to Your people. Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, Your servants to whom You swore by Yourself, and said to them, "I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heavens, and all this land of which I have spoken I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it forever.'" So the LORD changed His mind about the harm which He said He would do to His people" (Exodus 32:11-14).

Before we get confused about the Lord changing his mind, let us consider the dynamic nature of the will of God. While the Lord himself does not change, and his will does not change, his purposes may be bivalent as they interface with people. That is, his will may be shaped like an upside down "Y" with two different outcomes depending on human decisions. In this case, if the idolatry of the people of Israel were to be followed by no gleam of faith or repentance, the will of God would be judgment and destruction. But idolatry mitigated by the intercession of one leader who is willing to stand in the gap by leading people back toward the Lord would result in restoration of standing and judgment would be averted. So when the Bible says that God changed his mind we do not mean that he was confused or indecisive in any way. It is simply to say that the human factor traveled down the other side of the "Y."

What is the leadership need of the present hour? Leadership according to the way of faith takes the purposes of God to prayer in passionate intercession. Will you be the man or woman who stands in the gap for the people of God at the crucial moment? There may not be anyone else.

AVOID COMING UNGLUED

Third, what happens next is an illustration by negative example that spiritual leaders must avoid coming unglued: **"Then Moses turned and went down from the mountain with the two tablets of the testimony in his hand, tablets which were written on both sides; they were written on one side and the other. The tablets were God's work, and the writing was God's writing engraved on the tablets. Now when Joshua heard the sound of the people as they shouted, he said to Moses, 'There is a sound of war in the camp.' But he said, 'It is not the sound of the cry of triumph, /Nor is it the sound of the cry of defeat; /But the sound of singing I hear.' It came about, as soon as Moses came near the camp, that he saw the calf and the dancing; and Moses' anger burned, and he threw the tablets from his hands and shattered them at the foot of the mountain" (Exodus 32:15-19).**

The heat of perplexity and anger makes rash actions seem sensible and feel good. They are neither one! In fact, Moses probably felt that his anger was appropriate in light of God's anger. It was not, because human anger is almost always poisoned by sin and God's anger is always utterly pure. The Apostle James warned us about this, namely, that **"...the anger of man does not achieve the righteousness of God"** (James 1:20).

Those who lead by the way of faith ask God for peace of heart and strength to avoid smashing the holy tablets. What is the sense of smashing the good things? We might restate this as the line from the Hippocratic oath: "First, do no harm." Rather than coming unglued Captain Sullenberger moved into a more intense focus on his purposes. He did not begin to shout wildly: "We're going down! We're going down!" The fact of going down was already upon them, and the only thing left to determine was how it would come out. Coming unglued only makes it worse.

SMASH THE IDOLS

Moses then moved to smash the idol: **"He took the calf which they had made and burned it with fire, and ground it to powder, and scattered it over the surface of the water and made the sons of Israel drink it"** (Exodus 32:20). This action is high on the priority list of everyone who would lead by faith. We have a God who tolerates no competitors. Smashing every idol is high on his agenda, so it must be high on ours. This is not a time for delay or waiting for the confused believers to agree with you.

I remember an incident with my mother during my teen years. Back then I was an unbeliever and actively learning popular rock songs. I typically borrowed other people's records because I did not want to spend the money myself. So I borrowed my sister's two Black Sabbath albums. I was working on some tunes one day and my mother came into the room and picked up the vinyl records. She looked at me and said: "Do you know what a black sabbath is?!?" And without waiting for me to answer, she snapped both records in half over her knee and walked out. At the time I was dismayed because it got in the way of my becoming more cool in the eyes of my peers. My reaction now is: Thank you, Mom!

APPRAISE THE SITUATION

Having dealt with the core of the problem Moses then moved to make an appraisal of the situation. You cannot fix a problem unless you know what the problem is. Moses immediately interviewed Aaron: **"Then Moses said to Aaron, 'What did this people do to you, that you have brought such great sin upon them?' Aaron said, 'Do not let the anger of my lord burn; you know the people yourself, that they are prone to evil. For they said to me, 'Make a god for us who will go before us; for this Moses, the man who brought us up from the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' 'I said to them, 'Whoever has any gold, let them tear it off.' So they gave it to me, and I threw it into the fire, and out came this calf'"** (Exodus 32:21-24).

It always takes me a moment to recover after reading this mealy-mouthed, lying, blame-shifting excuse. But now Moses had the specific facts about the case, and he also knew another thing for certain. Aaron was not a spiritual leader in spite of his exalted position as Moses' right hand man.

PROVIDE A PATH BACK TO THE LORD

Now that Moses had intervened by destroying the idol, and gotten the facts of the case, he was prepared to do a most crucial thing for the faith of the group. He then provided a concrete path back to the Lord. **"Now when Moses saw that the people were out of control-- for Aaron had let them get out of control to be a derision among their enemies-- then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, 'Whoever is for the LORD, come to me!' And all the sons of Levi gathered together to him. He said to them, 'Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'Every man of you put his sword upon his thigh, and go back and forth from gate to gate in the camp, and kill every man his brother, and every man his friend, and every man his neighbor.'" So the sons of Levi did as Moses instructed, and about three thousand men of the people fell that day. Then Moses said, 'Dedicate yourselves today to the LORD-- for every man has been against his son and against his brother-- in order that He may bestow a blessing upon you today'"** (Exodus 32:25-29).

Moses actions seem extreme to us. The only explanation I can give is that he did exactly what the Lord told him to do. Surely they all got the point: *If we don't follow the Lord, we're dead!*

But these actions also provided a crucial element of restoration. It's one thing to help people repent of an idol, but then how do they get back with the Lord? We always do this in church discipline cases. The wayward believer has the boom lowered on him or her. But then there is a plan for how he or she can get back with the Lord and re-enter the place of blessing. The Lord wants his people back, and the leader who follows the way of faith provides a practical way for people to do that.

LEAD TOWARD ATONEMENT

Finally, Moses knew that simply fixing the present problem was not enough. The sins which the people had committed were on their souls working death until atonement could be made. So Moses went in pursuit of that atonement: **"On the next day Moses said to the people, 'You yourselves have committed a great sin; and now I am going up to the LORD, perhaps I can make atonement for your sin.' Then Moses returned to the LORD, and said, 'Alas, this people has committed a great sin, and they have made a god of gold for themselves. But now, if You will, forgive their sin-- and if not, please blot me out from Your book which You have written!'"** (Exodus 32:30-32).

The way of faith always has atonement for sin at the top of the list of God's priorities. Many people have tried to change the presentation of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the name of cultural contextualization. And yet the Apostle Paul was shockingly clear about the place of atonement in God's purposes. He wrote to the Corinthians: **"For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures"** (1 Corinthians 15:3). Those who would lead according to the way of faith must always be leading toward atonement. Not much else will matter if we do not get that right.

When Captain Chesley Sullenberger moved into action to save the lives of an entire commercial airplane full of people and whoever they might have killed on the ground, the whole country took a gasp full of the precious air of good leadership. Everyone thought, in this day of weak or absent leaders: *This is the kind of leader we need--someone who will take charge without hesitation and do what is necessary for the good of all.*

And if that is true of a man landing an airplane to save earthly lives, how much greater is the need for those who will, without hesitation, take action to preserve eternal lives. Years ago the Barna Research Group surveyed pastors about leadership, and one of the questions was: Do you have the spiritual gift of leadership? Only eleven percent said yes! My immediate thought was: *Then why did they become pastors? And why did their churches call them? How can any church avoid disaster and fulfill God's purpose if there is no leader at the helm?*

We live in a world crying out for good leaders. Let the people of God rise up with the power and wisdom of God to meet the need. May we start in our families and our churches, and then move out into the community. Comedian Bill Cosby joked that the moment a baby is born his first cry is the question: Who's in charge here? Moms and dads, you need to answer and say: I am! You may never achieve acclaim for landing a plane in the Hudson, but you, too, will have the challenge to make the right decisions even when there is no one to consult. And let us pray that the Lord will raise up leaders for his church who will follow his word unquestioningly, make the hard decisions, take the heat if necessary, and lead God's people into the joy and freedom of our redemption. God is looking for a man or a woman who will stand in the gap for the sake of his people. Be that man. Be that woman.

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