

THE LEADING LORD - EXODUS 15:13  
PICTURES OF GOD IN EXODUS 15 #5

Frank Slazak had a dream. It was a dream that had captivated him since he was 13 years old. But it was a dream that he knew deep down in his heart he would never be realized. Frank's dream was to be an astronaut - to fly in space.

As Frank grew up, he chose a life path that would be as close to his dream as he could be. He graduated from high school and then college with a degree in science, and then returned to the small coal mining town of his birth to teach science in the high school where he had graduated. And he always emphasized the space program hoping to inspire his students towards the space program.

Then it happened. In early 1985, President Reagan announced that he was directing NASA to begin a search for an ordinary citizen to fly into space onboard a shuttle mission - and that citizen was going to be a teacher. Frank couldn't believe his ears. Could this be his chance? Every day, Frank began to pray that God would let him be that ordinary citizen astronaut.

When Frank heard the announcement that any teacher interested in the mission could contact NASA requesting an application, he wrote his letter the very same day. Even though it was very time-consuming filling out the 25 page application, Frank performed the task with eagerness and sent it right back in. Little did he know that 43,000 other teachers had also requested applications to be part of the crew for flight 51-L.

Every day Frank checked the mailbox for a letter from NASA like a little kid. And every day he prayed that God would let him be the teacher chosen to fly on the Space Shuttle Challenger. Finally he received a letter. Frank had made the first cut down to 11,000. NASA wanted to know more about him. His confidence soared as he filled out more papers. And soon everyone at school was beginning to share in his excitement.

The next few weeks seem to drag on like an eternity for Frank. But finally he received the call from NASA that he had been waiting for. Frank had been chosen as one of 100 teachers to attend a special astronautics training program at the Kennedy Space Center. This was it. The final cut. Frank had prayed so hard for this opportunity that he just knew he was going to be the teacher chosen. And everyone in his small community of 2,000 began to share in his excitement. Frank's flying in space would really put their small town on the map.

The training program was friendly, but fiercely competitive. The teachers never knew when they were being tested and evaluated by NASA. Even the smallest tasks became competitive challenges. The simulators, the claustrophobic testing, the dexterity exercises, the motion sickness experiments, all designed

to find out which teacher was best qualified. With every test Frank prayed that God would help him excel so that he could fly into space.

When the training session was over, Frank returned home with confidence. He had done well in every test. He just knew in his heart that he was finally going to be able to realize his dream. And he prayed every day that God would make his dream a reality.

Then came the devastating news. NASA had chosen a teacher from Concord, New Hampshire named Christa McAuliffe to fly on the mission. Frank Slazak was totally crushed. In his own words, *Depression, loss of confidence and anger replaced my euphoria as I questioned everything: Why God, why not me? What part of the right stuff did I lack? Why had life dealt me such a cruel blow? How could I face my students, my family and my community? Why did my dream have to come to an end when I was so close?*

On Tuesday, January 28, 1986, the day that he had dreamed of for 25 years, Frank Slazak gathered the strength to join a number of family members and students before a television set to witness history - the flight of the first civilian teacher into space. Tears streamed down his cheeks as he watched the Challenger lift off the launch pad with a perfect take-off. And again the thought came into Frank's mind. Why hadn't God answered his prayer? Why did God allow him to go so far only to be so bitterly disappointed?

As we all know, 73 seconds later the Challenger exploded in the sky killing everyone on board. According to Frank's own testimony, that was the moment that changed his life forever. For in an instant, Frank realized that God's plan for his life was better than his ever could be.

Today, Frank Slazak no longer teaches science in that small coal mining town. Today, he travels across our country speaking to adult and youth audiences about learning lessons in life and dealing with failures and disappointments, and most of all, Frank speaks about the necessity of committing our life paths into the hands of a Leading Lord.

There is nothing that will bring greater confidence to our lives than committing our life's direction to God's leading hand. On the other hand, few courses of life bring greater frustration than trying to force our own desires and goals on God. If we are to live life to its fullest, we must know and experience God as the Leading Lord in our lives.

During these past Sunday Mornings, we have been looking at 8 pictures of God that Moses paints in a great song of praise following that miraculous deliverance at the Red Sea. We have already seen God as the Saving Lord, the Warrior Lord, the Majestic Lord, and the Preeminent Lord in the weeks before Mother's Day. Now we continue in our studies as we look at Moses' portrait of God as the Leading Lord found in Exodus 15:13.

*In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed. In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling.*

Now as their physical leader, Moses would have been keenly aware of their need for a Leading Lord. God had redeemed his people out of Egyptian slavery and had promised to bring them to a land flowing with milk and honey. But nobody knew how to get to this land. Where was it and how were they going to get to it? They needed a God who was a Leading Lord. And God would prove himself to be such a God by giving them a cloud by day and a pillar of fire at night. And in keeping with God's infinite capacity for goodness, He would kill several birds with the same stone. Many forget the other practical conveniences that a cloud and pillar of fire would have afforded to the Israelites. Having spent time in Israel, I have grown to appreciate God's ingenuity here. For the cloud would not only give daily direction, but it would provide the Israelites with much needed shade from the hot desert sun. It's hot in that desert region of the Negev. There have been many times when I have longed for some shade out under that sun that seemed to bore right through me. One of my first purchases upon arriving in Israel was a good hat. But I quickly found that one of the characteristics of this desert region is the extreme temperature change from the almost unbearably hot days to the chilly, cool nights. So God not only provided direction every night from the pillar of fire, but his provision would have also given his people a portable heater to keep them warm during the chilly nights. The cloud during the day would have given clear direction for the Israelites would have only needed to follow the moving shadow on the ground, being careful, of course, to stay in that shadow for comfort. And the pillar of fire at night would have provided great comfort and assurance of God's presence as well as some light to them.

Now there are 2 attributes of the Lord that are emphasized by Moses in connection with his presentation of God as a Leading Lord. Both of these attributes are critically important if there is to be any confidence in following the Lord's leading in life. For we are naturally hesitant to follow someone if either one of two leadership conditions is not met.

If we are not convinced that a leader is really concerned for us and has our best interests in mind, we are naturally hesitant to follow him. There is nothing that is more unsettling than to walk into a doctor's office and have him abruptly write out a prescription without sensing any concern or care on his part. Now the doctor might have impeccable credentials and training. But if we don't sense that he is really interested and concerned for us personally, if we sense he is just trying to get us out of his hair so he can get on with his day's schedule, we tend to balk at his suggested directions for the welfare of our health.

We also are hesitant to follow the direction of someone if we are not convinced that they know what

they are talking about. A family member can love us dearly, but we would be hesitant to take her health suggestions unless we are convinced that she knows enough to help us. Unless a person has gone through a similar problem successfully or has done extensive research, concern and care just by themselves are not quite sufficient.

I want you to notice the attributes that Moses chooses in presenting this picture of the Leading Lord to his people with me this morning for they address both of these areas of concern. And as we consider the importance of following the direction of God in our lives, we also need to be reminded of these divine attributes. For we probably will not consistently follow God's direction in our lives unless we really know and understand who God is.

1. The first attribute that Moses brings out here is God's unfailing love. *In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed.*

Now the Bible presents a God who is infinite in His love. In fact, the Apostle John calls God love. *God is Love*, John writes. Love is a primary attribute of God. And God's love is without any limitations or boundaries. God's capacity for love is infinitely greater than even our capacity to receive love let alone give it. So it should not surprise us that God's love for us is greater than even our love for ourselves as great as self-love is. God loves us more than we can love ourselves. God is totally committed to the best direction that we could possibly have in life.

Now if we really believe that - we will not hesitate in following God's path for our life. But the problem comes with our natural tendency to doubt this truth. You see, most people in their hearts really feel that they love themselves more than God loves them. This leads them to think that their plans and directions for their life are more in their best interests than God's. So as long as God is leading them in the path that they would also choose, there is no problem. But as soon as God begins to lead them in a different direction, they immediately begin to question and draw back. Because in their heart, they don't doubt their own love for themselves, but they question God's love for them. All of us have failed at one time or another in our lives to experience God's best for us because we have questioned His love for us.

Now this happened with the Israelites, didn't it? They had grown weary of the hardships of slavery in Egypt so they jumped at the opportunity for freedom. As Moses executed those plagues that brought Pharaoh to his knees, the Israelites were all too willing to take the gold and silver that the Egyptians offered to them and walk out of Egypt as wealthy, free citizens. But when they got up to the border of Canaan that first time and God told them this was the land of milk and honey that he had promised them, they balked when the spies brought back their report, didn't they? It wasn't that the land failed to meet their expectations of

fruitfulness for the spies brought back amply evidence of the land's goodness. No, it was the report of giants that caused them to hesitate. They convinced themselves that they couldn't conquer these giants. They doubted that God loved them enough to give them the land. They thought they had a better plan for their lives. So instead of following the Leading Lord into the Promised Land, they ended up wandering around in the wilderness until they all died.

Now if we are to follow the Leading Lord with absolute and complete confidence, we must realize the fact that God loves us unconditionally and infinitely. His path for our life is absolutely in our best interests. There could be no better course of life than the path that God would lay out for us. For God loves us completely and He is committed to our success in every area of life. This doesn't mean that God's path for us is always the easiest one. Sometimes God leads us onto the battlefield because victories cannot be achieved without battles first being fought. But even when God leads us through tough times, they are for our ultimate good.

Without the confidence of God's unfailing Love, we will not aggressively seek God's leading in our life - for we will really feel deep down inside that our own desires and directions are in our own best interests. So Moses begins to speak of the Leading Lord as One who is unfailing in His love for His people. *In your unfailing love you will lead the people you have redeemed.*

2. But there is also another attribute that is critical to having confidence in God as our leading Lord - and that is God's strength and power. Moses goes on to say of God, *In your strength you will guide them to your holy dwelling.*

God not only has unfailing love, but he also has the absolute power to accomplish whatever He desires. God is omnipotent. That means that He is all powerful. God is infinite in His power, just as He is infinite in his love and all of His other attributes. So when God wants to accomplish something, he has the strength and the power to do it. And this is the perfect combination for someone who is going to be the perfect leader - both the love and concern to do what is best and the strength and power to get it done.

Now the problem that we face in trying to direct our own lives is that we overestimate both our love for ourselves and the strength that we have. We often become convinced that our love for ourselves is greater than God's love for us. And in this we totally overestimate our love for ourselves and underestimate God's love for us. For too often, what is confused as love for ourselves are just the desires of our sinful flesh. Our flesh cries out for satisfaction and pleasure and we are deluded into thinking that fulfilling these desires is really loving ourselves. It's often too late when we finally realize how we have been trapped and deceived.

And then we also overestimate our own strength and abilities to accomplish what the flesh demands of

us in life and underestimate God's strength and power. We convince ourselves that we are in a better position to accomplish good in our lives than God is. What a horrible deception this is - for it robs us of God's unlimited strength in our lives.

Without the confidence of God's strength, we won't be willing to follow God's direction in our life - for we really won't have the assurance that He is able to lead us safely where He wants us to go.

Now in the historical setting from which we receive this song of praise, Moses and the Israelites had just experienced God's unfailing love and strength. The Israelites had been slaves in Egypt. They had cried out to God for deliverance and God had heard their cries. The Lord had delivered them from their bondage demonstrating His great love for His people. But no sooner had they crossed the borders of Egypt than Pharaoh had changed his mind. So he mustered his army and chased off after them finally catching them and cornering them against the Red Sea. The people immediately cried out to Moses - *Look what you have done now. Why didn't you just leave us alone in Egypt? Now we are going to die.* You see, they still doubted the strength of God. Even after all of those plagues, they still questioned his mighty power. God might love them, He might mean well, but what was He going to do now that the Egyptian army had them pinned against the Red Sea.

But God proved himself to not only be a God of unfailing love, but a God of great strength as well. By His mighty hand the unthinkable happened - the waters of the Red Sea separated so that the Israelites were able to walk through on dry ground and escape the Egyptian sword.

This was the God that the Israelites had to remember - a God of both unfailing love and great strength. For if they never forgot the God of both love and strength, they would not fail to follow His direction and guidance through life. But as they did forget the God of both love and strength, they would continue to be tempted to plot out their own course through life.

I would like to conclude this morning by quoting a little anonymous article that I have in my files called *the Bike Ride*.

*At first, I saw God as an observer, like my judge, keeping track of things I did wrong. This way, God would know whether I merited heaven or hell when I died. He was always out there, sort of like the President. I recognized His picture when I saw it, but I really didn't know Him at all.*

*But later on, when I recognized God better, it seemed as though life was rather like a bike ride, on a tandem bike, and I noticed God was in the back helping me pedal.*

*I don't know when it was that He suggested we change places, but life has not been the same since. When I had control, I knew the way. It was rather boring, but predictable. It was always the shortest*

*distance between the points.*

*But when He took the lead, He knew delightful cuts, up mountains, and through rocky places and at breakneck speeds; it was all I could do to hang on. Even though it looked like madness, He kept saying, "Pedal, pedal."*

*I worried and became anxious, asking, "Where are you taking me?" He just laughed and didn't answer, and I found myself starting to trust. I soon forgot my boring life and entered into the adventure, and when I'd say, "I'm scared", he'd lean back and touch my hand. He took me to people with gifts that I needed; gifts of healing, acceptance and joy. They gave me their gifts to take on my journey. Our journey that is, God's and mine.*

*And we were off again. He said, "Give the gifts away, they're extra baggage, too much weight." So I did, to the people we met, and I found that in giving I received, and still our burden was light.*

*I did not trust Him at first, in control of my life. I thought He'd wreck it. But He knew bike secrets, knew how to make it bend to take sharp corners, jump to clear places filled with rocks, fly to shorten scary passages.*

*And I'm learning to shut up and pedal in the strangest places, and I'm beginning to enjoy the view and the cool breeze on my face with my delightful constant companion, my Leading Lord. And when I'm sure that I can't go on anymore, He just smiles and says, "Pedal".*

APPLICATION: Do you have confidence in God's unfailing love and ability to direct in your life? Are you actively seeking God's leading in your life? Are you willing to follow His direction? Where are you on your bike ride through life?

\*Do you still see God as a mere observer? Do you really not know God personally at all? Then you need to invite the Lord Jesus Christ into your life to be your Savior.

\*Do you feel that God is on the bike, but on the back seat? Are you really the one who is giving direction to your life? It's very sad to miss out on life's best because we are deluded into thinking that we love ourselves more than God loves us. Isn't it time to give God the front seat? To allow Him to be the guide and leader through life? What beautiful scenery we see and what joy we experience in our hearts when God is given His rightful place in our lives as the Leading Lord.

This morning, as with every sermon in this series, the background slide is an actual picture taken at the bottom of the Red Sea of an Egyptian chariot part from the 18<sup>th</sup> dynasty. This one is a metal chariot wheel half-embedded in the sand. These chariot parts that await excavation when and if the Egyptian and Saudi Arabians authorities allow it remind us that this event that we have been studying from Exodus 15 is not just a

legend or fable, but it is rather an historical account that can be corroborated by physical evidence just like the countless other archaeological artifacts that have been uncovered confirming Biblical accounts. There was a time in history when the Leading Lord delivered the Jewish people from slavery in Egypt and guided them up to the land that they in part possess even to this day. This God who led his people 3,500 years ago is just as willing and able to lead his people today. The question is not with God's ability to lead but it is rather with our willingness to follow his leading.