

Sermon for Sunday, September 17, 1972 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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"HOW TO OVERCOME YOUR LIMITATIONS"

Exodus 14:10-18

Text: "The Lord said to Moses, 'Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward.'" Exodus 14:15

All of us are concerned about the future. Some are concerned about the future because they don't have much of it left. Some are concerned because they don't know what it holds. Some are concerned because they are afraid they do know what it holds. I remember standing in the hospital room of a young girl in her early twenties who had attempted to take her own life. There was a look of weariness a thousand years old in her eyes and her voice sounded tired as she spoke, "I just can't think of facing tomorrow." Part of our problem is that as we face the future we do so with certain limitations. I want to talk about some of those limitations and how we can overcome them.

When the Hebrews started out of Egypt they went with the highest of hopes. The future seemed to beckon with glittering promises. Yet, only a few hours later when they stood poised on the brink of the Sea of Reeds, their backs were to the wall. Suddenly they had no future at all. Before them lay the muddy, impassable waters of the Sea of Reeds and behind them, heralding the approach of Pharaoh's men, rose a great cloud of dust stirred up by the wheels of many chariots and the hoofs of many horses. They were, in a very real sense, caught between the devil and the deep blue sea.

Standing there on the banks of the sea the Hebrews were limited by their past. For one thing, they had little strength of body to face what lay before them. For years as slaves they had been driven almost beyond human endurance. They knew what it was to work for hours on end with too little food and too little rest. Their backs knew the lash of the taskmaster's whip. They knew the agony of blistered hands, bleeding feet, aching muscles. They knew what it was for every nerve to cry out in weary protest against an awful abuse of body. As they stood on the banks of the sea that day, their past limited them for they were weary in body.

But their weariness was more than physical, for their souls were weary, too. Born in slavery, all their lives they had known only humiliation and ingratiating groveling before the haughty Egyptians that had destroyed the very fiber and dignity of the human soul. There was nothing in their past to make them brave or courageous; there was nothing in their experience to make them visionary or hopeful, or resourceful. So, as they stood there trapped by the awful circumstances of life, they had no inner resources of the soul to draw upon. In their moment of need they were spiritually bankrupt.

Is not this part of our problem? You and I, too, are shaped and molded by all we have been. Recently Ann Landers carried a letter from a young girl. She had lived fast and loose at college but now she had met a wonderful man who thought she was wonderful, too. But, she asked, how could she marry him in the light of what she had been? And let me say to you students, be very careful about your present. You see, your present today will be your past tomorrow. If it is the wrong kind of past it will place limitations on you for the rest of your life.

Yes, we are all limited by our past. Can you be a scholar if you've never read a book? Can you be an accountant if you've never learned to add? Can you be a bricklayer if you've never mixed mortar? Can you be a mechanic if you've never seen a machine? And this is particularly true of the things of the soul. What

kind of spiritual future do you have if you have a spiritually impoverished past? How can you be an effective Christian today if you have not read your Bible, if you have not prayed regularly, or worshipped but rarely? You see, there will come those times in the lives of all of us when we stand on the shores of some personal Sea of Reeds. Perhaps it will be facing death as we stand on the brink of eternity; perhaps it will be saying a last, fond farewell as we lay a loved one to final rest; perhaps it will be some decision we must make that will affect the whole course of our lives and even the lives of those we love. And as we stand there faced with ultimate alternatives, we--like the Hebrews--will be limited by our past, by who and what we have been.

But notice secondly that the Hebrews that day were also limited by their present. Had they stayed in Egypt they would not have incurred the Pharaoh's wrath. Or were they beyond the Sea of Reeds safely away into the wilderness they would be safe. Yet, they were neither back in Egypt nor safely away into the wilderness. In fact, they were precisely where they were, on the banks of the Sea of Reeds. They were, in fact, hemmed in on one side by mud and water, and on the other side by the pursuing charioteers. If they had been at some mountain pass, they could have sacrificed a few while the main body escaped. If there were armed soldiers among them with a capable general perhaps some ingenious plan could have been devised. But there was no mountain pass, only the muddy shores; no brave soldiers, but only a wilderness shepherd to lead them. In that desperate, critical moment when their destiny hung so precariously in the balance, they were limited by the present, by the circumstances of the moment.

Doesn't our present often limit us? Given the right circumstances, the right opportunity, each of us is capable of far greater things than we have accomplished. If only the boss liked me, I would get that promotion. If only the teacher didn't hate me, I would make better grades. If only I had the chances he had, I'd really get ahead in the world. I know this is true in my life and I suspect it is in yours, too. You see, if I only had a Scotch brogue, a bad heart, and a wife who was a gifted writer, I know I'd be another Peter Marshall.

This is true of us as Christians, too. If only we had lived in the time of Jesus, we would never have turned him down. If only we had been in Corinth when Paul preached there, how we would have followed him. If only we had lived in Geneva, we might have been a Calvin, too. And it is really too bad, is it not, that we are who we are and where we are? Whatever future you have and I have is limited by this moment and this place and this circumstance.

Limited by their past and limited by their present, the Hebrews cried out at Moses, "Were there no graves in Egypt?" As they saw it, they had little future. There seemed little hope for them. The Bible tells us that at that moment the voice of God spoke to Moses and said, "Why do you cry to me? Tell the people of Israel to go forward." Then it was that the people began to move out. As they marched forward the very waters divided before them. They did, after all, have a future. They had a future because they walked with God. They had a future because as they moved into it, they were trusting God.

Is not this the only future any of us have? What assurance do you have that you will even be alive this time tomorrow? What assurance do you have that all you have built your dreams on will not collapse? What assurance do you have that all you have hoped and labored for will not vanish like the mist burned off by the morning sun? No, not a one of us has a future that is worth any thing at all unless we walk into it with God, trusting him.

I remember reading somewhere of a man who visited a leper colony. At their worship

services he expected them to sing some hymn of great sorrow. To his surprise they began to sing a hymn of joy, "Singing I go along life's road, Praising the Lord, Praising the Lord...." And how could these pitiful, crippled people find the inner resources to sing a hymn of joy? Simply because whatever future they had was in the hands of God and they were walking into their future trusting God.

Let me say this about your past. It does not matter what you have been or the things you have done. It does not matter what sin smears and blackens your soul. You can overcome that limitation this morning. Jesus died for you on the cross of Calvary. He died for your sins. His death is big enough and his cross is broad enough to cover all your sins, to wipe them out, if you will accept the forgiveness he offers you. You can start with a fresh sheet this morning, a blank page. All you have to do is to ask God in Christ to forgive you--ask him and mean it--and he will do it in a moment.

And let me say this about your present. If you will love God, if you will turn over the throne room of your heart to him, he will take your present and turn it to his purposes. You have the promise you can claim this morning that all things work together for good to them that love God. If you will love the Lord this morning by inviting him into your heart, whatever your circumstances this very moment, God will transform them, he will turn them and use them. No, you do not need to be limited by your past, for God offers you forgiveness. You do not need to be limited by the present, for God offers to transform it. If you will trust God, if you will walk with him he will divide the waters before you.

In his book entitled The Sacrament Table, George Jeffery tells a story that warms my heart. It is the story of a missionary in Canada whose area of travel was so large he could not cover all of it very often. Once, in visiting the remote home of a settler, he began to teach the little invalid son of that home the Lord's prayer. On this trip he taught the sick little boy the first line of the twenty-third Psalm. He taught him by giving him a word for each finger on his right hand-- "The Lord is my shepherd." "Remember," he said, "Always hold on to the fourth finger, for the Lord is my shepherd." Two years went by before he made his way back to the settler's lonely cabin and when he came he was not at all surprised to learn that the sickly little bedfast boy was no longer there. In the dark of a winter night he had gone to sleep and had not awakened. The mother told him about it and said, "It was so strange. We found him in the morning with his hands outside the coverlet, his left hand holding the fourth finger so tightly we could not break his grip." Strange? Not really, for the Lord is my shepherd. No matter how bad our past, no matter how awful our present, we can overcome our limitations if we trust God and walk into the future with him. Are you truly trusting him this morning? Are you truly walking with him? You see, if you will let him forgive your past, if you will let him rule your present, you can overcome every limitation. You can have a future because we have a loving God who is our shepherd.