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Short of cash but rich in curiosity, my wife and I were exploring Israel in 1987 during a break from studying at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. We carried backpacks, traveled on public buses, and slept in a little dome tent in public campgrounds.

In Haifa there was no campground, so we stayed in a youth hostel. The next day, we walked the tree-lined boulevards of that lovely northern coastal city, just below the Carmel mountain range. Near downtown was a maritime museum, which chronicled the history of boats in that region. The largest item in the exhibit looked like an old ferry.

As we walked up a ramp to enter the boat, I noticed that its Hebrew name was the equivalent of "*In Spite of the Fact That . . .*" How strange! But it made sense when we learned how the boat was used. In the 1930s and 1940s, before the country of Israel was established in 1948, there was a strict limit on the number of Jews who were permitted to emi-

IN SPITE OF THE FACT THAT...

grate to Palestine. This was a terrible problem because the Jews in Europe were being harassed and exterminated by the Nazis, but they had nowhere to go.

Here is where the boat fits in. It was used for rescue operations to carry European refugees attempting to escape from hideous places of death, such as the concentration camps at Auschwitz and Treblinka. People crowded into the boat and huddled there. Under cover of darkness, the small ship would slip in to the shore of Palestine *in spite of the fact that* there were all kinds of obstacles, such as gunboats at sea and patrols on shore. The refugees jumped into the water to swim or wade to safety in their "promised land."

Today there are many refugees in our hostile world. In fact, in a larger sense, we are all refugees from the cruel dictatorship of Satan, longing for a better country (Heb. 11:16). Without help we can never make it, but God has a rescue operation.

Unlike some popular preachers

today, God does not promise that His people are sure to enjoy prosperity in this life. But He promises to be with them through everything they experience, including hardship and pain:

"Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff—they comfort me" (Ps. 23:4, NRSV).¹

"When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned, and the flame shall not consume you" (Isa. 43:2).

Where was the Lord when Daniel's three friends were thrown into the fire? *With them* (Daniel 3:23-25)! Where was He during the time of Jacob's trouble, when he wrestled until daybreak? In Jacob's arms, as close as He could get (Genesis 32:24-30)!

The struggle against self and for total dependence upon God is the greatest battle God's people have to face. It was tough for Jacob, who clung to his divine wrestling partner and would not let him go without receiving a blessing from him (vs. 26). Once he had prevailed with God (vs. 28), the crisis of meeting Esau and his 400 men turned out to be an anticlimax (33:1-17).

Gideon "wrestled" with God through signs. Once he was assured and reassured that God was with

him (Judges 6:17-24; 36-40; 7:9-15), attacking and pursuing the Midianites was still a challenge (7:16-8:12). But God had already given Him the victory before the battle, so that he could tell his troops: "'Get up; for the Lord has given the army of Midian into your hand'" (7:15).

Do we lose battles with evil? If so, perhaps it is because we confidently saunter into battle on our own, without prior victories gained on our knees as we insist on receiving assurance that God is with us and we are with Him. The outcome would be different if we would pray tenaciously like Jacob: "'I will not let you go, unless you bless me'" (Gen. 32:26).

The time of Jacob's trouble was intense, but the time of Jesus' trouble was incomparable. We think of His dying on the cross as a battle with forces of evil, and so it was. But He was there only because He had already won the victory during the previous night, when He had clawed the ground of a garden and cried out to His Father: "'Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done.' In his anguish he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground" (Luke 22:42, 44).

That night our own fate was determined: "The awful moment had come—that moment which was to decide the destiny of the world. The

fate of humanity trembled in the balance. Christ might even now refuse to drink the cup apportioned to guilty man. It was not yet too late. He might wipe the bloody sweat from His brow, and leave man to perish in his iniquity. . . . His decision is made. He will save man at any cost to Himself. He accepts His baptism of blood, that through Him perishing millions may gain everlasting life.”²

Because of Jesus’ victory, His friends are pursued—by blessings that “shall come upon you and overtake you” (Deut. 28:2). David expresses the same idea: “Only goodness and steadfast love shall pursue me all the days of my life” (Ps. 23:6).³ While the United States Declaration of Independence recognizes a person’s right to “the pursuit of Happiness,” God guarantees to His faithful people that happiness will pursue them!

The Lord not only rescues us and pursues us with happiness, He involves us in His operation to rescue others. Why doesn’t He just use perfect, powerful angels to share the Good News? Wouldn’t they be a lot more efficient and trouble free than humans like us? He calls us because we have the most powerful testi-

mony in the universe: that Jesus Christ is saving us. This was the testimony of those whom Jesus delivered from demons. He told them: “Go home to your friends, and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and what mercy he has shown you” (Mark 5:19).

Let’s always remember that we are all in this together as members of God’s rescue team. As God empowers us, we help one another. Our joys and rewards are breathtaking, but in many cases we must wait to see them, just as the messianic Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 waits to see the results of His sacrifice (Isa. 53:11).

At times, the going gets rough as we seek to escape this place of death. There seem to be all kinds of insurmountable obstacles between us and the inviting shores of the ultimate Promised Land. But we have a friend named Michael (Daniel 12:1). He has a “boat” for refugees. Michael will row that boat ashore, *in spite of the fact that . . .*

REFERENCES

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture references in this article are quoted from *The New Revised Standard Version*.

² *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 690, 693.

³ *The New Jewish Publication Society Translation*.

