

Mission Out-of-Control

Genesis 21: 8-21 Matthew 10: 24-39

Few things of human creation are as complex and dangerous as space flight. Because of that high degree of danger, and the incredible complexity of the operation, controls and redundancies and the quest for perfection drive the whole operation. Few space missions were routine and flawless in the beginning. Launchpad explosions of test rockets were common, particularly for the American program. It took a lot of very expensive and spectacular trial and error for the US to create a workable, reliable launch rocket. Clearly, controlling for all of the factors that could possibly go wrong was critical.

But think about what was required. A Ph.D. helps me here. Just to get into Low Earth Orbit requires getting the craft to a speed of roughly 25 - 30,000 mph or 8-11 kilometers per second. There are lots of variables and formulas for calculating what's needed.

You need enough instrumentation to tell how fast it is going and where it is, as well as some to monitor what is going on from time to time, such as engines' status, remaining propellants, nearby objects....

The craft needs to survive in the ridiculously harsh environment long enough to deliver the cargo, and preferably return intact. Both the vehicle and the contents have to stay intact.

To survive in space, a craft and its systems have to withstand extreme temperatures - both high and low - and hard vacuum. They must not fail or disintegrate under hard ultraviolet or ion bombardments. It has to be able to operate while surrounded by the vacuum of space.

I could go on much, much further, but my own eyes are starting to glaze over. It's an amazingly complex feat, demanding an extensive mission control system to function.

Three missions ended in fatalities for the entire crew; Apollo 1 in a pre-launch engine test trapped inside the Apollo capsule, and two Space Shuttles, Challenger which blew up soon after lift-off from a gas leak, and Columbia which disintegrated on re-entry due to some damaged heat shields.

In a sense, those few fatalities are an indication of the high level of preparedness in dealing with the routine complexities of a mission. In another sense, they illustrate how even a small mistake, or a small lapse of judgment, can lead to nearly immediate catastrophe.

One outstanding mission avoided calamity, Apollo 13. The launch was picture perfect, as seen in the cover graphic. There were several issues, but those were routine. Apollo 13 headed through space on schedule to be the third Moon landing. It was about 2 1/2 days into the journey when the crew put on some fans and unwittingly ignited the

main oxygen tank with a very damaging explosion. Suddenly, it was a mission out-of-control. The story of how they managed to salvage the operation and prevent a terrible loss was so incredibly good that it became a hit movie. Using amazing ingenuity, resourcefulness, and dogged perseverance, the crew were able to splash down with all members alive and well.

The best plans, designs, and back-up plans can still have “mission control” turn into ‘mission out-of-control.’ The plans fail, the designs reveal flaws, the assumptions rear their ugly heads, and circumstances and conditions beyond any control impede and imperil the whole effort. It’s a real lesson in faith when the mission is out-of-control.

God had a plan. Abraham had a promise from God. God had promised Abraham that he would have an heir. God never said how that was going to happen. Sarah got the idea that her maidservant Hagar could bear a child for Abraham when Sarah could not. Abraham obeys his wife, and through Hagar, the boy Ishmael becomes the first-born child of Abraham. So, Ishmael has the inherent rights of the first-born, returning us to our favorite vocabulary word: primogeniture – the inherent rights of the first-born.

Ishmael’s primogeniture isn’t a big deal. That is, until Abraham and Sarah have some visitors arrive and predict Sarah’s imminent pregnancy, causing Sarah to laugh, and then lie, and get pregnant, and give birth to Isaac.

Now it gets complicated. Jealousy erupts between Sarah and Hagar. Sarah wants Hagar and young Ishmael gone. Sarah caught a glimpse of the future, and she doesn’t like what she sees for her son Isaac. One word sticks in her mind. Primogeniture. Her little Isaac is not “primo” but “deutero” and there is no inheritance for “deuterios.”

Abraham’s ranch doesn’t seem to be located in a place where he can go to the next town to set up Hagar and Ishmael with new digs at a safe distance. And he knows quite well that Sarah doesn’t have an urgent concern about whether Hagar and Ishmael might be imperiled. She wants them **gone**. If death should overtake them, oh, well. Actually, given biblical family values, it’s rather nice of Sarah not to have killed them both Hagar and Ishmael in their sleep and blamed it on lions or tigers or bears (oh my). She tells Abraham to ditch them. Abraham, being the man of the family, the head of the household, says, “Yes, dear.”

For poor Abraham, it’s a hard thing to do. He cares for both Ishmael and for Isaac. It doesn’t seem like a choice he should have to make. But in his distress, he discovers God has some reassurance. God says something like, “Abe, don’t sweat it. I’ve got it covered.” That’s an abridged form, but that’s really what God tells Abraham.

Being a man of faith who has gone through some interesting times with God, Abraham knows that God is good on his promises. He feels much better about sending Hagar and Ishmael off into the desert on what would seem like a journey to certain death. As the journey progresses, Hagar is pretty convinced that death is imminent for them, until God intervenes with provisions and the assurance that Ishmael will receive the promised blessing of God since he is a child of Abraham’s covenant, too.

We learn a few things here. First, God indeed is good on God's promises.

Second, that being faithful to God, as Abraham was, really means renouncing your belief that you must control everything. Mission out-of-control became okay for Abraham when he realized that God promised to take care of them. As Abraham was put in this dilemma, as we may find ourselves placed in a dilemma where things are beyond our control, Abraham did not believe that he was the "savior" of the situation.

Of course, Abraham struggled upon hearing Sarah's orders that he needed to "take care of it." And despite the tears and protests that Hagar probably poured out in her departure, Abraham knew not only that he could not produce an outcome to make this work, but also that this whole mess was wrapped up in God's original promise to him that he would become the "father of many nations." God was within this out-of-control situation somewhere, and God would need to make it all work to fulfill this promise.

Third, whether by design, default, or accident, God takes whatever messes we create or experience, and then works to create whatever goodness God can produce. The situation may not be remedied or recovered in the way we would expect or desire, but God makes use of that situation for whatever can be suited to God's purposes. The success or accomplishment or positive quality of something is not measured quite the same by God as it is by us. We do not set the measure of something's value; God does.

When the mission spirals out-of-control, whatever our mission may be, we should watch closely as God positions us to employ faithfulness and trust in God's presence with us. Abraham's hallmark faithfulness entrusted every mission to God.

When we recognize these aspects of Abraham's faithfulness and what is revealed about the relationship to God, we can better consider the intent of the Jesus sayings in Matthew's gospel that form the instructions in sending the 12 disciples on a mission trip.

The sayings aren't as important as the understanding of God and the mission that the disciples are sent to perform, starting now and never ending. Don't worry about what people say about you because of the work you're doing. Don't be fearful of what may happen to you. Be fearful of the possible weakness of your faithfulness. Don't expect everything will go as you expected and that everyone will appreciate what you're doing. Even your family may hold you in contempt. Be prepared to take up your own cross in obedience to your calling, for if you lose your life – the life that you have now, and the standing and the comforts and the peace that you have now – for the sake of the mission of life through Jesus, you will gain a whole new life. But if all you find in your life is more of what makes you fat and happy, your life is being lost. Mission out-of-control gets you there.

In all of these sayings, Jesus is repeating the faith lessons that Abraham learned in his situations. For the faithful who are willing to follow where God calls, who are

willing to sacrifice what they have by trusting in the promise of God that there is more, they will find their promise being fulfilled.

Here we see the difference between the Golden Rule and Christian mission. The Golden Rule, doing unto others as you would have them do unto you, is very nice. However, it generally suggests how we deal with situations that *happen to us*. These situations simply happen in the normal course of events. The Rule gives us a model of conduct, an ethic, when these occasions arise.

Christian mission is very different. It is not situations that *happen to us*. Rather Christian mission is deliberately putting ourselves into situations that may **not** happen to us. It also means **not** waiting for someone's need to confront us. Christian mission is going out and looking for the needs and the situations where we can offer our own unique witness to the love and life of Jesus Christ, often through the faithful stewardship of our personal gifts.

In his sending of the mission-working disciples, Jesus expects them to cross boundaries, break rules, and get in trouble with the powers-that-be. Jesus expects them to be faithful and to rely on God to work out the mission when they cannot. And if it becomes dangerous, or if it requires certain sacrifices, and even if the consequences seem fearful, or that the mission is a failure, the disciples are to look to the model of Abraham, for example, and know that God is active within their faithful act, working to bring forth his good purposes.

Mission can't truly occur without a heart of faith. Mission not only understands being faithful, it makes faithfulness the primary power. People do mission – faithful people – and they find that faith is their primary power when the mission seems out-of-control.