

Dear Class Member,

For nearly a week, world news reported daily about a massive container ship stuck sideways in the Suez Canal and thus blocking all other ships from passing through the waterway. The ship was finally freed on Monday, but the incident will likely have consequences for global shipping and the world economy.

Nonetheless, people on social media made the event humorous commentary on life's existential problems. (For examples, see the "Applying the News Story" section below.) But there was also a sense that the humor came from a place of struggle, and so, for our next class, we are using the stuck ship as an opportunity to reflect on the difficulties of life and offer the encouragement of our faith. And this Sunday being Easter, we celebrate the long-term encouragement of Christ's resurrection.

The in-person and Zoom *Wired Word* classes are cancelled. We continue to have Tuesday morning Zoom Bible studies with Zion UCC. We plan to start another six week Sunday evening study series in April/May with Zion UCC. We are planning a book discussion of *The Post-Quarantine Church: Six Urgent Challenges & Opportunities That Will Determine the Future of Your Congregation* sometime in April. We look forward to resuming in-person *The Present Word* classes Sundays at 9:00am on May 2, 9, 16, & 23. In the meantime, you can continue to use *The Wired Word* discussion sheets in your homes, with your friends/family/co-workers or fellow Abide Group members.



Massive Ship, Stuck in Suez Canal for a Week, Finally Freed; Canal Reopened

The Wired Word for the Week of April 4, 2021

In the News

On Monday, the container ship *Ever Given* was finally freed from where she (yes, ships are "female") had gone aground in one of the narrowest sections of the Suez Canal, completely blocking ship traffic through that passageway for almost a week. According to the Suez Canal Authority, the waterway has now reopened and navigation by other vessels has resumed.

The ship was refloated after intensive efforts to vacuum up sand with several dredgers and push and pull the ship with a fleet of tugboats during high spring tide.

The *Ever Given*, a Golden-class vessel is one of the world's largest ships -- at more than 1,300 feet, she is almost as long as the Empire State Building is tall. The 200,000-ton ship is capable of carrying 20,000 containers, and when loaded, is as high above the water as a 20-story building -- with another 48 feet or so below the waterline. She is powered by an 11-cylinder two-stroke Diesel engine, and had at least 18,300 containers on board when she went aground.

The grounding occurred on March 23, while the ship was moving through the canal, en route from China to the Netherlands. Buffeted by winds of up to 46 mph, she skewed sideways in the channel, wedging her bow into one bank and her stern into the other -- or as one commentator put it, the *Ever Given* was "ashore in Asia and implanted in Africa."

Authorities stated that the wind was "not the main reason" for the grounding and that "there may have been technical or human errors."

The Suez Canal is a man-made sea-level waterway in Egypt, connecting the Mediterranean Sea to the Red Sea through the Isthmus of Suez and dividing Africa and Asia. It's a vital shortcut for ships moving from Europe to Asia and vice versa. In normal operation, some 18,000 vessels a year, or about 10 percent of global trade, sail through the waterway,

carrying everything from consumer electronics to food, household goods, chemicals, ore, petroleum and even livestock.

Without the canal, ships have to travel around the tip of Africa, adding about 3,500 miles and up to 12 days to their journey.

When the canal reopened on Monday, about 450 ships were queued up awaiting passage through it -- some at each end of the canal. Shipping expert Lloyd's List estimates that the obstruction was holding up an estimated \$9.6 billion of goods each day, which works out to \$400 million an hour in trade.

It is likely that the blockage of the canal will result in some increase in the prices of goods and for a while, a bump in what much of the world -- and perhaps even we in the United States -- pays for fuel at the pump.

More on this story can be found at these links:

[Ship in Suez Canal Has Been Freed.](#) *CNN*

[How the Giant Boat Blocking the Suez Canal Was Freed: Dredgers, Tugboats, and a Full Moon.](#) *TIME*

[Suez Blockage Is Holding Up \\$9.6bn of Goods a Day.](#) *BBC*

[I've Sailed the Suez Canal on a Cargo Ship -- It's No Wonder the Ever Given Got Stuck.](#) *The Guardian*

Applying the News Story

The ship stuck in the Suez Canal was no joke, and the week-long blockage may still pass financial and shortage consequences down to people on many parts of the globe, including those who have no direct connection to global shipping. Nonetheless, photos on the internet of the giant ship stuck catawampus across the waterway and obstructing all other traffic unleashed a proliferation of memes and metaphors for life's existential problems.

For example, there's a photo of a front-end loader (an earth-moving machine) on the bank of the canal near the bow of the Ever Given. In road construction, a front-end loader is considered a large piece of heavy equipment, but in the photo, it's dwarfed by the massive front of the ship, which is so huge that she extends far above and beyond the borders of the picture. Someone has added their own captions to the shot, labeling the loader "my therapist" and the ship "my issues." (See both the photo and the "captioned" version in this [article](#).)

Someone else has taken the same photo and [captioned](#) the loader "drinking exactly two beers" and the ship "the incessant, crushing weight of existence."

A related [picture](#) of an excavator machine looking tiny as it dug away the shoreline where the ship was stuck bears the added captions "me trying to lose weight through diet and exercise" (the excavator) and "type-2 diabetes" (the ship). Another person used a similar [photo](#) and labeled the ship "all my responsibilities" and the excavator "me trying to make it through the week without breaking down." Yet another person used [that photo](#) and captioned the ship "the crushing despair of everything from the past year" and the excavator "you, doing your best."

You can find several more stuck-ship related memes on the internet. No doubt, some of these were meant to be lighthearted, but you get the drift: Many people find life hard enough that their struggles are reflected even in a humorous venue.

Thus, our topic for this discussion is the difficulty of life and getting past obstacles. And we invite you to hear the encouragement of our faith, especially as Easter reminds us of Christianity's ultimate encouragement -- the Resurrection.

The Big Questions

1. In general, do you find life to be easy, hard or somewhere in between? On what experiences do you base your answer?
2. In what sense and how often does the statement "I've hit a brick wall" apply to your projects, relationships, spiritual journey or other parts of your life? What is your strategy, if any, when you hit that wall? Can a brick wall mean it's time for you, or your church, to change focus? What do you think being stuck might tell you?

3. Should a significant part of a church's ministry to people be offering encouragement, and if so, why? If not, why not?
4. In what ways can obstacles ever be a gift from God? Talk about a time when an obstacle turned out to be a good thing.
5. What is the Christian faith's response to the reality that life is hard? In what ways is Easter a response to that reality?

Confronting the News With Scripture and Hope

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

Luke 18:2-5

[Jesus] said, "In a certain city there was a judge who neither feared God nor had respect for people. In that city there was a widow who kept coming to him and saying, 'Grant me justice against my opponent.' For a while he refused; but later he said to himself, 'Though I have no fear of God and no respect for anyone, yet because this widow keeps bothering me, I will grant her justice, so that she may not wear me out by continually coming.'" (For context, read 18:1-8.)

We thought about connecting our topic today to the David and Goliath story, but in several ways, Jesus' parable about the widow and the unjust judge better approximates the majority of our struggles in life. When David faced down Goliath, the obstacle the giant man represented was removed more quickly than most of the blockages we face. It took just one slung stone.

In contrast, consider the situation of the widow in Jesus' parable. There was no quick fix for her. We are not told the nature of her legal claim, but it was evidently legitimate. It may have been an inheritance that was being withheld from her. But in any case, unless she could get a trial hearing, it made no difference how just her cause was.

She was in a difficult position. She lived in a culture where women generally had to rely upon their husbands or other male relatives for financial support. As a widow, she may have been too old to have much chance for remarriage, and other male relatives would have been reluctant to take on the extra responsibility. As a poor person she had no money to bribe an official to do what he should have done for her anyway.

Because widows, along with orphans, had such low standing in that society, it was a primary duty of the local judges to see that they were treated fairly. She was completely at the mercy of the system. But in this case, the judge was self-serving. There was no gain to him in hearing this widow's case, so he simply ignored her.

Compared to her situation, some of our problems may pale a bit, but the frustration is similar. And it doesn't really matter whether the reason we are stymied is that the system is malicious or just too cumbersome to treat all individuals equally, let alone to handle special cases. It still hurts to hit a brick wall.

Of course, in the parable, the widow did finally get her day in court, but look at what she had to go through for that to happen. The parable says simply that she kept coming to the judge and saying, "Vindicate me against my adversary," and that judge finally heard her case only because he said to himself "she will wear me out by continually coming."

But can you picture what is being suggested in those few lines? If we would put her situation into a 21st-century context, we can imagine that she had no Uber account and no money for a taxi. Thus she had to bother a neighbor to drive her to court. Then she had to lurk around the back of the courthouse day after day waiting for the judge to make an appearance. When he did, she had to hound him so persistently that he finally gave in just to get her off his back. We may feel that the judge deserved the trouble, but what did that persistence cost the widow? After all, it takes something out of us to have to make waves and be obnoxious. She had to do something foreign to her nature -- pester this man who thought she was scum. She must have gone home each day with her stomach tied up in knots.

But isn't that often how it is? Don't we usually have to work hard and go to uncomfortable lengths to get by the obstacles life throws at us?

Questions: Verse 1 says that Jesus told his disciples this parable to illustrate "their need to pray always and not to lose heart." Are there times when taking action is the best possible prayer? Do you think prayer is the only topic the parable addresses? (Explain your answer.) Who do you think is the target audience for this parable today?

Lamentations 3:7-9

[God] has walled me about so that I cannot escape; he has put heavy chains on me; though I call and cry for help, he shuts out my prayer; he has blocked my ways with hewn stones ... (For context, read 3:1-3, 7-9, 22-24.)

1 Thessalonians 2:18

For we wanted to come to you -- certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again -- but Satan blocked our way. (For context, read 2:17--3:5.)

Here are two biblical interpretations of obstacles. The writer of Lamentations is talking about literally being trapped, with the people of Judah exiled in Babylon. Notice, however, that the writer says the real source of the blockage is not the Babylonians, but God, who "has blocked my ways."

In the 1 Thessalonians passage, the apostle Paul alludes to circumstances that prevented him from returning to Thessalonica to visit the Christians there, "but Satan blocked our way." We don't know what those specific circumstances were -- perhaps a travel embargo or illness -- but Paul interprets them as being from the devil.

Questions: How can you determine when God is the source of your obstacles? when Satan is the source? Are these characterizations of the source of our blockages even useful? Why or why not? How should we respond if we determine that God is the source?

Matthew 11:28-30

Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light. (For context, read 11:25-30.)

Many of the common people who heard Jesus carried the burden of an uneasy conscience. They had been taught the strict and legalistic interpretations of the Mosaic laws by the Pharisees and some rabbis. These interpretations created a body of requirements much larger than the original laws. It was such a formidable mass of regulation that only a full-time legal specialist could hope to know them all.

The result was that the common people often unknowingly violated one of these interpretations. For those who were the most sincere and devout in their attempts to be faithful to the laws, a guilty conscience must have been a common experience. No doubt people were exhausted in their efforts to satisfy the demands of legalism. As a community of people, they shared the accusing conscience.

It was to such people that Jesus addressed these words: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest."

We who may labor at exhausting jobs or who are overwhelmed with other responsibilities may hear these words of Jesus as a call to somehow find relaxation in him. But in the original setting, Jesus' invitation was not addressing the work-burdened. For that matter, neither was he addressing the sin-burdened either. He was speaking to those who were trying to live holy lives under the enormous burden of keeping all of these rules the Pharisees had laid on them, the law-burdened.

In comparison to that, Jesus' burden is light. He didn't come to do away with the laws of Moses, but to fulfill them by giving them the ultimate interpretation. In fact, his interpretation could be boiled down to two: Love the Lord with all your heart, and love your neighbor as yourself.

He certainly didn't mean that God's laws had no value. But he did mean that the scrupulous attempt to reduce every law to a restrictive set of behaviors missed the point.

He was addressing those who had felt inward moral disapproval, not because they were intentionally doing wrong, but rather those who were trying to do right under constant judgment by nitpicking rules they couldn't even know. To paraphrase Jesus, he was saying, "Come to me, all you whose consciences bleed because you cannot achieve everything you believe is expected of you. And I will give you healing and inward peace."

To those in Jesus' day who were struggling to carry the heavy yoke of legalism, and to those of us who are trying to carry the heavy yoke of righteous intentions, Jesus says, "Instead, carry my yoke. My yoke is easy."

Questions: In what ways, if any, have you found your commitment to follow Jesus a heavy load -- or even an obstacle? What message might you hear for yourself in Jesus' words here?

John 16:33 (NIV)

[Jesus said,] "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (For context, read 16:17-33.)

A popular bit of advice that passes for wisdom these days tells us "If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen."

Insofar as the kitchen is a metaphor for our lives, that's really not very useful advice. For most of us, getting out of the kitchen is not an option. The kitchen is where we live.

The only ways to get out of the kitchen would be to drop out and become a hermit, or worse yet, exit life altogether.

And so much is "heat" -- or pressure -- a part of normal life, that Jesus devoted some of his final hours before his arrest to talking to his disciples about it. He spoke to them the words quoted in the verse above.

The word "trouble" in that verse is sometimes translated as "tribulation" or "persecution," but in the original Greek, it is derived from a verb meaning "to press" or "to squeeze." Thus the noun form is "pressure." So Jesus said to his disciples, "In this world you will have *pressure*."

And notice that he does not offer them even one suggestion on how to escape that pressure. He simply states it as a fact of life: "In this world you will have pressure." And of course he is right. Our own experience bears out the truth of Jesus' words. We know about pressure; we live with it much of the time.

The word we commonly use for our reaction to the heat of the kitchen is "stress." Stress is the emotional wear and tear we feel from the pressure of life.

Pressure is a fact of life. But the most important thing is that we pay attention to where the pressure lies. If we do not allow it to come between ourselves and our God, then the greater the pressure, the more it presses us toward God.

Some of life's heat we just have to take, but when we allow it to push us closer to God, we can not only survive it, but can even find the kitchen a better place to be.

Questions: How much do you consider stress to be a given? What have you found helpful in dealing with stress? What, if any, elements of your faith in Christ have helped? From your experience, how could you encourage someone else who is overburdened or simply feeling the weight of daily life?

For Further Discussion

1. For some perspective on what it's like to work on ships going through the Suez Canal (or the "ditch in the desert" as it's sometimes called) read and discuss the article from *The Guardian* in the links list above.

2. Respond to this, heard in a sermon: "If the parable of the widow and the unjust judge is actually about prayer and the widow represents the pray-er, we want to be careful not to assume that the uncaring, self-centered judge represents God. Rather, the movement of this parable is from the human to the divine: If even a cruel judge will finally respond to a petitioner who won't give up, *how much more* will God respond to the prayers of those who serve him.

"And if this parable is about persistence in prayer, one conclusion we cannot escape is that some petitions to God need to be sent again and again over long periods of seemingly no response. We don't know why, but perhaps the person praying like that is being molded by the long days and nights of silence into a container that will be able to hold the answer to prayer when it comes.

"All we know for certain is this: That Jesus taught us ask, seek, knock and not give up. And the testimony of the Bible is that through prayer, with God's help, somehow, we are able to get around, step over, or in some way change the meaning of the walls that block us."

3. Discuss this: Wilfred Reynolds, a Christian writer from Illinois, tells of being in the public library one day when he was disturbed by a woman at a nearby table who was talking to herself in loud tones, and gesturing freely. She didn't appear to be focused on anything in particular, but her tone became more and more strident. Clearly, the woman was not in touch with reality. Eventually the woman got up and left, making little chopping motions with her hands, as though giving a speech.

It happened that while all this was taking place, a young man came in and sat down at the same table with Reynolds, and saw what was going on. This young man had a severe physical disability -- probably cerebral palsy -- which contorted his facial features and made him walk with difficulty.

After the ranting woman left, there was an awkward moment that seemed to invite comment. Reynolds turned to the young man and said, "I imagine people like that have a lot of loneliness. It's likely they need human companionship an awful lot, but probably drive it away. It's a vicious circle."

At that moment, seeing the physical difficulties of the young man, it dawned on Reynolds that it was insensitive to address those remarks to this particular person.

But the young man responded, "Everybody has their problems. But every time you stand up under a hard experience, you're a little tougher and better able to handle the other things down the road. The trouble is, lots of people give up too easily. They give up and get buried under it, and they expect someone else to solve their problems for them. If God wants anything for people, God wants them to keep going. I think that's where God's inspiration comes in, in knowing that God wants you to keep trying ... no matter what."

The man then added, "Don't give up. Don't you give up."

Reynolds writes that he didn't know how the young man knew he -- Reynolds -- needed to be encouraged just then, but somehow he did. Apparently this man, living every minute with a body that wouldn't serve him very well and that made him an object of pity, had learned something that made him an encourager.

4. An outdoor chapel at a Christian camp for young people has the following posted on a plaque near the altar: "I come here often to find myself. It is so easy to get lost in the world." The quote is from John Burroughs (1837-1921), who was an American naturalist and nature essayist. He probably intended the quote to apply to the natural environment, but why might someone have chosen to post it in a chapel?

Responding to the News

Now is a good time to offer some words of encouragement to people you know who may be struggling. You may find that you receive encouragement yourself in doing so.

Prayer

We ask, O Lord, not to be freed from the stress of living, but to receive the encouragement of our faith and of our fellow travelers on the journey of life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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