

God Remembers: Pilgrim Days

Exodus 13:17-22

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January 25, 2015

Now if you would, take your Bibles and turn please to the book of Exodus, chapter 13. If you're using one of our church Bibles, you'll find that on page 55; Exodus 13. We're going to read from verse 17 through the end of the chapter. Before we do, let's bow our heads as we pray together.

O Lord our God, would You please send us the help of the Holy Spirit to open Your Word to us, to enlighten and illuminate our understanding, to grant faith to those who do not yet know Christ, to strengthen those who trust Him, yet who, because they find themselves in trial and endure suffering, are struggling to cling on; strengthen them by Your Word. Restore backsliders now by Your Word. Bind up the broken-hearted, strengthen weak knees and feeble arms and make straight paths for feet. Do not break the bruised reed nor smoke out the smoking flax; instead, O Lord, by Your Spirit and through Your Word now, work in us new life, trust in Jesus, and new obedience to Him. For we ask this in Jesus' name, amen.

Exodus chapter 13, reading from the seventeenth verse. This is God's own holy Word:

When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, "Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt." But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea. And the people of Israel went up out of the land of Egypt equipped for battle. Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones with you from here." And they moved on from Succoth and encamped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness.. And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people."

Amen, and we praise God for His holy and inerrant Word.

God is In-Charge Of Our Life's Windy Roads

One of our favorite hymns here at First Presbyterian Church is the great meditation on the providence of God by William Cowper, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way." It's familiar, I'm sure, to many of you. It may even have been your companion through some dark and hard times. Let me read a few verses of it to you:

God moves in a mysterious way His wonders to perform; He plants His footsteps in the sea and rides upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines of never failing skill He treasures up His bright designs and works His sovereign will.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense, but trust Him for His grace; behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.

I read that as we turn our attention to the last six verses of Exodus 13 because I think in many ways it gets at the message of this text very helpfully. It deals with the providence of God, often surprising, often unfathomable to us as God works in our lives, and yet that same providence always utterly reliable and sure. It's a vital truth that we do need, I think, to get a firm and clear grasp of because hard trials are inevitable in our Christian lives. You may know that across the mouth of the Thames River in London there is the Thames River Barrier. In 1953 there was a massive surge in the North Sea causing huge flooding in the city, so when technology finally allowed in the 1980s they built a huge flood barrier that can be raised or lowered at need to protect the city. I think the words of Cowper's hymn and the message of our text this morning can function, ought to function, rather like a flood barrier. You put it in place in anticipation of the day when the flood comes to protect you so that you have the machinery in place for when the flood of trial and suffering and pain and loss break in, as it inevitably will, in our Christian lives. And so that's what we're going to do together this morning as we turn to Exodus 13:17 to the end; we're going to use this passage to begin building a flood barrier in our hearts and in our minds to prepare us with a robust doctrine of the providence of God for the days when trials and floods sweep in.

The Path of God Preserves Us

So let me direct your attention to the portion of Scripture we read together, Exodus 13:17 to the end, and I want you to look at verses 17 and 18 first of all. And the first thing to see that we are taught here is the path of God, particularly that the path of God preserves us; the path of God preserves us, verses 17 and

18. The people of Israel have now at last, after many dangers, toils, and snares, made their way out of bondage in Egypt. Actually, to be more precise, they have been expelled from bondage in Egypt. Until now, Egypt has done everything that it could to retain the slave labor of the subjugated Hebrew people. And as a result, God has judged Egypt with terrible judgments, and so now, this side of the judgments of God, the ten plagues climaxing in the death of the firstborn, this side of the judgment of God the Egyptians are as eager to be rid of the Hebrews as they once were to retain them. And so at 12:32 we hear Pharaoh saying, "Be gone! Get out of my land!" Verse 33, "The Egyptians were urgent with the people to send them out of the land in haste, for they said, 'We shall all be dead!'" So Israel is expelled and pushed out of the land and we saw 600,000 men, not to mention women and children as well as a vast multitude of Egyptians and others, come out of the land, turning their backs on Egypt and Egypt's false gods, to trust in Israel's God, Yahweh the Lord, to be their protector and deliverer and guide. And 12:37 has them moving from Rameses to Succoth, and then the intervening material is instruction on how to observe Passover.

God Leads Us Home Through Windy Roads

And the narrative of Israel's flight from Egypt resumes again at the beginning of our passage in verse 17 where we read that God does something, on the surface at least, that appears altogether counterintuitive, quite almost backwards. Look at it please, verse 17. "When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by the way of the Philistines although that was near." The normal, the quickest route was by what was known as the "via Maris," "the way of the sea," a busy trade route from the Nile through northern Sinai into Canaan. The land of the Philistines was near, and yet God sends them southeast instead, through the desert. It would be like going to New Orleans by way of Memphis; it doesn't make any sense! It's completely the wrong direction. And it wasn't a brief detour either. If they'd taken the most direct route, the Via Maris, it would have taken about two weeks' journey from where they were to the borders of the Promised Land. And as it is, on the route that God sent them on, it took them about a year finally to arrive at the edge of the land of Canaan. And as we'll see after that, they did not enter the land at that point; they spent another forty-one years wandering in the desert. Quite a detour; not at all the quickest route. The quickest route, the familiar route, seems like the best route, but the paths that God leads us on, although sometimes circuitous and hard, we need to learn, Israel needed to learn, are always safer and better for us in the end.

God Knows the Frailty of Our Faith

We don't usually get to know why God does what He does, although in this particular case we are given a window into God's reasoning for the direction He provides for His people. Look at verse 17 again, "For God said" - here's God's reasoning - "Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt." So God knows the landscape ahead of them better than any among the

people of Israel. He knew that along the fastest trade route from the Nile to Canaan there are a string of strategic Egyptian fortresses protecting the land and so obtaining their freedom would be very difficult indeed and the Philistines themselves waited at the end of the line. He knew the people were in no shape for battle. In verse 18, at the end of verse 18, our translation says, "they were equipped for battle." Actually that's better rendered simply that "they left Egypt in formation." Not that they are equipped for battle but they are organized. The Lord knows that if they face war they are inclined to turn around and run back to bondage in Egypt. He knows not only the lie of the land ahead of them; He knows the lie of the land within them, in their hearts; He knows the landscape of their soul and He sees their weaknesses and their fearfulness and the fragility of their faith and that should they face armed resistance they might think slavery in Egypt preferable to defeat in Canaan, which actually is what happens on that occasion when, a year later, they finally arrive for the first time at the border of the Land of Promise, Numbers 13:3-4. They take one look at the strength of their enemies and they declare, "Why is the Lord bringing us into this land to fall by the sword? Our lives and our little ones will become a prey! Would it not be better for us to go back to Egypt?"

The Lord knows their hearts well. He knew what lay ahead; He knew what was safe and good and wise and He knew the lessons His people still had to learn about His character and His holiness and His grace and His covenant that they could only learn by trial and suffering. And so while it may not have seemed obvious at all, or even wise to the people of the day, God led them in almost the opposite direction from their desired destination. Such is the wisdom of God in His providence and many of you have firsthand experience of precisely that. God is working His purposes out as year succeeds to year. Do you believe that? There are times, aren't there, when we are tempted like Israel were tempted that first time when they arrived at the borders of Canaan to "judge the Lord by feeble sense," to wonder, "What in the world was God thinking? This is a disaster!" - to suggest that God's ordering of the events of our lives are unwise, unjust, not good.

God Performs All Things for Our Good

Our passage teaches us that actually even when the path of God leads us by ways we cannot see over strange, difficult, sore terrain God is yet at work in all things for the good of those who love Him and are called according to His purpose. A very great deal that appears to us as an evil, God intends for good. The Hebrews, remember, knew well where the Promised Land was. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had been promised that land as a permanent home for them and for their descendants. They knew that the path they were on at this point was not the road to Canaan, but what they needed to learn, perhaps what we need to learn too, is that whatever the appearance, the path of God's ordination is for our good and His glory. It is a path much safer than any we might choose for ourselves. Were you captain of your own soul you will make shipwreck of your

life. Thanks be to God that He is in charge and in control and our lives are in His hands. "Judge not the Lord by feeble sense but trust Him for His grace; behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face." The path of God preserves us. It may seem counterintuitive, but His wisdom and His goodness are utterly dependable.

The Promises of God Assure Us

Then secondly, look at verse 19. The path of God preserves us, then secondly, the promises of God assure us; the promises of God assure us. Verse 19, "Moses took the bones of Joseph with him for Joseph had made the sons of Israel solemnly swear saying, 'God will surely visit you and you shall carry up my bones with you from here.'" Now picture the scene, would you? Here is a huge army of refugees traveling, living like nomads in the desert. They are going to face extremes of hunger and thirst and need of every kind. There will be seasons where their hearts betray them and they fall almost into outright apostasy and God will judicially discipline them. They will deal with sickness and war and for forty-two years they will endure all of this in an epic trek toward the land of Canaan. And through it all, over deserts and mountains, through drought and famine, through disease and war, through sin and spiritual growth, even after an entire generation among them dies in the desert, even then they will carry with them the moldy old bones of Joseph.

Joseph's Legacy of Faith in God's Promises

Why in the world would they do that? Was it that Joseph was perhaps sacred to them, a relic like the bones of some old saint in a cathedral some place? Do they venerate this man? What's going on? It's simply that Joseph had made them promise because Joseph himself was so utterly confident about the certainty of God's promise. He couldn't see from his vantage point how God would bring it to pass, but he was sure that God who makes promises keeps them, and so he said, "However long it will be when God visits you and delivers you, take my bones home and bury me in the plot of land where my ancestors are buried." What a rebuke that would have been to the Israelites at times in their wilderness journey, these bones that were a testimony to Joseph's utter confidence in the purpose and promise and providence of God. When Israel wandered far from obedience and wanted to return back to Egypt as they did again and again - Exodus 16:2, Exodus 17:3, Numbers 11:5, Numbers 14:2 - over and over and over they said, "We'd be better off back in bondage and slavery than that the Lord had ever brought us out into a life like this!" That's what was happening in Israel and all the while there are the bones of Joseph saying, "I know better than you about the way God works, often leading us through strange paths working out His purposes. My whole life is testimony to that."

You remember Joseph's story, don't you? He was betrayed by his brothers,

thrown into a pit, sold into slavery, wrongfully accused, falsely imprisoned, and then in the marvelous ordering of God made lord of Egypt, second only to Pharaoh, in a position to become himself the savior of the Hebrews. God worked in His providence in strange ways in Joseph's life and Joseph was able to say, "What man intended for evil, God intended for good." That's what his bones proclaimed, eloquently, powerfully to the Israelites in the desert. They were a powerful proclamation of the utter reliability of the promises of God and eventually he was buried in Succoth, sorry in Shechem, with his ancestors on the family plot. Under Joseph, Moses' ancestor, God's promises were fulfilled and Israel came to see them and we need to learn, don't we, especially in those times where we don't understand what God is doing or why He's doing it, that understanding, that figuring it out, that making sense of it all is not always what is best for us, that very often we will never be led to understand the "Why?" of it all in God's wise dealing and that if we seek to harness our comforts and our assurance and our peace to an explanation we may never find comfort and assurance and peace. Instead our passage reminds us the place where comfort and assurance and peace are found is in the promises of God, not in an explanation for "Why?" but in the promise of God that He is faithful and gracious and good. We don't always need to know why God is doing what He is doing, but it is to be enough for us that we know that it is God who is doing all of these things. He is good, His promises are true - cling to them and find your peace and rest there.

The Presence of God Directs Us

The path of God preserves us, the promises of God assure us, and now finally the presence of God directs us. Look at 20 to 22 please. We get a little glimpse of their travel itinerary in verse 20. They move from Succoth to Etham, the edge of the wilderness, but do notice that it was not Moses who led them there, not some map giving them direction. They did not have a GPS showing them the way out of Egypt. It was the very presence of God Himself who guided them. "The Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light." God had appeared to Moses, remember Exodus 3, in the fire of the burning bush, and now He appears again to Israel in the cloud and fire to lead His people as a whole, day and night, never departing from before them. He is with them. They do not go alone. He never leaves them. His guidance is comprehensive and covers every moment of every day of their journey home.

God's Presence Among the Israelites: A Shadow of the Reality We Enjoy

And as we take that in, I suspect it may be tempting for us to think the Israelites were better off at this point than we are, right? I mean right in front of them is the glory cloud of the presence of God burning and blazing before their very eyes. If we think that way we really are undervaluing our privileges as believers in Jesus.

The presence of God that preceded the Israelites in the wilderness was at best a dim shadow of the full reality we now enjoy. It dawned on that day when the wind and fire descended to rest upon the church at Pentecost and not merely to go before them or to be in the midst of them, but to dwell within them forever - the Spirit of God inhabiting the hearts of the people of God. Isaiah 63:10 is reflecting on the Exodus and particularly about the pillar of cloud and fire and says that it was God putting His Holy Spirit in the midst of them. We have something far better. We have God putting His Holy Spirit in our very hearts to dwell with us forever so that we can speak of Christ in us, the hope of glory.

If today you are a Christian through faith in Jesus Christ you are better off by far than the Hebrews under the cloud and fire. You have more light than they, more of God than they. You have Christ Himself dwelling within you by His Spirit who leads you and guides you by His holy Word, by the Scriptures, which back in the days of Moses you will remember was only partial and incomplete. But now that Jesus has come, in our day we have the Scriptures full and finished and sufficient. And God who dwells in our hearts by His Spirit guides us and directs our steps never, never deserting us, walking with us down every dark path, through every rocky valley, in every trial, in every wound, through every loss, never leaving us nor forsaking us, bringing us back again and again to His precious promises and enlightening our minds in the understanding of His holy Word, directing our steps and saying, "This is the way; walk in it." Child of God, you are one with Christ, inhabited by the Spirit of Christ and directed by the Word of Christ. Your privileges are vast and incalculable, rich and sweet, so that though God in His providence may often lead you to hard, hard places, because His Spirit now dwells within you to be your comforter, you may taste and see for yourself the reliability of the promises of God, how He brings out of the worst, sweetness and beauty and glory for His name and blessing for your soul. "The bud may have a bitter taste, but sweet will be the flower."

The path of God preserves us, His ways are not our ways nor are His thoughts our thoughts. He knows best, so trust Him. Trust Him. The promises of God assure us, His Word is true, His covenant is secure. Do not judge your circumstances by your best guesses nor wed and marry your comforts to explanations or understanding why. Instead, find your hope and your joy and your peace in the unshakable promises of God. And the presence of God directs us. The Holy Spirit Himself lives within you, believer in Jesus, and that means though you will not often always see how to get home from here, the one who has brought you safe thus far will lead you home one day. He will navigate the ship of your soul safely to the harbor at last and on that you can utterly depend. May the Lord bless to you the ministry of His holy Word. Let us pray together.

Father, we confess that often we are looking for explanations and reasons and answers to our "Why?" questions and it shatters our peace. Help us instead, when everything else is sinking sand, to find solid ground on Your promises. Build in place, would You please, a flood barrier that is the rich, robust, truth of

divine providence working all things together for our good so that even what man intends for evil You will intend for good. Do this that Jesus' name may have glory and honor in our lives, in our homes, in our witness, in our workplace. For Jesus' sake, amen.

(last sermon in series)

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