

## Leading of the Lord • Exodus 13:17–22

I invite you to do a mathematical exercise that will take just a little bit of financial commitment on your part, actually a total of ten cents. Take ten pennies and number them from one to ten. Now put them in your pocket and reach into your pocket and pick out the penny that says number one. What are the odds of doing that? They are one in ten.

Now, put that penny back into your pocket. On the second try, pick out the penny that says number two. The odds of doing that are one in a hundred.

Now you put that back in your pocket and this time you have to pick out number three. What are the odds of doing that? You're right! The odds are one in a thousand.

Put that back and out of the ten you keep doing that until in ten tries you have picked out number one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine and ten. What are the odds of doing all ten? The odds are one in ten billion.

Now think in terms of all the options and alternatives that we have in life. There are choices of whom to marry, the different jobs you might take, the different schools you might attend, all the different ways you might invest money, the different paths you can follow in getting to work or home, all the different houses you can live in. What are the odds of making the right and best decisions, sequentially, all the way through life? Mathematically, that cannot even be assessed. I suppose it would be in the trillions, at least.

And yet, obviously, that is the quest, the desire of us all. To make sequentially, through life, all of the best decisions that can be made so that our lives can be as good as they can possibly be.

Now there are different ways of living life; some people may live life, like with the coins, by blind chance. And so whatever chance picks out of the pocket is what they take. Or the other way of doing it is by human choice. So we try to reason out what is the best way to go. Looking at some people's lives one might think that they would have been better off with blind chance than with human choice.

But there is yet a third alternative. That third alternative is to follow God's guidance, and that, to be sure, is the best alternative of all.

In the last paragraph of Exodus 13 is a demonstration of the principle of following God's guidance. Here were two paths that the recently redeemed Hebrews had to choose from. The first of those paths, in Exodus 13:17, is the road that they didn't take.

Exodus 13:17 tells us, "When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter."

For about 400 years the Hebrew people have been in captivity in the nation of Egypt. It has been a miserable existence for them. They cried out to God, and he, through his messenger, Moses, set up a process for softening the hardened heart of Pharaoh to set the people free.

There was a series of nine terrible plagues. Each plague resulted in hardening Pharaoh's heart even more. Then came the tenth plague, the terrible plague where the eldest of each family died. And with that, Pharaoh acquiesced and he allowed the people to go free.

In their escape from Egypt, the logical route for them to take, the shortest route, is what is called the Mediterranean route or the Philistine road. If you have a Bible that has a map in the back, you may want to take a look at that. This particular map shows the possible routes that could be taken from Egypt to Canaan or Palestine - what is modern day Israel.

Goshen, the part of Egypt in which the people of Israel lived, is in the northeast corner, the delta region of Egypt. Obviously, the shortest way to go is along the Mediterranean coast and straight on up to Palestine. This route is about a couple hundred miles. If you figure the people could travel ten miles a day,

it would take about three weeks to travel the distance on foot from Egypt to Palestine.

Now, that was the shortest way and the surest way and the easiest way. But, according to verse 17, that was not God's way. It is interesting

because our basic inclination in life is to take the easiest route, the shortest and the best of ways.

A Scottish tale is told about a lady who, when she would take the unmarked roads through the valleys and the hills of Scotland, would carry with her a stick or pick one up along the way. At a crossroad she would throw the stick in the air and, when it

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would land on the ground, the direction in which the stick pointed was the direction she would go. That was her compass.

One day she threw the stick up and, when it landed, she picked it up and threw it again and then again and again. Some other wayfarers who knew about this lady, she being something of a legend, asked why she kept throwing the stick up in the air. She explained that the stick kept pointing to the rough road to the right, and she much preferred taking the smooth road to the left.

Well, her system wasn't working for her because she had already predetermined that she would take the easiest way. However the easiest way at times may also be the most dangerous way.

God told the Hebrew people not to take that northern Philistine road, in verse 17, because, "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt".

Normally, people traveled between Palestine and Egypt along this Mediterranean caravan route. It was a comparatively easy route to travel because there were inns and other resources for survival.

But there was more to it than that. The Egyptian people, like all ancient peoples, were concerned about invasion. Egypt was amazingly protected in various ways. That was not a day of great navies, so the Mediterranean to the north provided safety. The Sahara Desert to the west was also pretty safe. To the south was Africa and, while there were tribes and some empires there, that was not a place from which Egypt was typically invaded.

But the east, that was different. These huge eastern empires would come along that caravan route and seek to overthrow the Egyptian dynasties. In order to stop that from happening, the Egyptians set up a series of garrisons with soldiers all along that caravan route.

That accomplished a lot of things. If there was an invasion, their best troops were there to fight it off. If there were spies that came along, they could be filtered out in the process. If there were thefts in the land of Egypt, or those who were seeking to escape, they could be stopped on the way out.

Now God anticipated that when Pharaoh set the people free, he would later change his mind. And then word would be gotten to these garrisons, these fortresses, to stop the Hebrew people from escaping.

These were slaves. They weren't people who were trained in war. All they would need to do is to go into one battle and see some of their people die and immediately they would give in. They would then be turned around and, as verse 17 says, "They might

change their minds and return to Egypt." God not only guided them to where they should go, he guided them away from where they should not go.

Often, when we think of the guidance and direction of God, we imagine that God tells us to go this direction or that direction to get us to a particular place. However, is it not that God directs us more away from the places that we should not be than to the places that we should go?

When we get to heaven, if God allows us to look at the maps of our lives and all the alternatives that we had, will it not show that God repeatedly blocked us, in his guidance, from this place and that place, and the dangers and disasters that were there?

I think, for example, of an experience I had as a college student. I had recently been appointed editor of the campus newspaper. Although I had some journalism training, I wanted to take a great deal more. I learned that the University of Minnesota offered the best in journalism training. So, although I knew nothing about Minnesota at the time, I applied to the University of Minnesota, to the school of journalism and was accepted. I paid the fee and was ready to go.

The difficulty was that for one week I had no place to go because where I was in a school in Chicago finished a week before the University program started. At the time my family lived in the northern part of New Jersey and there was really not enough time to go back there and then come back to the Midwest.

A friend that lived down the hall from me in the dorm in Chicago offered to have me come and stay at his home in rural Wisconsin for that week. So I packed up my Volkswagen Beetle and he and I drove up there and enjoyed the major part of that week. During that week I had a feeling that that road to Minneapolis was one I ought not take. I am not a mystic by nature, so that is seldom the way I operate. But at least that one time I had this gut level feeling that this was not the thing to do.

I can still picture the living room of this home I stayed in. I got up early in the morning, a couple of mornings, and read the Bible and prayed and said, "God, this is strange. The fee is paid; it is a good thing; everybody is expecting me. But I feel like it is not the thing to do. What is this all about? And I asked God to either take away that uneasiness or to increase it and I would call off the summer school at the University of Minnesota.

The uneasiness did not subside, so the next day I packed up the car again and decided to drive straight through the thousand miles back to New Jersey.

That was a little bit hard to explain to my host

and hostess whose food I had eaten for the whole week. It was hard to explain to the people at the University of Minnesota that I had this feeling I shouldn't be there. I just said I wasn't able to come. And it was hard to explain to my parents who thought they were rid of me for the summer and all of a sudden there I was, back home again.

The day I arrived I became ill with what turned out to be the measles. Now, if you're a kid and you get the measles, I guess that is tough, but when you're an adult and you get it, let me tell you, it is the sick-est I think I have ever been in my life. As I lay there in bed I thought, "What if I had gone to Minneapolis? I didn't know anybody. Who would I turn to? Where would I go? I wouldn't be able to be in school. How would I get back home again? If I were to fly back, how would I pay for it? What would I do with the car?"

How good it is that God, in his guidance, not only shows us where we should go, but also shows us where we shouldn't go. The houses we ought not buy. The churches we ought not attend. The marriage we ought not enter. The investments we ought not take. The jobs we ought not pursue. God is as much a God of the road not taken as the road to be taken.

For Israel, following the guidance of God pointed away from that road not taken. And pointed towards the way of the wilderness. Let's pick up the story in verse 18 of Exodus 13:

*So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt armed for battle.*

*Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the sons of Israel swear an oath. He had said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you form this place."*

*After leaving Succoth they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert. By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.*

Unlike caravan routes, wildernesses do not have normal roads. Deserts are typically trackless places. When you want to set out in a wilderness or desert, you need someone who is a trustworthy guide who

will get you to your ultimate destination. That is what the people of Israel needed. And so, in this final paragraph of Exodus 13, God shows three indispensable factors that the nation of Israel needed to survive and succeed on their way through the wilderness.

The first one is in verse 18 - equipment. "The Israelites went up out of Egypt armed for battle." Now understand, these were not soldiers. The experience they had was in agriculture. Scratching out in the land of Goshen, a fairly fertile place, enough of a living in their gardens that they could feed themselves. Tending sheep, because that was unpleasant as far as the Egyptians were concerned. And, of course, as slaves. Their main vocation was making bricks.

But war? They knew nothing about war. Generations had passed since they had fought even the smallest of battles.

People who analyze military preparedness in the United States indicate that one of the benefits of the United States being in both the Korean conflict and the Vietnam conflict since World War II is that, all along the way we've had officers in our military who are battle experienced. At the same time, some of our potential enemy countries, because they have not been in similar conflicts, have gone a whole generation or more without having battle experienced personnel.

Well, these poor people of Israel had no experience at all. They had been slaves for 400 years. They were not at all prepared to battle. But battle was what they would face as they sought to occupy the Promised Land of Palestine. And they were equipped. God saw to it that, when they left Egypt, they had the equipment for the battle even though they did not have the preparation for the battle.

That is much like our Christian lives. We are told in Ephesians 1:3 that God has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing. That means that God has given to us, as Christians, all the resources, all the equipment, that we need to fight any of life's

battles in any wilderness. That doesn't mean that we are prepared to fight, but we are equipped to fight.

We can take a new recruit and put an M16 rifle in his hands, but

that doesn't mean he knows how to operate it or that he would survive very long in actual warfare. He needs to be trained. And so it was, for the Hebrew people. They had the equipment but not the preparation.

***How good it is that God, in his guidance, not only shows us where we should go, but also shows us where we shouldn't go.***

And often that is the way it is for us. So God has given to us the equipment of prayer, but that doesn't mean we know how to pray. God has given to us his Word, but that does not mean that we are knowledgeable about the Bible. God has given to us, as Christians, the indwelling of the Holy Spirit who gives direction to us, but that doesn't mean that we are responsive or in tune to the Holy Spirit who is in our lives.

Maybe you've been in the wilderness. Maybe there have been times when you've wondered if you can even survive, much less succeed. Understand that if you know Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, you have all the equipment that it takes to fight whatever battles will come your way.

But that is only one of the indispensable ingredients that God gave to those people. The second, after equipment, was faith. In verse 19, Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for Joseph had made the sons of Israel swear and oath, saying, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place."

Those words are 400 years old at the time of Exodus 13. Joseph had come himself as a slave to Egypt but had risen in ranks until he had become the prime minister, the number two man, in all of the Egyptian dynasty. Only Pharaoh was over him. He sensed from God what was to happen.

When his family came to visit, they came as guests and as a tiny clan. But Joseph sensed that, in the future, the clan would become a nation and the guests would become slaves. And he was concerned that he not be buried in the land where he was an alien and a visitor. He preferred to be buried in the land that was promised to his forefather, Abraham, the land of Palestine. And so he made his generation promise that, when he died, his burial would not be in Egypt, but would be in Canaan.

Joseph, of course, was not buried like an ordinary slave. He was an aristocrat, and so his body was embalmed and mummified like the mummies we see in the museums and in the books. His body was preserved and in a coffin so that four hundred years later, when it finally came time for the nation of Israel to walk out of captivity, they walked with the coffin of Joseph on their shoulders.

Now that may seem bizarre, but try to picture what that meant. Here was a nation of people walking through this desert wilderness and, at the head of the line, you see a group of men carrying a coffin with a mummy in it.

Those people became discouraged; they became disheartened. They were hungry; they were hot. They

thought they were going to die out in the wilderness. There were times when they yearned to go back to Egypt, even with the slavery. And they wondered if they'd ever make it to the Promised Land.

But then their faith was enhanced by seeing that coffin and remembering there was a man, once a leader of their family, who trusted God for four hundred years later, and, even though a long period of time had elapsed, God was faithful in his promise. God had gotten the nation through the 400 years, and he would get those wandering Jews in the wilderness of Sinai from slavery in Egypt to the promise that was theirs in Palestine. Faith is important when you're out in the wilderness.

Maybe you've heard the story about a man who was lost in the desert. His tongue and throat were parched and he was at the point of dying of exposure. He didn't know what direction to go and had virtually given up hope when he stumbled across a little sign that pointed to a well.

Desperate, he followed the sign until he came across a well that had a pump handle. He pumped it, but it was dry. Then he noticed, near the well, a tin can. He picked it up, and in it was a note giving instructions to anyone who came across the well.

The note said that under the can was buried a jar of water. In the jar was enough water to prime the pump. "Pour the water from the jar into the hole and start pumping like crazy. When you're finished, refill the jar and bury it for the next person. Don't drink the water from the jar. There isn't enough for you to drink and to prime the well. Trust me, the note said, "this well has produced more than enough water to satisfy everyone who has ever come, and it will work for you, too." It was signed, DESERT PETE.

Now what would you do? If you drink the water, you might live. If you pour the water into the hole and Desert Pete is right, then you'll have an abundance of water, not only to meet your present need, but also to take with you and get you out of the desert and to provide for the next person in your circumstance. But if you pour the water into the hole and pump like crazy and nothing comes out, you're dead.

It's tough, out in the wilderness, in a desert, when your life is at stake, to trust the word of someone you cannot see. And that is the way it was for those Hebrew people. They could not see the God who gave them the instructions and said, "Trust me. I'll get you through."

Nor can we. For we, too, have our wilderness experiences, and we, too, have a God whom we cannot see. This God has given to us instructions in the Bible, and in it he repeatedly says, "Trust me." It is a

matter of life and death how we decide. Not only is it a matter of life and death for now, but it's a matter of life and death for all of eternity.

Be assured that faith in the God of the wilderness way is never wasted. He has provided for those who have gone before us in the wilderness and he will provide for those who come after us in the wilderness. There is enough in him to satisfy us and everyone else, as well.

Indispensable ingredients: equipment, faith and finally, amazingly, a pillar. Those Hebrews never could have guessed how God would guide them through the wilderness. But we're told, in verses 21 and 22, "By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people."

There have been lots of guesses about this pillar. Some have said that there really wasn't any pillar of cloud or pillar of fire, but it was something in the minds of the people that, collectively, all of them saw.

Others have said it was a little more tangible than that. It was really a whirlwind in the desert. That whirlwind would spin around and pick up the dust and the sand and then God would guide that whirlwind and they would follow whatever direction it would go.

There are others who have said that, in those days, they had an altar and they did sacrifices, almost continual sacrifices, and the smoke would come off the altar and would shape itself around like a column, like a pillar. The flames from the altar would lighten up that cloud of smoke so it was a pillar of cloud or smoke in the daytime and it was a pillar of fire at night.

And then there are those who say that the God who created heaven and earth could do anything. And what he did was provide some supernatural phenomenon. It was a one-time thing for this particular situation. He did it then, he hasn't done it since and there is no point in trying to guess what it was.

We do know a little bit more about it, though, from the Bible. For example, according to Exodus 14:24, it was not two pillars, it was one. A single pillar was a pillar or column of cloud in the daytime and the same pillar was the pillar of fire at night. Whatever it was like, it was God's means of divine guidance through a hostile and difficult wilderness.

What is most important to us is to know that God does guide through the wilderness, although he doesn't do it with us the way he did it with them. We

have a far better system, for he has externally given to us his written word, and he has internally given to us his Holy Spirit. They are the main means of guidance, like the pillar of cloud and pillar of fire then.

He adds to that the counsel of other Christians, the circumstances of life around us and a multitude of different things in order to give us guidance. But understand that he does provide that guidance. He is committed to it. So much so that God is more concerned about our direction and our destination than we ourselves are concerned about our direction and destination. He wants us to get there, and he wants us to get there the right way.

Maybe you're in the wilderness now. A lot of us often are. Then be assured that he will provide the guidance that you need. He will do it. He will do it in terms of the road not to take and the way to go. He is committed to transform us, like those Hebrews, from slaves coming out of Egypt to soldiers going into Palestine. He will prepare us to use the equipment he has already given to us. He will provide the means to get us through the wilderness.

Do we really want God's will in our lives? I hope we will say yes, because God's will is better and more important than anything else. May we choose not to live by blind chance, picking coins out of the pocket of mathematical possibilities, nor living by human choice, for human choice is often not even as good as blind chance.

The best way is God's way, God's will, God's guidance. So may we say with that great explorer and missionary, David Livingston, "I would rather be in the heart of Africa in the will of God than on the throne of England out of the will of God."

What do you choose? Choose for God and his will and his guidance.

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