

## God's Unexpected Ways

### Scripture Lesson: Exodus 13:17 - 14:18

*When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt." 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 from 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.*

*Then the LORD said to Moses, "Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. They are to encamp by the sea, directly opposite Baal Zephon. Pharaoh will think, 'The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert.' And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD." So the Israelites did this.*

*When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about them and said, "What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services!" So he had his chariot made ready and took his army with him. He took six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them. The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, so that he pursued the Israelites, who were marching out boldly. The Egyptians—all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, horsemen and troops—pursued the Israelites and overtook them as they camped by the sea near Pi Hahiroth, opposite Baal Zephon.*

*As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD. They said to Moses, "Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"*

*Moses answered the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the LORD will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The LORD will fight for you; you need only to be still."*

*Then the LORD said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground. I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they will go in after them. And I will gain glory through Pharaoh and all his army, through his chariots and his horsemen. The Egyptians will know that I am the LORD when I gain glory through Pharaoh, his chariots and his horsemen."*

*This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.***

The Exodus beautifully foreshadows Christian experience. We were held in the grip of an evil oppressor, not Pharaoh but sin and Satan. God sent a Deliverer to set us free, not Moses but Jesus. Jesus defeated the enemy, not by sending plagues, but by dying on a cross and rising again from the dead. We are protected from the judgment of God by the blood of a lamb, not blood applied to the doorposts of our homes, but the blood of Christ, "*the Lamb of God*," applied by faith to our hearts. And now that we have been set free, we have embarked on a pilgrimage, not to Canaan, but to Heaven.

Our pilgrim pathway, like Israel's, takes us through a harsh wilderness where we encounter problems which have no apparent solution. Many times we aren't prepared for that. Especially when we have just begun to walk with the Lord, we are so aware of His goodness that we naively assume that He will spare us from the worst problems. But sooner or later we realize that He does not always protect us. When that happens, it often tests our faith. We are confronted with a decision: will we keep going, faithful to the Lord, or will we surrender to disillusionment and despair?

The first test of Israel's faith came very early. They had not yet crossed the border out of Egypt before they ran into a situation which seemed hopeless. They were trapped at the Red Sea. There they learned five vital lessons, lessons they would have cause to remember again and again during the next forty years, lessons we must learn, too, if we're going to endure in our "wilderness." The first lesson for wilderness survival is this:

### **I. If you are a Christian, you never travel alone.**

One of the wonderful things about the Exodus was that when the Israelites began their journey, God traveled with them. Verse 21: *'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.'* Neither do we travel alone, and what an encouragement it is to know that.

Before I say more about these reassuring realities, I want to say that I am not talking about abstractions, but about things that have been proven true in our lives. In early 1995, our daughter, Amy, and her husband, Ed Hartman, and their four children, ages 8, 6, 3 and 2, moved to Kosciusko, Mississippi, where Ed had been called as pastor of the First Presbyterian Church. They had not been there long before Amy began to suffer excruciating headaches. In the providence of God the head of the Neurology Department of the University of Mississippi Medical Center had become a friend of ours, and when he heard of Amy's headaches he insisted that she come in right away for tests.

The tests revealed that she had an inoperable GBM--a *glioblastoma multiforme*--, the most virulent kind of brain cancer. The doctors were quite candid that apart from what one of them called "the God-factor," long-term survival could not be expected. It was frightening news, and the next year was painful, yet through the entire experience of Amy's illness, the Lord's presence was very real to us.

Someone may be thinking, "It would certainly be nice if we had a visible sign of God's presence like the Israelites had, because then I wouldn't be so prone to forget, or to doubt, that He is with me."

Someone else might respond that we shouldn't need signs, that God's promise ought to be enough. Strictly speaking, I suppose that's true, but God knew that pictures can help, so in His grace He did not leave us without a visible sign! Every time you come to the Lord's table and drink the cup and eat the bread, you see and feel and smell and taste the physical tokens He has appointed to bolster your faith in His promise. As the minister stands there and offers the bread and cup to you, he is acting on the Lord's behalf, and through him you can hear the Lord saying, "I gave myself to rescue you from your sin and guilt; I will not desert you now that you are my child. I have gone this far for you; you can trust me to meet every other situation you may face. I will never leave you nor forsake you." So, the Communion reminds us in a tangible way of God's promise that when we put our trust in His Son, He not only cleanses us from sin and gives us new life, but also promises that He will walk with us until He has walked us all the way home.

Be assured, then, Christian: you never walk alone. God wants you to believe that and to take it seriously, to count on its reality in every situation. When you do, it will make all the difference.

The second lesson that will help you make it through the "wilderness" is this:

## **II. Your pathway has been mapped out by God**

As the Israelites began their journey their hearts must have been filled with the realization of the greatness and grace of God. They had seen the plagues He sent on Egypt, which finally had broken Pharaoh's resolve so that he allowed them to leave the country. They had experienced God's protection from the devastation those plagues caused throughout the rest of the land. They could look up and see the cloud which assured them that God was with them. Their dream of liberty had come true at last, and it was more wonderful and more glorious than they had imagined.

Moreover, they knew that God was leading their route of march. Verse 17 says: *"When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter."* Instead (verse 18), *"[He] led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea."* He did not lead them this way; He did lead them that way. The point is plain: every turn they took God was leading them.

Yet they had not gone far before it dawned on them that they were headed in an odd direction. The simplest way to get to their destination was to head north to the Mediterranean coast and turn right. From there Canaan was just a short trek up the coast. But God did not lead them that way. Instead, He led them by the much longer and more rugged road that would take them through the Sinai desert, one of the most inhospitable places on earth.

Soon their situation became even more perplexing. If you trace their route on a map you will discover that they were being led on a zigzag path. They started moving toward the southeast, to Succoth, and beyond that to Etham on the edge of the desert. And then God instructed them to reverse directions and head north: (14:1) *"Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. They are to encamp by the sea, directly opposite Baal Zephon.'" And according to verse 9 it was in that very spot that the Egyptian army caught up with them. They had traveled in a circle and walked into a cul-de-sac from which there appeared to be no exit. They were*

trapped between Pharaoh and the deep Red Sea. Not because Moses misread the map, and not because they took a wrong turn, and certainly not because of chance, but because God had led them there.

The fact is, nothing happens by chance. God has a plan that includes all things. Ephesians 1:11 says that He *"works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will."* Proverbs 20:24 says that our *"steps are ordered by the Lord."* Proverbs 16:9 adds that even though we plan our own course, it actually is the Lord who *"determines [our] steps."* So, when the going gets tough, be sure of this: God Himself brought you to that difficult spot. Wherever you find yourself, you are there by His providence. Whatever predicament you face, it is part of His plan. And if sometimes it seems perplexing and confusing, meaningless even, you can rest in the assurance that He knows what He is doing even though we do not. He makes no mistakes and He does all things well. What an encouragement it is to know that we are not the victims of blind chance, but are the objects of the tender watch-care of our Sovereign Father.

Amy believed that. On the day of her diagnosis I sat on the edge of her hospital bed, and with tears in my eyes, I said, "Sweetheart, I would do anything if I could trade places with you." She looked at me with strong confidence and said, "Oh, I wouldn't want that, Dad. God has entrusted this to me, and He will use it for some purpose." She had the assurance that above all the perplexing chaos of life, God sits sovereign, unfailingly working out His wise purpose. She had heard me say often over the years that nothing touches a child of God that does not come through the perfect will of a wise and loving God. It was gratifying to see how firmly she believed that, and how joyful that assurance made her.

But it was humbling, too, to hear her confidence, for my own heart was aching with questions that dark August day. Why would God allow this? I wondered. Why? . . . But as I wrestled with such questions, here was my daughter calmly echoing back to me what she had heard me preach. She never wavered in her conviction that the Lord was in control and that He could use even a brain tumor for a good purpose. She knew that every step of her path had been plotted in eternity past.

I tell you these things about Amy, not to glorify her, but to magnify the Lord, and to encourage you to believe that your pathway, too, has been mapped out by God.

A third principle pops out of the explanation Moses gave for why God led them by the longer road through the desert rather than the easier route along the sea. It is this:

### **III. The perils along the way are moderated by God's goodness.**

That explanation is in verse 17: *"For God said, 'If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.'*" The coastal road, you see, went through Philistine territory and was guarded by strong border fortifications. If they had gone that way they would have had to fight. I know that verse 18 says they *"went up out of Egypt armed for battle,"* but the more literal New American Standard Bible says they went up *"in martial array."* The New King James Version translates it similarly, saying they went up *"in orderly ranks."* They looked like an army, but they were not armed and were not armed and trained for battle. For that reason, God chose the longer, and to the human eye, the far less sensible route. He knew their limitation, you see, and His guidance took that into account.

The Apostle Paul drew that very lesson from Israel's Exodus experience in I Corinthians chapter 10. If you look at the way that chapter begins you will see that he was reflecting on the Exodus as an example for Christians, and in that context he made the statement of I Corinthians 10:13: *"God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted [or tested] beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."*

Paul was saying that God knows exactly how much strain our faith can take, and in His providence He always guides us away from those situations where that critical limit will be exceeded. There may be ways that God could lead us that would break our faith. But He knows our limitations, and He guides us accordingly. So whenever your path takes an unexpected and unwanted turn, let the way God dealt with Israel reassure you that the route has been carefully assessed by Him; it has been moderated by His kindness and grace; it has been tempered to your limitations, and He will provide a way through the problem. The way He leads you may test your faith to the limit. But it won't send you back to Egypt. He will make sure of that.

We need to remember that, especially in those times when we are tempted to become cynical about whether God loves us or not. In those times when God's providence seems hard and meaningless, we can know that God knows what He is about.

Next, remember this fourth principle:

#### **IV. Every problem along the way is designed for God's glory.**

In verse 3 of chapter 14 the Lord explains why He was leading the Israelites to reverse directions and to camp by the sea opposite Baal Zephon:

*"Pharaoh will think, 'The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert. And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD.'" So the Israelites did this."*

And it worked. Pharaoh was fooled just as the LORD had forecast. Seeing the Israelites going in circles, he concluded that they would be easy prey, and so pursued them with his army and overtook them at their seaside encampment. But he had overlooked the "God factor." Moses lifted his rod, and God sent a strong east wind which blew all night, driving back the waters and drying up the ground, so that the Israelites walked to freedom on dry ground. But when the Egyptians tried to follow, He released the pent-up waters and the entire Egyptian army was drowned, and the awesome greatness of God in deliverance and in judgment was magnified.

In our experience, sometimes God glorifies Himself by delivering us from our problems just as miraculously as He did those Israelites. No situation in which God is active is hopeless. BUT . . . I would not be presenting the whole truth if I did not add that sometimes He does not do that. Sometimes the sea does not part. Sometimes the problem does not disappear. But even then, God is at work to glorify Himself. He does it by being with us and sustaining us in such a way that even in apparent defeat our spirit remains victorious. Sometimes God gets greater glory through enabling us to endure difficulty than in removing it.

The sea did not part for Amy. One year after her tumor was discovered, on a Sunday, her favorite day of the week, at slightly past 11 o'clock in the morning, the time Ed ordinarily would have been giving the call to worship at the church, he sat beside Amy's bed in the hospital. The end was near. He held her in his arms and prayed, committing her to God. Just as he said, *"In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit,"* she took her last breath - and stepped into the presence of her Lord. She worshipped with the angels that day.

And God has used her brain tumor for His glory. I could give you many examples, but I shall mention just one. Danielle, Amy's oncology nurse, gave her heart to Christ and joined a church for the first time in her life, and told me that God had used Amy to bring her to Himself, the conversations they had when Amy came in for chemotherapy, and especially the confident attitude with which she had faced death.

I preached Amy's funeral, and later it was my privilege to marry Ed to Emily Potts, a wonderful gift of God. Ed and Amy had longed for several years to take the Gospel to Eastern Europe, but the brain tumor put those plans on hold. But last August, Ed and Emily and the four children, now 18, 16, 13 and 12, arrived in Romania as missionaries with Mission to the World, the missionary arm of the Presbyterian Church in America, fulfilling their dream, and Amy's.

There is one more thing I want to point out very quickly as we conclude:

#### **V. Your pathway will take you at last to a place of singing and praise.**

In chapter 15, having made it safely to the other side of the Red Sea, the Israelites paused to sing the praises of God. The only thing I will say is that their singing did not last. It was merely a rest on the way to continued hardship and difficulty. From the Red Sea they moved right back into another crisis situation, and for the next forty years that would be the pattern. That's the pattern of the Christian life as well. But praise God, there is coming a day when He will bring us to a place where the singing does not stop!

As later generations of poets and prophets reflected on this Exodus story they saw in the rout of Pharaoh's army a picture of God's final conquest over every form of evil. And that song Israel sang became the source of much of their poetic imagery in depicting that final victory.

Thus, in Revelation 15 the apostle John draws on Exodus 15 to describe the church in heaven. He sees them standing by a sea, not the Red Sea but a crystal sea. He describes them as having been victorious, not over Pharaoh but over Antichrist and all that he stands for. And he hears them singing about God's great victory for His people, a victory pictured in the deliverance led by Moses, and accomplished in the work of Christ on the cross. They are singing, says Revelation 15:3, *"the song of Moses the servant of God and the song of the Lamb!"*

One day you and I will join that unending chorus. Until then, let us not forget that we have something worth singing about here and now. We have a God who, through Jesus Christ, has delivered us from sin and guilt and judgment, a God who will never leave us nor forsake us, a God who has mapped out every step of our earthly journey, a God whose ways may sometimes be perplexing and very painful, but whose sustaining grace is always sufficient, a God who desires to glorify Himself through our lives, a God who is taking us to a place of eternal praise.