

Why are we going this way?

Exodus 13:17-14:12

'All Going South' sketch

God led us into a *desert*? Why are we going this way? It doesn't make sense. It doesn't feel right. It feels like we're walking in a wilderness - like we're walking *away* from everything we're supposed to be walking towards.

Ever feel like that? Lots of God's people feel like that. We can feel like that as individual Christians, walking through a desert time. It feels dry and empty and useless and long, and you wonder why it's like that - did I sin? Is God pulling away from me? Is Satan getting in and spoiling everything? Why won't God throw him over and make things better then?

And we can feel that collectively as God's people. As churches, we can have seasons like this. And enough of you have told me that you're 'struggling with church right now' that it's worth saying that we can have seasons of confusion, disillusionment and desert as God's people together, too.

And in Exodus 13:17-14:12, we read about Israel having the same experience. What we read here is about physical *and* spiritual direction, movement, survival and wellbeing. And it speaks to God's people today of how God deals with us still in spiritual direction, movement, survival and wellbeing. And it all starts with God taking them in the opposite direction to the one they thought they should go in.

When Israel walked free from Egypt, the obvious thing to do was head north. 5,000 miles that way would take them to the promised land. About a year of consistent, determined marching and making camp. A big task, no doubt, and some battles on the way, which they were all armed for. But always with a sense of going forwards, heading in the right direction.

But God said no. God said, 'Head *south*.' Do a U-turn. Change direction. Go the desert way. What actually lay before Israel was not wrapping up their mission and their destiny in a year's time, but 40 years of wandering in the wilderness. *Why?*

We as readers get told exactly why in 3:17 - 'For God said, "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.'" God's people were not ready for the fight. They *thought* they were ready... but they weren't.

And the proof of this comes at the end of our reading, when they actually are faced with an army, and longing to go back to Egypt is exactly where their minds go in 4:12.

We're not told that God shared this insight with Moses, or declared it to His people. He just knew that His people weren't ready for what they thought they were ready for, what they had gotten themselves all geared up for - so He pulled them away from it for their wellbeing.

What God's people thought they should be going after would actually break them if they did, and would see people giving up on being part of the people of God and running back to an old life under an old slave master. And what God's people thought was a useless, fruitless detour in the desert that felt hard and dry and weird, was actually God keeping them safe.

God's people would fight. Many times, actually. The first time will come in chapter 17, against the Amalekites. But they wouldn't fight until they had learned two lessons in the desert. Lessons about being toughened for hardship, because fights are hard - spiritual ones as well as physical - and maturity and endurance needed developed in God's people through a desert time to endure.

And lessons about total dependence on God. God wanted to knock out of Israel any self-sufficiency. He took them to the desert to learn how helpless they were without Him. That every bite they ate, every drop they drank, every turn they took, could only be by God's provision. Once they'd learned those lessons, they could fight in a new way - a totally God-dependent way, which we'll come to in Exodus 17.

What if we are not ready for what we think we are ready for? What if God has purpose and protection and preparation for us in the desert time that many of us feel, individually and as a church?

As a specific example, what if we are not ready for a building project yet? What if God needs to deepen something in us before we get to that fight? We shouldn't underestimate what this is going to be like.

Another pastor in Inverness, who's been prayerful and loving to us, warned me about his experience in another church - 'Our building project nearly killed me.' We're not ready until God leads us to that fight.

I don't think that means we don't keep raising money and giving - our family gave again to the fund this week, and I'd encourage you to do so any time you like. It just means that all the big work of fundraising, grant applications, buildings etc will all unlock and get going only when God means it to. When He's readied us in the desert.

I've talked a lot about God saying to us as a church, 'Get ready...' What I've learned through this passage this week is that God is telling us 'I'm getting you ready.' That He's the One doing it, we're just to faithfully receive how He's at work to shape us. To trust that spending a long time in the desert is for our good.

Alec Motyer says, 'Putting it bluntly, where the people expected to turn north, they turned south and ended up in the wilderness! And this was not because they had got God's directions *wrong*, but because they got them *right*.'

He says that when we have these wilderness experiences as Christians that lead us to the 'why is it like this?' questions, Christians tend to answer it in one of two ways. We say, 'it's Satan! He's getting in and wreaking havoc amongst God's people! That's why it's all wilderness-y!' Or we say, 'Is it... us? Have we sinned, God? Have we strayed out of your will somehow, and that's why it's like this?'

And Motyer says that whilst these can sometimes have elements of truth, this is not the explanation that Exodus gives us. What Exodus tells us is that strangely - and yet, actually, very reassuringly - *God* leads us to the desert place. And He does it for our good. He does it to make us ready.

How would it change your experiences of struggle and confusion to believe that God has led you there?

'Sitting Ducks' sketch

God led us into a *trap*? He has deliberately put us in a position where there is no way forward, no way out - there just is no *way*! He's put us in a place where the old enemies we used to be slaves to can just come and swamp us again and claim us back. What on *earth* is our God up to?

In Exodus 14:2-4, God tells the Israelites, 'Go backwards and make yourselves vulnerable.' I'd never noticed this before: God actually tells Israel that Egypt is coming after them again, and God's plan is to put them in a place that traps them between the army of Egypt on one side and the Red Sea on the other. God is telling them to actually walk into an impossible situation to get through.

Now we know, because the story is so famous, what astounding thing God is going to do to make a way when there is no way. Stuart's preaching on the parting of the Red Sea for God's people to walk through next week. It will turn out that the trap is for God's enemies. God is going to perform the most almighty reversal and lead His people to life and His enemies to death.

But right then, God's people hadn't the faintest idea what miracle He was going to perform. All they knew was, God told them to head into what seemed like a trap. God told them that the old enemies were coming for them. And God told them that He was going to gain glory for Himself 'through Pharaoh and his army.'

But do you know what? That was enough for Israel. God said do it, so they did it. God said 'I will be glorified through what happens next,' and that's what mattered to them. So they trusted, and obeyed. As much as it didn't seem to make any sense, and as vulnerable as it made them, together they trusted and obeyed.

Trust and obey. You're going to need to hold on to that, at every stage of your life of faith in Jesus. But perhaps we can say a particular word to those of you who are pretty new in your faith in Jesus.

We've talked in other Exodus sermons about how the Exodus story plays out in what Jesus came to do for us - that just as God set Israel free from slavery to Egypt, He sets us free from slavery to sin and death through Jesus' death on the cross (which the New Testament describes as an Exodus) and His resurrection.

What we're reading about are Israel's earliest days of freedom - learning to use that new freedom, paradoxically, by obeying just what God told them instead of what they were inclined to do. When you first become a Christian, you get that you're free from the old life, you get that sin and death have no hold on you, and you get that you're learning to follow the lead God gives, however strange it seems and however unused to it you are.

But just as Israel had an old enemy in Pharaoh who threw everything at claiming his slaves back, we have an enemy in Satan who throws everything at claiming back the people Jesus has just set free. In vv.5-9, Pharaoh literally doesn't spare the horses - every horse, every chariot, everything he can throw at clawing back Israel, he throws at them.

That can be the experience for new believers in Jesus. A number of you have wondered why things have seemed so tough when you've just been baptised, or professed faith in Jesus. Well, there's an enemy who wants you back. It's good to be aware of it. But there's no need to be afraid of it.

Because God's fully aware of it too. And He deals with you as He deals with Israel. He says, 'I know the enemy will throw everything at you. I know he wants to claim you back. But I won't let him. I will defeat him, and I will keep you free.'

Hold on. Trust and obey. You know the old life and its pull are not really life. There's sin, pollution, damage and darkness there, and only death at the end. But you're drawn to it, because it seems too big not to give in to. You're losing your bold swagger that the Israelites had in v.8, and you're starting to succumb to the old days of being slaves because it just seems easier and more familiar, like the Israelites in v.12.

But don't believe it. Hold on. Trust and obey. It seems like there is no way forward for you, and the only way is back. But it's not true. God's going to make a way, where it seems like there is no way. Your old life *doesn't* win. Sin *doesn't* win. Death *doesn't* win. Jesus does. So hold on to Him with everything you've got, and be assured that He will not lose His grip on you.

*What does your old life throw at you to try to claim you back?
What does 'trusting and obeying' look like in response to that?*

God led us. Into a desert, sure. Into a trap, yes. But the desert turned out to be grace to us. And the trap turned out not to be for us, but for those old enemies of sin and death.

The thing is, this whole time, *God* led us. We did not get here by our own design. God led us. He always has, He always will.

In v.19, we read that Moses was faithful to a man who lived 400 years before him. A man who believed that the day would come that God's people would walk free and God would lead them to the land He'd promised them. A man called Joseph.

There was a long-term-ism in Joseph's faith and thought. A really long view of God's purposes unfolding. Even beyond his lifetime. Praise God for the people like Joseph whose words and actions express a faith in God's purposes that will bless God's people long after their lives are over. And praise God for the people like Moses who are faithful to the promises and commitments of God's people in the past.

Moses takes up Joseph's bones now. This journey - although physically *away* from the promised land at first - is also the journey *to* the promised land that Joseph foresaw. And so this is the moment for Moses to fulfil a 400 year old commitment, one which helps God's people see that they really are on the right journey.

More than that to assure them, though, is the undeniable, unshakeable presence of God. In 3:21 we read, '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.'

There's something deeply settling and something deeply unsettling about this constant presence of God. Settling, because He is 24/7 present with His people. Day and night, there He is. When everything else fails you, as everything that isn't God does at some point, there He is. *Always*.

And unsettling, because of this bit: '...so that they could travel by day or night.' They could move at any moment. Change direction any time. There were many twists in the plot and direction changes to come.

Unpredictable in their timing. Always meaningful and purposeful and for their good, though they could not see it. God was not playing games with His people with these twists and turns. He does not toy with us, though He does unsettle and surprise us and move us in strange ways.

But here's the bottom line, in 3:22 - 'Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.' God *never* left His people. Not for a moment.

Wherever they journeyed, however pleasant or disturbing the terrain around them seemed, however steady or unsteady the ground beneath them, they always had the best possible thing with them already - the presence of God. There was nothing that they could journey to that was better than what they already had together.

That's worth remembering. God has not left or forsaken us, and He never will. He goes with us, before us, now and forever. In the first part of Exodus, we have read about God *coming to* His people, to save them and set them free. Now, from Exodus 13, we read that once He has set us free, God also *goes with* His people on their journey of new life together.

May we hold on to that. Together. In the desert. In the fight. In the oasis. On the strange journey the long way round. That God is with us. Absolutely *always*. And God leads us. Absolutely *always*.