

No Short Cuts

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[0 : 00] If I could ask you please to turn with me to Exodus chapter 13, that passage we just read a minute ago. Exodus 13 and we'll read again at verse 17.

And it came to pass when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near. For God said, lest peradventure the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt.

But God led the people about through the way of the wilderness of the Red Sea. And the children of Israel went up, harnessed, or that word could mean in various divisions or groups, harnessed out of the land of Egypt.

And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, especially the words of verses 17 and 18. Under the leadership of God, for God's people, there are no shortcuts onto the promised land.

God actually takes us in the way that he knows is best for us, even though that should sometimes to us feel very long and tedious and tiring and difficult.

[1 : 18] That, of course, is reflected, really, when you look at the best sort of craftsmanship that you find even in this world. Most of you, I'm sure, have seen that program on television called The Repair Shop, where you find expert craftsmen taking items that are given to them that have been either broken or in disrepair for many years.

And sometimes when you look at them, you'll say, well, he'll never make or she'll never make much of that. Maybe it's a beautiful porcelain bowl or plate or whatever, and it's in dozens and dozens of little pieces.

And yet, when you see the finished product after that, you can see just how wonderful a job they've made of it. Very often, indeed almost always, you just cannot see where the joins are, where the breakage was.

And that kind of craftsmanship, as you see from that program itself, requires a lot of patience. It doesn't happen overnight. It's not something that they attend to as quickly as they can.

I'm sure they do it as quickly as they can, but the object of the exercise is to bring the thing back to as near new condition or perfect condition and broken condition as it used to be.

[2 : 34] And for that, they need to take time. They need to be patient in how they go about the various ways of taking the thing apart, reassembling it, cleaning up all the parts, all of that stuff, as you know very well yourselves.

And as you come to chapter 13, verse 17 in this chapter, there's something like that in a spiritual sense that you have in the emphasis here.

It came to pass, when Pharaoh let the people go, that God led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines, though that was near. That was the quickest journey.

That would be, in the people's own mind, probably the most favorable way to go. It was shorter. They would get there quickly, more quickly than any other route.

But God didn't take them that way because God said, lest peradventure the people repent when they see war. In other words, they might change their mind, is what that means, when they see war and just go back to Egypt.

[3 : 32] They needed to have the experience of the longer way. And we're told here the reason why. They needed that longer way so that they would be kept from the mindset that would want to go back to Egypt, which really was in them anyway, as we find in other passages here in Exodus and in Numbers.

But that too has the spiritual application of that, is that when we come to our spiritual, our Christian walk, it's not always what seems best to us, or the way that seems best to us, of course, that God chooses for us.

It's not the smoothest way. It's not what you might say is the shortest way. In that sense, God does not do shortcuts. When we come to know the Lord, we might think that we're going to make pretty quick progress, and God might have other ideas.

We might have it in mind that we're really not in need of any great difficulties or challenges, or even suffering on the way. God may have other ideas. He did not lead the people here through the way of the Philistines, though that was near, in case they said, let's return back to Egypt.

And that's why you find this is applicable to our own lives as well. The people here in Israel, they were just newly out of the land of Egypt, out of that place of bondage.

[5 : 01] They weren't able really to function meaningfully there as a people, because they were obviously slaves in Egypt. They had been kept in bondage by the Egyptians. It didn't give them the opportunity to have the kind of life together by which they would be bonded together increasingly as a people.

They needed cohesion. They needed discipline. They needed the Lord himself to teach them certain things that were not possible in Egypt. And so that's why they needed to take time on the way to the promised land, and God led them in this way, so that when it came to fighting, when it came to warfare, they would be better prepared than they were here immediately after they left the land of Egypt.

And so the first thing briefly to look at is God's wise leadership. God's wise leadership of his people. And secondly, we can look at more fully the benefits of accepting God's leading on our own part, the benefits for us of accepting God's leading of our lives, the way that God himself would have us to go.

So God's wise leadership, first of all, here in verses 17 and 18, as we say, now it's important that we notice there is an emphasis here on who it was that was leading them.

Now, remember, Moses, in the human sense, is their leader. And that's very important to remember as you read the various passages where Moses and the people are highlighted for us in the relationship between them.

[6 : 35] But here it's very definitely, it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them through the way of the Philistines, though that was near.

But, verse 18, but God led the people about through the wilderness, the wilderness of the Red Sea. And it's God, specifically, that's mentioned as their leader.

They couldn't see God. He had given indicators to them, like the pillar of fire, the columns of fire, and the column of the cloud, to actually guide them, to enable them to know when to move and when to stay in a certain place.

But all the time, it is God who is leading them. Yes, Moses is their leader in a human sense. Moses is very much significant in the guidance of the people.

And God, revealing himself to Moses, so often tells Moses what to tell the people by way of counseling them and guiding them. But ultimately, God is the leader. God is the one who's leading them from this point onwards through their journey in the desert.

[7 : 39] God led them, not through the way of the Philistines, but God led them, twice it's saying. Firstly, in the negative, God did not lead them one way, but God did lead them the other way.

And so that's so important, isn't it, for ourselves as well, to ask the question tonight, who am I looking to to guide my life? What am I looking to to guide my life?

Am I relying on the philosophy of the world out there? Am I looking at a certain worldview or point of view that would actually give me the wisdom, if you like, of the world, the wisdom of secularism, the wisdom of something else that I would depend upon, the wisdom that maybe I imagine I have myself as an active human being?

Well, there's the question. Who is leading your life and who's leading my life tonight? When you go to the Bible, it's God who leads his people. And nowhere better do you see that than in the testimony of the psalmist.

You find so often in the Psalms, that I can just point out one or two of them, where this is really made so obvious. You'll know these, I'm sure, yourselves in any case.

[8 : 46] But we need to remind ourselves so often in our lives that it is actually God who directs our life through his word, through the testimony of his people, through the means that he uses.

Psalms 5, for example, you'll find there, Psalm 5, verse 8, Lead me, O Lord, in thy righteousness, because of my enemies.

Make thy way straight before my face. Psalm 31 and verse 3 there, find the same sort of emphasis that you find in many places in the Psalms, as we're saying.

Psalms 31 and verse 3, Thou art my rock and my fortress. Therefore, for thy name's sake, lead me and guide me. Pull me out of the net that they have laid privily for me.

So often the context for the psalmist, as he seeks the guidance of God, is that there are enemies round about him. There are alternatives to God being offered to him all the time. There is opposition to the way of God, to him following the way of God.

[9 : 47] And he's pleading with God, and he prays for God to continue his guidance. One of the best known, of course, would be Psalm 23, where God, as the shepherd of David, David's shepherd, and the Lord is my shepherd.

And he leads me in the paths of righteousness. Psalm 73, Asaph, who had gone so near to, as he testified himself, to slipping away, as he saw, as he at one time thought that it was much easier for the world and for him as a believer, until he went to the house of God and understood what was waiting those people who did not have God as their God, he learned then how foolish he had been.

And then he said, Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward receive me to glory. They are the guidance of the Lord.

That does not come just like a flash out of the sky, at least not most of the time. It doesn't mean that God isn't able to do that for us. But we rely upon the word of God.

We rely upon the spirit of God to teach us and to guide us through life. And that's what I hope is the case for yourself and for yourselves. And if I may say so, it is something that becomes particularly obvious for a congregation when it comes to a situation like you have yourselves, a vacancy.

[11 : 15] You're looking for another minister. You're looking for God to guide you. Now, he's going to lead you by certain ways. And it may not be the way that you would want.

Maybe not the way that you would expect. Maybe it's not the person that you have in mind to begin with, or even the second time, whatever it might be. It is God that you rely on. It's to God that you come for your guidance through this time of vacancy until in the Lord's own time and by his own guidance, you come to someone who will again be your pastor to lead you in the ways of God.

This is the first point that's in the passage. God's wise leadership. He did not lead them by the way of the Philistines, although that was near. Instead, he took a much longer route by the way of the wilderness of the Red Sea.

And what are the benefits of ourselves being accepting of God's leading of our lives? To go by God's directions, by God's rules, by God's promises, by the various specifications you find in God's word.

What are the benefits of that? Well, there are two. I'm just going to mention them and then amplify a little bit about each of them. First benefit is that it is a much better way for ourselves.

[12 : 32] And the second benefit is that it will bring benefit to others also. It is a benefit and a much better way for ourselves. Now, taking a shortcut might seem more attractive, might seem something that's for us that, well, there's no reason why we shouldn't take that shortcut or whatever it might be, spiritual.

I remember when I was in primary school in Airtong, having to walk home from the school, which was, as you know, out at the main road, walking through the village and then you come to a certain point in the road, going through Airtong, you come to a very sharp turn to your left and then you follow that road through to where our house was near the end of the road in the village, the inner part.

Now, if you think about that right angle, as you cut across that right angle, it's a shorter way. And I remember one day thinking, well, instead of going around the road and following it, I'll go just off the road here and I'll walk up this other croft and I'll be quicker.

I'll come out on the road further up. That's what I did. But what I didn't realise, of course, that there was a boggy bit there and I had to walk through it and my shoes got, as you can understand, into a mess and boggy and wet.

And, of course, when I got home, the first thing my mother said was, where on earth have you been? And I had to explain to her then that I tried to take a shortcut and she said, well, next time, stay on the road.

[13 : 57] Fodich errat. And that's what God is saying to us as well. Stay on the road that God has specified, that God sets out in his word. Don't think that you can take a shortcut and benefit from it.

Don't think that you can advance beyond what God himself is setting out for us. That's the temptation, that we can actually do a better job of it ourselves. And, of course, if we try and do that, at the end of the day, we actually don't get there any quicker.

In fact, we spoil things altogether because we very often have to then undo some of the mistakes we've done on the way. And that then takes us longer and we don't benefit from it that way.

And it's that way in the Christian life. It's the wisdom of God that we always find so important for us. The wisdom of God is behind every single event of our lives.

The wisdom of God is what maps out the way for us. The way that the world will see us foolishness. The way that the world will say is just completely at odds with how people think nowadays and the advances of science and everything else.

[15 : 08] But you know that the way of God, as the psalmist said, as we sang, show me thy ways, O Lord, thy paths, O teach thou me. He doesn't want to actually depart from these ways.

He wants God's grace to enable him to keep to the way that God has marked out for him. And so, that's really how it is for us as well.

Sometimes, you know, we think, most of us at least, I'm sure, will think that once we've come to know the Lord, then that's us really ready to face the world. That's us ready to, like the people of Israel here, to face the giants that lie on the road into the promised land.

Well, we'd be defeated if we just went out and thought, that's it, we know, we've made it, we know everything. It's a bit like what you do with your gardening.

When you bring on plants, you sow your seed or just small plug plants, you have them inside, you have them sheltered. If you put them out straight away, then they'll die. They won't progress the same.

[16 : 12] If they don't die, they'll certainly not progress very well because they need to be hardened off bit by bit. That's really what the Lord was doing with his people here. He was hardening them off day by day, step by step, until they got used to the journey, until they learned bit by bit what it was to follow the Lord, until they learned the obedience that God himself required of them.

Now, if you, I'm sure you know the Pilgrim's Progress. It's a while since I read it myself, I have to say, but Pilgrim's Progress, of course, is John Bunyan's great analogy of the Christian way, of Christian leaving the city of destruction and making his way to the celestial city and the experiences that he had as they fit in with Christian experiences.

They illustrate the Christian way for us. Well, can you imagine instead of actually making his way through all the different parts of the region, of the land, that led to the celestial city at last, imagine that Christian had just said, I'll just get into the helicopter now and I'll make my way quickly across to the celestial city.

Look at all the difficulties he would have avoided, but look at all he would not have learned. Look at the benefits he would not have had. For example, if he had come to, let's imagine, the hill difficulty, and he describes in the hill difficulty how difficult the way was.

Imagine coming to the hill difficulty and there's a tunnel there for him. He doesn't have to climb it. It's been tunneled through and he can just go through very quickly. That's how some people actually deal with the gospel.

[17 : 51] They think that the difficulties really should be set aside or certain things which in old days used to be emphasized as essential Christian experience and learning that we know better than that nowadays.

We make a tunnel through it. We'll take the short way and notice God, that's not going to benefit you. It's my way that's best. It might be short for some, shorter than others, doesn't matter.

That's in God's hand. This is the crucial thing that we follow the way that God himself has appointed for us. And if we don't, then we will lose the benefits of being tested, the benefits of coming to learn obedience.

You know, Hebrews chapter 5 tells us something remarkable about Jesus himself. Though he were a son, the son of God, yet he learned obedience. Remember, this is the son of God in our nature as a human being that's being talked about.

It's not a human nature on its own. It's the son of God in his incarnate state as a human being. He learned obedience. How? By the things which he suffered.

[19 : 01] He learned obedience by the things which he suffered. and you remember how the offer was made to him by the devil right there before he began his public ministry or just near to beginning his public ministry.

You remember the Gospels tell us Matthew and Luke and tell us he was taken into the wilderness, led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit to be tempted there by the devil.

Forty days, forty nights, the devil then came to him after he had fasted. He's now hungry. The devil comes to him and says, If you're the son of God, command these stones that they be made bread.

And Jesus answered him from the book of Deuteronomy. The devil took him up to a high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment. And he said, All these things, all these will I give you if you fall down and worship me.

What was the devil really trying to do? He was trying to get Jesus to bypass the cross. To avoid taking the long way that involved the death of the cross.

[20 : 13] And here was the devil saying, I'll give you a shortcut. I'll make sure you have all of these kingdoms. You don't have to go by the way of the cross. All you have to do is fall down and worship me.

That's what he said. And of course, Jesus again dismissed him. And he dismissed him these three times by quoting from the book of Deuteronomy.

So there you see is the first point that it is God's better way. It's not the easiest way. It's not the way that we ourselves might have chosen. And I'm sure there are many of you, not all of you here in this building tonight that would say, well, I had to come through things.

Those of you who are older especially, I had to come through things which I would never have planned for myself. They were placed in the path that God had mapped out for me.

They weren't easy things. They were testing. They were challenging. They were difficulties. But I know that I benefited from them because when my trust was in the Lord, he took me through that.

[21 : 25] He strengthened me. He showed me the benefits of obedience, the benefits of keeping to the path that he had marked out for me, and the benefit especially of accepting and confessing that his way is best, the way of God's wisdom is always the best.

So there's the first point, the benefit of accepting God's leading. It's a better way for ourselves as followers of the Lord. The second is it's a benefit also to others along with us.

I'm going to read from 2 Corinthians, Paul's second letter to the Corinthians, and at the very beginning there you find words that are very applicable to what we're looking at here in Exodus.

Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God and Timothy, our brother, and to the church of God which is at Corinth, grace to you, peace from God our Father.

Then he says this, blessed be God even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. Notice, it's so important always in the Bible to notice the names that God gives himself through the writing of the apostle or a prophet or whatever but the name that God gives to himself and that's what ultimately is happening.

[22 : 44] It's not that Paul has invented this name for him, he's under the guidance of the Spirit of God and this is in fact how God has led him to write this to the Corinthians and this is the title.

He is the Father of mercies, the God of all comfort. And then it becomes clear as to why the apostle is speaking of God in these terms because he says who comforts us in all our tribulation that we may be able to comfort them who are in any trouble by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God but as the sufferings of Christ abound in us so our consolation also abounds by Christ and whether we be afflicted it's for your consolation and salvation which is effectual in the enduring of the same sufferings which we also suffer.

You see that's the long way that's the difficult way that's not the shortcut but what Paul is saying is when you take God's way even if it's a very difficult way a way that involves sufferings a way that has something akin to the way that Christ himself followed in his faithfulness to God the Father the way of affliction as he puts it here as well it's for your consolation and salvation you see what he's saying is yes this is the way that we come to experience God's comfort but why is it that way not just for our own benefit so that we too may comfort those who are in affliction with the comfort which we ourselves had as comfort from God in other words you could put it something like this you have you have comfort from God in terms of coming through different afflictions and experiences and losses in life and these are very private things they're very personal things but they're not to be privatized for the Christian it's a matter of sharing the benefits of that with your fellow Christians and with your neighborhood or whoever so as to actually relate as much as we can possibly to those that we come across and those who ask us how did you actually experience that affliction how did you come through that affliction and what can you tell me about the affliction

I'm going through how can I cope with this how can I overcome how can I fit that into the pattern that God has for me how can I think of God being a good God and yet giving such difficulties and trials to his people to experience and that's really what Paul is saying and that's what you find in principle here in Exodus chapter 13 as well God led them not by the easy way not by the way that was quick but by the way of the wilderness of the Red Sea the more difficult way so that they would share in the difficulties that they would be able to express to each other what it meant to share the difficulties of following the Lord and following the ways of the Lord and that essentially is really what fellowship means the word what fellowship is something that we use of usually our gatherings together perhaps after church and what we call an after church fellowship and there's absolutely nothing wrong with using the word in that context but that's not the main meaning of it the main meaning of it is to say something like this the church of God is a fellowship because fellowship means sharing sharing in something and sharing something out as you share as Paul said there to the Colossians to the dear Corinthians as we share together in sufferings so we share together in comforts we come to share in something so that we can share out from that experience what we hope will benefit others as well and that's really the beauty and the benefit of fellowship the comfort that God gives us the guidance that God gives us this is really why God takes us through the difficulties so that we trust they will benefit ourselves receiving through our obedience his comfort his guidance his direction but then you pass that on to others as well for their benefit you hope and there's the beauty of belonging to the church isn't it it's one of the things that we want to emphasize for those who are not who are not partaking of the church

I don't mean membership in the sense of communicant membership only but membership in terms of belonging to a congregation it's one of the things that we need to again and again stress for people you know we don't just come together formally to worship God on the Lord's Day or on the midweek and then that's it we go home or we share something in meetings at other times this is something that we have as part of a fellowship of the fellowship of the body of Christ so that we can be of benefit to one another so that we're not just benefiting for personal salvation ends for ourselves but are able to share in the likes of comfort and guidance and advice and so on that we share out amongst the fellowship that God's people are and when you come to Deuteronomy chapter 8 you find something very close to what you find here in Exodus chapter 3 here is Deuteronomy now remember

[28 : 30] Deuteronomy is at the time that the people had reached the borders of Canaan they had come through the wilderness they had experienced so many things in the wilderness they had experienced the wilderness as really tough going many times they had actually been on the point of giving up until God through Moses or through something brought them back to themselves but in Deuteronomy and in chapter 6 chapter 8 rather you find God speaking to the people through Moses and remember this is God's counsel given to them on the borders of the promise this is what they are to carry into the land that's flowing with milk and honey this is how they have to conduct themselves this is how they have to have their thinking and their actions their behaviour their way of life as they go into the promised land this is what he says to them you shall remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness to humble thee and to prove thee to know what was in thine heart whether thou would keep his commandments or not and he humbled thee and suffered thee to hunger and fed thee with manna which thou knewest not neither did thy fathers know that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread alone but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the Lord thy God doth man out of the mouth of the Lord doth man live and there is Moses or there is God through Moses saying to the people remember all the way which the Lord led you through the wilderness he didn't lead you through the quickest way he didn't lead you by the way of the Philistines in case you panicked and wanted back to Egypt he led you by the way of the wilderness and he brought you through that wilderness forty years and you're now standing on the borders of the promised land so what was the purpose of all that

Moses is saying well it was to humble you to prove you to know what was in your heart whether you would obey the commandments of the Lord and keep them or not so that he might make you know that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes out of the mouth of the Lord now as you well know these are the very words that Jesus used when he actually rebutted the temptations of the devil these were the very words he chose and it's interesting and it's significant that he went to that passage in Deuteronomy because it's a passage in Deuteronomy that had to do with the guidance of the people the temptations the people faced and the temptation to go back to Egypt to stop progressing the way that God had led them and Jesus is saying to the devil man shall not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord in other words this is the scripture that Jesus used in his own journey in facing the devil and he's saying to us that's what you and I have that's the benefit you have as well you can go to the word of God you can actually say that as you face temptations as you face the struggles in many ways their struggles that are in the way of Jesus himself of course we're not we're not bearing the sufferings that he bore in terms of carrying the weight of our sins but still it's very like the way that Jesus in being true to God the Father faced sufferings for that and was tempted by the devil in relation to that so from that point of view it's essentially the same journey the same wilderness the same spiritual path where our obedience is tested and where God has not taken us on a shortcut but is taking us on the way day by day through life to test us to know what is in our hearts and the temptation of the devil of course for us is the same as it was for Jesus you know you don't have to go through with confessing the Lord as your God you don't have to go to the Lord's table and take communion you can be a believer without taking those steps and of course that's perfectly true but what's not perfectly true is that that will actually benefit you in the end because what God is saying to us is that every way by which our obedience is called out and tested is going to add further strengthening when we comply with what God is saying that's not for any reason at all or for no reason at all that God is setting out for us the way that he is mapped out even if it's a way that is difficult and challenging but nevertheless that's the way that God will lead us and you remember to finish with this remember in Hebrews and chapter 13 where the writer to the Hebrews is coming towards the end of this great letter that he's written and of course throughout the letter you've got these passages where Jesus is specifically mentioned in terms of his suffering and bearing sin and being the high priest of his people and various points as well where the challenges that face the Lord's people are actually mentioned specifically but this is how chapter 13 and from verse 12 remember this is what it says therefore Jesus also that he might sanctify the people with his own blood suffered outside the gate let us go forth therefore unto him

outside the camp bearing his reproach for here we have no continuing city but we seek one to come therefore by him let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually that is the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name but to do good and to communicate forget not for with such sacrifices God is well pleased in other words there's the way of God let's identify with Jesus he suffered outside of the gate outside of the good opinions of human beings that's the place that he chose that's where he suffered for his people culminating in the cross let's say go out to him let's identify with him let's stand where he stood let's take the cross as the central feature foundational feature of our lives let's not be ashamed to go out there though there is shame attached to it let's not try and bypass it for an easier way because the rewards are there that God promises to those who faithfully follow him and let's also not forget to do good and communicate in other words to share out as we said the benefits we receive from God with the Lord's people and with others too as we would want them to benefit from what we ourselves have received by God's grace may God bless these thoughts on his word let's pray briefly oh Lord our God we thank you that the wisdom that is revealed in your word that belongs to God himself alone is a wisdom that has devised and planned the path of his people through life and we give thanks Lord that there are no accidents with you and give thanks that there are no shortcuts for your people and that you have not left us to choose what we might think will be the best way for ourselves and so oh Lord we pray that you would indeed as the psalmist and whose words we have sung that we too would take up these words daily show me thy ways oh Lord thy paths oh teach thou me be our teacher and our guide we pray give us each day to be concerned that we are on that path through obedience to Christ that will lead us on safely through the wilderness of this world and into the promised land of heaven receive our thanks we pray and pardon our sin for Christ's sake

Amen