

The Exodus Begins

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[0 : 00] If you can turn your Bibles now back to the second reading that we had in Exodus chapter 13. We're going to look at the verses towards the end of that chapter, verse 17 to 22.

This morning I want to take you, if you like, to the very beginning of the Exodus. Not the beginning of the book of Exodus, but that moment when the Israelites, when they set out on their Exodus journey.

That moment when they set out on their wilderness journey, headed towards the great promised land of Canaan. I want to do that by looking at these verses, 17 to 22.

And we'll also consider the spiritual significance of this for us. Because as Israel are saved here, this picture, this dramatic picture of Israel being redeemed, being rescued out of Egypt, is a picture of our redemption, if you like.

A picture of us being redeemed by God. And as Israel, as they are saved from the bondage of Egypt, and as they begin their wilderness journey, that is a picture of us, as Christians.

[1 : 26] As we are saved, if you like, from the bondage of sin. And as we begin on our wilderness journey. Our journey to the promised land of Canaan, to heaven itself.

And there's three things that I've taken out of these verses. Three things that teach us about how Israel set out on their wilderness journey. And as well, three things that teach us about how we set out on our wilderness journey.

And you've got the three things on your sheet there. An army. They set out as an army in its infancy. They set out carrying the bones. And they set out following the pillar.

Now, just by a way of context, Israel, they've been in Egypt for hundreds of years now. Remember when Joseph took them there, under the leadership of Joseph.

And the Israelites were, back in Genesis, the Israelites were taken into Egypt. And they were taken there, basically, for refuge from a famine that was going on around the land at that time.

[2 : 38] And when they were first of all taken in, the Egyptians treated them quite well. The Pharaoh treated them quite well. They looked quite favorably upon the Israelites.

But as time went on and as the generations passed, things began to change. Joseph died. That Pharaoh who liked the Israelites, he died.

And as time went on, the Egyptians, they started not to really like the Israelites. They started to feel threatened by the Israelites. And one particular Pharaoh, he felt particularly threatened by the Israelites.

He saw them multiplying greatly. And he wanted to stop this. So he brought them into slavery. And then Israel carried on in that situation of hardship and slavery for quite some time.

And just when they thought things couldn't get any worse, and they thought that God had forgotten about them, and we read a few chapters before this, that God remembered his covenant with Abraham.

[3 : 42] God remembered his people. And then God puts into motion a plan to save, to redeem his people, to take them out of the land of Egypt, to buy them back from the bondage of the Egyptians.

And we pick up the story this morning. Moses has gone in. The ten plagues have happened. That last plague, if you like, associated with the Passover, has just taken place.

And Pharaoh has finally said, Look, go, on you go. You can escape now. So Pharaoh gives them permission to leave.

But God doesn't just let the Israelites leave Egypt and then just almost let them loose to find their own way home to Canaan. That's not the picture you have at all.

God is very much with his people. He's preparing his people. And he's going to be with them through this wilderness journey. And we see that from the events at the very beginning of this

journey, which is what we're going to look at this morning.

[4 : 51] God preparing them for this journey, a journey full of surprises. It's a journey full of dangers. And we read a lot about the dangers. It's a journey full of blessings. And a journey as well full of learning.

A journey full of learning. And that's exactly what it's like for us. And that's what it's like for us on our wilderness journey. It's a journey. Yes, it is full of surprises.

It is full of dangers. It is full of blessings. It is full of times of mourning and times of joy. It's full of learning, like the Israelites did.

But, importantly, it is a journey with the people of God, led by our Lord and our Savior, Jesus Christ. And he prepares us for our journey, just like he prepared the Israelites for that Exodus journey that they were going to go on. So let's look at the three things that I've identified from this passage this morning.

[5 : 52] And the first one is that they set out as an army in its infancy. Now, you maybe think of the Israelites when they were given permission to leave Egypt.

You maybe think of them leaving in almost frenzied panic, frantically running away the moment they were given the all clear to leave Egypt.

But that's not what you have here at all. That's not the picture that's painted for us here. And they leave, if you like, with the order and the mentality of an army, with a military mentality.

Look at verse 18. 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.

Equipped for battle. Now, the ESV translates that last phrase as equipped for battle. Now, I don't know what versions you have in front of you, but you'll probably notice that it's quite different in a few of our Bible translations.

[7 : 00] Now, I'm not going anywhere near Hebrew. And really, I should probably have maybe discussed this with a minister before actually looking at some of this. Maybe he'll give me a wee telling off later on in the afternoon.

But from what I've read about that particular translation of being equipped for battle, it perhaps doesn't quite convey the right thing. Because, well, I don't know about you, but when I read that, I think of an army, you know, full of swords and weapons, a ready-made army, if you like, entering into the wilderness, ready to take on whoever it is they need to take on.

But that's not really what's at the heart of the passage here. That's not what's going on here. I mean, why on earth would Pharaoh have given them weapons?

That sounds crazy. I mean, he was threatened by them. The Egyptians were threatened by the Israelites. In fact, that was one of the reasons they were taken into bondage, into slavery in the first place.

Now, if you felt threatened by someone, the last thing you would do would be to arm them. So it is highly unlikely that they came out full of weapons and shields and like a ready-made army.

[8 : 15] And we read there in the first bit of the passage that we read, we read when they were leaving Egypt, that they took things like food, gold and silver, clothing, but at no point do we read that they took weapons with them.

They are setting out in military fashion, not loaded with weapons. It's the mentality that they have that's been talked about here. They are leaving with that military mentality.

They are leaving with that kind of organization of an army, a marching army, but they are not the finished article. They are not an army ready to go into combat.

They are moving out like an army, but very much an immature army. One day, as we read of further on in scripture, they would become a formidable army.

One day they would grow into quite a strong army, fully equipped with weapons. But at this stage of their journey, yes, they are moving and marching, if you like, in military fashion, but they are far from the military force that they were going to be in years down the line.

[9 : 23] So that's what you have here. An army, if you like, but an army in its infancy, prepared for battle in that sense. And that is what it's like for the Christian.

That's what it's like for us who are saved, isn't it? When we're saved, we begin a warfare. It is a spiritual warfare. And when we're converted, we fall into battle array, if you like, as we go through our wilderness journey.

But we're far from being accomplished soldiers. We're far from it. Sometimes maybe we feel like we are, but we are not. We do not go into the battle arena, if you like, of our wilderness journey, fully equipped for the battles ahead, fully equipped with the armor of God.

Just like these Israelites had a lot of learning to do, when we start off, we have a lot of learning to do. And there is an armor available to us, the armor of God.

We read about it in Ephesians chapter 6. But when we start out, we need to grow into that armor, don't we? We're not fully equipped with it as soon as we begin.

[10:32] We need to grow into it. And Ephesians, it speaks of our sword as being the word of God. But it takes time to get used to that sword.

It takes time to get to know it. It takes time in order to figure out how best to use it. It takes time in order to know best how to use it against our enemies. The sword of the spirit, the word of God, and it speaks of our shield, doesn't it?

As that of faith. But how weak that shield is when we start off. And it's strengthened, doesn't it? And through the fire of trial and testing, over time, the shield gets stronger and stronger.

And that's how it is. As we progress in this pilgrimage, indeed in this warfare, if you like, we are more and more becoming equipped with the armor of God.

Friends, becoming a Christian is not a time to start the wilderness journey and sit down and relax. That's not what the Christian life is at all.

[11:37] We are called, if you like, to march through. To march through ever maturing, getting ever more familiar with this armor of God, putting it in day in, day out, getting more used to it, becoming more mature, if you like, Christian soldiers.

Are we marching forward today? Christians in here, can you say that? Are you maturing as a Christian? Do you identify yourself as someone who's progressing and maturing throughout this wilderness journey that we are on?

Or are we becoming, perhaps, lazy, falling behind, and getting sucked back into the pleasures of Egypt and all the things that come along with that?

Well, the Israelites here, they go out in military fashion, but praise God for his grace because he deals wisely with this immature army here.

He knows that even though they are set out with this kind of military mentality, he knows that they are not ready for the intensity of some of the battles that lie ahead.

[12:51] God knows that, and God takes account of that. You see that in verses 17 to 18. 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. You see, the Philistine route, that was a much quicker route, much quicker route to where they wanted to go to, but God knew it was too dangerous for them.

At that point in their experience, that route was too dangerous for them. The difficulties of doing battle there would have meant they would have turned around, they would have turned back straight away, and they would have gone straight back to Egypt.

And friends, that is the wisdom of God and how he deals with us. He knows what we can take, and he knows what we are not yet ready for.

He knows these things, and he takes account of these things as he leads us through this wilderness journey. He doesn't take us a shortcut in the promised land. Sometimes, I think maybe we would love for God to take us on these shortcuts, these shortcuts through the wilderness journey.

[14:11] Sometimes we feel like God is taking us a long-winded route. Sometimes we feel like he's taking us the long way around. We can maybe perhaps see an easy route and say, God, why can you not take us down that route?

It looks a lot quicker. It looks a lot easier. Why are you making me take, if you like, this long-winded route? But friends, God knows what he is doing. You might look down a route and think that looks easy, but God sees the dangers that we do not see.

We have little idea of what God is protecting us from. And by stopping us going down, what we think is the easy route. Now, I'm not saying this is an absolute rule here, but from my limited experience, very often, from what I see, new converts, God makes things relatively easy for new converts.

Now, I don't mean by that that he makes things easy. I mean that he makes things easier relative to your experiences as more mature Christians.

Quite often, that is the case, not in all cases, I'm not saying that, but as we go on in our Christian journey, as we grow in our faith, and as we become more mature, Christian soldiers, if you like, then he exposes us to battles that we wouldn't have managed at the beginning of our journey. [15:41] He takes account of that. And he's taking account of that with the Israelites here. He leads them away from the difficult battles with the Philistines.

They're just not ready for it. They're not ready for it. A time will come when they will be ready for it. And as we read in Scripture, they come back and they do fight the Philistines, but not yet. At this stage, when they start out, they are not yet ready for it. So they set out with military mentality. They set out as an army in its infancy. So that's the first thing that we pick up from these verses.

But secondly, and perhaps a bit bizarrely, they set out carrying bones. As they begin their journey, they're carrying the mummified bones of Joseph.

That sounds about strange to read here. What on earth is all this about? And 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.

[16:47] Why on earth are they carrying bones? Why is this, if you like, military army marching through, carrying the dead remains of a man who was alive hundreds of years before this?

will be dry bones by now. What's with these bones? Is it some kind of lucky charm to them? What's the deal with these bones that we have here?

Well, there's nothing special about the bones. They are just bones. There's nothing at all special about the bones. There's nothing powerful about these bones inherent of themselves.

but what these bones represent is of crucial importance to all the events surrounding the Exodus.

That's how important they are.

You see, long ago, God came to Abraham and he made a covenant with him. He made a treaty with him. And part of this treaty, there were certain promises that he made to Abraham.

[17:47] And one of those promises were that God was going to give them a land of their own. And the first bit of land that Abraham's family actually owned in Canaan was a burial plot.

Quite often, I think the first bit of land I owned was a burial plot. Quite often, that's the case. And that's what it's like with Abraham. A burial plot is what he owned, first of all. And all the patriarchs were buried there.

Abraham was buried there. Isaac was buried there. Jacob, even though Jacob actually died in Egypt, he made arrangements straight away for his body to be taken to Canaan and to be buried there.

And then the rest of his family went back to Egypt again. But Joseph, he was different. He didn't want his, when he died, he didn't want his body taken straight away to this burial plot in Canaan. No, he wanted to wait until all the children of Israel, until they all left Egypt together. Then you will take up my bones with you, he said to them.

[18:51] At the end of Genesis, Genesis chapter 50, that's where you get this kind of conversation. In verse 24, Joseph speaking to his brothers and he says, I am about to die, but God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac and to Jacob.

He will visit you and you shall carry up my bones from here. This request from Joseph was a sign of his faith in the promise of God. Joseph believed in the promises that God made to Abraham. Joseph believed that God would come and take his people out of Egypt and take them back home to Canaan. He believed that and he said, then, and only then will you take my bones up with you. Now I don't know what they actually did with the bones when they were in Egypt. Did they keep them somewhere special or I don't know what they would have done with them. But, these unburied bones of Joseph, they would have been a constant reminder to the people, even while they were in Egypt, that God would come.

God would come and deliver them and take them out and take them back home to the promised land of Canaan. And this dead body wasn't just a reminder when they were in Egypt, but they carry these bones out with them and they become a reminder throughout all their wilderness wanderings, in all their marching, in all their resting, in all their trials and troubles, in all their victories and even in all their defeats, even as they pass through the Red Sea, these bones come with them.

[20:30] The bones of the dead man, Joseph, a visible sign to them of the faith of Joseph and the promise of God. A visible sign of the promise of God's covenant blessings.

And, well, you know yourselves the story of the wilderness journey. They had times of doubting, didn't they? Times when they complained. Boy, did they complain. It feels like they're constantly complaining through this wilderness journey.

Times when they said, well, we want to go back to Egypt. Things were better there. But I wonder, in these times of difficulty, did they ever see these bones and I wonder if it ever strengthened them and thought of the faith of Joseph and reminded them of the promises of God's covenant blessings. So Joseph gave the people his own body as a visible reminder in that sense of God's covenant promise. Well, what about our wilderness journey?

Because God knows that we need reminders too, don't we? Boy, do we need reminders. We very easily forget things. and he has given us various reminders, hasn't he?

[21 : 49] Reminders of his covenant blessings, reminders of his presence with us. He's given us various, if you like, oases in the wilderness. And we need these things.

And one of them, there's a lot of them, but one of them is where we are today, isn't it? In the house of God. And this is like an oasis to us in the wilderness. A time for us to gather together in all the hardship of the journey that we are on.

We gather together and we think about God and we think about his promises and we think about all the things that he has done for us. We need that time.

We need this oasis, if you like. Because, think about the Israelites. You know, when they were marching along there through the wilderness journey, if one of them just decided to go it alone, they wouldn't have lasted very long.

I guarantee they wouldn't have lasted very long. They needed each other and we need each other. That's the importance of being in the house of God. We need this oasis in the wilderness along with other things as well, but that is one of them.

[22 : 59] And as well as various other ones, which I'm not going to go into all the different means of grace, don't have time for that, but he did give us specific reminders reminders of God's covenant promises, specific reminders.

Just like Joseph gave his body as a reminder to the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings, so Jesus, he gives us his body as a reminder for us during our wilderness wanderings.

You see, in the Lord's Supper, we feast on the broken body, on the shed blood of our Lord and our Saviour Jesus Christ.

We take strength from that. We take strength from that reminder of what he has done for us and we need it. We need that reminder. Perhaps we should have that reminder more often than we do.

That reminder of what he has done for us and what he continues to do for us. It is a much-needed reminder of the covenant promises that he has made to us and continues to work through us.

[24 : 12] You see, Joseph's body that the Israelites carried with him, that was just the dead, decayed, embalmed body of a man. There was nothing special about Joseph's bones.

But how different it is to what we remember, the Lord Jesus Christ, in the elements. We remember the one who died for us.

We remember the one who remained under the power of death for three days, yet he never decayed. The one who rose again, the one who conquered death, and the one who has risen to the right hand of God, not the dead body of a patriarch, not the dead bones of Joseph, but the living body of the God-man, Jesus Christ.

that is our hope. That's what we look to. That's what gives us strength on our wilderness journey. Oh, how much we need that reminder.

I wonder if that is your hope today. The living body of the God-man, Jesus Christ, is that your hope today?

[25 : 23] What is Jesus to you? Is he just like Joseph, a dead man decaying somewhere in the world? Or is he the living God?

Is he your hope? Is he the one who strengthens you through this journey? Is he the one you look to as you make your way to the promised land of Canaan, to glory itself?

The Israelites here, they go out in marching fashion and they go out carrying the bones of Joseph, reminding them of God's covenant promise.

But as well as that, as well as going out in military fashion, as well as carrying these bones, they follow the pillar. And that's the third point today. 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. You see, God doesn't just equip them with a military mentality.

[26 : 36] They don't just take the bones of Joseph with them and then God tells them, on you go, make your own way. No. He comes with them. He comes alongside them.

He leads them. And he does that in this peculiar way through a cloud. A pillar of cloud and yet at the same time a pillar of fire.

Quite a strange phenomenon. Often wondered exactly what this was, this idea of something being a cloud and a fire. I was reading John L.

Mackay on this earlier this week. And he speaks of it kind of like a column of fire surrounded by a cloud.

As though the fire is, if you like, concealed by this cloud. And the idea that he goes on to explain is that in the daylight you see the cloud. It's more visible.

[27 : 33] And because of that column of fire within it, the cloud shines brightly. But then when the darkness comes, the contrast, if you like, of the darkness, then the inner radiance of that fire, it burns through the cloud as bright red.

And I guess the way I was thinking about this was in terms of what we're used to seeing, well, perhaps not used to seeing it over the last few weeks, but a red sky at night, as the daylight dooms and as the sun goes down and you see the clouds almost a reddish colour, as the sun makes them that colour.

That's the kind of idea I had in my head there when I was reading about what John L was saying. But of course, the source of the light in this pillar is not the sun, it's the fire itself.

The fire of the presence of God. Because fire in the Old Testament, it was often a symbol of the presence of God. You see it in the burning bush, you see it in Mount Sinai, remember when God comes down on Sinai, he comes down in cloud and in fire.

It was a very real symbol, if you like, of the presence of God. So here with this pillar leading them, it's as though God has come down with them. God is leading them.

[28 : 57] And it's not like a beacon. It's not like the stars that the wise men just followed. That's not the picture. This pillar is not just something to be followed. There's more to it than that.

It's the idea of God being the shepherd of his flock, the people. As he led them in the wilderness, we are quite often used to chasing our sheep, but they would go before their sheep.

And the images of this pillar, if you like, going before them, leading them along the way, and when they needed rest, the pillar would stop. Any good shepherd knows when his sheep needs rest.

The pillar would stop and they would have rest and then they would go again and then they would go and then when danger came, this pillar, God would go from the front in between the danger and the Israelites.

You remember that happened when the Egyptians came out and the Egyptians chased them and God went from the front, if you like, to the rear and separated the Egyptians and the Israelites and he cast a darkness on the Egyptians and he cast a light on the Israelites.

[30 : 03] And you remember the famous story as he opens up the Red Sea and he takes the Israelites through and then he destroys the Egyptians.

You see, in this pillar, God wasn't just leading them, he was their shepherd. He was protecting them, he was doing all the work. It wasn't the Israelites that were doing the work, it was God. At this early stage, if you like, in their journey, God was protecting them.

God was fighting for them. It was all the work of God, this great shepherd. shepherd. And in this pillar, he comes near his people in an unprecedented way.

You see, without going into all the details, the Old Testament is really all about God coming nearer and nearer to his people and bringing his people, if you like, nearer and nearer to himself.

And this is one great step in that, coming in the pillar. But it culminates, doesn't it, with the resurrection of Christ. And then at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit, when God himself, in the symbols of wind and fire, when he fills his people, he fills his disciples.

[31 : 20] You see, friends, the Christian is filled with the Holy Spirit of God. God is God. See, the pillar, the pillar isn't out in front of us anymore.

The pillar isn't out in front of us. The pillar is, if you like, inside us. Maybe we would like the pillar to be out in front, showing us where to go. But, you see, this is even better.

God is actually within his people. And that's remarkable. That's one of those things that easily rolls off the tongue, and you may be easily thinking about, without actually realizing the significance of that.

The God who was in the pillar, the God who was in the burning bush, if you like, the God who came down on Sinai in smoke and fire, the God who before the Israelites trembled, that God is in us. That is utterly mind-blowing. Those of us who are Christians in here, today, God is in us.

[32 : 28] And that should affect everything that we do. Everything that we say. Everywhere we should go. We should be thinking about that. God is in us. We are temples of the living God.

The pillar is not outside us anymore. The pillar is in many ways within. And that is incredibly powerful. And as we make our way throughout this wilderness journey, we do so drawing on him for strength.

Drawing on him for light. Drawing on him for guidance. We don't follow something external anymore. Something very much internal. God in us.

That is how we make our way through this wilderness journey. And in verse 22 there, you notice the pillar. It didn't depart. Day or night. It didn't leave them.

And friends, if we are a Christian in here today, the Spirit of God never leaves us. He will never forsake us. He will never leave us alone.

[33 : 33] Even though sometimes we might feel like we are forsaking him. Even though sometimes we might feel like we are letting go of him. He doesn't let go of us and he will never forsake us.

He will never leave us. We know that because he has promised so. He is there. Always with us. Feeding us.

And strengthening us. On this wilderness journey. What an incredible journey we are on. This is an incredible journey.

Friends, where are you today? What kind of journey are you on? If you are a Christian, then you are on this pilgrimage journey. You are, if you like, battling your way through the wilderness to the promised land of Canaan.

Not just carrying the dead bones of the old patriarch Joseph, but looking to the living God-man, the living body of the Lord Jesus Christ to strengthen us.

[34 : 35] not just following a pillar of fire and cloud, but having God indwell us, leading us along this journey.

Is that your experience? Is that the journey you are on or are you still stuck in Egypt? Are you still caught up in the pleasures of Egypt? The sins of Egypt drawing you in?

Well, friends, if that is the case, where are you going? What hope do you have? We don't read good things about the Egyptians.

They were destroyed in the Red Sea. And friends, if we remain within Egypt, destruction is the only thing that will come to us. I pray that you would be released from the grips of Egypt.

and the grips of sin. I pray that you would step outside the borders of Egypt. I pray that you would ask Jesus to save you. It's not complicated.

[35 : 43] It's really not. Ask the Lord Jesus Christ to save you. Trust in him. And begin your own wilderness journey. Begin your own exodus journey.

Yes, it's a difficult journey. There's trials. quite intense difficulties sometimes. But I'll tell you what, it is the most incredible journey you will ever walk on.

And I pray that everyone in here would find themselves there. Will you join us on this journey to the promised land of Canaan? Amen. Let's join in prayer.

Heavenly Father, we give you thanks that you are our great shepherd, that you lead your people, that you take them by the hand and you take us on this journey that we are on.

We confess it is difficult and we know how much we need you, we know how much we need each other, but we are thankful, O Lord, that you have made these provisions for us. And we are thankful, O Lord, for that sure hope that it is not down to our ability, it is not down to how good we are, but it is all the work of God.

[37 : 06] As we see there, you in the pillar guiding the people of Israel and destroying their enemies, it is all your work. And we give you thanks for that hope.

Help us, O Lord, to mature as Christian soldiers in that sense, and help us to engage in the spiritual warfare that we are part of, knowing that we will be triumphant because of our commander in chief, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Cleanse us from our sins now we pray in his name. Amen. Amen.