

“That Don’t Make No Sense (Part 1)”—Exodus 13:17-18

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com.]

Take your Bible and meet me in Exodus 13...

The commentary of children is usually quite amusing. In a house like mine, as you can imagine, we are never short on entertainment. Some of the more laughable installments have come while driving in a car. You see, my children are what you might call “backseat drivers.” Hardly a ride goes by without the accusation coming from the backseat, “Daddy, you’re lost!” I could be driving from my house to the church parking lot and somehow my kids think that I’m lost. Let me assure you, I’m not. It’s comical really. Not once have I had to ask for directions while my kids were in the car. But somehow these little backseat drivers constantly think that the only one in the car who can tell East from West is lost. I’m not sure where they got that from. Maybe their mother.

In any case, now that I’ve realized this tendency in my children I do what any good father would do...I mess with them. Whenever we have a few minutes to spare, I love to take back roads that my kids are not familiar with. Without fail one of the kids will say, “Oh no, Daddy’s lost!” On my better days, I will reassure them. “I’m not lost dear. I’m just taking a shortcut.” They then will usually correct me, explaining that, at best, we are really taking a “longcut” or, at worst, I am in fact lost. Depending how tapped in to my depravity I am that day, I sometimes agree with them. “Oh no, I am lost! What are we going to do! Oh wait, my bad...there’s the house...”

My kids have a very limited understanding of these things. They possess no knowledge of a map of Tyler. They know a couple roads they take regularly. Beyond that, everything else seems out of place and unexpected. There are a dozen ways I could take them from where they are and get them home, but in their mind they can only conceive of one route and cannot fathom there might be any reason to go a different course. I may take a detour because I know there is an accident ahead that they can’t see or because there is construction on the Loop or because this time of day only a fool would take Broadway or maybe I want to prolong some productive conversation we are having, but from their limited perspective that makes no sense. They are not privy to what I know and what I am trying to accomplish. From their vantage point the only explanation is that I am lost.

Friends, I believe this is somewhat analogous to our relationship with God. Of course, God is never messing with us. But His ways do not always make sense to us. He often takes us on the “longcuts” in life for reasons we are not privy to. We sometimes feel like we know better than He does when it comes to the direction that our lives should take. We adopt the posture of spiritual backseat drivers, scratching our heads, acting like God is lost despite the sovereign and inerrant track record of the one at the wheel.

In this analogy, I am the child in the backseat. You have been too. Maybe that eerily depicts your life at the present and how you have been reacting to your circumstances. Your life is full of anxiety and you’re scrambling to alter course because deep down you cannot fathom that God could have a purpose for what you are experiencing. You think you know better. You may concede with your lips that God’s ways are mysterious, but your actions declare that you believe God’s ways are wrong.

The Israelites knew these temptations well. Our text this morning reminds us of a time when God asked them to do something that probably didn't make much sense to them. For whatever reason, on this occasion, they trusted God. The text actually gives us some indication of God's reasoning, something God doesn't always share with us. You'll see what I mean as we progress this morning. Follow along as I pick up where Derek left off last week, in verses 17 and following...This is God's Word...

“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.’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.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.’²⁰ And they moved on from Succoth and encamped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness.²¹ 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.²² The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.” (Exodus 13:17-22)

If you have been with us at Southern Oaks for a while, then you probably know that one of my favorite hymns is “God Moves in Mysterious Ways” (1773), by William Cowper. It will be familiar to many of you, but humor me as I share some of the lyrics...

God moves in a mysterious way
His wonders to perform;
He plants His footsteps in the sea
And ride upon the storm.

Deep in unfathomable mines
Of never failing skill
He treasures up His bright designs
And works His sov'reign will.

Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;
The clouds ye so much dread
Are big with mercy and shall break
In blessings on your head.

Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,
But trust Him for His grace;
Behind a frowning providence
He hides a smiling face.

His purposes will ripen fast,
Unfolding every hour;
The bud may have a bitter taste,
But sweet will be the flow'r.

Blind unbelief is sure to err
And scan His work in vain;
God is His own interpreter,
And He will make it plain.

In some ways, these six verses of the hymn capture one of the great messages of these last six verses of Exodus 13. Both sets of verses deal with the providence of God. Both convey that God's way is often surprising. Both confess that His way is nonetheless reliable. And both, especially the biblical verses, help to fortify our thinking so that we have a secure barrier in place before the floods of adversity come crashing upon us. A robust doctrine of the providence of God can serve as a flood barrier around our hearts and minds before the storms of life assail us.¹

But before we get to that it's important for us to see that the instruction of God in this text could have appeared counterintuitive at first. The Israelites have been slaves in Egypt for centuries. Their day of liberation has come and they are heading to the land of the fathers. Their destination is North East. The quickest route by far is usually referred to as the *Via Maris*, which means "the way of the sea." This was a well-traveled trade route in ancient times, extending from the Nile river in Egypt, through Northern Sinai, and on into the coastal plane of Palestine. If you wanted to travel from Egypt to Asia in those days, the *Via Maris* was the way to go. They would have arrived at their destination within a couple of weeks.

Yet instead of leading them North East along that highway, God sends them South East. Verse 18 says, "*God led the people around by way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea.*"² Then verse 20 mentions their migration from "*Succhoth*" to "*Etham, on the edge of the wilderness.*" Some of the oldest literature in existence was written on a material called papyrus. The plant is grown in Egypt and the oldest biblical manuscripts we have were also written on this material, which requires a dry climate for it to survive this long. Years ago someone discovered a papyrus from the 13th century B.C. (called *Papyrus Anastasi V*) that contains testimony written by an Egyptian soldier who was sent on pursuit of two slaves who fled, evidently, to the wilderness via the same route as the Israelites were traveling. The place names in that document seem to correspond to the places mentioned in our text.³ This discovery helps corroborate the biblical account and may suggest that the way they traveled was a common escape route. Even still, if your destination is the Promised Land of Canaan, you are heading in the opposite direction. It would be like driving to Dallas by way of Houston. That's the "longcut." In Israel's case, God's way will add about fifty weeks to their commute to Canaan. That's quite a detour!

Was God lost? It may have looked that way. I imagine there's a temptation for many of the Israelites to question the logic of God's instruction. If it were us, would there be some backseat driving in our murmuring? How do we usually handle things when God seems to be leading us in a direction that doesn't make sense to us immediately? Truth be told, we probably disobey more than we would like to admit. We resist. We opt for the path that makes sense to us. There's a tendency to follow God to the degree that God's way corresponds to the script we are drafting for our future. In retrospect, we regret that decision. But at the time, we have trouble trusting God when He's not making sense to us. If we can't understand "why?", we struggle taking orders, even from God.

And what do we do when God allows circumstances into our lives that make things difficult? How do we respond to adversity? Tragedy? Sickness? Unemployment? Or other hardships that God seems to allow into our lives? Do we not ask "why?" Why did you let this happen God? Why are you doing this to me? We want answers to the "why" questions. That's only natural. But should our faith in God be contingent on our understanding?

Let's linger here for a minute because not all "why" questions are created equal. Our gut reaction when some adversity comes into our lives or when God leads us in a direction that doesn't make sense is to ask "why?" At times that question is a spontaneous and very emotional cry in anguish when some tragedy first strikes us. I don't think such outbursts are necessarily sinful. But when they evolve into persistent questioning with an accusatory tone, demanding God to explain Himself or justify His actions, then we have indeed crossed a line into sin.

As far as I can tell there are three psalms that begin with “*why*”:

“Why, O LORD, do you stand far away? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble?” (Psalm 10:1)

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my groaning?” (Psalm 22:1)

“O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?” (Psalm 74:1)

If you live long enough, you will find yourself echoing the sentiments of those verses. Perhaps they capture how you are feeling this morning. But each case the psalmist ends on a note of faith, trusting in the wisdom of God’s providence. As Jerry Bridges writes, “The psalm writers did not allow their *whys* to drag on. They did not allow them to take root and grow into accusations against God.”⁴

Contrast that with the *whys* we find in the book of Job. Sixteen times in the book, Job asks God *why*.⁵ “He is persistent and petulant.” He’s accusatory. But God refused to answer Job’s *why*. He only answered *who*.⁶ That’s not the question Job asked, but it was the only question God saw fit to answer. Job didn’t need to know *why*; he needed to know *who* was God. It seems that is one of the lessons of the book of Job—stop asking why and remember who your God is. By the end of the book, he learns this lesson. Here’s Job’s response to God in the final chapter:

“I know that you can do all things; no purpose of yours can be thwarted. You asked, ‘Who is this that obscures my plans without knowledge?’ Surely I spoke of things I did not understand, things too wonderful for me to know.” (Job 42:2-3; NIV)

In other words, “I was wrong to question you, God. I see now that you know what you are doing. I don’t have to understand your reasons to acknowledge that you have them and that they are good and proper.” So Job repents of his arrogance. He acknowledges God’s wisdom. He derives assurance from a Person, not from having all the answers. And that Person was God. Consequently, Job stopped asking *why* and started trusting *Who*. He arrived at a place where he could honestly say, “God, I don’t have to understand. I trust you.”

So how can we do the same? I’m glad you asked. I believe there are three things in Exodus 13 that we must remember if we are to arrive at this place of trust when God’s way does not make sense to us. Here’s the first reminder...

God’s Purposes Are Meant to Benefit His People (17-18)

Things are not always as they appear. When the circumstances of our lives take a turn for the worst or trend in that direction, we may be tempted to conclude that our life is out of control or that God does not care about our good. But God’s purposes in the lives of His children are *always* good. Always. And every circumstance that befalls us has been sifted through the sovereign hand of a God who loves His children and will use those circumstances for good.

Just because we do not always know how God will bring good out of our trials, doesn’t make that outcome any less certain. He tells us enough for us to trust Him, not enough to satisfy our curiosities. But have you ever considered that it may be a kindness that God doesn’t fill us in on those details?

In a book called, *The Hiding Place*, Corrie ten Boom recalls a story from her childhood when she and her dad were returning home on a train after purchasing some parts for his watch-making business. While they

were en route, Corrie took the opportunity to ask her father about the meaning of a word she read in a school poem. It was an adult word. The question, as you can imagine, took her father a bit off guard. He thought about it for a moment, collected himself, stood up, and took down his suitcase from the rack. Here's how Corrie describes what happened next.

“‘Will you carry it off the train, Corrie?’ he said. I stood up and tugged at it. It was crammed with the watches and spare parts he had purchased that morning. ‘It’s too heavy,’ I said. ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘And it would be a pretty poor father who would ask his little girl to carry such a load. It’s the same way, Corrie, with knowledge. Some knowledge is too heavy for children. When you are older and stronger you can bear it. For now you must trust me to carry it for you.’”⁷

Do you see, church? God is a wise Father and He knows when knowledge is too heavy for His children. He’s not being mean or deceptive when He withholds explanations. No, no. He’s carrying burdens for us. He delights to do that for us because He loves us. That’s why He invites us to cast our anxieties on Him precisely because He cares for us (1 Peter 5:17). But, friends, that same care is often expressed by carrying the burden of knowledge. God’s refusal to answer all our *why* questions is one of His most loving graces to us. Some day, when we are older and further along in maturity, He may allow us to carry more of the weight of such knowledge. In the meantime, we must remember that He is a loving Father, trust Him, and give thanks to Him for carrying more burdens than we know.⁸

That character of God is seen in our text. God is taking the Israelites in a direction that may not make sense to them immediately and will not for some time. They will arrive at a place that will so terrify them that they will wish they could go back to their Egyptian slavery. But God is carrying burdens for His people. He knows the frailty of their faith.

He knows that if He allows the people to take the shortest and easiest route, they will pass through a militarized zone. God knows the landscape ahead of them better than the Israelites do. The Egyptian military has forces scattered in the region to guard against potential invasion from Canaan and, yes, at the present they were wanting the Israelites to leave and were in the process of expelling them, but what if they changed their mind? And even if they didn’t, the Israelites would eventually come into the land of the Philistines and that was sure to rattle them as verse 17 makes clear. They would run back to Egypt in fear with their tails between their legs begging for captivity. They may have the look of an army, but the Israelites were not ready for battle.⁹

God knows all this. If you ever doubt whether God was right, just read ahead and see how they respond when they finally make it to the land of Canaan (Numbers 13-14). He knows the frailty of their faith. And He knows how to shepherd them in light of that knowledge. And He knows the frailty of yours as well and, believe it or not, His providence in your life, sweet or bitter, reflects that.

But they don’t know all of God’s purposes. Nevertheless, God has given them enough proof by means of the plagues to demonstrate that He is for His people, not against them. Now they must trust that He knows what He is doing, even when it doesn’t make sense. They must trust in the Lord with all their heart and lean not on their own understanding, as Solomon counseled his son (Proverbs 3:5). They must trust that the shortest way, and the easiest way, is not the best way because it is not God’s way.

Whatever is going on in your life right now, do you believe that God means you well? It may not seem that way, but it is for the best, because the Bible says that “*for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose*” (Romans 8:28). “Even when we are tempted to doubt whether God knows what he is doing, we are called to believe that his way is the best way.”¹⁰ The only way we can do this in the present is by seeing and believing God’s track record in the past and this is why the Gospel, and the cross of Christ at the center, is so vital for the present.

A few verses after the verse I just read, Paul asks the Romans a rhetorical question.

“He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Romans 8:32)

In other words, it's very difficult for us to look thoughtfully at the cross, at what God's Son endured in our place, and conclude that our circumstances prove that God is against us and doesn't want the best for us. The cross of Christ secured our ultimate good. Why would the Father subject the Son to such agony on our behalf only to lead us into ultimate peril. He wouldn't. So as dire as our circumstances may look at the present, as counterintuitive as His direction may seem in the moment, God must indeed be working His purposes for our good in the end.

John Flavel, a Puritan who lived in the 1600s, captures Paul's logic quite well. I'll close with his insight.

“He spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all; how shall he not with him freely give us all things?” (Romans 8:32). How is it imaginable that God should withhold, after this, spirituals or temporals, from his people? How shall he not call them effectually, justify them freely, sanctify them thoroughly, and glorify them eternally? How shall he not clothe them, feed them, protect and deliver them? Surely if he would not spare this own Son one stroke, one tear, one groan, one sigh, one circumstance of misery, it can never be imagined that ever he should, after this, deny or withhold from his people, for whose sakes all this was suffered, any mercies, any comforts, any privilege, spiritual or temporal, which is good for them.”¹¹

God always does what is good for children. Always. If you believe that He gave His own Son for you, then this is what you should believe. It follows from the cross that God always works for our best interests. The Christian life is merely the outworking, the fruit, of such faith. So we must look to Christ. Look to the cross. Behold the love of God. And allow the sight of it all the melt our unbelieving hearts and leave in their place a solid trust in God and His purposes for our lives.

I'd like to say more about this next week, and then add two additional reminders that we can glean from the rest of Exodus 13. I'll tilt my hand now and give you the points so you can be thinking on them this week. Next week I've invited a guest to join me and he will help me illustrate the truth of these lessons. Here they are:

God's Promises Are Meant to Assure His People (19)

God's Presence Is Meant to Guide His People (20-22)

Pray with me...

¹ David Strain, “Pilgrim Days,” preached on January 25, 2015, to First Presbyterian Church in Jackson, Mississippi, which as of the date of the present sermon could be found online at: <http://www.fpcjackson.org/resource-library/sermons/pilgrim-days>.

² For debates on the referent of the “Red Sea,” see John D. Currid, *Exodus – Volume 1* (EPSC; Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2000, repr. 2014), 272f; T. Desmond Alexander, *Exodus* (TTCS; Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2016), 65.

³ Currid, 273-274.

⁴ Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God Even When Life Hurts* (NavPress, 2008), 130.

⁵ Don Baker, *Pain’s Hidden Purpose* (Portland: Multnomah, 1984), 103.

⁶ Bridges, 131.

⁷ Corrie ten Boom, John L. Sherrill, and Elizabeth Sherrill, *The Hiding Place* (Grand Rapids: Chosen, 1984), 42.

⁸ Jon Bloom, *Things Not Seen: A Fresh Look at Old Stories of Trusting God’s Promises* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 85.

⁹ For more on the curious expressions about “ready for battle,” which has attracted a lot of attention among scholars, see Alexander, 66; Currid, 273.

¹⁰ Philip Graham Ryken, *Exodus: Saved for God’s Glory* (Preaching the Word; Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2005), 381.

¹¹ Quoted by Piper Sermon in a sermon, titled, “God Did Not Spare His Own Son,” which was accessed at the following online address: <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/god-did-not-spare-his-own-son>.