

“That Don’t Make No Sense (Part 2)”—Exodus 13:17-19

Brandon Holiski
Southern Oaks Baptist Church
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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 let’s meet in Exodus 13...

I once heard the story of a shipwreck survivor who washed up on the shores of an uninhabited island. For days he prayed to God for rescue, but no one came. In order to protect himself from the elements, the man built a small hut. This was all he had. One day, while he was out searching for food, the hut caught fire and by the time the man returned there was little more than ashes that remained of his shelter. As you can imagine, he was crushed. He was struck with grief, feeling pity for himself and anger toward God for making his already bad situation even worse.

The next morning, he spotted a boat floating toward the coast to rescue him. Once secure on the boat, the man asked the captain how he came to find him on the deserted island. The captain seemed surprised by the question. “We saw your smoke signal yesterday,” he replied. “How else do you think we would have known where to find you?”¹

I don’t know if this story is fact or fiction, but it makes a valid point. Often the unwelcome circumstances in our lives, the things that don’t make sense initially, prove to be the means by which God brings His help and meets our need. We may not be able to fully appreciate His purposes at first. We may be tempted to think His purposes are flawed and that our way would be better. But in reality God always has a plan and that is good news for His people because His plan is always for their good.

Of course, in the moment, God’s ways often don’t make any sense to us. That’s what we saw last week in Exodus 13. God’s people have been set free from their slavery in Egypt and they are making their exit, heading for the Promised Land. Yet surprisingly God doesn’t take them in that direction. He leads them south when they should be going north. He takes them on a year journey instead of what could have been a mere two weeks. This could not have made much sense to many of the Israelites in that moment, but they trusted God and moved forward at His direction.

That’s what we should want to do as well. So last week we began to explore a question—What do we do when God is not making sense? When life takes a turn for the worse or when God seems to be leading us in a direction that we can’t explain, how do we move forward in faith? I believe Exodus 13 provides us with three answers. We got to one of those answers last week, which we will review and expand upon in a moment, but there are two more answers in the text and we will get to one more of those in our time today.

The first thing we need to remember when God’s way is not making sense to us is that...

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

We see this especially in verses 17 and 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.’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.” (Exodus 13:17-18)

God’s has His reasons for taking them the long way. One of those reasons, as we discussed last week, is explained in verse 17. He knows the frailty of their faith. He knows that if they take the route that makes sense on paper, the people will eventually encounter opposition that will shake their resolve. In truth, God is still taking them on a path that will test their faith to the max, but He has a plan to do something that should build their faith. We’ll come to that in the next chapters. But the point is that, contrary to the way it may have appeared, the Lord had His reasons for leading the people in the direction they are heading. He always has reasons for His instructions. Nothing is ever arbitrary and pointless with our God. And His purposes always prove to be what is best for His people in the end.

This principle—that God’s purposes are meant to benefit His people—is all over the place in Scripture. We could spend weeks exploring the stories and verses that communicate that key truth. One of the verses I mentioned last week in this regard was from Romans 8—“*we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose*” (Romans 8:28; NIV). That oft-quoted verse, however, has a next verse and that next verse begins with the word “*for*”, meaning that Paul was about to provide his readers some clarification on just what “good” God aims to bring about in “*all things*” for those He has called. “*For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers*” (8:29). So the good that God works for in your life, if you are a believer, is not your financial security or your upward mobility in the workplace. It’s not the emergence of your version of the American dream. It’s not the comfort and happiness that you imagine accompanies a life of luxury. No, not at all. Those things are not bad in themselves, but that’s not the “good” Paul has in mind. It’s conforming your life to the likeness of His Son, Jesus Christ, and bringing Him glory. That’s the “good” God wants for us and it’s better for us than we can imagine.

The same idea is echoed in Hebrews 12:10—“*for [our earthly fathers] disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but [God] disciplines us for our good, that we may share in His holiness.*” Sharing in God’s holiness is just another way of describing conformity to the image of Christ. God, like a potter, has something He is fashioning us into. That is why He leads the Israelites in the direction He does. He knows exactly how to shape us into the people we should be and the circumstances in our life, both sweet and bitter, are used to that produce that finished product.² That finished product is good, something we would never exchange for our present day dreams.

If we believe this, then it allows us to embrace the counsel of James, who calls us to “*Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing*” (James 1:2-4; cf. Romans 5:3-4). In other words, the challenges we face are never pleasant but they can produce something beautiful.

In a book called, *Trusting God Even When Life Hurts*, Jerry Bridges tells the story of the Cecropia moth. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen one of these moths before, but if you have you know their wings are visually stunning. It’s as though God uses their wingspan as His canvas to paint these beautiful murals for all of nature to enjoy. It’s amazing. But before we get to see that, there is a cocoon. That’s not quite as stunning. It could easily be mistaken for something your dog deposits in the yard. When the time is right, however, the moth begins to emerge from that cocoon and in due course something beautiful comes out of something ugly.

If you get a chance you can see videos online of this event, this metamorphosis, you quickly realize that it is a slow process that involves a lot of struggle on the part of the moth. Perhaps you have heard the story of

a man who witnessed this struggle and tried to help the moth out by cutting the cocoon a bit to make it easier for the creature to escape. Out came the moth in half the time, its wings crimped and shriveled. But as the man watched, he realized that wings remained weak. The moth, which very soon on God's timeline would have spread its wings to fly, was now doomed to living out its frustrating existence from the ground, never realizing the potential it had to become one of God's most beautiful creatures.

What the man did not understand was that the struggle of escaping the cocoon was an essential part of the moth's development. As these creatures struggle and strain to break free, their muscular system develops and fluids are pushed through the body to help the wings expand. Seeking to cut short this struggle, the man had accidentally crippled its life and doomed its existence. Bridges writes,

“The adversities of life are much like the cocoon of the Cecropia moth. God uses them to develop the spiritual ‘muscle system’ of our lives. As James says... ‘The testing of your faith [through trials of many kinds] develops perseverance,’ and perseverance leads to maturity and character. We can be sure that the development of a beautiful Christlike character will not occur in our lives without adversity... However, we shrink from adversity and, to use the terms from the moth illustration, we want God to snip the cocoon of adversity we often find ourselves in and release us. But just as God has more wisdom and love for the moth than its viewer did, so He has more wisdom and love for us than we do for ourselves. He will not remove adversity until we have profited from it and developed in whatever way He intended in bringing or allowing it into our lives.”³

Do you see? “A faith that is not tested is like a muscle that is not used. Both atrophy.”⁴ Now that doesn't mean that we are masochists. We are not to rejoice because we enjoy pain and love tragedy. We don't seek adversity. We don't count it victory that we were punched in the face for Jesus today. No, chances are that was because you were being obnoxious and weird. We rejoice instead in knowing God and knowing that He is at work in those circumstances, even if we can't discern how. And, likewise, none of this means that we don't seek to relieve our suffering or the suffering of the people we encounter through legitimate means at our disposal. It simply means that “we should accept from God's hand success or failure of those means as He wills and at all times seek to learn whatever He might be teaching us.”⁵

God refines and strengthens our faith through the fires of adversity, opposition, and suffering. So the trials of our present life are not wasted in His hand. He leverages them for His purposes and thereby we are built up over time, along with His church. His glory and our good will prove to be the net result. And the path He takes us on will serve that outcome better than any we would choose for ourselves. If we were captains of our own soul, we would shipwreck our lives. Fortunately for us there is a true Sovereign at the helm and, as Paul wrote, we can be “*sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ*” (Philippians 1:6). So we “Judge not the Lord by feeble sense but trust Him for His grace” because we know that “behind a frowning providence He hides a smiling face.”⁶

That is the life of faith. The life He has called us to. The life He called Israel to. It won't always make sense to us. It will sometimes seem unfair. God may lead us down a path that seems much more difficult than the one we would chart. But this is where we have to trust in the wisdom of God—He knows what He is doing in our lives—and the character of God—He loves us, in Christ, with Fatherly affection. He is wise and loving. He can be trusted.

But God gives us reassurances along the way. We focused last time on the fact that God often responds to our *why* questions with *who* answers. We want to understand things. He doesn't owe us such explanations and often doesn't supply them for us. We even saw how His silence may even be a grace to us. He's a loving Father who often carries the burden of knowledge on behalf of His children. But He does want us to understand *who*. He wants us to understand some things about who He is so that we can trust Him with the uncertainties of life.

But another thing He leaves for us are certain promises about the future. These are meant for us to treasure. They are meant to be a warm blanket in times of chilling adversity and uncertainty. As Bridges remarks, “Trust is not a passive state of mind. It is a vigorous act of soul by which we choose to lay hold on the promises of God and cling to them despite the adversity that at times seeks to overwhelm us.”⁷ And this leads us to the next thing we have to keep in mind when God’s not making sense to us...

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

Take a look at 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.’” (Exodus 13:19)

This is basically a direct quotation from the end of Genesis 50. It is interesting that the author brings up Joseph at this point in the story. One of the most famous verses from the life of Joseph is Genesis 50:20. After decades of struggle that God had turned for good, Joseph turns to his brothers who initiated his trouble and says, *“As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good...”* It has been said that this verse is the Old Testament’s “Romans 8:28” (i.e., in all things God works for the good...).⁸ When I think of Joseph it is hard for me not to think of that remark and the end of his story. That would also be the case for the Israelites in time. And so in bringing the bones of Joseph along with them for the journey there would be an opportunity for them to recall the previous point—that it may not make sense what God is doing at the moment, but it will be for good in the end. Just like it was for Joseph.

But Joseph’s bones also challenge the Israelites to embrace Joseph’s faith. In the New Testament, the writer of Hebrews says,

“By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.” (Hebrews 11:22)

Joseph knew that his descendants would become slaves in Egypt, but he also knew that one day God would set them free. How did he know this? He knew this because God had made a promise to his great grandfather Abraham. Joseph had faith in God’s promise, that covenant, and therefore he wanted to make sure that he could go along for the ride when the day came when God brought the people back, so he made his brother swear to bury his bones in the Promised Land.

The last verse in Genesis says that his brothers *“embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt”* (Genesis 50:26). Now that coffin is on Israelite shoulders as they took his bones with them and throughout their wilderness journey. Eventually they would bury his remains in the land of Shechem (Joshua 24:32), keeping the promise of their ancestors.

Between those times, the bones served as a constant reminder to Israel of Joseph’s confidence in the promises of God. Joseph couldn’t see how God would bring these promises to pass, but he was sure that the God who made the promises was faithful to keep them. The Israelites were meant to share that same confidence in their God. They were meant to carry the bones and think “our ancestor Joseph knew all about trusting God through strange paths in pursuit of God’s purposes. He was right. That’s why his bones are with us. His faith was well placed. Ours is too!” When God makes a promise it is meant to assure us. It’s meant to fuel our faith. As someone has said, “Faith lives in the present in the light of God’s promised future.”⁹

But in order to experience that assurance we need to know these promises and the character of the God who made them. How will we ever do this, if we are not in His Word? The brothers and sisters I see who weather adversity and uncertainty in their lives well, providing a model for me to aspire to, always seem to be in the Word regularly. There is often an observable correlation between the stability of their faith and the Word. Why? Because just as the faith of salvation comes through hearing the message of the Gospel (cf. Romans 10:17), so the faith to trust God's providence comes from hearing that same "*word of Christ.*" We will not find the faith we need from any other source than the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is the heart of the story the Bible tells. In the Gospel we see the character of God, the promises of God, and the model for us to follow. All are needed for us to fuel our faith for the trials and uncertainty that we will encounter in life.

We see the character of God because at the Gospel's center, the Bible's center, there is a bloody cross. It stands there to remind us that God is holy and sin deserves His judgment. But it also assures us that God's love is more definitive than our sins and God's love compelled Him to provide a Savior, His Son, Jesus Christ. This Savior laid down his life for sinners like us who did not seek God, who did not want God, who every day choose things instead of God, who deserve no good thing from God, and who have no hope without God. God shows us love in that "*while we were still sinners, Christ died for us*" (Romans 5:8). That is our God. He has made a way for our salvation in Christ. We receive it freely through faith alone in the work of Christ alone, His cross and resurrection. So trust in Christ. He is the only way to experience salvation. You don't have what it takes. Admit your sin and need and trust in Christ alone.

As we saw last week, Paul assures the Romans, "*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?*" (8:32). This an example of how the Gospel is filled with promises for a glorious future for all followers of Christ. We discover that Jesus does more than forgive us of sin and give us relationship with God in the present, He prepares a place for us to dwell with God forever, He promises that we will share in His glorious resurrection, He promises to do away with sin and Satan fully and finally so that we can know an existence where every tear is wiped from our eyes and death fades out of reality. This is our hope. This is God's promise for His people. This is secured by that same work of Christ. This is the outcome of the Gospel. And nothing we experience in this life can separate God's people from that end.

So we follow Christ. And in the Gospel we don't just see the character of God and the promises of God, but also our model. As the writer of Hebrews instructs us, we look to Jesus, "*the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame....*" (Hebrews 12:2). In other words, Jesus knew the character of His Father so He believed the promised hope that His Father put before Him and this gave Him the resolve to persevere through the adversity that came in His life, including the cross. The same is true for us. Christ blazed the trail for us to walk in it. Just like Him we need the assurances that God is working for our good and God has promised that good and we must keep the joy of that hope before us to prop up our faith in times of adversity and uncertainty.

So we see again our need for the Gospel. Not just because it births the faith that saves, but because it supplies the faith that perseveres. We must preach it to ourselves regularly so that we can remember the character of God, the promises He offers, and the example of Christ. We need to find ways to keep this Word of Christ and these reminders before our eyes, like the bones of Joseph that would constantly jar the memory of Israelites, testifying to the nature of true faith. And, of course, this won't take away all the challenges of our present life. It won't remove all the uncertainties. But it will help us to see through them to the God who reigns behind them.

Let me close with the words of another pastor and author named Crawford Loritts Jr.:

“To refuse to allow the difficulties we face to squelch and temper our faith does not mean that we are living in denial. To be sure, there are those who refuse to accept the harsh reality of their condition or the full weight of their circumstances. Faith does not deny that you have cancer. Faith does not deny that you’ve lost your job and you’re upside down financially. Faith does not deny that your marriage is in a very bad place. Faith does not deny that your children have walked away from the faith. You name it, and faith does not deny its existence. It looks at it. It ‘considers’ it. It examines it. It stares it in the eye, but it says: ‘*You* don’t stop or determine what God wants done. So I stare through you and see my great God, who is able to do what he has promised.’”¹⁰

Amen, someone!

Next week we will look at one final point we can learn from the final 3 verses of the chapter—God’s presence is meant to guide his people.

But with the remainder of our time I want to invite Josh Green to the stage with me...

¹ Deron Spoo, *The Good Book: 40 Chapters that Reveal the Bible’s Biggest Ideas* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2017), 59.

² Jerry Bridges writes, “God in His infinite wisdom knows exactly what adversity we need to grow more and more into the likeness of His Son. He not only knows *what* we need but *when* we need it and *how* best to bring it to pass in our lives. He is the perfect teacher or coach. His discipline is always exactly suited for our needs. He never over trains us by allowing too much adversity in our lives.” Jerry Bridges, *Trusting God Even When Life Hurts* (NavPress, 2008), 128.

³ *Ibid.*, 186.

⁴ Crawford W. Loritts, *Unshaken: Real Faith in Our Faithful God* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2015), 23. He continues, “Christianity is not simply a body of truth to be believed; it’s a supernatural life that is meant to be lived. Our growth does not take place in the wonderful confines of our Bible studies, conferences, and fellowship groups. To be sure, we need these events and resources to encourage us. Our strength is found, however, in the heavy lifting of application. This has to happen when we are tested not only by the gap between our current reality and where God is calling us to be, but also when the winds of adversity are fiercely blowing against us.” *Ibid.*, 23-24.

⁵ Bridges, 190.

⁶ From the William Cowper song, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way.”

⁷ Bridges, 214.

⁸ E.g., Tony Merida, *Exalting Jesus in Exodus* (Christ-Centered Exposition; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2014), 79.

⁹ Tim Chester, *Exodus for You* (Denmark: The Good Book Company, 2016), 91.

¹⁰ Loritts, 20.