

“That Don’t Make No Sense (Part 3)”

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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 one last time...

The last couple weeks we have been exploring a question: What do we do when God is not making sense? I suggested that the end of Exodus 13 supplies us with three things we should remember in those confusing times when life takes a turn for the worse or when God seems to be leading us in a direction that we can’t explain. The first two reminders were as follows:

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

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

If it’s okay with you, let’s dispense with the opening illustration and make haste to the text because my heart is anxious to show you some things. So let’s look at the final three verses of chapter 13 to find our third and final principle. Follow along as I read. This is the Word of God Almighty...

“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 13:20-22)

In these verses we are reminded that...

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

This is a pretty incredible scene. The Israelites are being led by a pillar, which suggests something visual that stretched from the sky to the ground. By day the pillar appeared as a cloud (or perhaps smoke). By night the pillar was fire. There is some discussion among scholars as to whether these two pillars are in fact one and the same—fire enclosed in cloud—so that in the day the fire is concealed by the cloud and at night it shines through. Hard to say. It’s ambiguous. In either case, what is clear is that this miraculous occurrence blazed an unmistakable path for the Israelites to follow.¹

We must not miss the significance of this manifest guide. Look again at verse 21. *“And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud...and by night in a pillar of fire...”* So we are told that it is God Himself who is guiding them “in” or “as” a pillar of cloud and fire. When they see and follow the pillar, they are seeing and following God’s presence among them. That’s incredible. God is with them. We are seeing not only His care in the choice of the route, but also His companionship for the journey. And this won’t be the last time these images of fire and cloud mediate God’s presence to the people in our story, so stay tuned.²

When God appears to people in these mysterious ways, scholars usually refer to it as a “theophany.”³ And the nature of this particular theophany is not entirely unprecedented in the Pentateuch, which is what the

first five books of the Old Testament are called. In Genesis 15, an oven with smoke and a flaming fire was a visible sign for Abram of the presence of the covenant-keeping God. In Exodus 3 the Lord appeared in unapproachable fire from the midst of a bush. Now that same fire is present among His people, no longer unapproachable, but beckoning the people to draw near. Why? Because a lamb has been slain. A redemption has occurred so God draws His people near.

The same is true today. God is still present among His people. Just like the Israelites, we don't have to stumble through the foreboding wilderness of this life alone, relying on our own wit and sense of direction. God is still present with His people, guiding and directing them on the journey. But we, like the Israelites, must keep our eyes on the Lord, His presence among us, and we will find ourselves arriving at the destination God has for us.⁴ We're not looking for Him in a cloud or a fire. He's even closer to us. As Christians, God actually dwells within us by the Holy Spirit.⁵ As one scholar has put it—"The God of the great moving pillar is still the same, still conducting the pilgrimage of his people. Though he has removed the visible sign, he will never remove his presence or fail to make his way known to those who watch and wait (cf. 40:36-38)."⁶

I don't think it is a stretch to draw a parallel between the Israelites journey by God's presence in the pillar and our journeying by God's Spirit. In fact, I think there are biblical grounds for doing so. For example, when Isaiah reflects on the Exodus event, he refers to God's activity among the people during this time as the work of the Holy Spirit. Listen to an excerpt from Isaiah 63.

"Then he remembered the days of old, of Moses and his people. Where is he who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of his flock? Where is he who put in the midst of them his Holy Spirit,¹² who caused his glorious arm to go at the right hand of Moses, who divided the waters before them to make for himself an everlasting name,¹³ who led them through the depths? Like a horse in the desert, they did not stumble.¹⁴ Like livestock that go down into the valley, the Spirit of the LORD gave them rest. So you led your people, to make for yourself a glorious name." (Isaiah 63:11-14)

You could make a case that when Isaiah refers to the "Holy Spirit," who was "put in their midst," the prophet is thinking of the presence of God in the pillar of cloud and of fire.⁷ Paul seems to have this in mind as well when He writes to the Romans 8:14, "all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God." We don't have time to go in great detail, but in Romans 6 to 8 Paul shows how the salvation of God's people out of Egypt is the pattern that God fulfilled in Christ when He saved His people from their sins.

"As we shall see, just as Israel was liberated from slavery in Egypt by being baptized into Moses through the Red Sea (1 Corinthians 10:2), so we have been liberated from slavery to sin through our baptism into Christ through his death and resurrection (Romans 6). Just as Israel came to Mount Sinai to receive God's law, so God's law is written in our hearts by the Spirit (Romans 7). Just as Israel was led by the pillars of cloud and fire to their inheritance in the land, so we are led by the Spirit to our inheritance in the new creation (Romans 8). Just as Israel was God's 'firstborn son' (Exodus 4:22), so the Spirit testifies to us that we are children of God (Romans 8:16)."⁸

So I think we are justified in seeing in Exodus 13 a principle that is still at work in our lives—God's presence is meant to guide His people. Christians today are led by the Spirit of God, as the New Testament suggests in a number of ways. The Spirit guides the Church and the people who make up the Church. That's not all the Spirit does for us. But it's an indispensable aspect of His work in our lives.

But we have to be cautious here for a couple of reasons. First of all, we have to be careful because we live in an age where people love to speak about "God's leading" in very casual and inaccurate ways. There is much that masquerades as "God's leading" that has nothing to do with the things of God, even if it is

baptized in spiritual sounding statements used to mask the agendas and ambitions of sinful hearts. Eric Mason, another pastor, may be right when he comments that the Holy Spirit “is the member of the Godhead who is lied about the most. People say that He says and is doing things He is not. Or they ascribe things to Him that are obviously far from His holy character.”⁹ So we must be careful that we don’t join the chorus of such frivolous speech that is the hallmark of the age.

But, secondly, we have to be careful because when you live in such a climate, where people speak as though they have some special revelation from God, you end up searching for God to direct your steps in ways that have more in common with various New Age movements than they do with the normal ways and means the Lord leads His people. We look for signs. Instead of turning to our Bible for wisdom, we spend all our time trying to read the tea leaves of our lives’ circumstances and this leads to some pretty bizarre claims of how people “know” that God spoke to them. I read some funny examples of this in recent days. For instance, how many of you have known the guy who says things like this:

“You won’t believe this! I was praying about whether I should ask Sarah out, and driving on the interstate, I saw a billboard and the first letter on the billboard was the first letter of her last name and the last two digits of the phone number were the same as her age, and right at that moment, my favorite Christian song came on the radio...and so I just KNEW God was telling me to ask her out! Jehovah Jireh!!!! God is good, all the time!”

Have you met that guy? Have you been that guy? Are you dating that guy? If I’m being honest, my wife probably married that guy 12 years ago to the day. But that’s not spirituality at it’s finest. That’s adolescent biology. That’s the kind of thing that leads to restraining orders, but for the grace of God. So, ladies, on behalf of the male gender, please accept my sincerest apologies. Come on guys! We can do better. Man up and stop hiding behind God!¹⁰

Now, I’m not saying that God doesn’t ever use something we observe in our life to help direct our minds to certain actions. He can and does, at times. Jesus did say, after all, “*The wind blows where it wishes, and you hear its sound, but you do not know where it comes from or where it goes. So it is with everyone who is born of the Spirit*” (John 3:8). So there is something mysterious about the workings of the Spirit in our lives. When we read the book of Acts, we see the Spirit of God speaking close to forty times, but the author doesn’t usually explain *how* He spoke, just that He did. And, similarly, in the writings of Paul there are instances where the apostle speaks of the guidance of the Spirit, but they are similarly ambiguous. But what is clear is that the Apostles based most of their decisions on the wisdom they gained from Scripture.¹¹

There are certainly miraculous ways that God leads His people (cf. pillar from the sky). But these miraculous means are rare. They’re not the rule. They’re the exception. Not surprisingly, then, the subjective leaps we attribute to the Spirit’s leading are usually just our imagination connecting the dots between where we are and where we personally want to go. That’s not the normal way that God leads His people by His Spirit.

So what is the normal way that God leads His people? By the Holy Spirit, through the revelation of His Word. The Spirit has inspired every word of the Scriptures and in them we encounter His voice, the voice of God, as the Spirit illuminates our minds to hear and heed the truth we glean in its pages. That is the normal means the Spirit leads God’s people—the Word of God—not some “Magic 8-Ball” fashion, “where you peer into your heart to see what words float to the top, and you assume that’s the Spirit.”¹² That may be the modern way, but that doesn’t make it the right way. That’s not the biblical way.

And even here in Exodus 13, where God is leading the Israelites through the miraculous cloud and fire of His presence, He is not leading them independent of His Word. That pillar is taking them where God said He would take them. They had a word from God, spoken through the prophet Moses. They had a covenant

from God, established with His servant Abraham. The Spirit of God is leading them in conjunction with the Word of God. Indeed, His leading is actually fulfilling the Word of God. So even when we believe that God is leading us through some external means, we must always check it against the Word of God. If He is, then it will be consistent with what He has revealed in His Word. Always. Period. End of story.

The Spirit and the Spirit-inspired Word of God work together in guiding God's people. And this is why the Spirit and the Gospel are inseparably linked. I agree with J. D. Greear, a prominent Southern Baptist pastor, who writes,

“Where the gospel is not cherished, the Spirit will not be experienced. And, on the flipside, where the Spirit is not sought, there will be no deep, experiential knowledge of the gospel. The two always go hand in hand. Jesus said, ‘The words I have spoken to you—they are *full of the Spirit* and life’ [John 6:63]...Spirit and Word, inseparably united. Seeking experiences with the Spirit apart from the Word leads not only to confusion, but to disaster.”¹³

People are looking for a word from God when, ironically, we already have “a Word” from God. Sixty-six books full of them. They're still relevant. They're still speaking. They're still perfect and sufficient, according to Paul, so that “*the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work*” (2 Timothy 3:16-17). We have what we need. We're just lazy. Amen, someone! If you can't say “Amen,” you can say, “Ahh, man...”

So if we want to follow the lead of the Spirit and if the Spirit operates in concert with the Word, then we should seek the Spirit in the Word. Here again Greear offers a helpful illustration or two of how God guides us by His Spirit today.

“[The Spirit's] guidance functions something like steering a bicycle: It works only once you're moving. The Spirit steers as you obey God's commands. You start pedaling in obedience, he'll start directing. Or here's another way to think about it: The Spirit of God draws upon our knowledge of the Word of God to counsel and encourage us like a gunner draws on a stash of ammunition. If no ammunition waits in the chamber, the gunner simply has nothing to work with. The most powerful gun with no ammunition is impotent. If you want to be led by the Spirit of God, then devote yourself to the Word of God... You won't know the Spirit any more than you know the Word of God. So if you want to walk with the Spirit of God, get on your knees and open your Bibles.”¹⁴

Maybe you are here this morning and some major decision is weighing on you. You want to make the right decision. You want to be sensitive to the Spirit's leading, but you are not sure how to move forward. What should you do? Let me suggest five steps. They are not innovative. They are things that thousands of other pastors have counseled their flock in for centuries. Even the wording of these steps I've adopted from James Macdonald.¹⁵ But they are tried and true. They're biblical. They're what you need.

Step 1: Eliminate Unbiblical Options

You may say, “Well that was obvious, pastor.” But I'm not so sure. You'd probably be surprised by just how many Christians get derailed in their decision-making by considering options that violate Scripture. One example will suffice. How many Christian singles have claimed that they want to make a godly decision in choosing who to marry and yet they date non-Christians? Think about it. If Christian marriage is an object lesson to teach something about the relationship between Christ and His Church (Ephesians 5:22-33), then how is that image not perverted when one of the partners has no relationship to Christ?¹⁶ Do you see? If you want to follow the direction of God, then do yourself a favor and know your Bible well enough to eliminate the options that contradict it. Take Paul's advice to Timothy—“*Do your best to present*

yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).

Step 2: Pray for God’s Wisdom

When you weed out the unbiblical options, you may still be left with a variety of possibilities to consider. That can be overwhelming. But God invites us to come to Him for wisdom. Listen to the words of James.

“If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him. ⁶ But let him ask in faith, with no doubting, for the one who doubts is like a wave of the sea that is driven and tossed by the wind. ⁷ For that person must not suppose that he will receive anything from the Lord; ⁸ he is a double-minded man, unstable in all his ways.” (James 1:5-8)

So we make decisions in the context of relationship. We have a relationship with God through faith in the Christ and His work on our behalf, His cross and His resurrection. God is now our Father. He loves to give counsel to His children and He invites us to ask. So we should. This is a good thing to do every time you open God’s Word. Pray to Him for wisdom and don’t be shocked when the Spirit gives it through the Word.

Step 3: Yield to the Holy Spirit’s Leading

By which I do not mean looking for some secret message in the Alpha-Bits cereal floating around in your breakfast milk. Nothing like that. Something more objective. At some point in my preparations this week I caught myself asking, “Where is God’s Spirit leading us?” And as I searched the Scriptures for the answer, I discovered that many of the places that speak of God’s Spirit leading us, in context, refer to Him leading us into the holiness of Christ.

For example, in Galatians 5, Paul commands us to “*walk by the Spirit*” and he describes the Christian life as one that is “*led by the Spirit*” and the Christian people as those who “*live by the Spirit*.” But what does that look like? It looks like holiness. We are walking by the Spirit when we are growing in holiness. So Paul contrasts “*the fruit of the Spirit*” with the “*works of the flesh*.” He says, “*For the desires of the flesh are against the Spirit, and the desires of the Spirit are against the flesh*” (5:17). What is most interesting to me is that he puts in contrast crucifying the desires and passions of the flesh (5:24) with the call to “*live by the Spirit*” and to “*keep in step with the Spirit*” (5:25). In other words, “*When you decide to put to death—to crucify—your flesh, you are by default choosing the way of the Spirit. You are leaving one path and joining another.*”¹⁷ And that new path is the path of holiness. So you are following the Spirit’s leading when you are pursuing holiness.

“To be led by the Spirit is not a mystical experience in which we receive new revelations from God. It is to live our new, liberated life as we head for life in the new creation. We are being led by the Spirit every time he prompts us to say no to temptation and yes to Jesus (Romans 8:12-13; Galatians 5:16-18). We are being led by the Spirit every time our hearts are set on our heavenly inheritance rather than earthly treasure (Romans 8:16-17, 22-25). So we ‘live by the Spirit’ by putting to death selfish desires (Galatians 5:24-26). If today you refuse to give in to temptation, then you will have been led by the Spirit of God; the same God who led his people in the wilderness.”¹⁸

Here’s another example. Earlier I read Romans 8:14, which says, “*For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.*” When we hear that phrase, “*led by the Spirit of God,*” we automatically assume that it’s talking about God helping us make those hard decisions in life—like picking a spouse, job, house, etc. But, in context, that’s not it. The verse starts with the word “*for*” or “*because,*” which means there is an

extremely strong connection between verse 14 and what comes before it in verse 13. Here's what he said in that verse—*“For if you live according to the flesh you will die, but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live.”* Here's how Tim Keller explains the logical connection between these two verses:

“In verse 13 he says that with the Spirit we really can triumph over the sin within us. Then he explains why this great power—power over sin—is available to us. It is because we are sons or children of God. So being “led by the Spirit” must be the same thing as “put[ting] to death the deeds of the sinful body” of verse 13. In other words, we are led to hate the things the Spirit hates (sin) and love the things he loves (Christ). We are thus led by the Spirit.”¹⁹

So in arguably the most famous texts where Paul speaks of believers being “led” by the Spirit, he has in mind the Spirit leading us to the destination of holiness.²⁰ So if you want to follow the Spirit's leading, pursue holiness as it is described in God's Word. Do this and you will be walking with the Spirit.

Step 4: Weigh Heavily the Consensus of Godly Counsel

I don't have a lot of time to tease out this step this morning. Suffice it to say that if the Holy Spirit dwells within believers, then it stands to reason that God may speak to us through the counsel of believers, particularly believers who counsel us with an open Bible. I hope you heard that last thing. It's important for you to choose your counselors well. Just because they are Christian, doesn't make them wise or guarantee they will offer godly counsel.

This past week I was reading about a group of 19th century pastors who came together to plan a massive evangelistic campaign for their city. One of the pastors suggested that they invite the well-known evangelist of their day, D. L. Moody, to preach at the gatherings. As they discussed the possibility, as you can imagine, most spoke very favorably about the proposal. A bit later (after the awkwardness set in), one of the younger pastors spoke up and said a bit sarcastically, “By the way some of you talk, you'd think Mr. Moody has a monopoly on the Holy Spirit.” Quiet overtook the room. Eventually one of the pastors broke the silence with a thoughtful reply—“No, Mr. Moody doesn't have a monopoly on the Holy Spirit, but the Holy Spirit does have a monopoly on Mr. Moody!”²¹

It's true, friends, that all Christians have the Spirit deposited within them and God can and does, at times, speak through them as they speak in harmony with His Word pointing us to what God has already revealed. But that does not mean that all Christians are mature in the faith. If we are looking for godly counsel, God can bring it from surprising angles, but if we are wise we will seek it from the predictable sources. Choose your counselors well. Choose men and women who have weathered Bibles from frequent use and calloused knees from daily prayers. In these you're more likely to find brothers and sisters whom the Holy Spirit has more of a monopoly over and therefore brothers and sisters who can lead you in the Way.

The final step, which I'll have to be even more terse in explaining this morning, but is no less important, is...

Step 5: Trust God's Sovereignty to Use All Wise Decisions for Your Good

At this stage, I'll simply say, see the previous two sermons... Remember that God is working for the good of His people and glory of His name in all things. So trust Him to do so even as we make flawed decisions, which we will, and even when our best decisions lead us into difficult outcomes.

But these five steps are good counsel, it seems to me, if you are seeking to be guided by God's Spirit in the direction God wills for your life. God guides us by His presence, His Spirit, and His Spirit guides us in

concert with His Word. These steps seem to account for these truths and will position us, by God's grace, to follow the Spirit well in this life.

Earlier in the week I had planned to close by exploring one final question—What do we do when we can't sense God's presence with us? But as my preparations unfolded and I explored that question in God's Word, I realized that it's too important a topic and the Word has too much to say on it for me to dedicate only a few passing minutes to. So my hope is to explore that question next week. It will be a bit more topical than usual, but I think it will be biblical and therefore beneficial to us. And I suspect it's a question that weighs heavily on most of our minds—if not now, at some point down the road. So come next week. Bring a friend. And we will explore it together.

Let's pray...

¹ “Many scholars have tried to deny this miracle,” notes Tony Merida, “claiming it was just a natural rain cloud. The

² E.g., 14:19, 24; 16:10; 19:18; 24:17; 40:34-38.

³ For more on this, see John D. Currid, *Exodus – Volume 1* (EPSC; Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2000, repr. 2014), 274-275; J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Exodus* (BST; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2005), 177-178.

⁴ Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 208.

⁵ John 14:16-17 is one biblical example that speaks of the indwelling Spirit. Jesus said, “*And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you forever, even the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, for he dwells with you and will be in you.*” Commenting on these verses, James Hamilton writes, “Here Jesus encapsulates the Bible's teaching on God's dwelling in relation to believers in the old and new covenants. In the old covenant God faithfully remained *with* His people, accompanying them in the tabernacle and the temple. Under the new covenant, the only temples is the believing community itself, and God dwells not only among the community corporately (Matt 18:20; 1 Cor 3:16; 2 Cor 6:16), but also *in* each member individually (John 14:17; Rom 8:9-11; 1 Cor 6:19).” James M. Hamilton Jr., *God's Indwelling Presence* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2006), 3. He goes on to explain, however, “This does not exclude an interior ministry of the Spirit to individuals under the old covenant. Whereas God may not have been continually in his people, He could operate upon their hearts through other means.” *Ibid.*, 25.

⁶ Motyer, 170.

⁷ J. Hamilton, 39.

⁸ Tim Chester, *Exodus for You* (Denmark: The Good Book Company, 2016), 97-98.

⁹ Eric Mason, *Unleashed: Being Conformed to the Image of Christ* (Nashville: B&H Books, 2015), 30.

¹⁰ This illustration was drawn from J. D. Greear, *Jesus Continued...: Why the Spirit Inside You Is Better Than Jesus Beside You* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 36.

¹¹ For an excellent overview of the Spirit's guiding activity in the Old and New Testament and what we can and cannot discern by way of patterns from these descriptions, I would recommend one read the J. D. Greear's second chapter, “Mystery and Clarity,” in his excellent book on the Holy Spirit, *Jesus, Continued...: Why the Spirit Inside You Is Better than Jesus Beside You*.

¹² *Ibid.*, 40.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 44, 46.

¹⁵ James Macdonald, *The Will of God Is the Word of God* (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2017), 128-144.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁷ Francis Chan, *Forgotten God: Reversing Our Tragic Neglect of the Holy Spirit* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2009), 93.

¹⁸ Chester, 98.

¹⁹ Tim Keller, *Romans 8-16 for You* (The Good Book Company, 2014), 27.

²⁰ Robby Gallaty writes, “Being led by the Spirit is more than God showing us the correct path to take or pointing out the right direction to walk. When the Spirit of God is leading you, He is the dominating influence in your life. He doesn't just reveal the way, He directs you in the way. He walks with you. We should respond to the Spirit's leading by surrendering our lives to His direction. Remember, the Holy Spirit is a person. The Third Person of the Trinity. He is co-eternal with the Father

and the Son and is equal to them both. He is not a 'thing' or an 'it.' He is a person. Submit to His direction, and allow Him to control your life." Robby Gallaty, *Firmly Planted: How to Cultivate a Faith Rooted in Christ* (Nashville: CrossBooks, 2015), 60.

²¹ Ibid., 65.