

EXODUS

THE GOD WHO RESCUES

SESSION OBJECTIVE: EXODUS 13:17-22

To understand more about the leadership of God over His people in the Exodus.

Read the Text:

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, ESV)

Study the Text:

An Alternate Route

Exodus 13:17 reveals that God did not lead the Israelites "by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near." The easiest and most efficient route from Egypt into Canaan would have been by the road to Gaza, in the land of the Philistines via the Via Maris, a well-established coastal road. The reason God led them "by way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea," however, is because the Israelites were apparently aware of the Philistines' proficiency in war and would have likely "changed their minds" (Ex. 13:17-18). Old Testament scholar Douglas Stuart wrote concerning the known Philistine during this time: "We know, however, that the Philistines were so daunting a fighting force at the time of the conquest, forty years later and beyond, that even at Joshua's death their territory remained unconquered (Josh. 13:1-5). We also know that they were bold enough to attack Egypt proper in an effort to capture territory in the days of Ramses III, that is, about 1188 BC, suggesting that they considered themselves at that time—considerably after the Israelites had entered Canaan—potentially able to defeat even the Egyptians, depending on the circumstances."¹

WISE LEADERSHIP

While the LORD is certainly capable of dispatching any military force, regardless of size or threat, the LORD chooses to lead His people through an alternate route in order to not provoke His people into fear and therefore failure. While the LORD fights a number of battles on behalf of His people, it usually involves their efforts in faith. Beyond that, the goal of the LORD for His people is to leave Egypt first and enter Canaan and then to have dominion over it. War will follow at the appropriate time; there was no need for the LORD to rush them into battle having just left Egypt. This move merely demonstrates the wisdom of God to care for His people and to lead them in the path that will make them most successful. God's people are not robots. He cares for us and leads us with wisdom for our sake. This is less about the power of the Philistines and more about the wisdom and kindness of God.

¹ Douglas K. Stuart, *Exodus*, vol. 2 of The New American Commentary, eds. E. Ray Clendenen and Kenneth A. Mathews (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2006), 322.

EQUIPPED

Though God leads the Israelites through the wilderness toward the Red Sea, they still come out of Egypt “equipped for battle” (Ex. 13:18). The road (as we will discover) to Canaan is long and arduous and full of enemies on all sides. The people were prepared for the inevitable attacks they would face along the way.

The Bones of Joseph

Verse 19 reveals that along with the people of God came “the bones of Joseph.” This portion of the story seems like a random detail that is off script, but it’s actually important to the overarching narrative. One needs to recall Genesis 50:24-25 to connect the dots: “And Joseph said to his brothers, ‘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.’” Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, ‘God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.’” Joseph was the reason the Israelites came into Egypt to begin with, and for good reason; he saved them from famine and thus certain death, though he had been sold into slavery by them (Gen. 45:1-15). By Genesis 50, at the end of his life, he still held fast to the promise of God to bring Israel into the land first promised to Abraham, Isaac, and his own father Jacob. He so trusted God to fulfill His promise that he demanded his own body be taken with them when God led them away. Verse 19 brings fulfillment to this request. Genesis 50:26 goes on to say that “Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.” Because he was embalmed, his remains were likely more substantial than simply bones; probably a mummified body still with skin and hair intact.

The LORD Leads

One aspect of this story that is clear is the leadership of God in bringing them to their ultimate destination. But how does God accomplish this? He appears to Moses in a burning bush (Ex. 3:1-22). He carries out the plagues on Egypt through the agency of Moses and Aaron. One can even imagine Moses and Aaron at the front of the pack on the way out of Egypt. But the LORD’s leadership was tangible to the people through a “pillar of cloud and a pillar of fire” (Ex. 13:21-22). Below is a brief breakdown of the rest of this passage with key details and terms.

FROM SUCCOTH TO ETHAM

It is unclear where Etham was, but what is clear is that it was on the outskirts of the desert, but not out of the sights of Egypt. It is also unclear if their journey took a single day or if it was a succession of days. The latter is more likely, and they likely stayed in Etham for more than one day as well. Traveling with the number of people that made up Israel was no small feat, and it likely required a lot of stopping and communicating down the line. This also explains how such ground could be made up by the Egyptian army in the coming chapter.

A SINGLE PILLAR OF BOTH

After a cursory read, it’s probably tempting to assume that there were two separate pillars, a pillar made of a cloud, and another pillar made of fire. However, further study reveals it is likely one cloud-like structure with fire sometimes inside of it. Exodus 14:19 describes it as “the cloud” that “it lit up the night.” Exodus 14:24 describes it as “the pillar of fire and of cloud.” Exodus 24:15-18, “Then Moses went up on the mountain, and the cloud covered the mountain. The glory of the LORD dwelt on Mount Sinai, and the cloud covered it six days. And on the seventh day he called to Moses out of the midst of the cloud. Now the appearance of the glory of the LORD was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain in the sight of the people of Israel. Moses entered the cloud and went up on the mountain. And Moses was on the mountain forty days and forty nights.” The final words of Exodus, Exodus 40:38 say: “For the cloud of the LORD was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys.” Later, in

Numbers 14:14, it says, “For you, O LORD, are seen face to face, and your cloud stands over them and you go before them, in a pillar of cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night.” It seems as if the text describes one pillar that looks like a dark cloud by daylight and a glowing fire by night, thus contrasting itself from the sky as an easily followable object. One aspect of travel that is often forgotten in the modern context is the lack of lights at night. The world was a much darker place at night (though the stars were likely far more beautiful and thus provided some light). The pillar of fire in particular would have been a helpful signal at night to follow in an otherwise dark world.

What About Now?

The big, overarching takeaway of this passage is the intentional leadership that the LORD provides for His people coming out of Egypt. He doesn't take them on the most dangerous path (though it was the quickest) because He doesn't want them shaken to the point of fear and doubt. He also doesn't send them out without being equipped for battle. He leads them by tangible signs of cloud and fire by day and night. All throughout their journey, the LORD provides not only what they need, but what is best for them in the moment.

Study Questions

Day One

1. Read Exodus 13:17. Which way did the LORD not lead His people? Why?

2. Read Exodus 13:18. Which alternate path did the LORD choose for His people? What were the people equipped for?

Day Two

1. Read Exodus 13:19. What did Moses take with him?

2. Read Genesis 50:24-26. How is this passage fulfilled in Exodus? What did this indicate about Joseph's faith in the promise of God to His father, grandfather, and great-grandfather?

Day Three

1. Read Exodus 13:20. From where did they travel and where did they arrive?

2. Read Exodus 13:21. How did the LORD lead His people by day? How did the LORD lead His people by night?
-
-

Day Four

1. Read Exodus 13:22. Were the people ever without leadership?
-
-

2. Read Exodus 14:19, 24; 40:38; Num. 14:14. Did the LORD lead His people by two pillars or one?
-
-

Discuss the Text!

Week 31 Discussion: Led by the Spirit

One of the major themes of Exodus 13:17-22 is the intentional leadership of God for His people. Talk as a group about how the Lord leads us today, by the power of His Holy Spirit, with intentionality.

1. Icebreaker: What is the most valuable thing you look for in a leader?
2. How does God practically lead you on a day-to-day basis?
3. Does the Lord ever lead you to do something that He Himself is not able to accomplish?
4. How does God “light your path” as He leads you?
5. What is God currently leading you toward?
6. How do you know if the Lord is leading you to do something or if it’s your flesh?

Takeaways:

1. The LORD led His people in an alternate direction to avoid a powerful Philistine army that would have scared them into retreat.
2. The LORD led His people by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night to light their path.