

God's Frustrating Detours

Exodus 13:17-18

By Phil Kayser at Dominion Covenant Church on 2018-06-24

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Text

Ex. 13:17 Then it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, "Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt." 18 So God led the people around by way of the wilderness of the Red Sea. And the children of Israel went up in orderly ranks out of the land of Egypt.

Introduction

When Kathy and I were in the apartment for six months, we were constantly looking for houses. And it was disappointing in some ways to see house after house that did not meet our criteria for ministry. I think the Simmons can relate. But we would spend time in thanksgiving after each house did not work out thanking God that He was guiding us. Each "No" was a kind of guidance. But there were houses that seemed perfect that we missed because it sold within an hour or two of being on the market. But we praised God that this too was His guidance. In fact, I think part of the reason God had it take six months is that God knew we needed a full six months of recuperation time. It was a blessed time of regrouping. Just ask Kathy; she'll tell you.

Anyway, in all of our driving around in a 45 minute radius, we faced detours from time to time that would slow us down. And when I am going slow, I like to watch the faces of people in other cars to see how they react to the detours. You can tell a lot about a person by how they react to traffic. It used to be that when I was put on a detour that would make us late, I would get very uptight and anxious. I hate being late to anything. But I have gradually come to recognize detours, flat tires, and other slow downs as part of God's divine guidance.

This morning I want to look at how we should respond to God's detours. You all face them. The Simmons have faced detours in looking for a house. The Lanes have faced detour after detour in their restaurant plans. This past week Miriam faced a detour for chemo treatment by getting the flu. The Kirsches have had a major detour with their house. Maybe there are other things that you have been planning for and desiring, and they may be perfectly good things, but the Lord has in one way or another put a wrench into the gears. As I went through name after name in prayer for the people in my church directory, I could see detours all over the place. I can see why

Donna Dykstra really wanted me to preach this presbytery sermon to you all. I wasn't originally planning on doing so, but she talked to some others and convinced me that it wasn't just Texas that needed to hear this message.

So - how does the Lord want you to react to the detours of life? What is He teaching you? I am firmly convinced that it is only as we respond correctly in the fear of the Lord that we will benefit from those detours. Psalm 25:12 says, "Who is the man that fears the LORD? Him shall He teach in the way He chooses." So this morning we will look at the subject, "God's frustrating detours." And hopefully by the end of the sermon you will be committed to praising God for the detours rather than getting frustrated over them.

In this passage we see that God did not lead Israel by the shortest possible route to Palestine. Everyone agrees with that. If He had led them by the shortest possible route, it would probably have been an eleven day trip before they reached their destination. There were three routes that would have been shorter than this one, but God had them travel through a long circuitous road that took them months to reach their destination. We are going to examine why He did that by looking at God's guidance and His purposes in the detours.

I. See those frustrating detours in your lives as God's perfect guidance

Point I says that those frustrating detours are God's perfect guidance. God's guidance can be seen simply and plainly in the phrase in verse 18 "God led the people around." Verses 21-22 show exactly how it was that God led the people. He went before the people with a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. We learn from other passages that when the pillar began to move the people packed up their tents and they began to move. It was a pretty easy form of guidance, wasn't it? Sometimes the pillar would stand still for several days to give them rest, but always, they were to follow behind the pillar. They failed to follow the pillar when it went out over the Red Sea because they didn't recognize that crossing was God's guidance. I am convinced that if they had followed, the Sea would have parted the moment their feet touched the water - just like with the Jordan 40 years later. But God accommodated their weakness of faith and had Moses pre-part the waters. But the point is, God guided them with this cloud. This was God's method of guidance with them.

A. Guidance is always possible

Now, I am here to tell you that determining God's guidance is always possible, even today. God is going to do it differently for us than he did for them. In fact, this was unusual for most of Israel's history. The day they entered into Canaan, God no longer used that method of guidance. He used other methods. But God guides us just as surely today by means of Scripture and by means of His providences. So guidance is possible. And yet we need to qualify that statement. Only believers are led by God.

for believers

Remember that the people of Israel were God's people and that He had just finished redeeming them from Egypt - at least corporately. In chapter 12 they had by faith put the blood of the Passover on their houses. Chapter 15:13 says, "You in your mercy have led forth the people whom You have redeemed; You have guided them in Your strength." His guidance came to a redeemed people "You have led forth the people whom you have redeemed; You have guided them in Your strength."

The Egyptians didn't have that privilege. They couldn't even look to the Providential arrangement of their lives as God's leading since only the believer can say that all things work together for the good of those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. If you are an unbeliever you don't need to worry about God's lessons of detours. You are not in the plans of God's pathway at all until you put your faith and trust in Christ. But all believers can be led by God. If you don't believe that, let me read you Romans 8:15. It says, "As many as are led by the Spirit of God these are the sons of God." That phrase "as many...are" means there is a 100% (as many) = sign (are) between the the two phrases. If A=B then B=A - all sons are led by the Spirit, and if you are not led by the Spirit, you are not a son. So this is a privilege that all true believers have at some point in their lives.

for those who follow

But there is a second qualification for guidance. God's guidance only benefits those who are ruled by God. God led His people and His people followed. There was a spirit of willingness to be led - at least for a while - they followed the cloud. But periodically in the wilderness the people rebelled against God, and God had to chasten them to be in a learning spirit. God exhorts His children in Psalm 32:8-9 to follow rather than to have to be dragged around like a mule. He says,

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will guide you with My eye. Do not be like the horse or like the mule, which have no understanding, which must be harnessed with bit and bridle, else they will not come near you.

Don't make God have to put a bit into your mouth and drag you unwillingly around, but be willing to submit to the training He is putting you through.

for those who are resting in Him

One other qualification that could be added is that God loves it when His children not only submit to His will, but they submit cheerfully and restfully. It's no fun to have a child who obeys, but who stomps her feet and glowers at you when she does so. Her heart is not right. When these people went into the wilderness they had to trust God completely to provide for them, to protect them, and in every way to care for them. They were called by God to rest on Him and realize that His guidance was a good, and perfect and acceptable will of God. Yes they were slowed down, and for those who are goal driven like I am, being slowed down can be very frustrating. I'm a driven person; I want to get there, and I want to get there now. That's why I need to use cruise control when I'm on the freeway. I want to get there.

But God has had to teach me that relationship with Him is more important than service. Does He really need my service? I sometimes act like He does, but the answer really is "No." He allows us to serve for our own good. I have had to learn that how we get there is more important than when we get there or even that we get there. He's going to get us there, but how He gets us there is important too. He has all the time in the world, and He is more interested in our growth in Him than He is in how much we produce. He is more interested in our holiness than in our comfort. And it has taken a while for me to come to the place where I trust that God has His perfect purposes for even the interruptions that I get at work.

Now, one caveat on this promise that God guides His people is that God will not give guidance to those who are double minded - to those who say, "Well, I want to hear where you are leading me before I commit to following."

No. God guides those who gladly rest in His will. The rest He drags - He doesn't guide with the reins. It's no fun to be dragged. So God's guidance is definitely possible to those who are believers, who willingly and restfully are following Him. That's when life begins to get downright exciting.

B. Guidance is progressive

But guidance is not only possible for us, but guidance is progressive. The Israelites didn't always know what was coming ahead of them. In fact, they

probably would not have wanted to know. God didn't lead them any farther than He had already prepared them to be able to handle. If I knew at the age of thirty everything that God was going to put me through, I would not have wanted to enter the pastoral ministry. But step by step God prepared me for what was ahead.

Remember that the pillar of cloud led them only one step at a time, not months and years at a time. And that is true for us as well. Psalm 37:23 says, "The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD" Get that? The steps of a good man are ordered by the Lord. You've got to be stepping in the guidance or already walking in the guidance that God has previously given. Why would God give more guidance for our steps if we haven't followed the light of His flashlight that He has shone on our path previously. You know - God is carrying the flashlight and going down the dark path to show us the way, and we are staying way behind and then complaining that we are in the dark. If the pillar of cloud had left a day or two before and some had refused to follow, they couldn't expect God to come through for them when they ask Him, "Lord, where should I go today?" The answer would be to repent and to catch up. It is as we are walking in obedience to what we know from His Word that He gives further insight and guidance. We do not need to know if we will be living here 20 years from now. In fact, James says that we should say, "If the Lord wills" knowing full well that the Lord may give further direction in the future. So guidance is possible; guidance is progressive.

C. Guidance is sometimes perplexing

But thirdly, guidance is sometimes perplexing. Don't be surprised if God's guidance in your life has sometimes been perplexing. There is nothing wrong with you when you are perplexed. Don't be frustrated when you do not know immediately what God is doing. This teaches us to have faith. I'm sure the Israelites who knew their geography must have wondered why they were heading south, which was away from Palestine, rather than north West. That didn't make sense. They must have thought, "We'll never get to Canaan this way." Many times our perplexity can simply be because of our finite minds, but often it can be because of faulty insight or foolish interpretations of His guidance.

I know one time my mother was disappointed because she was forced to get off of a plane in Buffalo, New York because of icy conditions and find an alternate form of transportation. Just after she had purchased a bus ticket she found out that she had been in too much of a rush to get out, because everybody had been invited back on the plane and it was going to take off. It

would have been easy to think, “Why didn’t I find out before I got my bus ticket?” Anyway, she took the bus the rest of way, which took much longer than the plane ride. But there was no need for frustration over God’s detour. Yes it slowed her down, but she knew that God doesn’t make mistakes when He sends us on detours. When she got to her destination she discovered that the plane that she had been on got iced up wings and had crashed. God gave her a frustrating detour that saved her life. And if you ask her the rest of the story, you will discover that the detour opened my dad and her to get married. They might not have otherwise gotten married. It’s an interesting story. So even on the physical detours that God brings into our lives, we need to be willing to thank Him by faith.

Now, we don’t always discover the reason for God’s detours like my mom did, but we should have a confidence that the Lord knows what He is doing, even when He brought those detours into your life this year that slowed you down so much and frustrated you so much. Think of Joseph being sold into Egypt. Had God not clearly guided Joseph with his dreams and shown Joseph that he was going to be the leader of the family? Yes, he had. But his brothers stripped off the multi-colored coat of leadership. They sold him into Egypt. Then later, Joseph was slandered by Potiphar’s wife and sent to jail. Then later Joseph was forgotten by the Butler. Joseph faced detour after detour after detour. He could have thought, “Satan is alive and well on planet earth.” But He didn’t. Instead he says, “You meant it for evil, but God meant it for good.” Every one of those detours was absolutely essential for God’s beautiful story to work out.

But you could go back further in the Joseph story and see other detours that were used perfectly by God in that story. Think of the people who had spent weeks digging the cistern that Joseph was let down into. They had no doubt dug that to find water. But it ended up being a dry well. Those people probably never discovered why God made them “waste” two weeks of labor in digging a well that ended up being dry. But God was guiding them nonetheless. Without that well, Joseph may have been killed. And you can look at numerous other detours in Joseph’s story that God put together for the good of the kingdom and the glory of God and for Joseph’s good. In your life the detour may be a sickness or a financial setback, or a fall-through on a house, or something else.

The guidance is not always a mystical sense of anything, though God sometimes does that as well. But more often than not, it is simply His amazing orchestration of providence. People often say, “I wish God would guide Me.” And I say, “No, He has been guiding you all along. He controls

every detail of every day. He wants you to have open eyes to see His hand in everything.” So that’s the first point – see those frustrating detours as God’s guidance in your life, not the absence of guidance. You are privileged to be guided by our awesome God. You must see those detours as part of His guidance.

II. Realize that God has a goal in mind for every circumstance that comes into your life. Here Moses spells out why God took them on that circuitous route.

But there is a second thing that God wants us to know in this passage, and that is that God always has a good goal in mind for every circumstance that comes into your life. Here, Moses spells out why God took them on this long, circuitous detour. In verse 17 He says, “Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt.”

A. A negative reason

Here then is part of the answer stated negatively. God did not want His people to abandon their purpose due to fear or discouragement. God knew perfectly well the frailty and feebleness of this people. He knew that they wanted desperately to get to the promised land, but He also knew that they were not ready for that privilege. They needed preparation. Psalm 103:14 says, “For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust.” This detour was perfect for their frailty. If He had put them on one of the other routes, they would have faced war earlier, and they were not prepared for that yet. It would have been too much for them.

God never put the Israelites into a situation which they could not handle, or into a situation where they would be forced to sin. And you know what? God promises the same thing for us. In 1 Corinthians 10:13 Paul says, “No temptation has overtaken you except such as is common to man; but God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will also make the way of escape, that you may be able to bear it.” When you think about that, that is a phenomenal promise. It guarantees that God controls our circumstances, our genetics, our upbringing, and every other detail of life so well, that He always makes it possible to do His will. There is always a way of escape from sin. You just need to have eyes to see it. That verse guarantees that there will never be an ethical dilemma where you are forced to sin either way you choose. And by the way, if that was not the case, then Jesus would have had to have sinned.

Why? Because He was tempted in every way just as you are, yet without sin. If you are faced with ethical dilemmas where either choice constitutes a sin, then Jesus had to face that too, and either choice He made would have involved Him sin. So it really is a very important doctrine - for God's people there never is an ethical dilemma. To me that is encouraging.

That is why Paul exhorted us to not only be thankful in every circumstance (1 Thes. 5:18), but to be thankful for every circumstance that comes into our lives (Eph. 5:20). God tailor makes every detail of our lives. Have you thanked Him that He allowed you to get the flu? No? Why? That is a part of His guidance. There was a good reason for it. Have you thanked him for the lemon car that you purchased two or three years ago? Have you thanked Him for your other detours? They are a gift of guidance from God, and they are thankworthy.

B. Positive reasons

But there were positive reasons for this detour as well. The negative aspect was that without the detour they would have become feeble, fearful and defeated. But the first positive reason was that God was going to use this detour to turn them into a dependent, developed, faith-filled, and disciplined group of believers.

Make us dependent

First of all, God was seeking to make them dependent upon Him. Where did God lead them? If you know the geography of the area, it wasn't a happy place. The text here says, "Through the way of the wilderness of the Red Sea." That area was called in Deuteronomy 32:10 a "waste howling wilderness." It was a terrible way to go, and for that reason it was a much less frequently traveled route. The fact that there were fewer people there served God's negative purpose (because they wouldn't have to face war), but the fact that it was barren, hot and desolate served the positive purpose. God was going to teach Israel to be absolutely dependent upon Him. He brought them to the place where they had to look to God for their daily food and water, their clothing, and for everything.

We are so wealthy in the West that the request, "Give us this day our daily bread" means nothing to many of us. It can and it should, but frequently it doesn't. But it meant a lot to them. This lesson was important so that later they would be dependent upon Him even when everything was great and when they had houses and they had great wealth. We tend to look on dependency as weakness, and certainly dependence upon other humans can

be a weakness. But Scripture says that if we fail to depend upon God we will ironically become weak and powerless and when we have learned to depend upon Him for everything, we ironically find His power flowing through us. It was this dependent people who forty years later were able to conquer the land of Canaan so that no one could stand before them. That is one of the lessons of God's detours in life. To cause us to look to Him for our day by day needs. That's assuming of course that you are responding to these lessons well; otherwise you have to repeat the lesson.

Make our faith to grow

So the first positive purpose was to make us dependent, and the second positive purpose was to cause the muscles of their faith to grow. Now it is to the discredit of the Israelites that the first testing of their faith in chapter 14 led to their murmuring and grumbling. When they saw the Egyptian army gaining on them they said to Moses in verse 12,

Is this not the word that we told you in Egypt, saying, 'Let us alone that we may serve the Egyptians?' For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than that we should die in the wilderness.

But even though that was true initially, God gradually over a period of time strengthened their faith - well, especially the faith of the second generation. You will find yourself in similar situations when Satan's way looks far more attractive to us than the way in which God has placed us. I mean, the way God has called us to sometimes looks just as suicidal as the Israelites going into this desolate area. But God has tailor made the situation to cause your faith to grow. If God had destroyed the Egyptians before He parted the Red Sea, there would have been no testing of faith. The same was true of numerous other challenges that some grumbled over. So it caused their faith to grow.

Sometimes it is to help us see God's grace

Thirdly, it caused them to enter into the experiences of God's grace. At the Red Sea God's grace was seen in His mighty deliverance. And they would never be the same after that. Chapter 14:30-31 says,

So the LORD saved Israel that day out of the hand of the Egyptians and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. Thus Israel saw the great work which the LORD had done in Egypt; so the people feared the LORD, and believed the LORD and His servant Moses.

Sometimes God puts detours into our lives so that we will experience His power because we aren't availing ourselves of His power when the detours aren't there. We don't have to have detours if we are quick to learn God's lessons. There is far less need for detours when you are daily walking in the

Spirit. They could have gone straight to the land of Canaan if they had been walking in the Spirit. But because they had not learned the lesson of detours, He kept detouring them over and over again. Remember that God is more interested in how you get there than when you get there, and the sooner you learn to respond in faith, the better off you will be.

To produce discipline and self-control

The last aspect of God's goal is that God wanted to turn them into a disciplined and self-controlled people. He wanted them to be trained to be able to respond to any emergency that they might face - not in fear, but in a spirit of discipline and self-control. You can think of this wilderness journey as God's boot-camp for Israel. It taught them to be disciplined soldiers.

At Prairie Bible Institute (which I attended in the 70's), becoming disciplined soldiers of Christ was a central theme of their training. This is one of the characteristics of our age that is almost non-existent. Discipline in godliness. Discipline in service. Discipline in devotions. Discipline in evangelism, church attendance, Bible reading, exercise, finance, diet, and every other task that God has given to us. God put the Israelites in the wilderness detour to bring them to the place where they would be a disciplined people. This is one of the reasons that I think the church in America is due for a rude awakening - we have become one of the softest and undisciplined generations of Christians in the history of this nation. But if you keep reading in Exodus you will discover that as a result of this boot-camp, the next generation of Jews actually became one of the most disciplined and faith-driven generations in Israel's history. So don't think that the previous generation has to dictate where you are able to go.

So those are the lessons of God's frustrating detours. And the more times you go through those successfully, the more your faith will grow. In fact, you will get to the place that when you get a flat tire that will make you late to work or to a meeting, you will thank God and tell Him that you are looking forward to the good thing He intends in this detour. And even if you get fired for being late, you will thank God for the detour. You will look with excitement at what God intends to be the next chapter of your life.

So, no matter what your current detour may be, start to look for God's hand and what He is doing in this detour. Perhaps God has a tow truck driver that you will need to witness to. Perhaps that flat tire made you avoid an accident two miles up the road. Perhaps you won't find out, but you will still be able to thank God that He is even working that detail together for your good. But you need to get used to seeing God's hand in every situation and looking for

divine appointments and divine contacts and divine opportunities. They are there for the taking. Many of you have missed the divine opportunities because you have been so focused on yourself and your disappointment that you have grumbled rather than thanking God and asking Him to open your eyes.

Week by week as you come to the Lord's Table, I would urge you to relinquish any things you are frustrated with the Lord about. Thank Him by faith for the detours in your life. Thank Him that He has providentially provided everything you need for those situations through Father's eternal plan, the Son's purchased provisions and the Spirit's power. Those provisions should change those detours from being frustrating detours to being blessed detours. May it be so Lord Jesus. Amen.