

Taking the Long Way

Well it's that time of the year again when lots of people are on the road heading to see family and friends or going to their favourite holiday destination. There are hundreds of thousands of people driving on the road this month but I believe there are only two kinds of people behind the wheel of all those cars. When it comes to taking a trip, the first kind of person is the one who has a clear mission to get from point A to point B, as quickly and efficiently as possible. The destination is the focus and the goal and the sole purpose of that trip. It's not about stopping; it's not about seeing things along the way; you want to get there and get it done. The second type of the person is the one who wants to take their time and enjoy the journey; they want to stop everywhere; they want to see all of the sights; they want to experience everything as they enjoy the trip *and* the destination.

Now what I find fascinating is that more often than not those two people end up marrying each other. Of course it's often assumed that men are the 'let's just get there' destination people and women are the 'let's enjoy the trip' journey people. But there are many women who want to spend as little time in the car as possible. They pack lunch for everyone so they don't need to stop and apart from essential toilet breaks – their mission is to arrive as quickly as possible. I also know some men who would rather explore along the way – even if it means a longer trip. Sadly, in our time-obsessed culture, more often than not, taking the long way is seen as failure or an interruption and the least desirable option.

So that brings us to Exodus chapter 13 today. The Israelites have just been set free from generations of slavery in Egypt and they begin a journey out of oppression and toward their new home - the Promised Land that God said awaits them. But as we read the story about their journey, we discover that they ended up taking the long way. What should have taken them between 8 and 11 days via the direct route, ends up taking them 40 years. Now *that's* taking the long way!

Every time I've heard sermons on this passage the focus is always on the disobedience of the Israelites as being the sole cause of them taking the long way. Of course that is most definitely part of the reason for this delay. The Bible makes that very clear. Had they trusted God and not complained to Moses all the time and allowed him to lead them to the Promised Land, they may well have made it there sooner. But there's always another side to every story, every journey and certainly every narrative in the Bible: and that's God's side. The more we explore the whole Scriptures, the more we see this dual reality playing out of God's sovereignty and our responsibility. Some things clearly seem to happen because of the actions of God's people through their obedience and faith or their disobedience and lack of faith. Other things seem to happen simply because God decrees it. But in reality, most of the time both are true at the same time. We are responsible for our actions and the consequences of those actions, but God is always at work in and through our actions – be they good or bad. God's overall plan continues to play out in the background whilst we stumble around in the foreground.

The reason this 11-day journey ended up taking 40 years, wasn't because they were just taking too many bathroom breaks along the way. It also isn't only because they were a bunch of whingers who lacked the faith to believe God's promises. God was also at work in the midst of their delay. He had a whole agenda playing out behind the scenes and it's possible this group of people needed 40 years for God to form them into the people that He was calling them to be before they reached their new home.

That's why God took them the long way, not only because of their disobedience and lack of faith but because God needed to transform them into the people who belonged in the Promised Land and would fulfil the plan and purposes of God in and through this rather long trip.

I am sure there are things that have happened in your life that took so much longer than you planned or wanted and perhaps in your finite human mind you may have only seen that as a delay, a failure, or an unwelcomed distraction. However, it's entirely possible that God took you the long way for a very important reason and often we only know that reason in retrospect as we look back over our long journey and realise that God had a plan all along.

So as we look again briefly at the Exodus story again today I don't want to brush over the Israelites responsibility for the length of this journey but I do want to remind you that when you take the long way, nothing has been lost and God is at work every step you take. Disappointments, delays and detours are just as important as those times when we have a quick trip direct to our destination. God is at work in every circumstance and at times He will actually push back when we try to escape those times, and avoid those delays because there are things God can only teach us in those scenarios.

In Exodus 13 and 14 we have the well-known story of the Israelites crossing the Red Sea. But instead of looking at just the details of that amazing event, today I want to focus on what led up to that momentous occasion. As we know, the Israelites had been enslaved in Egypt for generations - hundreds of years in fact. All of these people only knew captivity and slavery. Stories of being free and living in a Promised Land were only that – stories, dreams, hopes, longings. They had only known oppression. Then finally, God raises up this man named Moses who confronts Pharaoh, and through God doing miracles through Moses, Pharaoh finally agrees to release the Israelites. He lets them all go free.

They leave Egypt and they head toward the Promised Land - their new home. But as they're heading to the Promised Land, they end up on the shore of the Red Sea, this massive body of water. So they're camped there at the shore of the sea, trying to figure out a plan. While they are camped there getting discouraged and wondering why they ever left Egypt, things get worse! Pharaoh has a change of heart. He regrets the fact that he let them go in the first place. So Pharaoh gathers his troops and heads off in pursuit of the Israelites. If he can't drag them back as slaves then he will just slaughter them all and leave their bodies in the desert.

Now picture this: Moses is stuck at the Red Sea with hundreds of thousands of Israelites who thought they had been liberated forever were being led to the Promised Land. But now one of their scouts would have come back to tell them the Egyptians are coming and so on the surface they are completely hopeless; they are trapped with no likelihood of deliverance. But just when they are out of hope that's exactly when God delivers them. In one of the greatest miracles of all time, God parted the waters of the sea so that His chosen people could walk across on dry ground.

So the Israelites walk across. Given how many there were and all the livestock they would have had, this is no quick dash. It would have taken a long time – long enough for the Egyptians to arrive just as the last of the Israelites make it to the other side. That's when the next miracle happens as God closes the massive gap and the waters come back together and Pharaoh's army is drowned. So that's the context. But I want to rewind a little bit and look at what sets that up.

Exodus 13:17-18 *“When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, “If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt.” So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea ...”*

This is fascinating. The text makes it clear that there is a much easier way to get from Egypt to the Promised Land. There's a much quicker way. But God doesn't lead His people that way. He takes them the long way. Not only does He take them the long way, He takes them the long way that leads them to being trapped between a raging sea and the Egyptian army!

Now God wasn't doing this because He's cruel. God wasn't doing this because He just wanted a good laugh at the expense of His people. God had a plan. God had a purpose all along. God says if He allows them to go the easy way; if He allows them to take the shortest route, then they may be faced with a battle, and they will be afraid. They won't believe and trust that God will fight for them and take care of them. They will never have the confidence that God is with them.

The short route from Egypt to the Promised Land was littered throughout with small Egyptian military outposts. And so what God is saying is if they go the short way, they will come face to face with these Egyptian military outposts. They're going to be afraid; they're not going to be willing to fight; they will surrender and they will be taken back to Egypt as slaves. God knows that will be the outcome so He says He will not take them the quickest way because the quickest way isn't the best way for them in these circumstances. So let's read on:

Exodus 14:1-4 *“Then the Lord said to Moses, “Tell the Israelites to turn back and encamp near Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea. They are to encamp by the sea, directly opposite Baal Zephon. Pharaoh will think, ‘The Israelites are wandering around the land in confusion, hemmed in by the desert.’ And I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will pursue them. But I will gain glory for myself through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the Lord.” So the Israelites did this.”*

So God says He is going to take them the long way. He is going to lead them to the Red Sea. That's going to look like they are trapped there because Pharaoh is hot on their heels. God deliberately led them to a dead end where they could see no possible way out.

Then God says He will do this so that He can display His glory through destroying the attacking army. God declares that He will display His glory to the whole world by miraculously destroying the most powerful military force on the planet at that time. He says, *“Through that they will know forevermore that I am your God, and that I am with you, and that I have your back and that I will always fight for you. And you will then know that you don't need to be afraid. And you never have to return to your chains in Egypt.”*

So when God is taking His people on this journey, He doesn't take them the easy way – the short way. He doesn't take them on the obvious route. He takes them the long way. But we can see that God clearly had a plan. He always has a plan. And He clearly had a purpose the entire time and here is the whole point of this story:

God is always doing more than we can see in the moment.

In your life and my life; in the world; in our Church; in our community and our nation, God is always doing so much more than we can ever see in the moment. If you were to ask the people of God what was happening as they were leaving Egypt and headed to the Promised Land, all they could see was that God was taking them from point A to point B. They could not see beneath the surface where God was doing so much more than just taking them from point A to point B. God was getting ready to display His glory to them so that they would never have to live in fear of their enemies again.

If God didn't do this; if God didn't prove Himself faithful to them; if God had taken them to the Promised Land in a couple of weeks without any opposition, here's what would have happened. The people of God would have arrived in the Promised Land and then for the rest of their lives they would have spent every day with an underlying sense of fear and anxiety, that at any moment, Pharaoh would change His mind and come to get them. But God takes them the long way to display His glory to them so clearly, that they will know they never have to be afraid again. God was doing something that they could not see on the surface.

Now I can guarantee there are going to be times in your life and my life, in the life of our Church, where it feels like God is taking us the long way; where it feels like we are on a detour; where we are scratching our head and thinking, *"I didn't expect it to be like this. This was never the plan."* But the thing that we can have confidence in is that in those moments, God is doing so much more than we can see. It may not feel like it. It may not look like it. It may be hard to believe - but God is always doing far more than we can see and especially during those times when we find ourselves taking the long way when we never planned it.

When we don't know what's going on; when hope feels lost; when plans are delayed; we can trust God. We can trust God that He is good, and that He is always up to something which will ultimately be a blessing for us and produce fruit in God's kingdom. Let's read on:

Exodus 14:10-14 *"As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, 'Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn't we say to you in Egypt, 'Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians'? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!"* Moses answered the people, *"Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. The Egyptians you see today you will never see again. The Lord will fight for you; you need only to be still."*

Can you see what's happening here? Literally hours before this, not years before but hours before this, God miraculously freed these people from slavery. They witnessed all those miraculous plagues roll out one after the other as a display of God's power. That all just happened in front of their eyes, but already, they're doubting. They are frantic. They're saying, God doesn't care about them. He's just going to let them all die in the desert.

Now if I was God, I might have let them all die. But Moses told the people not to be afraid. Just stand still. I love that. Just stand still and watch the Lord rescue you today. The Egyptians you see today will never be seen again. The Lord Himself will fight for you, just stay calm. This is why we can trust God, even when we can't see what He's doing. It's because **God's faithfulness to us is not determined by our faithfulness to Him.** That's such good news.

God has just moved mountains to rescue these people. They should trust God, they should be faithful. But their level of faithfulness on a scale of 1 to 10 is like a minus 7. They are not faithful at all. But even still, we see that God shows up and fights for them. Isn't that the best news you could ever hear? That God's faithfulness to us is not determined by our faithfulness to Him? Because for me, most days I'm more unfaithful than I am faithful. Most days I get more things wrong than I get right. Most days I don't follow Him like I should. I have a long way to go in my relationship with God and still, in spite of that, God is faithful to me and that's good news.

So let's just think about this as a Church for a moment. Like all Church families, there have been many seasons along the way. Our journey has had many twists and turns. There have been wonderful days and really hard days. There have been easy times and some really challenging times. There have been times when it seems like God hasn't been working at all; that God hasn't been moving; that God has not been up to anything. But again, God is always doing so much more than we can see in the moment.

Do we deserve God to still work among us? I don't know. Maybe, maybe not. Do we deserve God's faithfulness as a Church? Probably not. Do we deserve it for God to turn this place around to be a place of hope and healing and a lighthouse to our community? Probably not. But again, the good news is this: God's faithfulness to us is not determined by our faithfulness to Him. God is faithful because God is faithful – it's not His response to our behaviour or obedience, God is faithful because that is part of God's nature, God's essence. It's like saying God is holy. He is not holy because of His actions, He is holy because of His essence, His character and that results in His actions.

Now for you personally, if you're walking through a difficult season at the moment; if you're struggling to see what God is doing or hear what God is saying; if you feel like you lost your way and took a detour in life and are now on a very long road to nowhere, don't give up. Don't think for one moment that your inability to see God at work means God is not at work. We have a whole Bible full of stories which prove that God is always at work in us, around us and for us.

Do you want to know the greatest proof of that? If you ever doubt either of those two things that God's always doing more than we can see, or that His faithfulness to us is not dependent on our faithfulness to Him, if you ever doubt either of those two things, all you need to do is look to the cross of Christ. If you ever begin to struggle; if you ever begin to wrestle with God; if you ever begin to doubt either of those truths; just fix your eyes on the cross - because on the cross, we see the truth and beauty of both of those truths.

Before your great, great, great, great grandparents were even born, God was securing your salvation and your eternity in His glorious presence on the cross of Christ. Before this whole planet was even formed, God decided you would be His son or His daughter and when He knit you together in your mother's womb, He did so with a purpose, with a plan, with a guarantee that what He began, He will complete.

So never forget this: whether you take the short way or the long way, it will always be God's way.