

Following God's Lead: Pillars of Clouds and Fire

Whenever I'm traveling anywhere, the first two things that I want to know are how I will get there and how long the trip will be. When I was first learning to drive, I had an Ohio state map in the car and a US atlas that I could use to plot my course. Then came the advent of MapQuest online, where I could look up directions to exactly where I wanted to go and then print them out for my convenience. Now this took foresight and planning because loading anything on the internet took a long time, and then printing anything out took even longer than that, especially if you were using a color printer. Then, of course, you needed to read the directions carefully ahead of time and make sure that you had a good navigator sitting in the passenger seat who could pay attention to the road so that you didn't miss any turns. Eventually Garmin GPS came out that could be mounted on dashboards and give you your location, read directions aloud, and give you an approximate time of arrival. This technology was great, as long as the software was up to date and you had good satellite signal. Eventually GPS moved to our phones, satellite connection became faster, and programs like google maps and MapQuest stay pretty up-to-date on road closures and accidents, so getting where you need to go on the best route possible is easier than it has ever been. Of course, with every evolution of directional technology, from maps to GPS to phone, there has always been the presence of user error that can send you off course.

There's a classic scene in the popular television show *The Office* where Regional Manager Michael Scott and Assistant to the regional manager Dwight Schrute, who work in the sales department of Dunder-Mifflin Paper Company, are attempting to gain back former clients who had left by personally giving them fruit baskets. The two rent a car and use the GPS system. Everything is going fine until the GPS gives the confusing directions. Michael, who is pretty literal, decides to follow the GPS rather than Dwight's advice and his own common sense. Let's see what happens.

*****Watch Clip**

Transition:

Now that's a pretty extreme example of user error, but I think we can all agree that user error is pretty common when following directions. And unfortunately, user error is common when following God's directions too. Our passage today is all about a journey, the journey of the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt and towards freedom in the Promised Land. And in that journey, God served as their leader and their GPS. But as we will see, God's directions offered several challenges to his followers who were very prone to user error. Before we explore some of those challenges, let's first consider the context of Exodus 13.

Context: God, through Moses, had sent 10 plagues to Egypt in order to prove his power to the Pharaoh and rescue his people. The final plague, the Passover event had just happened, where

God, as a final act of his power over the Egyptians, sent an angel to kill the firstborn of every family in Egypt. Moses had instructed the Israelites to put the blood of a lamb on their doors so that the angel would know that house belonged to God and pass over it. Pharaoh, devastated by that final plague and finally coming to terms with God's power, gave Moses permission to take the Israelites out of Egypt. Now, Moses was leading the people into the desert, and it was here that God guides their path toward Canaan, the Promised Land. And God uses spectacular means to lead the people.

Exodus 13:21-22

²¹ By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. ²² Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

Now, when you and I decide to take a trip or make a journey, we are basically in charge of all of the details. We choose the route, we pick when to stop and for how long, we can decide the comfort level of the car by adjusting temperature, surrounding ourselves with drinks and snacks, and choosing the radio station. For the Israelites, all of these choices were being made for them by God, from the route, to the rest, and even the “snacks” of manna and quail. Even Moses their leader, who was able to talk with God, more or less functioned as the GPS voice. Their role in the journey was simply to follow. And their

journey, as they would come to discover, would be full of danger and challenges.

This morning we are going to take a closer look at three specific challenges that the people of God faced in leaving Egypt and what they each say about the truth of following after God. And through their experiences, we can begin to answer for ourselves, what does it mean to follow God?

Challenge 1: God leads them on the scenic route:

Exodus 13:17: ¹⁷ 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.” ¹⁸ So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt ready for battle.

From the very get-go, God had Moses lead the people on an indirect route that would inevitably be blocked by the Red Sea. The quickest path to Canaan would have gone through the country of the Philistines, which would have meant an inevitable battle for the refugee people of God. The Scripture tells us that the people knew this and went out of Egypt prepared for battle. But God had something different in mind.

What do we learn about God leading?

To the Israelites, avoiding Philistia made no sense; it was the quickest, most direct route, and even though they would have to enter battle, they were prepared to pay that cost. God knew

that they weren't ready for that kind of fight and that their losses would eventually force them to return to Egypt. When God leads, He makes the best decisions on behalf of his people, even if they don't seem to make sense by our standards.

Challenge 2: The People are Pursued

Exodus 14:6-9 ⁵ When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, Pharaoh and his officials changed their minds about them and said, "What have we done? We have let the Israelites go and have lost their services!" ⁶ So he had his chariot made ready and took his army with him. ⁷ He took six hundred of the best chariots, along with all the other chariots of Egypt, with officers over all of them. ⁸ The LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh King of Egypt, so that he pursued the Israelites, who were marching out boldly. ⁹ The Egyptians—all Pharaoh's horses and chariots, horsemen and troops—pursued the Israelites and overtook them as they camped by the sea near Pi Hahiroth, opposite Baal Zephon.

Now Pharaoh had changed his mind over letting the people go many times up until this point. So, it is no surprise that once again he decides to challenge God and chase after the Israelites. He came with the full force of his army and 600 chariots; the Israelites stood absolutely no chance of surviving this assault. And not only had Pharaoh and his council changed their minds, but God once again hardened Pharaoh's heart, ensuring that he would follow through with his pursuit of God's people. But as we will find out in a moment, God had a plan.

What do we learn about God's leading?

Following after God does not mean that everything will become easy, or that bad situations, events or people won't come after us. In fact, I would say that committing to follow after God almost guarantees that *evil* will pursue us. Jesus tells us in John 15:18 ¹⁸ "If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first." Following God is the harder way to go.

Challenge 3: The way seems impossible.

Exodus 14:1-2: *Then the Lord said to Moses, ² "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.*

God had led the people into an impossible situation, or at least a situation that would be impossible for them to escape by their own power. The people were caught between a rock and a hard place, or more specifically, they were caught between a sea and an army of former captors. Neither option appeared particularly promising. They could either face the army that they weren't strong enough to confront while they lived in Egypt, or they could go for a swim. With their backs to the Red Sea, the people cry out to Moses, demanding to know why he had dragged them out to the desert to be killed.

Exodus 14:10-12:

¹⁰ *As Pharaoh approached, the Israelites looked up, and there were the Egyptians, marching after them. They were terrified and cried out to the LORD. ¹¹ 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? ¹² 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!"

The way seemed impossible and in fact, if left to their own devices, would have been impossible to escape and survive; but not to God. God would do not one, but two miracles to prove His power and His love for Israel. God would use the pillar of fire which had so far been a guide for the people, as a shield to confuse and protect them while he, through Moses, made a dry path for them through the middle of the Red Sea. And then after the people had safely made it across, God would use the power of the Sea to crush and destroy the Egyptian army.

What do we learn about God's leading?

Allowing God to lead means we have to give complete control over to him. In order to prove this, God may lead us to a place where we are completely incapable without His power and presence. I want you to let that sink it because as much as we like control, we and God cannot be in control at the same time. In fact, the last decision we get to make is, God, take my life and let it be yours.

***So, why did God choose to lead them in this way, with so many different challenges?**

There are three possible reasons that I can see for this:

- God was testing their faith.

- God was testing their obedience.
- God was testing whether or not they had truly given Him control.

So What: So in light of God's actions and the people's response, what can we learn about what it means for us to follow after God today?

Observations and Questions:

There are several observations that I want to make about their journey and the challenges that they faced in following after God. And there are a few questions I would like us to ask ourselves, in order to see if we understand what it means to follow after God and if we are ready to face what's ahead in doing so.

i. The signs of God leading were very obvious and apparent to the Israelites. They had pillars of fire and cloud that lead from the ground to the sky; even those in the back would know where God wanted them to go. And yet, they still struggled to trust that God was leading.

We don't have the same luxury of obvious and undeniable signs. So what kind of faith does it take for us to follow after God when signs of His leading aren't as apparent?

ii. God spoke his directions and plans directly to Moses, who then communicated those plans to the people. And in spite of

having a direct line of communication with God, the people still complained and rebelled.

What is the role of having the help of spiritually mature Christians in discerning God's will? Do we know people who are more attuned to God's voice through prayer? And what is the role of church leadership in determining God's leading?

iii. God led the Israelites into places that made little sense and situations that seemed impossible.

How do we persevere in following after God when the direction doesn't make sense to us?

iv. The Israelites who followed God out of Egypt would not live to see the Promised Land. Because of their continued disobedience, the people would not cross into Canaan until the very last person who came out of Egypt died. This included Moses. The reward for following God would ultimately go to their children and grandchildren.

How can we follow God when the reward isn't immediate?
What if we never see the fruits of our labor?

So, how do we follow after God?

i. **Firstly**, we have to make the *conscious decision* that we are going to *give up control* to God. We then *commit to remain obedient* to that decision.

ii. Secondly, we *prayerfully* seek God's direction through regular practices of listening and discernment. To listen is to spend time in prayer, alone and together, and allow God to speak.

iii. Thirdly, we need to spend regular time in God's Word, so that we can know His will and character and be more certain of the directions that align with who God is.

iv. Fourthly, we need to *spend time in community* and test what we believe to be God's direction together. We do this by reading Scripture together, praying together, and making decisions through discernment and consensus together.

v. Finally, and most importantly, we need to realize that God's wisdom is not the wisdom of the world and God's ways do not make sense to the ways of the world. But just because it doesn't seem wise or make sense to us does not mean that God is not leading. It just means that we need to give over control to the one whose love for us and wisdom is greater than we can understand.

In the months to come, as we discern how and where God is leading us individually and as a church, let us commit to praying together, to Scripture reading, to community discernment, and let us hold fast to faith that the same God who led the Israelites out of Egypt into the Promised Land is the same God who is leading us today.

Closing Prayer:

⁴ Show me your ways, LORD, teach me your paths. ⁵ Guide me in your truth and teach me, for you are God my Savior, and my hope is in you all day long. ⁶ Remember, LORD, your great mercy and love,