



## TRANSITIONS: TRUSTING GOD IN TIMES OF CHANGE WILDERNESS LEADING

Exodus 13:17-22

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### Introduction – Transitions

This morning we begin a new series on transitions. This is a deeply personal series for me because we as a family, as many of you know, have been in the midst of so much change over the last twelve months. In fact, I think Katie and I have experienced six of the top ten stress factors—and some of them twice. It's been a year of change, a year of amazing transitions. And let us also reflect on the fact that transitions can be wonderful times of blessings and failure as we turn away from Christ in our times of transition.

I also recognize that many of you are going through significant times of transitions in your own life.

Transitions are a part of life. Think about how pervasive transitions are in our lives. There are the normal life change and physical transitions: adolescence, illness or growing old. There are relational transitions: getting married, becoming parents or grandparents or losing a loved one. There are professional transitions: starting a new job, taking on new responsibilities, losing your job. There are intellectual and emotional transitions: significant changes in the way you see the world or feel about the world. And there are spiritual transitions: profound changes in how you relate with God.

So transitions are an all pervasive reality in our lives. But why devote a sermon series to the topic of transitions? Transitions are *critical junctures* in our lives. Transitions are times to *trust Christ* or *turn away* from Christ.

During times of transition, God's people have often gone to the story of the Israelites wilderness wanderings for instruction and assurance. And where I'd like to take us within the Old Testament to find instruction and encouragement for our time of transition is to the great story of transition in the entire Bible, the story of the Israelites in transition from Egypt to the Promised Land—Israel during their wilderness transition.

Today we begin with perhaps the most important question related to transitions: How does God lead us in times of transition?

### **During Times of Transition God's leading is Often Counterintuitive But Always Merciful (13:17-18)**

We find Israelites close on the heels of their exodus from Egypt and now perched, as it were, on the edge of the wilderness. Pharaoh, king of Egypt, had finally decided after a little arm twisting (otherwise know as the ten plagues upon Egypt) that it was time to let the Israelites go.

Truth be told, after the tenth and most deadly plague, he'd had enough and wanted to get rid of them as quick as possible. Exodus 12:31-32: "Up, go out from among my people, both you

and the people of Israel; and go, serve the Lord, as you have said. [Only] take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and *be gone*, and bless me also!"

This paragraph, then, introduces and thus frames Israel's entire wilderness journey. It sets out how the Lord guided the Israelites during their time of wilderness transition; and why he led them the way he did.

<sup>ESV</sup> Exodus 13:17- *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." <sup>18</sup> 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."*

Notice a few things in these two verses.

First, note what God *did not do*. God *did not lead them in the more simple and straightforward path*. God did not lead them "by the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near." This was a well-fortified military road on the direct route from Egypt to Canaan, where they were going. God doesn't take them along that predictable path.

Instead, note what God *did do* (v. 18). God led them in the more circuitous and counterintuitive path. "But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea." Instead of the predictable path, which was the shortest and most direct route, God leads them in basically the opposite direction south, by the "way of the wilderness."

Now this would be as counterintuitive as trying to get from Chicago to Detroit, and instead of taking the Toll Road across the north of the state, you take I-65 South down to Indianapolis for three years, and to Louisville, Kentucky for the next twenty-five years, then meandering around on a few country roads back up to Cincinnati, before heading up I-67 north past Fort Wayne and on up to Detroit. Yet this is the way God led the Israelites.

We all learned the basic principle in geometry that is useful for travel. The shortest distance between two points is a straight line. Well, shortest distance between Egypt and Canaan was the way of the land of the Philistines; that was near. But God doesn't always – or even, often – follow that principle when leading his people. Instead, he'll often take a rather unexpected and counterintuitive path.

What does it mean to say that God's leading is sometimes counterintuitive? When something's counterintuitive it strikes you as going against common sense or common experience. It is counterintuitive to think that you should press the accelerator, rather than the brake, when your car begins skidding on ice. Sometimes God's leading is like that: it seems to go against common sense.

And you can certainly imagine the Israelites questioning God's sense of direction. Did he not know that the most direct, efficient route from Egypt to Canaan is to take the express highway that runs just south of the Mediterranean? Why, then, is he taking us on this horribly circuitous route?

Well, notice what God said (v. 17). They can't handle the predictable path. They might prefer that path, not least because it's more direct and shorter. But the Lord knows they cannot handle it; they're a fragile bunch. Though, as the text says, they go out equipped for battle, if they see war, they're going to wilt.

That's why God does not lead them that way. He wants to keep them from returning to Egypt and get them to Canaan—and *he knows* the best way to get them there, even though it may seem to not make a lot of sense to them.

There are several implications. First, God does not lead us with a tape measure. He does not identify the shortest distance between where you are and where you need to be, and then take you in that way.

The second implication is that there is always a merciful design behind God's counterintuitive leading. And we've got to believe it. So as your transitions seem increasingly counterintuitive, take a moment to pause and remember that God did not flunk geometry. He knows you! He is leading you in a more circuitous path on purpose.

### **During Times of Transition God Remains Faithful to His Promises (13:19)**

This leads to a second important point from this passage about how God leads us in times of transition—God remains faithful to his promises.

One of the difficult things about transitions is the change. And change can often feel like it is not in our favor and therefore God is not being faithful to us.

*<sup>ESV</sup> Exodus 13:19 - 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."*

You read some commentators, and they'll tell you this appears to be an "arbitrary interruption" in the account. What's with the bones?

We need to see this between two other references to bones.

*<sup>ESV</sup> Genesis 50:22 - So Joseph remained in Egypt, he and his father's house. Joseph lived 110 years. 23 And Joseph saw Ephraim's children of the third generation. The children also of Machir the son of Manasseh were counted as Joseph's own. 24 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." 25 Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here." 26 So Joseph died, being 110 years old. They embalmed him, and he was put in a coffin in Egypt.*

*<sup>ESV</sup> Joshua 24:32 - As for the bones of Joseph, which the people of Israel brought up from Egypt, they buried them at Shechem, in the piece of land that Jacob bought from the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for a hundred pieces of money. It became an inheritance of the descendants of Joseph.*

But what was the significance of those bones?

Of course, they are a beautiful reminder of *Joseph's faith* in what God had promised. We see the writer to the Hebrews pick up on this. <sup>ESV</sup> Hebrews 11:22 "By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones."

It is also a testimony to *Moses' faithfulness* to make good on the Israelites pledge to not leave Joseph to rest in peace in Egypt.

But, ultimately the purpose here in the text is show that Joseph's bones were a powerful testimony to *the faithfulness of God* to his promises—"God will *surely* visit you."

Wonder what effects the bones had on the Israelites? No doubt the Israelites would have seen this and been aware of it; and what an encouragement to their faith and a boost to their confidence! For them to see one of their patriarchs, who died nearly a half-a-millennium ago, being carried so to where they're going.

When you're in the wilderness transition, it is good to carry bones with you; good to hold onto tokens of God's faithfulness. Do you have tokens of God's faithfulness that you pull out when you're feeling confused or anxious or unsettled about the change in your life or in your church?

A great wilderness transition in my own life was in high school, when the Lord got a hold of me for the first time, getting converted in the corner booth at McDonald's. The person who led me to the Lord drew the gospel presentation on a coffee-stained napkin that I have had framed since I became a Christian. I took this little napkin and put it in my bible. The early months were some confusing months as I tried to come to terms with this newfound faith and beliefs relationally, mentally, emotionally, spiritually—fluid transitions with lots of times for doubt. This napkin was for me the "bones of Joseph" that reminded me of the love and promises of God that I was a new creation. It was my bones that I carried with me during those early months of wilderness transition.

Do you have bones of Joseph you can carry with you during times of transition? Do you have reminders, symbols, or some tokens of the promises of God? As you reflect on how the Lord has led you faithfully through significant times of transition, find the "bones of Joseph" in it, capture it, memorialize it, write it down so you can go back to it as you go through new and more challenging times of transition.

Implication is, first, you must be a person of the word during times of transition. At critical junctures in life it is critical to be daily reminding yourself of the promises of God.

## **During Times of Transition God Not Only Goes Before You, He Never Leaves You (vv. 20-22)**

During times of transition, not only do we have the assurance of God's promises, we also have the assurance of God's presence. God not only goes before us, he never leaves us.

*<sup>ESV</sup> Exodus 13:20 - And they moved on from Succoth and encamped at Etham, on the edge of the wilderness. <sup>21</sup> 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.*

What precisely was this pillar of cloud by day and pillar of fire by night? What exactly did the Israelites see? We're not entirely sure. But what is clear from the text is that the Lord was *in* the pillar of cloud and fire. And that's the important thing. Just as the Lord earlier appeared to Moses in the burning bush; and just as he will appear later in a thick cloud atop Mount Sinai; so too he appears here, in the sight of all the Israelites, in a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night.

In the closing verse of Ps. 77:20 is a wonderful statement about wilderness: "You led your people like a flock." God shepherded his people in the wilderness; God was a pastor to them;

God led them like a flock. How did he do it? His presence was in the pillar that went before them.

Not only did the Lord plainly manifest his presence to the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings, but he also never left them, as verse 22 says: “*The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.*”

During their wilderness transition not only does he go before you during times of transition, he doesn’t leave you. “Never will I leave you nor forsake you,” says the Lord. He will never leave or forsake you. That’s a promise you can bank on.

When commenting on this passage of Scripture, John Calvin noted that “the flow of God’s grace was continual.” That’s a wonderful way of putting it. During times of transition, the flow of God’s grace is continual in our lives.

So we see three things in this passage: we see God’s merciful *purpose* in leading the Israelites along an unpredictable path; we see the Israelites carrying with them a token of God’s *promises* in the bones of Joseph. And we see the assurance of God’s *presence* in the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night.

## **Conclusion**

Paul said: “whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope” (Rom. 15:4). What instruction and encouragement can we take from God’s word this morning? Life is full of transitions and transitions are crucial and critical times to either trust Christ or times of tragic turning away from Christ.

Two final exhortations in closing—first, as we think about transitions, to embrace Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday, today and forever. He is the only constant in this world of change and fluidity and transition. Embrace him as the one who is the same always. Secondly, as you embrace Jesus Christ, do not lead on your own understanding as Proverbs 3 says—which is all our temptation during times of transition, but instead to trust in the Lord with all your heart and to not lean on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledging him and to bank of the promise as is articulate there that he will in the end make your paths straight.

Amen.