

Led by the Way of the Wilderness

"And it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near; for God said, Lest peradventure the people repent when they see war, and they return to Egypt: but God led the people about, through the way of the wilderness of the Red Sea." – Exodus 13:17, 18

Summary:

God did not lead Israel to Canaan by the shortest road, but by the way best suited to their weakness and his purpose. His guidance often contradicts human preference because we cannot safely choose for ourselves, and the nearest way is not always the best. Delays mature faith, prepares richer blessings, and protects believers from conflicts they are not ready to bear. God's patient care for Israel also teaches ministers and mature Christians to guide new believers gently, giving truth and responsibility according to their growing strength.

Outline:

1. **God chooses the wiser way**
 - Israel was led by a longer, unlikely route rather than the short road through Philistine territory.
2. **Our need of divine guidance**
 - Human judgment is ignorant, selfish, and easily deceived by hopes and fears.
3. **The nearest way is not always best**
 - God's delays ripen his gifts, test faith, and prepare his servants for useful work.
4. **God measures trials to our strength**
 - He spared the newly freed Israelites from warfare they were not yet prepared to face.
5. **New believers must be guided gently**
 - Christ's example calls ministers to teach patiently and avoid premature controversy.

Text

Two routes could have led them to their destination: one was a quick, direct path from northern Egypt to southern Canaan, taking only a few days—similar to Jacob’s sons fetching corn or a swift military raid. The other was a much longer, more indirect route. Interestingly, God chose the latter; instead of guiding them through the Isthmus of Suez, He directed them toward the Red Sea’s border. He deliberately bypassed the usual, seemingly obvious route that people might have taken or recommended, opting instead for the less obvious, unlikely path..

His thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are his ways our ways. The promise is, “I will bring the blind by a way they do not know; I will lead them on paths they have not known.” It is fortunate we are guided by him, as human means are inadequate: man’s ways are not in himself, nor can he direct his steps alone. We often do not know what is best for us; like children left unchecked, we might stumble into trouble. Our ignorance, selfishness, and worldly-mindedness make us unsafe to choose independently.

How were the Jews in the time of Moses? They must have had flesh—and God gave them their hearts’ desire, but sent leanness into their souls. And was it not the same in the days of Samuel? They would have a king—and God gave them a king in his anger, and took him away in his wrath.

How have we fared with ourselves? Haven’t we often been misled by our hopes and fears? Haven’t we longed for what was ultimately harmful? And haven’t we desperately wanted to avoid what now appears as a blessing? If our bones aren’t broken, haven’t we at least been bruised by our own foolishness?

It is recognised that the course chosen was “near.” However, as the guide, God reminds us that the closest option isn’t always the best. For example, Jacob, in seeking the blessing, took the quickest route to deceive his blind father; nonetheless, God’s superior plan would have taken more time but been better overall. Similarly, Joseph’s dreams might have been realised sooner if he had forced his brothers to bow to him immediately. Instead, over twenty years passed—he was sold into slavery in Egypt, imprisoned as a criminal, before being released and ultimately gaining control of the land’s resources as a deliverer.

The truth was clear; however, the appointed time was lengthy. Nonetheless, the Lord's timing is perfect, and the fruit we desire will be far more abundant and healthy when fully ripe than if we try to take it early while still green. Therefore, those who believe do not rush. You might ask, why is my longing unmet? Why am I not permitted to get the peace and prosperity I want?" It's because your principles are to be tested and proven.

"How long have I waited for an answer to prayer, for deliverance from suffering, or a sense of Divine favour!" It's also said that "it is good for a man not only to hope, but to wait quietly for God's salvation" (Lamentations 3:26), and that "blessed are all who wait for him." Nature doesn't harvest immediately after planting. Instead, weeks and months of sometimes gloomy and cold weather prepare for the harvest. Similarly, with grace—be patient as well.

God does everything well. Even if He guides them through the longest route, it is the best choice. His decisions are not random; they are based on His wisdom and compassion. While some reasons are not revealed at first, they are explained later. It was to prevent them from "seeing war," particularly "with the Philistines," which would have happened if they took the shorter path.

Currently, they were unprepared for serious conflict. Oppression had crushed their spirits, making them timid and meek like slaves. They were inexperienced shepherds and brickmakers. It was wise for them to avoid immediate combat against seasoned enemies, hardened by battle and emboldened by past victories.

God understands our fragile nature; he remembers that we are dust. He will not break a bruised reed nor quench a smoking flax. Instead, he gently gathers the lambs with his arm and carries them close to his heart. He provides special encouragement to new believers to motivate them as they grow, until they reach a point where returning feels impossible, regardless of challenges. He shields them from many enemies and protects them from trials.

When will ministers and Christians understand how to truly follow God? Under their guidance, recently freed individuals from Egypt often find themselves in disputes, even with Philistines. They quickly move from the basic lessons of repentance to the complex debates of predestination. Instead of being nurtured

with simple faith, they are given difficult theology and controversies. Consequently, their hope is weakened, and their comfort is lost, simply because they lack confidence and complete assurance in their faith.

But when examining our Lord's conduct, we see that not everything is to be revealed all at once, nor demanded from all people in every situation. Listen to his words: "I have yet many things to say unto you, but ye cannot bear them now" (John 16:12).

Listen to the words of Luke 5:33-38;

"They said unto him, Why do the disciples of John fast often, and make prayers, and likewise the disciples of the Pharisees; but thine eat and drink? And he said unto them, Can ye make the children of the bridechamber fast while the bridegroom is with them? But the days will come when the bridegroom shall be taken away from them, and then shall they fast in those days."

"And he spake also a parable unto them: No man putteth a piece of a new garment upon an old: if otherwise, then both the new maketh a rent, and the piece that was taken out of the new agreeth not with the old. And no man putteth new wine into old bottles, else the new wine will burst the bottles, and be spilled, and the bottles shall perish. But new wine must be put into new bottles, and both are preserved."

This sermon is taken from William Jay's devotional, *Morning and Evening Exercises* (January 12, Morning), first published in 1854.