



10. Pillars of Faith Exodus 13:17-14:5

No way out. My son Michael likes to watch American All-In Wrestling. It's a bit of a put-up but the guys really do genuinely hurt themselves. One of their contests is No Way Out where the ring is covered by a steel cage and the only way a winner can be decided is if the men fight until one of them gains a fall or a submission to win. No way out – trapped and having to fight or surrender. And that was the situation with Israel in this evening's reading. If they went one way they would kop it from the Philistines and surrender or if they went the other way, they would be trapped by the Red Sea and have to surrender to Pharaoh. No way out!

They had a land promised to them and to get there was a few days journey but it was through Philistine country. Philistines were feared warriors. They would not stand a chance. They were not fighting men because the Egyptians made sure of that. They weren't even a nation – just a rag-tag group of Hebrew people of the same lineage who had been denied all those things which would have made them into a strong people – education, training, nationhood, skills, wealth – they needed to be forged into a nation. They were armed, yes, but needed another solution. And here was the considered opinion of God: *"I do not want the people to change their minds and return to Egypt when they see that they are going to have to fight." Instead, he led them in a roundabout way through the desert toward the Red Sea.*

And how He led them was spectacular. Here were a people being led by God and the visible presence of God appeared as a pillar of cloud by day and fire by night – and the people followed it. Actually, they were to have this visible mark of God's presence with them for 40 years in the desert – even through the times of their disobedience!!

But there was a problem – if they weren't going to face the Philistines, they had the barrier of the Red Sea to breach and if they thought about going to Egypt – oh, dear the Egyptian army was out to get them. It was the No Way Out scenario – they looked cornered and at Pharaoh's mercy. But we know the rest of the story don't we? It's a fine follow up to what we learned about Listening to God this morning.

Here, the Israelites had to trust God implicitly because they had nowhere to go. The Lord led them out and they followed. What can we learn about following God from their journey?

◆ God wants to be leader of our lives

The people were given the opportunity and salvation from Egypt and they obeyed. God always saves with a purpose. For Israel it was through being taken on a journey to the promised land, for us it is a lifetime in His presence as we journey and an eternity with Him. God has a purpose for our lives. The end is eternal life *and* a route by which we can get there.

How did they get to Canaan? Did they get given a map and told to find their own way? Did they have to battle their own way? No. He led them out of Egypt. He led according to His ways and wisdom – and all they had to do to remind them of His saving presence was to look at the pillar of cloud or fire and they knew He was there. And it says in 14:4 *The Israelites did as they were told.*

That is one of the most wonderful truths of our faith – God saves for a reason. Whatever the stage we have reached in our walk with God; He has a purpose for us – a direction in which we should walk. He leads, we follow. Salvation isn't just about averting wrath or bringing freedom – it is about a God who desires to lead us to a promised land.

The pillar of cloud and fire – it was there each day through the wilderness – and they followed it – and if they didn't, they were going the wrong way and it would end in grief – and they tried going their own way many times to their loss as we know.

Before we think “silly them” then consider. We have the very presence of God in our own lives – the promised Holy Spirit. Like the pillar of cloud and fire, that’s amazing. But when problems come or just as we live life – how often do we raise our spiritual eyes to check where our fiery pillar is and ask ourselves “what’s God doing here?” He’s there large as life – let’s pray that God will give us the spiritual eyes to see what the Spirit is doing in our lives.

◆ God never leads us by “The Way of the Philistines”

This is an important truth. God does not lead us into disasters. He may lead us into hard wilderness places where we need to discover His grace and goodness and where we need to find ourselves as Israel did.

What if Israel had ignored the pillars and just legged it into Canaan. They would have been routed and sent back to Egypt. Would that have been God’s leading - no, it would have been their fault. That said, after being saved here, they did try their way many times in the wilderness and that resulted in near disaster.

Let’s learn two things here. Firstly we must always seek God’s way – and that involves spending time in God’s presence to understand His way. As we shall see, that isn’t always what we want or expect. We saw that this morning. God does not lead us to our doom, but we can through disobedience completely destroy our own Christian witness and our church fellowship. The NT and history is full of those sort of sorry tales. This just carries from this morning – long serving believers are just as vulnerable or perhaps even more vulnerable to falling – maturity doesn’t protect us from idiocy.

◆ God’s leading often defies common sense

This is soooo true! God led the people into a place where it looked like they were trapped and would be slaughtered next to the Red Sea – but the rest as they say is history. It didn’t make sense – there was no way out – the people had to trust God.

I’ve personally been in that position a few times where there seemed no way out. Sometimes I’ve been sure of God’s presence there – other times I’ve wondered what He’s doing. Yet God is faithful. This enigmatic verse sums it up really:

*Prov 3:5 (TEV) Trust in the LORD with all your heart. Never rely on what you think you know.
6 Remember the LORD in everything you do, and he will show you the right way.*

◆ God’s leading is always perfect

Because the Israelites went the way they did, they had time to develop an army, they became a nation with an organised religion and laws, they saw God’s power displayed in many more ways as well as being more than equipped to eventually face and destroy the Philistines.

We can’t see the whole picture that is our lives as Christians – but God sees it all, He knows, He lives and He will always lead us in the best way for us – if we are ready to follow.

*Prov 3:5 (TEV) Trust in the LORD with all your heart. Never rely on what you think you know.
6 Remember the LORD in everything you do, and he will show you the right way.*

One of the hardest lessons to learn about God is to trust Him implicitly. I tend to find if people want to take God seriously, the gradient of faith gets steeper as God leads us along. And to grow in our faith, we need to go from challenge to challenge up that gradient. And the journey may sometimes be difficult as we walk our pilgrimage through life but if we remember the Lord in everything then He will and does direct our paths -even if it is in quite unexpected ways – it usually is! But His ways are perfect. God often “leads” us in ways that may look humanly illogical **Question: “Why did God take the Israelites to the Promised Land by the route He did?” Answer: “Because God knew more than they did!”** **“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are My ways your ways,” says the LORD. ‘For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so far are My thoughts above your thoughts and My ways above your ways.’”** **Isaiah 55:8, 9. Because God knows more than we do, we can expect that God’s leading in our lives will often not make sense to us at first.** Most will make sense eventually but it may be eternity before we see how it all fitted together!

What about us?

Preached at MRBCfelixstowe 31/08/08

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