

DETOURS, DEAD ENDS, AND EMPTY VESSELS¹

EXODUS 13:17–22; 14:8-12; 15:22-27

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Introduction

I love music. I like to hear it. Sing it. Play it. Music can sooth a broken heart or get the toe to tapping. I remember as a high school student, that I would study while listening to the radio. I don't know how I could study, listening and singing-a-long all at the same time. I didn't consider listening to music as a distraction back then. Now? I want peace and quiet as I study.

Sometimes the melody and words come together for a truly inspiring session of worship. I can't help but stop and worship God when Matt Redman's "10,000 Reasons" comes on. When we are to turn to #10 in the Baptist Hymnal and the organist and pianist begin the first strains of "How Great Thou Art", my worship begins.

Turn in your hymnal to #52. This is a haunting melody with very encouraging words. Look at the first verse with me:

"He leadeth me! O blessed thought! O words with heavenly comfort fraught! What-er I do, wher-er I be, Still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me! He leadeth me, He leadeth me, by His own hand He leadeth me: His faithful foll'wer I would be, For by His hand He leadeth me."²

I would have to say, I have sung this hymn since I was a child. I can sing the melody and the words by heart. And, many times that is all I am doing. I am singing the song, but it may not be a testimony of my life at that time.

There are many hymns written that have the same general idea, God is leading us.

"Guide Me, O Thou Great Jehovah"; "All the way my Savior leads me"; "Savior, Like a Shepherd Lead Us"; "God Will Take Care of You."

While all of these are great hymns, "God Leads His Dear Children Along"³ is one of my favorites:

In shady, green pastures, so rich and so sweet, God leads His dear children along;
Where the water's cool flow bathes the weary one's feet, God leads His dear children along.

Some through the waters, some through the flood,
Some through the fire, but all through the blood;
Some through great sorrow, but God gives a song,
In the night season and all the day long.

Sometimes on the mount where the sun shines so bright, God leads His dear children along;

Sometimes in the valley, in darkest of night, God leads His dear children along.

¹ Sermon by Adrian Rogers

² He Leadeth Me, Baptist Hymnal 1991, Convention Press, Nashville, Tennessee, #52

³ God Leads Us Along, George A. Young

Refrain

Though sorrows befall us and evils oppose, God leads His dear children along;
Through grace we can conquer, defeat all our foes, God leads His dear children along.

Refrain

Away from the mire, and away from the clay, God leads His dear children along;
Away up in glory, eternity's day, God leads His dear children along.

Have you ever listened to someone's advice on a route to take only to find a "detour" that ended up taking twice the time to get to your destination? Have you taken someone's advice on directions only to end up at a "dead end?" Have you ever gone to the faucet expecting to get a drink of water only to find that there is no water? Well I have and in each of these situations, I found myself getting very frustrated.

Have you ever considered your life as a journey with God leading you? Have you ever entertained the idea, "Well, if God is leading us, then He doesn't know how to read a map?" Perhaps you may have considered that God surely knows what He is doing, perhaps it's all my fault and I must be out of His will, because, if God is leading me, how come I keep on ending up on detours and dead ends and desert roads?"

Moses has the answer. We remember that God chose Moses to lead His people. All Moses had to do was to follow the lead of God.

We have the testimony of Moses in our hands, the Bible. The Holy Spirit is our willing guide, so let us dive into "Detours, Dead Ends and Empty Vessels."

God Has A Purpose When He Leads Us Through A Detour

Exodus 13:17 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: 18 But God led the people about, through the way of the wilderness of the Red sea: and the children of Israel went up harnessed out of the land of Egypt.

19 And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him: for he had straitly sworn the children of Israel, saying, God will surely visit you; and ye shall carry up my bones away hence with you.

20 And they took their journey from Succoth, and encamped in Etham, in the edge of the wilderness. 21 And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night: 22 He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people.

Most of us are aware of the preceding events for the Children of Israel. The Children of Israel have been in captivity of the Egyptians for over 400 years. When they had grown large enough, God chose Moses to lead them to the Promised Land. But first, the Egyptians had to be prepared to let their workforce leave. God sent ten plagues and finally Pharaoh commanded that they be set free.

This is where we pick up the story. What a glorious time for Moses and the Children of Israel. They have been freed from their oppressors and with their first step, they are beginning a life they could only

dreamed about. Could you imagine your thoughts as the word spreads to prepare to leave the land of slavery and journey to the Land of Promise.

First of all, it is clear that the LORD [*Yahovah*] is leading them - *21 And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of a cloud, to lead them the way; and by night in a pillar of fire, to give them light; to go by day and night: 22 He took not away the pillar of the cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people.*

Secondly, the LORD did not lead them in the shortest route towards the Promised Land. - *17 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: 18 But God led the people about, through the way of the wilderness of the Red sea: and the children of Israel went up harnessed out of the land of Egypt.*

Notice the words, “*that God led them not through the way of the land of the Philistines...But God led the people about*” That means that God [*elohiym*] did not lead them by a straight line to the land that He had promised. And He tells us why – He knew that the first sign of adversity, they would want to quit and return the short distance to Egypt [less than a 190 miles to the southern border].

Note: Conquering the Land of Promise was to take place, but the Children of Israel were not yet warriors...they were just 2,000,000+ delivered slaves. They had not been trained, tested or experienced in warfare. They were slaves, trying to find their identity. Boot camp was about to begin.

We don't need to understand why things don't seem to work out for you right now. God knows and if we trust and follow him, we might just avoid some Philistines blocking the road ahead.

God Has A Purpose When He Leads Us To A Dead End

Exodus 14: Exodus 14:1 And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, 2 Speak unto the children of Israel, that they turn and encamp before Pihahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, over against Baalzephon: before it shall ye encamp by the sea. 3 For Pharaoh will say of the children of Israel, They are entangled in the land, the wilderness hath shut them in.

8 And the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued after the children of Israel: and the children of Israel went out with an high hand. 9 But the Egyptians pursued after them, all the horses and chariots of Pharaoh, and his horsemen, and his army, and overtook them encamping by the sea, beside Pihahiroth, before Baalzephon. 10 And when Pharaoh drew nigh, the children of Israel lifted up their eyes, and, behold, the Egyptians marched after them; and they were sore afraid: and the children of Israel cried out unto the LORD. 11 And they said unto Moses, Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness? wherefore hast thou dealt thus with us, to carry us forth out of Egypt? 12 Is not this the word that we did tell thee in Egypt, saying, Let us alone, that we may serve the Egyptians? For it had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness.

Yehovah in His omniscience, is leading the Children of Israel in a detour away from the Promised Land in order to make them ready for battles and wars. However, He now informs Moses where He wants them to camp over against the sea. And then He tells Moses why; “Pharaoh is going to have a change of heart and he will find his prey, camped before the Red Sea.”

I have to be honest, if the LORD had told Bob and not Moses what He was going to do, I think I would have scratched my head. Phrases like, “LORD, there will be no way of escape if we camp against the sea when Pharaoh finds us.”

When the Children of Israel see Pharaoh and his army ready to attack and slay them, they have some words for Moses. *“the children of Israel cried out unto the LORD. 11 And they said unto Moses, Because there were no graves in Egypt, hast thou taken us away to die in the wilderness? wherefore hast thou dealt thus with us, to carry us forth out of Egypt? 12 Is not this the word that we did tell thee in Egypt, saying, Let us alone, that we may serve the Egyptians? For it had been better for us to serve the Egyptians, than that we should die in the wilderness.”*

They were boxed in and their first response is “it wasn’t so bad back in Egypt.” They were between Pharaoh and the Red Sea.

It is important to note that they were exactly where the LORD wanted them. He wanted them at the water’s edge. No general’s plan of conquest, no sword, spear, bow or arrow will bring victory in this battle. The lesson this day is that *“Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the LORD of hosts.”* (Zechariah 4:6). God would use the Children of Israel in the conquest of the Promised Land as the implement, but the battle is the LORD’s. They needed to learn this TRUTH NOW.

God had a purpose in bringing them to a “dead end.” He is the same God who heard their prayers and brought them out of bondage and He is the One who is taking them on a detour to the Promised Land. He is the One who will get them out of this time of desperation.

Out of a heart of desperation will come a heart of dependence.

Exodus 14:13 And Moses said unto the people, Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will shew to you to day: for the Egyptians whom ye have seen to day, ye shall see them again no more for ever. 14 The LORD shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace. 15 And the LORD said unto Moses, Wherefore criest thou unto me? speak unto the children of Israel, that they go forward: 16 But lift thou up thy rod, and stretch out thine hand over the sea, and divide it: and the children of Israel shall go on dry ground through the midst of the sea.

The LORD had to lay the foundation of His commitment to them, so they would understand their dependence on Him. Look at what they were told.

Fear not, I know the situation and I am in control - v. 13

Stand still for there is nothing for you to do – v. 13. Psalm 46:10, “Be still, and know that I am God” (KJV).

See the Salvation of the Lord – “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidenc of things not seen.” Hebrews 11:1

The Lord will shew you the Way – take the step of faith...step into the water...go forward. They could not see the way in their natural eyes...they had to see the way through faith.

Of course, we know how the story continues for the Children of Israel...the LORD made a way for them through the Red Sea. Victory was theirs that day.

God has a Purpose When Our Vessels Are Empty

You would think that after such a great victory and miracle, the Children of Israel were ready to follow the LORD without further distraction.

Disappointment comes in many forms. I have always found my disappointments were results of my own expectations that were unfulfilled.

Exodus 15:22 So Moses brought Israel from the Red sea, and they went out into the wilderness of Shur; and they went three days in the wilderness, and found no water.

23 And when they came to Marah, they could not drink of the waters of Marah, for they were bitter: therefore the name of it was called Marah. 24 And the people murmured against Moses, saying, What shall we drink? 25 And he cried unto the LORD; and the LORD shewed him a tree, which when he had cast into the waters, the waters were made sweet: there he made for them a statute and an ordinance, and there he proved them, 26 And said, If thou wilt diligently hearken to the voice of the LORD thy God, and wilt do that which is right in his sight, and wilt give ear to his commandments, and keep all his statutes, I will put none of these diseases upon thee, which I have brought upon the Egyptians: for I am the LORD that healeth thee.

27 And they came to Elim, where were twelve wells of water, and threescore and ten palm trees: and they encamped there by the waters.

The Creator of the Universe has lead His Chosen People through a detour to a dead-end. Now He leads them to a wilderness where their own vessels have become empty of water, with only undrinkable water in sight. Their very lives depend on water...without it, they will die...this is where the LORD has led them.

The Children of Israel are following the LORD. They are in the wilderness with unfit to drink water. They have not done anything wrong. God is not punishing them in this wilderness. The LORD has led them here for a purpose.

They have arrived in the wilderness of testing – “*there he proved them.*”

My last duty station in the Coast Guard was to “prove” the next generation helicopter that would fulfill all that was required by the military specification, agreed upon by the Coast Guard and the manufacturer. I will tell you that in every operation and detail was reviewed and tested before the Coast Guard took delivery. Maximum speed and endurance. Actuators of landing gear, electronics, impact with the ground and water. Every possible item was checked, tested and verified.

The LORD was testing the Children of Israel...how could they fully trust Him without being put through a time of testing? How could they learn to rely on the One who would faithfully lead them for the next 40 years? Only through relying upon the LORD would they build their belief and trust in Him.

Deuteronomy 8:2, restates the LORD’s purpose; “And thou shalt remember all the way which the Lord thy God led thee these forty years in the wilderness, to humble thee, and to prove thee, to know what was in thine heart, whether thou wouldest keep His commandments, or no” (KJV).

You are going to come to detours, and dead ends, and empty vessels if you are following the LORD and walk in the Spirit. Chew on that for just a moment. This is more than “Bad things happen to good people.” This is intentional testing and proving by the LORD. This is not the devil who has caused these

things to happen in the lives of the Children of Israel. The Creator “knows His sheep and His sheep hear His voice.” (John 10:4)

Now that’s quite a revelation, because so many times we say, “Well, what went wrong?” Nothing went wrong; not a thing in the world went wrong. God is on the throne, and He’s leading you. And in this particular instance, when you come to the disappointment of empty vessels, God is giving you a test. And I pray to God that you won’t fail it.

Now, how did Israel do when they came to their test? They failed it, and they failed it miserably.⁴

In just three days, they have come off of the mountain top experience of the parting of the Red Sea, to the valley of despair with undrinkable water. (Rogers, 2013)

You teenagers who are murmuring about your parents, God gave you those parents. People murmuring about their teacher, their pastor, or murmuring about their boss. You see, God gave them Moses, and they murmured against Moses. And so, if God gave them Moses, and they murmured against Moses, what they were really doing was murmuring against God. God leads you into a circumstance. And when God, somehow, in His wisdom, leads you to one of life’s dry holes and to some of life’s bitter waters, and you murmur and you complain, you are really murmuring against God.

Murmuring is no little sin. Murmuring is a great sin.

Conclusion

The LORD is in the lead

Sometimes Detours aren’t because we read the map wrong.

God Has A Purpose When He Leads Us Through A Detour

God knew they were not ready to battle the Philistines...yet.

The Lord leads through Dead Ends

The Children of Israel were not out of God’s will or plan when they came to this dead-end. It is important to note that they were exactly where the LORD wanted them. He wanted them at the water’s edge.

God had a purpose in bringing them to a “dead end.”

If you are following the LORD, know that you will come face to face with situations that you will not seem to find a way out. While you may have panic in your heart, there is no panic in heaven.

The LORD has a purpose when our vessels are empty

The Children of Israel was following the leading of the LORD, not themselves or the devil when they entered the wilderness.

When you come to a time of testing, remember “Your murmurings are not against us, but against the Lord”

It is not important that you know what the LORD knows. We are simply to become obedient, trust in the LORD and follow HIM.

⁴ Adrian Rogers, *Detours, Dead Ends and Dry Holes*, Adrian Rogers @ 2013 Rogers Family Trust. Reproduced by permission from *The Adrian Rogers Sermon Library*, www.adrianrogerslibrary.com.