

**EXODUS 13:17-22**  
**(NT: 1 Cor 10:1-13)**

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**INTRODUCTION**

**God goes before us.** That's what I'd like to consider with you today. We worship the God who goes before us. Last week we said he comes after us. And he does. He pursues us. He seeks us out. He takes the initiative to draw us to himself. And today we'll see that God also goes before us. He leads us. He guides us. He directs our paths.

How does he do this? Let's go to the Bible. One Old Testament scholar, Dale Ralph Davis, divides our passage, Exodus 13:17-22, into three sections and I'd like to follow his outline to answer this question: How does God go before us?<sup>1</sup> As we do that, we'll see what this truth means and why it's such good news for us this Christmas.

**Transition:** So, how does God go before us? We see three ways he does so in our text.

**FIRST: PROVIDENCE**

**State: VV17-18:** When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near...<sup>18</sup> But God led the people around by the way of the wilderness toward the Red Sea...

- Under leadership of Moses – that most unlikely of deliverers – Israelites leave Egypt and begin journey to PL.
  - Amazing moment in their history!
  - 400 years of slavery have come to an end – they are bound for the PL.
- But soon becomes clear: They're taking an unusual route – by unusual, I mean terrible.
  - Imagine we're going to Nashville – most direct route is the interstate, I-40.
  - But Moses takes early exit – they meander their way down a series of back roads.
    - Backseat drivers raise their voices...
      - Do you have that friend or maybe they're a family member.
      - Disagree with google maps and tell you there's a better way to go.
      - Annoyingly, they're often right...
    - That's certainly the case here: the way Moses takes them – what our passage calls **the way of the wilderness** – makes no sense!
- But God knows what he's doing as he explains in **V17**: I'm taking you this way: **Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt.**
  - God knows most direct route will take them through series of heavily guarded Egyptian forts – if make way down interstate, meet armed resistance at every exit!
  - Having just left Egypt, people aren't ready for war:
    - God wants to spare them from it.
    - For reasons of kindness/mercy, takes them much more convoluted way!
- This is a great example of what theologians call providence:

**God is in control of all things – and he directs the normal events of life to bless his people.**

**Illustrate:** Reminds me of a story Corrie ten Boom tells in *The Hiding Place*.

- She was at home in Holland during the German invasion of WW2.
- One night, she tossed restlessly in her bed – while German warplanes growled overhead.
- Hearing her sister downstairs in kitchen, she decided to join her for midnight cup of tea.
  - Somewhere nearby there was powerful explosion; their saucers rattled.
  - Continued to talk until noise of fighter planes died away and night was still again.
- Corrie said goodnight to her sister and fumbled her way through darkness back to room.
  - Reaching out to find her bed, suddenly she felt something sharp – blood trickled down her fingers.
  - A jagged piece of shrapnel – 10 inches long – had blown through her bedroom window, shredding the pillow where she had laid just moments before...
- She ran back downstairs:
  - As her sister bandaged her hand, Corrie exclaimed: *What if I hadn't heard you in the kitchen...*
  - Her sister replied: *There are no ifs in God's world.*
- Corrie ten Boom didn't die that night...
  - God used a sleepless night to save her life.
  - And later he would use her to save hundreds of Jews from the Nazi Holocaust.
- That's providence:

***God is in control of all things – and he directed the normal events of life to bless his people.***

**Apply:** This is deeply encouraging to me:

- Most of us can remember times life went down unexpected/unwanted paths.
  - Health concerns, job issues, loneliness, or family pain.
  - We've all experienced seasons of sadness and frustration.
- Perhaps you find yourself there today?
  - Struggling down **the way of the wilderness...**
  - Unsure what your God is up to in your life.
- Be encouraged by his **providence...**
  - God might be using this sleepless night to save your life.
  - Route might not make sense, but it's directed by his mercy/kindness...
  - And in the end, it will take you where you want to go.
- This perspective helps us:
  - With pain from the past, discontent in present, fear for future.
  - We can trust him with our lives...

**Transition:** How does God go before us? First: Providence. And...

## **SECOND: PROMISES**

**State: V19:** 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."

- What a strange verse!
  - Just wrapping heads/hearts around these unusual travel plans when Moses appears with a box full of bones!
  - What's going on here?!
- Couple hundred years before, Joseph had risen to prominence in Egypt – eventually becoming Prime Minister.

- But though he had position of power/influence – he never forgot where he came from NOR God to whom he belonged.
- And he knew God sworn to deliver Israelites from Egypt – to take them to PL.
  - He believed that promise – he loved that promise.
  - So made his family swear: *This promise means so much to me – and I’m so sure it’s going to happen – when God takes you to PL take me with you!*
  - We read this in **Gen 50:24-25**: 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.”<sup>25</sup> Then Joseph made the sons of Israel swear, saying, “God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here.”
- Well, in time, Joseph did die, and his bones were buried in Egypt – but his tomb became a vivid reminder to people...
  - This land is not our home!
  - God is going to take us to the PL.
- The promises of God went before them – and enabled them to carry on.

**Illustrate:** God makes all kinds of promises in the Bible.

- Before we base lives on them, important to make sure promise applies to us.
- For example:
  - God promised **Abram/Sarah** that they’d have a child after years of infertility...
  - But that doesn’t mean he promises us the same...
    - You might be struggling with infertility...
    - And it’s not because you don’t believe the promises of God.
- It’s pastorally important to be careful with God’s word...

**Apply:** But this promise – the promise Joseph believed – most definitely applies to us...

- Joseph believed the promise – and his bones rose to see the PL...
- And if you believe in Jesus – our Savior who right now is alive...
  - You too will die – and your bones will be buried here in Egypt.
  - But on that great day, like Joseph, your bones will rise to see the PL...
    - You will have a life beyond this one...
    - Hard to imagine anything more encouraging than that...
- God goes before us – and he will make sure this promise comes to pass.

**Transition:** How does God go before us? First: Providence; Second: Promises. And...

### **THIRD: PRESENCE**

**State: VV20-22:** 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.<sup>22</sup> The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from before the people.

- Route was unusual but God’s people were not panicked.
  - Invisible God gave visible sign of his presence with them:
    - Pillars of cloud and fire.
    - To lead them by day and by night.
  - A Yellow Brick Road for them to follow!

- How encouraging that must have been for them:
  - Fears behind/unknowns before...
  - So, God brought his presence to guide the way.
- God did not leave them alone – He assured them that he was with them...

**Illustrate:** In my office I have a collection of items – mementos that remind me of people I love.

- **Picture** of my parents, **ornament** from my sister, **book** from my grandfather – I hold these items, and the distance begins to feel small...
- Do you have similar things, perhaps in your home?
  - Faces on fridge, photos in living room, mementos handed down from those you've loved.
  - There's a strange power in these items.
- But in the end... they're just reminders – the separation is not truly narrowed:
  - My loved ones remain on the other side of an ocean... some of them on the other side of the heavens...
  - I'd never confuse these mementos for presence of these loved ones themselves.
- But God gives us something better – something so much better!
  - Not mere mementos...
  - But a sign of a present reality...

As you see the pillars of cloud/fire...

You can know that I am really with you...

– Not that I **have been** with you in past, not that I **will be** with you in future –  
But that I **AM** with you – in this present moment, even now.

**Apply:** And, of course, during Advent – we celebrate his presence with us...

- Not in a **pillar**, but in a person; Not in a **cloud**, but in Christ; Not in **fire**, but in flesh.
- And, dear ones, he is with us:
  - **Heb 13:5b:** He has said, “I will never leave you nor forsake you.”
  - **He 13:6:** So we can confidently say, “The Lord is my helper; I will not fear...”

*Our God is the God who brings his presence into your present –  
wherever you find yourself this morning.*
- Jesus goes before us even now.

## THE CLOSE

- The challenge of this message is that it requires what we might call **next level faith**...
  - Faith to believe in his **providence** – that he's at work when you don't see how.
  - Faith to believe his **promises** – that all of them will come true.
  - Faith to believe his **presence** – that though you don't see him, he's with you now.
- You might say: “I could sure use a pillar...”
  - I get it...
  - There's something very human about that...
- But remember – He has given us:
  - **His Word:** As a lamp to our feet and a light to our path (**Ps 119:105**).
  - **His Spirit:** Who guides us in the way we should go (**Jn 16:13**).
  - **His Church:** So we can direct one another in all wisdom in this life (**Col 3:16**).
- And these things bolster our **faith**...
 

That through his **providence, promises, and presence**...

**God goes before us** – even now.

- Few truths in my life bring me as much comfort as this...
  - When I'm struggling, when I'm in pain, when I'm lonely, when I don't understand...
  - I say: **God goes before me...**
- As your Senior Pastor, I say the same...
  - Leadership is the art of navigating uncertainty.
    - There's no rule book.
    - And often – normally! – you don't know what to do...
  - But **God goes before us** – even now.
- Will you adopt this biblical mantra with me?
  - In your life:
    - Whatever it is you are going through – as you navigate the pain, uncertainty, or confusion that comes on Wilderness Way...
    - You can say: **God goes before me.**
  - And together – as a church – let's take comfort in fact that **God goes before us.**

## RESOURCES AND ENDNOTES

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### Resources

This list contains some of the resources that were used to prepare this sermon series. Check them out if you want to dig a little deeper.

- Dale Ralph Davis, *The God of the Bush*.
- Dale Ralph Davis, *Pilgrim Provisions*.
- John L. MacKay, *Exodus*.

### Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> See Dale Ralph Davis, *Pilgrim Provisions*, accessed [here](#) 12/5/23.