



Studies in the Book of Exodus

Text

Exodus 13:17-14:14

Topic

The Lord makes His presence known to the Israelites by leading them as a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day

Title

“Hey (Hey), You (You), Go After My Cloud”

I frequently get lost. The embarrassing thing is that I get lost going to places I’ve already been to.

GPS is a big help to me - *except when its not*. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard, “You have arrived at your destination,” when I’m nowhere near it.

Google it, and you can read all manner of hilarious stories involving GPS mistakes. Like the woman in Northbridge, Massachusetts, who drove her car into a sand trap on a golf course by strictly following GPS directions.

In 2013, an Apple Maps GPS error directed people to drive right onto an active runway at a major Alaska airport. Thankfully, no one was hurt.

Some GPS errors have been deadly.

"It's what I'm beginning to call death by GPS," said Death Valley wilderness coordinator Charlie Callagan. "People are renting vehicles with GPS and they have no idea how it works and they are willing to trust the GPS to lead them into the middle of nowhere."

"It's important for people to know that only a tiny portion of Death Valley has cell phone reception," search and rescue coordinator Micah Alley said. "GPS units are not only fallible but send people across the desert where no road exists."

The Israelites who left Egypt in the exodus had a positioning system to lead them through the desert:

Exo 13:21 And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so as to go by day and night.

Exo 13:22 He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day or the pillar of fire by night *from* before the people.

Unlike our modern GPS, God's Pillar System could never be wrong. Where it led, the Israelites were to follow. When it stopped, the Israelites were to camp.

Christians talk a great deal about God "leading" us on our pilgrim journey home. God's leading will be our point of contact with this history.

I'll organize my comments around two points: #1 God Positions You By What We Call His Leading, and #2 God Positions You For What He Calls His Glory.

#1 God Positions You By What We Call His Leading

(13:17-22)

It struck me that God enjoys giving us signs in the heavens. Can you think of some?

- The rainbow in the sky after the flood promised Noah (and us) that God would never destroy the earth by water again (Genesis 9:13).
- During Joshua's conquest of the Promised Land, God caused the sun and the moon to stand still "about a full day" so Israel could defeat her enemies on the field of battle (Joshua 10).
- The New Testament era began with the Star of Bethlehem leading the magi to the King of the Jews.

We have forgotten, or we ignore, what believers in times past called the *Mazzeroth*. It is the Gospel proclaimed by the constellations God has placed in the night sky. It's mentioned in the Book of Job, when God said, "Can you lead the *Mazzeroth* in their season?" (28:12).

Today if you even mention it folks think you're talking about astrology. But godly men like Dr. Henry Morris and Donald Grey Barnhouse pointed to the Gospel in the constellations as the real meaning of the phrase, "the heavens declare the glory of God."

In the future, the Revelation of Jesus Christ lists heavenly sign after heavenly sign as the Great Tribulation progresses on the earth. It will be the fulfillment of the prophecy of Joel that God “WILL SHOW WONDERS IN HEAVEN ABOVE AND SIGNS IN THE EARTH BENEATH: BLOOD AND FIRE AND VAPOR OF SMOKE. THE SUN SHALL BE TURNED INTO DARKNESS, AND THE MOON INTO BLOOD, BEFORE THE COMING OF THE GREAT AND AWESOME DAY OF THE LORD” (Acts 2:19-20).

Last year the internet was buzzing with the observation that for either the first time ever, or for the first time in centuries, constellations and planets were going to line-up just precisely they are portrayed in Revelation chapter twelve. Certain extremists argued that it pointed definitely to the rapture on a certain date in September, which was unfortunate because their critics had grounds to immediately ignore the sign and spent their time discrediting the extremists.

God went to extraordinary lengths to put that sign in the sky. He’s a heavenly sign-maker.

The exodus-ing Israelites experienced an amazing heavenly phenomena. We’ll see it as their story is told.

Exo 13:17 Then it came to pass, when Pharaoh had let the people go, that God did not lead them *by way of the land of the Philistines*, although that *was near*; for God said, "Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt."

There was a more direct route through the desert, but it would take them past Egyptian fortresses along the way. The people would look at those and “see war” by thinking the Egyptians might attack them. God therefore led them by another route.

Make a mental note: God led them with their best interests in mind. I’ll give you a spoiler: It won’t always seem as though God has their best interests in mind.

Nevertheless, God was definitely thinking about His people, for their good. It’s His nature to always do so.

Exo 13:18 So God led the people around *by way of the wilderness of the Red Sea*. And the children of Israel went up in orderly ranks out of the land of Egypt.

Contrary to what you might read or be taught, no one is absolutely certain of the route the Israelites took. There are several biblical possibilities.

Whatever route you suggest must take into account two things we are certain of:

1. The body of water they had to cross was deep enough to make crossing it impossible without miraculous intervention.
2. The water was deep enough to drown the Egyptian army.

You may have heard critics of the miracles of the Bible say that the words translated “Red Sea” are really “Reed Sea,” a different body of water. They say the Reed Sea was shallow enough to cross without divine intervention. That it may have been only a foot deep in places.

To which you've undoubtedly also heard it said that *it's an even greater miracle that Pharaoh's army drowned in twelve inches of water.*

Truth is, if you consult Strong's Concordance, the translation *is* "Reed Sea." But that doesn't resolve it, because there are places in the Bible where those words identify what is definitely today's Red Sea.

Whether the Red Sea, or the Reed Sea, or one of the other biblically possible locations, it was deep... And it was wide.

They "went up in orderly ranks." It was an orderly march - no small task for nearly 6 million people and their much livestock.

The exodus camp would rank as the fifth or sixth largest gathering in human history. I'll let you discover the list on the inter-web. The largest was in 2013 when 30 million Hindu pilgrims gathered for an event that occurs every dozen years.

Exo 13:19 And Moses took the bones of Joseph with him, for he had placed the children of Israel under solemn oath, saying, "God will surely visit you, and you shall carry up my bones from here with you."

Centuries earlier, Joseph requested that his bones be taken from Egypt (Genesis 50:25). In the Book of Acts, Stephen indicated that the remains of other sons of Jacob were taken there also (Acts 7:15–16).

Joseph, you'll recall, had risen to become second in power only to Pharaoh. From his position he was able to save his brothers from famine by having them move to Goshen. But Joseph saw it as a temporary stop on the way to the Promised Land.

He thought little of his position in the world and preferred to look forward to the fulfillment of God's promises.

People of God prefer a barren pilgrimage to the pleasures of sin for a season. Their hearts are set on the city whose builder and maker is God.

It had been centuries since Joseph died, yet his request was still fresh on the minds of the Israelites. We say "Good job" to previous generations for passing on their heritage.

Exo 13:20 So they took their journey from Succoth and camped in Etham at the edge of the wilderness.

Again, we do not know the exact location of these places. What is important is that they were straight out of Egypt, "at the edge of the wilderness."

Exo 13:21 And the LORD went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so as to go by day and night.

Exo 13:22 He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day or the pillar of fire by night *from* before the people.

It was a single "pillar" which was a cloud by day, and fire at night. Don't think of it as a narrow column, however. In Psalm 105:39 we read that God "spread a cloud for covering." That means it was wide enough to cover the entire congregation of 6million.

These were as Matthew Henry puts it, “constant standing miracles.”

In verse nineteen the cloud will be equated with the Angel of the Lord. The pillar was a manifestation of the Angel of the Lord - an Old Testament appearance of Jesus.

The pillar guided them and, when they get to Mount Sinai, God will speak to them from it. Thus were they led by the Lord.

We, too, are led by the Lord. We read in Romans 8:14, “For as many as are **led by the Spirit of God**, these are sons of God.” If you are a believer in Jesus Christ, the Spirit of God Who lives in you, leads you.

He’s not doing it as a pillar, so how is the Spirit leading us?

First, we have direct communication with the Holy Spirit. In Second Corinthians 13:14, the apostle Paul uses the phrase, “the communion of the Holy Spirit.” In Philippians 2:1 he calls it “the fellowship of the Spirit.”

The Holy Spirit, Who lives in us, **communes** with us; we have **fellowship** with Him.

It sounds like I’m saying that God talks to us. Vice-president Mike Pence got criticized for saying God speaks to him. One washed-up celebrity said people who believe God speaks to them are suffering from mental illness.

Except for Oprah, who denied she’s running for president in 2020 by saying, “If God actually wanted me to run, wouldn't God kinda tell me?”

Whether you call it a still small voice, or a prompting, or an inner witness, or a check in your spirit, or a quickening - as a believer you grow in relationship with the indwelling Holy Spirit and begin to commune with Him, and to have fellowship with Him.

Second, Jesus said that the Holy Spirit would bring His Words to remembrance, and thereby teach us:

Joh 14:26 But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things that I said to you.

An incredible amount of personal leading already is written for us in God's Word, the Bible. The Holy Spirit teaches us God's Word, then brings it to remembrance, then empowers us to obey it.

To be complete, we should mention a few other ways the Bible says God can lead us: visions and dreams and prophecies. Don't freak-out; all these are exemplified for us in the New Testament by believers in the church age:

- The Lord came to Peter in a vision to tell him to go to the house of Cornelius and share the Gospel.
- The Lord came to Paul in a dream to encourage him in his ministry to the city of Corinth.
- It was probably a prophecy that sent Paul and Barnabas out on the first missions trip.

Maybe it's rare, but God never quit communicating in these ways. The only caution, and it's a good one, would be that we must test visions and dreams and prophecies by the sure Word of God.

Bottom line: God positions you, getting you where He wants you, in order to continue the work He began in you at your conversion. You are probably right where God wants you.

#2 God Positions You For What He Calls His Glory

(14:1-14)

I gave you a spoiler earlier when I said that God's leading won't always seem as though He has your best interests in mind. I get that from the position His pillar put the Israelites in.

Exo 14:1 Now the LORD spoke to Moses, saying:

Exo 14:2 "Speak to the children of Israel, that they turn and camp before Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, opposite Baal Zephon; you shall camp before it by the sea.

They were to camp between two mountains with the sea behind them. They would thereby be boxed-in.

Exo 14:3 For Pharaoh will say of the children of Israel, 'They *are* bewildered by the land; the wilderness has closed them in.'

Pharaoh would receive intel about the Israelite movements. Their campsite was so absurd that not for a moment would he think that their God was still protecting them. They seemed lost and wandering aimlessly. They were in the perfect spot to be attacked.

Exo 14:4 Then I will harden Pharaoh's heart, so that he will pursue them; and I will gain honor over Pharaoh and over all his army, that the Egyptians may know that I *am* the LORD." And they did so.

We've spent a ton of time in previous studies discussing the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. Suffice it to say that it means that God was doing things that revealed Pharaoh's own hard heart. God would make a move, offering Pharaoh a genuine opportunity to obey Him, but each time it only strengthened Pharaoh's resolve to disobey.

"Let My people go," God said to Pharaoh. When Pharaoh refused, God sent a series of nine signs to plague Egypt. After each one Pharaoh had opportunity to obey, but instead he hardened his heart. Finally the tenth sign, the death of all firstborn among man and beast, overcame Pharaoh's refusal, and he let Israel go.

Pharaoh could have cut his losses right there. But his heart was hardened even more, and he was bent on punishing the Israelites. It would seem as though the Spirit of God had now ceased to strive with Pharaoh.

God didn't force Pharaoh to follow Israel, to attack them. It was his free-will decision.

God's response would bring Him "honor," or as it could be translated, "glory."

Exo 14:5 Now it was told the king of Egypt that the people had fled, and the heart of Pharaoh and his servants was turned against the people; and they said, "Why have we done this, that we have let Israel go from serving us?"

Exo 14:6 So he made ready his chariot and took his people with him.

They “let Israel go” because of the ten plagues. But now that the immediate crisis was over, they regretted the loss of their workforce, and probably wanted some revenge to boot.

Nonbelievers often cry-out to God for help in their catastrophe, only to renege on their promises to believe and follow Him if He helps them.

Exo 14:7 Also, he took six hundred choice chariots, and all the chariots of Egypt with captains over every one of them.

A difference is made between “the choice chariots” and “the chariots of Egypt.” The first were the king’s guard, amounting to six hundred, and they are called “choice,” literally, “third men”; three men being allotted to each chariot, the charioteer and two warriors.

As to “the chariots of Egypt,” they contained only two persons, one for driving and the other for fighting; sometimes only one person was in the chariot, the driver lashed the reins round his body and fought.

A chariot was the ancient equivalent of a tank.

Exo 14:8 And the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued the children of Israel; and the children of Israel went out with boldness.

They had left with “boldness.” But when God led them into what looked like a trap, their boldness gave way to fear.

Exo 14:9 So the Egyptians pursued them, all the horses *and* chariots of Pharaoh, his horsemen and his army, and overtook them camping by the sea beside Pi Hahiroth, before Baal Zephon.
Exo 14:10 And when Pharaoh drew near, the children of Israel lifted their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians marched after them. So they were very afraid, and the children of Israel cried out to the LORD.

Humanly speaking, there was no way out. It looked like a complete mistake. Remember, too, that they had no military training and no weapons. The Israelites were like lambs led to slaughter.

Exo 14:11 Then they said to Moses, "Because *there were* no graves in Egypt, have you taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you so dealt with us, to bring us up out of Egypt?"

A week, maybe two, had gone by. From elation and boldness they sunk into despair and fear. Even after everything they had witnessed God do, both in Egypt and lately, their faith was gone.

Exo 14:12 *Is* this not the word that we told you in Egypt, saying, 'Let us alone that we may serve the Egyptians'? For *it would have been* better for us to serve the Egyptians than that we should die in the wilderness."

The Israelites knew the location of the Promised Land. They knew that at first they had purposely been led to take a longer route. They knew that the way to the Promised Land was either across uncrossable water, or through the Egyptian army.

They thought they were about to die. Slavery looked pretty good compared to certain death.

Exo 14:13 And Moses said to the people, "Do not be afraid. Stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD, which He will accomplish for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall see again no more forever.

Exo 14:14 The LORD will fight for you, and you shall hold your peace."

Moses was like the watchmen who cries out, "All's well!" In fact it was better than well. Egypt would be removed as a threat for decades to come, and God would strike fear into all the surrounding peoples and nations by the glory He would bring to Himself defeating Pharaoh so completely.

Let's summarize what we know. God's chosen people found themselves in the worst possible position. They were caught in a trap that seemed to seal their imminent destruction. They had no way of escape. There was absolutely nothing they could do to help themselves. Any hope of reaching the Promised Land was gone. They had sunk to complaining against God.

It screamed "death by GPS."

And yet we are confident that God had divinely positioned them.

I must respectfully conclude from all this that a Christian may - in fact, **will** - find himself or herself in the worst of positions. You will see it as entrapment - thinking that God has Himself led you into the trap. All of His promises to you may seem empty. Hope is lost. There is nothing you can do. You are given to openly complaining against God.

Job was positioned. There was no way out of his suffering; nothing Job could do except scrape his boils. All God's promises seemed empty; all hope was gone. Job complained against God.

- The Israelites were in their precarious position for a day or so. Then they saw “the salvation of the Lord” as the pursuing Egyptian army was drowned.
- Job was positioned on the ash heap for maybe six months. Then he saw “the salvation of the Lord” as he returned to health and as his earthly fortunes were totally reversed.

The same will be true of you, Christian; *except I have one significant qualifier*. I can't tell you how long you'll be boxed-in by the advancing enemy.

I can't tell you if your 'position' will last for hours... Or for days... Or for weeks... Or for months... Or for years... Or for decades...
Or for the rest of your life.

I wouldn't have said that when I was younger. I couldn't comprehend a believer enduring years or a lifetime in such a position. But as I've suffered over the years, and especially as I've been privileged to share in the sufferings of others, I've come to understand that some believers who faithfully “stand still” do not “see the salvation of the Lord” **until *after this life is over***.

But see it we shall, when we are received to our reward in Heaven.

With Job we can cry, “I know that my Redeemer lives” (19:25). From Job we can learn, “He knows the way that I take; When He has tested me, I shall come forth as gold” (23:10).

Mean time, “stand still,” but look up and **keep your head in the clouds:**

Rev 1:7 Behold, He is coming with clouds, and every eye will see Him, even they who pierced Him. And all the tribes of the earth will mourn because of Him. Even so, Amen.