

Sermon outline and notes prepared by:

Dr. Stephen Felker, Pastor

[Swift Creek Baptist Church.com](http://SwiftCreekBaptistChurch.com), 18510 Branders Bridge Rd., Colonial Heights, VA 23834

9/9/07

Exodus 13:17-14:4 “How & Why God Leads Us”

Intro. Life is a series of decisions. Should we go this way or that way? Should we do this or that? A wrong choice can have serious consequences. In fact, the Bible warns in Prov. 14:12, “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.” There are so many forces at work that can lead us down the wrong path. Satan is constantly tempting us to go the wrong way, or do the wrong thing. Our own sin nature is inclined toward sin. The world pressures us to follow *its* ways, rather than the ways of the Lord.

It was reported by the Associated Press in July, 2005, that near the town of Gavas, in eastern Turkey, one sheep among a large flock walked to the edge of a cliff and jumped to its death. A second sheep quickly imitated the first, also leaping off the cliff to its death. Then a third sheep followed. Then a fourth. Then a fifth. The AP reported that “stunned Turkish shepherds, who had left the herd to graze while they had breakfast, watched [from a distance] as nearly 1,500 others followed, each leaping off the same cliff.” When it was all over, 450 sheep had died, and 1,050 survived, but only because those sheep that jumped later were saved as the pile of sheep got higher and the fall became more cushioned. Imagine the peer pressure that last sheep must have felt. Surely 1,499 sheep can’t be wrong, can they?¹ Actually, it all started when just one sheep led the entire flock astray.

Even so, people can lead you down the wrong path. Your own human reasoning can be quite flawed, making it hard to make the right decisions. But I have good news. God is willing and able to lead us in the right way we should go. In fact, the main thrust of this text is the fact that God led His people Israel. This is specifically stated in v.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.” When the cloud moved, the camp moved; when the cloud waited, the camp waited (Ex. 40:34-38). Israel did not determine their own way. They didn’t take a vote as to which way to go. They followed as the Lord led. He knows what is best, and you could not ask for a better guide through life. In fact, the beloved 23rd Psalm says, “He leads me in the paths of righteousness for His name’s sake” (v.3). Psa. 37:23 says, “The steps of a good man are ordered by the LORD....” God does not leave us on our own. We don’t have to figure things out with our own poor reasoning. That is why Prov. 3:5-6 says, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths.”

In our story today Israel has just been redeemed from Egyptian bondage. Now they are leaving Egypt, on their way to the Promised Land. But before they reach their destination, God will lead them through many trials and experiences to prepare them for victory. Even so, God saves us, sets us free, and then leads us through the varied experiences of life, a day at a time, so that we might get to know Him better and claim by faith all that He wants us to have.

This morning I want to challenge you to let the Lord lead you in life. And I want to glean from this Scripture the different ways God leads us today. First of all:

¹ From David Kirkwood in “There’s a Sheep Born Every Second,” via www.bereanpublishers.com in Pulpit Helps, April 2006, page 28.

I. DON'T EXPECT GOD TO LEAD YOU BY THE SHORTEST ROUTE

The story takes an unexpected twist when God leads the Israelites on a path that they may not have expected. In v.17 we read, "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..." Remember, God promised to give them the land of Canaan. Well, the shortest route from Egypt to Canaan would have been by the Gaza road to the land of the Philistines. I remember when Everett & I traveled from Israel to Egypt back in 1997, we traveled near the coast. That was the shortest & best route.

So why didn't God lead them that way? He gives the reason in v.17, "...for God said, 'Lest perhaps the people change their minds when they see war, and return to Egypt.'" God is in no hurry. He knew the people were not yet prepared for war. They had been slave workers for quite some time, with no military experience. They needed time to mature and develop. The Philistines were probably the toughest warriors in the land at that time. No doubt they would have resisted the approach of the Israelites. Of course, the Philistines were no match for God, but the Israelites still had not learned that lesson well enough. If they faced the Philistine giants first, they would not have enough faith to move ahead. Instead, they would quickly return to Egypt, to a more familiar environment. God had other reasons. He wanted them to travel to Mt. Sinai to receive His law. There they would also be organized into a nation. Finally, it was in order that they might be humbled, tried, and proved (Deut. 8:2, 3), and the sufficiency of their God in every emergency might be fully demonstrated.

For these reasons, we read in v.18, "So God led the people around by way of the wilderness of the Red Sea." The land of Goshen was near the mouth of the Nile River. When they gathered at Succoth, they were only about 100 miles from the land of Canaan. But instead of traveling northwest toward Canaan, God directed them to turn southwest toward the Red Sea. God knew what He was doing when He chose the longer way.

Even so, God often does not lead us along the shortest route. If you permit the Lord to direct your steps, expect to be led occasionally on paths that may seem unnecessarily long and indirect. Remind yourself that God knows what He's doing, He isn't in a hurry. He may close some doors and suddenly open others (Acts 16:6-10; 2 Cor. 2:12-13). One reason is given in our story: He will not lead you to do something you are not yet ready for. He will lead you based on your maturity & readiness. So if God does not lead you along the shortest path to your goal, don't complain or resist. Follow Him willingly and trust Him to lead you safely around unseen obstacles. He knows the safest and best route.

When God called me to preach at the age of 18, He did not lead me to become a pastor immediately. He clearly led me to go to Criswell College in Dallas, TX to prepare for the ministry. When I finished college & seminary, He did not lead me to a large church, but to a small church plant in Cedartown, GA. I gained 5 years of experience there, including some very difficult experiences that matured me, and helped me grow spiritually. Then through a series of events God clearly led me to this church 20 years ago.

Our plans for a building program have certainly not been fulfilled in the shortest possible way. We can point fingers to different individuals and circumstances as to why it has taken so long, but through it all, perhaps we are on God's timetable.

We live in a fast-paced society. Everybody's in a hurry. We want everything now, and we don't want to wait for anything. But the Bible often says, "Wait upon the Lord." When God leads us along the long path, let's be patient, for God has a purpose. Young people, don't be in too big

of a hurry to grow up & experience the privileges of adult life. After all, you first need to be prepared to experience the responsibilities of adult life.

Another truth I see here is this:

II. GOD LEADS US IN AN ORDERLY MANNER

God had done a mighty work. Pharaoh was left with little choice but to let God's people go. Now the time of their departure had arrived. So we read in the last of v.18, "And the children of Israel went up in orderly ranks² out of the land of Egypt." The Hebrew word literally refers to a formation or column of 5 side by side. I do not believe they necessarily departed by a military formation of exactly 5 people at a time, but they did depart in an orderly fashion. God did not lead them to flee like a disorderly mob running from the fictional monster that ate New York. Instead, they went up "in orderly ranks."

I believe there is a principle here for us to follow today. The apostle Paul said in 1 Cor. 14:33, "For God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all the churches of the saints." In the Corinthian church, different people would get up & speak during the worship services, each claiming to be led by the Spirit, but no one was in charge, and there was mass confusion. Some would speak in tongues, even without an interpreter. Some may not have even waited their turn, and 2 or 3 people were speaking at the same time! Paul said that was not right. God is not in that. He leads His people in an orderly way. He has established that churches be organized under elected or appointed leaders (Tit. 1:5). We have adopted a Constitution & Bylaws to provide an orderly process of making decisions, and carrying out the work of the Lord. We follow *Robert Rules of Order* in conducting our business meetings. If a church business meeting deteriorates into mass confusion, I can assure you that God is not in that! So let's follow the Lord in an orderly manner, just as the Israelites were led to follow the Lord in an orderly manner. Submit to the leadership structure that God has provided in your life. He will often lead you that way.

Another truth I see about how God leads us is this:

III. GOD LEADS US BY HIS WORD

We see an example of this in chapter 14, v.2, "Speak to the children of Israel, that they turn and camp before Pi Hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, opposite Baal Zephon;³ you shall camp before it by the sea." God did not just lead them by the pillar of cloud. Here is an example where He led them by His Word, spoken through His prophet Moses. This is one of the primary ways He leads us today.

We have another example back in chapter 13, v.19. There we read, "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.'" Ultimately, both the actions of Joseph & Moses were led by the promise of God that He had spoken. Joseph believed God's promise that He would deliver His people from Egypt some day. Joseph did not want his bones left behind in Egypt, so he directed that they be carried with the children of Israel on their journey to the Promised Land.

² Some translations have "armed" or "in battle array." However, based on the context, the correct meaning is given by the NKJV.

³ Scholars have not been able to agree on the location of these ancient communities.

We read in v.21 that God led Israel by a pillar of fire, and that illustrates the fact that God leads us by His Word. They could travel even at night, for God would enlighten the way they should go. Even so, Psa. 119:105 says, “Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.” If we read God’s Word, and learn its truths, we will be led in the right way by the light of God’s Word. Yet according to a recent (2005) Barna Research Group national survey, just one out of every six adults (16%) claim they make their moral choices based on the content of the Bible.⁴ I hope you are one of the 1 in 6!

It’s interesting to note what chapter 14, v.20 says, “So it came between the camp of the Egyptians and the camp of Israel. Thus it was a cloud and darkness to the one, and it gave light by night to the other, so that the one did not come near the other all that night.” The same pillar of fire that gave light to the Jews was a cloud of darkness to the Egyptians. Even so, God’s people are enlightened by the Word (Eph. 1:15-23), but the unsaved can’t understand God’s truth (Matt. 11:25; 1 Cor. 2:11-16).

Just as God led Israel by His Word, even so God leads us by His Word. My role as a pastor is to lead the church, not based on my thoughts & ideas, but by preaching & teaching the Word of God. How you live your life each day should be guided by God’s Word.

This means that you need to read God’s Word. You need to come to Sunday School & church & hear the Word of God taught & preached. How can God lead you by His Word if you do not read it, or listen to it?

God not only leads us by His Word, but also:

IV. GOD LEADS US BY HIS SPIRIT

This truth is not specifically stated in our text, but it is stated in Romans 8:14, “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.” All true believers are indwelt by the Spirit, and we are led by the Spirit. One of the primary ways the Spirit leads us is by helping us to understand God’s Word, and then He leads us by the Word. Jesus said in John 16:13, “when He, the Spirit of truth, has come, He will guide you into all truth....”

Even though this truth is not stated in our text, it is illustrated in our text. Look again at v.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.” Here in the Exodus story we see the Trinity manifested. The covenant-keeping God who spoke to Moses reminds us of God the Father. The shed blood of the lamb reminds us of God the Son. And the pillar of cloud & fire reminds us of God the Spirit. That’s because God manifested His presence by the cloud & the fire, and led them by the cloud & the fire. Even so, God promises that He will be with us by His Spirit both night and day, and His Spirit will lead us. As they traveled through the wilderness, they would certainly need the leading of the cloud & fire. The pathless wilderness had no roads or road signs to guide them. Not only did God lead them by the cloud, but at least 4 verses indicate that the Lord spoke through the cloud (33:9; Num. 11:25; 12:5; Psa. 99:7). In like manner the Holy Spirit is today the Spokesman for the Holy Trinity. Several times in Rev. 2-3 we read, “He that has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says unto the churches.”

Now look at v.22, “He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day or the pillar of fire by night from before the people” (cf. Neh. 9:19). Despite all Israel’s failures—their murmurings, their unbelief, their rebellion—God never withdrew the Cloudy Pillar! Likewise, God never

⁴ <http://www.barna.org/FlexPage.aspx?Page=BarnaUpdateNarrow&BarnaUpdateID=194>

takes His Spirit away from us. Jesus said in John 14:16, “And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever.”

By the way, the cloud served other gracious purposes. For example, it protected the people from the burning rays of the sun.⁵ That cloud must have been a welcome sight to those ex-slaves, accustomed to labor in the fields under the sun of Egypt. They would otherwise have seen few clouds in the arid wilderness. The fire at night would help scare away nightly predators.⁶ Little children would be comforted by God’s night light.

So we have seen that God manifest His presence, & led His people, by the pillar of fire & by the cloud. It represented God the Spirit, and illustrated the light of God’s Word. Now I want to take a moment to explain the pillar of fire & the cloud in more detail. We are not to regard the phenomenon as consisting of two different pillars that appeared alternately, one of cloud, and the other of fire. There was but one pillar (14:24); for even when shining in the dark, it is still called the pillar of cloud (14:19), or the cloud (Num. 9:21). Consequently we have to imagine the cloud as the covering of the fire, so that by day what was primarily seen was the cloud, for the fire was not very visible compared to the light of the sun. However, by night they primarily saw the fire. When this cloud went before the army of Israel, it assumed the form of a column or a pillar; so that by day it resembled a dark column of smoke rising up towards heaven, and by night a column of fire. Others believe that its upper portion rose up to heaven in the form of a column; its lower being spread out like a cloud over Israel’s camp. In fact, Psa. 105:39 specifically says, “He spread a cloud for a covering....” The fire in the pillar of cloud was the same kind of fire in which the Lord revealed Himself to Moses out of the bush.

Again, the main point I want you to see is the fact the God leads us by His Spirit, as illustrated by the way God led Israel by the pillar of fire and the cloud. Listen to the Spirit’s still small voice as He speaks through God’s Word, as He convicts us as we start doing something wrong, and as He directs us in other ways. Sometimes He leads by giving you a subconscious inclination. Be sensitive to the Spirit’s leading.

Finally:

V. GOD LEADS US TO ACCOMPLISH HIS PURPOSES

God is not finished with the Egyptians yet. He devises what by common military standards is a foolish strategy. Beginning in v.2 we see that God led His people to turn toward the wilderness, & actually camp with their backs to the sea. Humanly speaking, this was not a good move. If Pharaoh changed his mind and came after them, they would have no human way of escape. They would have the Red Sea on one side, and the plain of the wilderness on the other side. They would be easy prey to the fast-moving chariots of Pharaoh. This seemed like a poor choice militarily.

Even so, the ways of the Lord are not understood by men. Some even consider His ways to be foolish. But God led Israel to that spot to accomplish His purpose, which was stated in vv.3-4, “For Pharaoh will say of the children of Israel, ‘They are bewildered by the land; the wilderness has closed them in.’ Then I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, so that he will pursue them;

⁵ This will be repeated in the Millennial Kingdom. Isa. 4:5-6 says, “then the LORD will create above every dwelling place of Mount Zion, and above her assemblies, a cloud and smoke by day and the shining of a flaming fire by night. For over all the glory there will be a covering. And there will be a tabernacle for shade in the daytime from the heat....” Psa. 121.:6 says, “The sun shall not strike you by day, nor the moon by night.”

⁶ Psa. 91:5-6 says, “He shall cover you with His feathers, ... You shall not be afraid of the terror by night....”

and I will gain honor over Pharaoh and over all his army, that the Egyptians may know that I am the LORD.” Even the Israelites considered the ways of the Lord foolish. When they realized that they were hemmed in, they said to Moses in vv.11-12, “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? 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.”

However, Isa. 55:9 says, “For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts.” It is obvious that Pharaoh let the Israelites go reluctantly. God knew that the reports would convince Pharaoh that the Jews were wandering like lost sheep in the wilderness and therefore were fair game for his army to pursue and capture. It would seem to the king that his hour for vengeance had come. But the Lord was drawing the Egyptians into His trap. Like a master chess player, God induces Pharaoh to move his king into checkmate, and he doesn’t even realize it. What seemed like an easy victory to Egypt would turn out to be a humiliating defeat, and the Lord would get all the glory. Once again He would triumph over Pharaoh and the gods and goddesses of Egypt, and He would bring about the consummation of final & complete victory. Not only that, but notice again in v.4 God’s ultimate purpose, “that the Egyptians may know that I am the LORD.”

How this demonstrates the folly of human reasoning! There was one crucial fact that Pharaoh, and even the Israelites, left out of the equation: God! Had He not already shown Himself strong on their behalf? So again, Prov. 3:5 says, “Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding.” Follow the Lord, even when His ways seem foolish to this world. In time you will see that God is just working to accomplish His plan.

Ann’s brother, Tim Burgess, answered the call to preach when he was in his 30s. He had a wife & 1 small child, and 1 on the way. He quit his job, packed up his family to go 900 miles away to Dallas, TX to train for the ministry. Many thought he was being foolish. But he finished his training, and today he is being used of God in a wonderful way in a country church in NC.

Even so God may lead us into some difficult situations, not to harm us, but to accomplish other purposes. We must have faith in God in such situations. What purpose is God seeking to accomplish in your life? Has He led you to a difficult job, and you just can’t understand why? Have you considered the possibility that He has placed you there that you may be a witness to a particular person there?

Conclusion: [Review main points]

I want to encourage you to follow these different ways that the Lord will lead you. What if a ship in the Atlantic is abandoned? It would drift here and there, with no direction. Rocks or sand bars at some shore would eventually destroy it. Or an ocean storm would engulf it. But look and you can find other ships under the control of an able captain. It sails with purpose and direction. It arrives safely at a destination. What a blessing it is to be under control and direction.

Even so, we are like a ship on life’s sea. We are tossed to and fro by the circumstances of life. When we live for self we are just drifting along without direction or purpose. In time we would be destroyed by the storms of life, and certainly by the grim reaper called death. But what a blessing it is for Jesus to come to us, and be the captain of our soul? With Him in control as owner, He leads us through the storms of life. He directs us to that distant harbor of safety & rest

called heaven.⁷ Trust in the Lord. Follow the Lord, and He will lead you through the difficulties of life on to victory, and ultimately to the safe harbor of heaven!

What is God leading you to do today? Is He leading you to repent of your sin & trust in Jesus as your Savior? Is He leading you to make a change in your life? Is He leading you to join this church? Is He leading you to commit your life to fulltime Christian service? Then follow His lead today. That is the pathway of victory and blessing.

Sources: Ronald A. Beers, ed., *Life Application Study Bible* (Tyndale House & Zondervan, 1991); Peter Enns, *The NIV Application Commentary: Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000); Stephen Felker, [*Devotional & Explanatory Notes on the Entire Bible*](#) (Col. Hghts, VA: Published by Author), 2007; C. F. Keil and F. Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament in Ten Volumes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1978 reprint); J. Vernon McGee, *Thru The Bible*, Vol. 1 (Pasadena, CA: Thru The Bible Radio, 1981); Larry Pierce, *Online Bible* [CD-ROM] (Ontario: Timnathserah Inc., 1996); Arthur W. Pink, *Gleanings in Exodus* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972); Warren Wiersbe, *Be Delivered: Exodus* (Colorado Spring: Chariot Victor Books Publishing, 1998). Other sources listed in the footnotes. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from *The New King James Version* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982).

⁷ Adapted from Charles H. Spurgeon, *12 Sermons on the Passion and Death of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1971 reprint), 73.