The Long Hard Road
Exodus 13:17-22

After 430 years of bondage in Egypt the Bible tells us that the Hebrews were at last set free. God sent ten plagues upon the Egyptians to force their release. So after 24 generations of Hebrew slavery they were at last free to go. BUT their path out of Egypt was not the one they expected! The Bible says:

“When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by the way… that was near…” (Exodus 13:17)

In other words, when the Hebrew slaves were set free they did not leave Egypt on the road they expected. Rather than travel due East into the promised land, the Bible tells us that God led them South instead, toward the Red Sea and into the wilderness.

I. Down An Unexpected Road!

Here we have a couple of important spiritual principals to keep in mind. The first principle is this: **GOD RARELY TAKES US DOWN THE ROAD WE EXPECT!** Whatever pathway we assume we will travel may very well not be the pathway God leads us down. More often than not God takes us to unexpected places in unexpected ways.

I received a telephone call the other day from a young man in Ft. Worth Texas who is studying to be a pastor. He called me because he had been told of the explosive growth here in South West Broward County, and he wanted to know if I thought it would be a great place to start a new church. I told him its a great place to start a new church, but I reminded him that no matter how good the statistics of our community might be it does not mean that this is where the Lord will lead him. God doesn’t always lead us down the path we think is best. More often than not God leads us down an unexpected path.

When I became a Christian I never expected to become a preacher. I thought I might become a doctor, or go into politics, or maybe do some international relations. I never expected to be a preacher. I didn’t grow up in the Church, I didn’t know anything about it, and it certainly wasn’t the path I expected!
When the Hebrews left Egypt they never expected to leave the comfort of their homes to spend the next forty years in the wilderness. They assumed that their struggles were over. They did not appreciate their struggles had only just begun.

God does not lead us down the road we expect. We want the easy way, but the easy way is rarely the best way. For our own good God takes us down the long hard road because that is the way that leads to life. The Bible says:

“… the way is hard that leads to life…” (Matthew 7:14)

The long hard road is not the road that most of us choose for ourselves. We prefer ease over effort, comfort over challenge, and security over hardship. But there just aren’t any short-cuts to spiritual strength and maturity.

To build our body requires hard work. (Some of us spend hours in fitness centers and on the athletic fields pushing ourselves till our muscles burn and our lungs scream, but this is the kind of dedication required to build our bodies!) To build your marriage requires the same kind of effort. (Good marriages are not an accident. Ask anyone who has a good marriage. It requires a huge investment of time, effort and energy. Loving another person is a skill that is learned. Its not the product of infatuated feelings. It is the product of hard work and countless sacrifices.) Building your spiritual life requires the same hard work and sacrifice. Following will not take you down the easy road, for the Bible is clear that the easy way leads to destruction:

“the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many.” (Matthew 7:13)

There are no short-cuts to spiritual strength and maturity. Don’t think that just because you are going through a hard time in your life that God is against you. The opposite may well be true! The parent who loves their child best is not the parent who makes growing up the easiest. There are no short cuts to growing up, and the parent who protects their child from the hard lessons of life is not the one who loves their child the most. We spoil our children when we protect them from the hard lessons of life. They grow up soft and ill prepared to meet challenges. (God will take away whatever stands between you and Him.)
II. Character Not Comfort!

Now let me share with you a second spiritual principal that is related to the first. The principal is this: GOD IS MORE CONCERNED WITH YOUR CHARACTER THAN YOUR COMFORT! Your prayers and your concern may be for your comfort, but that is not God’s first concern.

Many children will be starting their first day of school tomorrow, and I know that parent’s number one concern is not their ease and comfort. You want them to get an education. You want them to be challenged. You don’t want them left with a dull, flabby mind, but a sharp one. School won’t be easy, but we don’t want it to be easy. As their parents we know that ease and comfort is not going to lead them down the road to success. The same is true in our spiritual lives.

Your comfort is not going bring you to spiritual maturity, nor is it going to get you into heaven. In fact, its more likely your comfort could lead you into hell. Here’s a story that Jesus told about how ease and comfort can be the door way to hell.

“There was a rich man… who feasted sumptuously every day. And at his gate lay a poor man named Lazarus, full of sores, and desired to be fed with what fell from the rich man’s table; moreover the dogs came and licked his sores. The poor man died and was carried by the angels to Abraham’s bosom. The rich man also died and was buried; and in Hell, being in torment, he lifted up his eyes and saw Abraham far off and Lazarus in his bosom. And he called out, ‘Father Abraham, have mercy upon me, and send Lazarus to dip the end of his finger in water and cool my tongue; for I am in anguish in this flame.’ But Abraham said, ‘Son, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner evil things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish.” (Luke 16:19-25)

The meaning of this story is obvious. Just because we are comfortable does not mean that all is well. It is quite possible to feel comfortable all the way to hell. Sometimes we have to get uncomfortable to realize the truth, which explains why God’s first concern is not for our ease and comfort. His first concern is for the growth and character of our soul. Jesus once asked,

“What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” (Mark 8:36 KJV)
You can be comfortable. You can have it all. But what good is it if we then lose our own soul?

The life of following God, is neither easy nor comfortable. The Hebrews found this out on the very first day of their freedom from Egyptian slavery. They assumed that they would travel due east and directly into the promised land, but instead God lead them south into the wilderness. Following God will not necessarily get you where you want to go, instead it will lead you to where God knows you need to be. Following God will not always get you what you want. Instead it will get you what God knows you need. This isn’t because God is mean or stingy. Its because God is more concerned about your character than your comfort.

All me to share this Poem that Curtis got for me on the internet. It expresses quite clearly and powerfully what I am trying to express. Its entitled “I Asked God For…”

I asked for Strength…  
And God gave me difficulties to make me strong.
I asked for Wisdom…  
And God gave me problems to solve.
I asked for Prosperity…  
And God gave me brain and brawn to work.
I asked for courage…  
And God gave me danger to overcome.
I asked for Love…  
And God gave me troubled people to help.
I asked for favors…  
And God gave me opportunities.
I received nothing I wanted
but got everything I need.
All my prayers have been answered.

As you know, I’m about to get married, and after 42 years of being a bachelor it’s not going to be easy or comfortable… especially in the first year. Of course, if I enter into the marriage assuming that its all going to be sunshine and light, I’m in for trouble. Actually, Stephanie and I are in for trouble anyway because marriage has its troubling moments, but if I enter into marriage eager to accept its challenges then we stand a great chance of being blessed. God’s first concern for Stephanie and me is not our ease and comfort. Together we must prepare first to love and serve God, second to love and serve each other, and next to love and serve each of you, and this is
neither easy nor natural. Its natural to be selfish. Its difficult to be generous. Its natural to be self-absorbed. Its a challenge to be thoughtful. God wants character, not comfort. No one achieved anything great by being comfortable all the time.

I can guarantee you that coach Jimmy Johnson of the Miami Dolphins is not much interested in his players being comfortable right now! Comfort is not what makes a great football team. Coming together in adversity is what makes for a great team. The same is true by the way for a church. Churches don’t become great because they are comfortable. They become great because they have the courage to step out of their comfort zone in faith.

Something we all might keep in mind is that God Himself stepped out of His comfort zone when he took on human flesh and paid a visit to earth disguised as a simple carpenter named Jesus. The Bible says that God:

“…laid aside His mighty power and glory, taking the disguise of a slave and becoming like men.”
(Philippians 2:7, LB)

The entire Christian Faith is based upon the belief that God chose to leave His comfort zone and take the long hard road Himself in order to rescue us from our self-destructive instincts.

After seventeen years of ministry I can tell you that one of the biggest obstacles to spiritual growth is the unwillingness to leave our comfort zone. When given a choice we almost always choose the well worn path. But God is constantly pushing us out into new territory. He leads us down pathways that we don’t expect because when we try what is new we are far more likely to look to God for help and support. God wants us to learn to look to Him first. He wants us to let go of trusting money, power, position, good looks, charm, whatever it is that we lean on, and the best way for Him to do this is by allowing adversity to enter our lives… the kind of adversity that forces us to look to Him.

III.
Into The Wilderness!

When the Hebrews left Egypt, God did not lead them down the easy or obvious path. He lead them into the wilderness. When we follow God we too will be lead into the wilderness. I’m not talking about being dropped into the middle of the Everglades or into some desert somewhere. The wilderness I’m talking about is the dry and lonely place inside our own
hearts and souls, where we feel empty and powerless. The obvious question is, “Why would God lead us into the wilderness?” The answer is because there is no one else to turn to but God in the wilderness.

Most of us are too social to spend any real time with God. When we feel lonely we pick up the telephone and we call Mr. or Mrs. Yakkety and talk, talk, talk, because we cannot stand being alone. But in the wilderness there is no one else to talk to but God.

The wilderness is a dry lonely place in our hearts. It’s the place we go to when the emptiness and disappointment of our lives overwhelms us. When we lose a loved one, feel left behind or alone we enter into the wilderness of our hearts. There we look for help from the words of family, friends, pastors, and therapists, but eventually it becomes obvious that no one can fill the emptiness but God. The words that our friends offer for comfort seem irritating. The help that our loved ones offer is useless. We’ve entered the wilderness when we come to the place where we turn to Him and Him alone for our joy and fulfillment in life. Most of us never open our hearts to God until we reach a point of disappointment and emptiness so profound that it drives us straight to Him.

There is a camping experience called Outward Bound which teaches kids how to survive in the wilderness. At the end of the camp each student is taken miles out into the wilderness with no food and three matches for three days of survival. The point of the camp is to teach you to rely on yourself.

But when God sends you into the wilderness He wants you to learn how to rely solely upon Him and Him alone. To learn this lesson He will present us with challenges far beyond our ability to cope.

When I was a student at the United States Naval Academy we were purposely given far more study and responsibility than we could possibly accomplish alone. We either had to learn how to work with our classmates to accomplish all that needed to be done or we would fail.

God leads us out into the wilderness and then gives us far more than we can cope with so that we will learn how to turn to Him for help and comfort.

The wilderness is a hard experience. There is nothing fun about it. But it is a necessary character building experience for the soul of every Christian disciple.

The promise of this morning’s lesson from the Bible is that even though sends us out into the wilderness He nevertheless does not leave us
alone there. We may feel alone, but that doesn’t mean that we are alone. The Bible tells us that when God lead the Hebrews into the wilderness that He lead them in a cloud by day and in a pillar of fire by night. God is in front of us. The promise of the scriptures is that He will “never fail nor forsake us.”

The Scripture says, “Yea thought I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, thou art with me.”

God may take us to unexpected places in the wilderness, but He is always there. He will supply our need. He will be our shield and our fortress. He will be a lamp unto our feet, and a light unto our path.