



## TRANSITIONS: TRUSTING GOD IN TIMES OF CHANGE

### WILDERNESS PERIL

Exodus 14:1-33

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#### Introduction

Life is full of transitions. There are those physical transitions of growing up and growing old. There are those important relational transitions like getting married, becoming parents, or losing a loved one. There are different kinds of intellectual and emotional transitions: changes in the way you see the world or feel about the world.

But why are transitions often so difficult? Why are times of change seldom very easy? Why is it, for example, that those first years of transition into married life can be the tensest and soul-searching of all? Or why does the transition from adolescence to adulthood need to be at times so strained and confusing? Or why does the transition from working fulltime to retirement seem to be so disorienting and depressing for so many people?

Earlier this week, for example, I received an email from a congregant going through a very difficult professional transition. He asked me to pray for his business. Here was his request: "Please pray for [our business], things have gone very soft for the last 3+ months . . . We can't keep going this way and survive. It's getting pretty scary."

In this series on transitions we've learned that transitions are not always straightforward because God's leading is often counterintuitive. But why are they often so challenging as well? Today we will grapple with this question; and find in today's passage answer that question which may surprise some of you; in fact, it may startle some of you.

You see, today's passage from Exodus 14 reminds us that transitions can be difficult because God is willing to lead his people to a place of peril—a place of peril, a place of risk, a place of danger. That place where you think about giving up, you wonder if all is lost, you begin to lose hope, you assume there's no way out; you've come to a dead end. That is where God not infrequently leads his followers during times of transition: to a place of peril.

#### God Takes Us to A Place of Peril

This was clearly God's method with the Israelites during their time of wilderness transition. *He took them to a place of peril.* In fact, he did so right from the start. They had hardly left Egypt when the Lord began to act in the most counterintuitive of ways. So we read in the opening verses of Exodus 14. There we see that the Lord, first of all, led the Israelites right into an impossible situation.

*Then the LORD said to Moses,<sup>2</sup> "Tell the people of Israel to turn back and encamp in front of Pi-hahiroth, between Migdol and the sea, in front of Baal-zephon; you shall encamp facing it, by the sea.*

You see what the Lord is doing. He is positioning Israel with their back up against an immovable and impassable body of water, on the one hand, and their faces now turned back

toward the land they had just fled. He led them between the proverbial rock and a hard place; or, better, between Egypt and the Red Sea. In short, God led the Israelites right into a dead-end!

But why on earth would the Lord lead the Israelites into this dead-end? In order to provoke Pharaoh, who would see their confusion and want to come after them. Note what verse 3 says:

*For Pharaoh will say of the people of Israel, 'They are wandering in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.'*

Yet not only does the Lord lead them into an impossible circumstances to provoke Pharaoh, the Lord in fact *guarantees* that Pharaoh and his hordes will pursue them by moving Pharaoh's heart in a way that is irresistible. And so verse 4:

*And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them.*

That is precisely what happened. So we read at the end of verse 4: *"And they did so."* The next paragraph goes on to explain what happened.

*When the king of Egypt was told that the people had fled, the mind of Pharaoh and his servants was changed toward the people, and they said, "What is this we have done, that we have let Israel go from serving us?"<sup>6</sup> So he made ready his chariot and took his army with him,<sup>7</sup> and took six hundred chosen chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt with officers over all of them.<sup>8</sup> And the LORD hardened the heart of Pharaoh king of Egypt, and he pursued the people of Israel while the people of Israel were going out defiantly.<sup>9</sup> The Egyptians pursued them, all Pharaoh's horses and chariots and his horsemen and his army, and overtook them encamped at the sea, by Pi-hahiroth, in front of Baal-zephon.*

Just imagine, then, the scene. Israel—all six-hundred thousand men, besides women and children and miscellaneous others (cf. Exodus 12:37-38)—with their backs up against an immovable and seemingly impassable body of water; and with their faces now turned to the west, toward Egypt, the land they had just left; and then they begin to see form on the horizon great clouds of dust stirred up under the hooves of a massive array of Egyptian military power: *"six hundred chosen chariots and all the other chariots of Egypt"* (14:7). For some of you images from the movie *Braveheart* will no doubt spring to mind at this point.

There is nothing surprising in Israel's response—it's perfectly human. It begins with fear and then moves to frustration—frustration at Moses and, no doubt, at God as well.

*When Pharaoh drew near, the people of Israel lifted up their eyes, and behold, the Egyptians were marching after them, and they feared greatly. And the people of Israel cried out to the LORD.<sup>11</sup> They said to Moses, "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us in bringing us out of Egypt?<sup>12</sup> Is not this what we said to you in Egypt: 'Leave us alone that we may serve the Egyptians'? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness."*

God took his people to a place of peril, to the end of their rope and their own resources. In leading them out of Egypt, he led them into a dead-end. This is God's method with his people.

Lest we think, however, that this is perhaps only an archaic technique of the God of the Old Testament, we do well to realize that this is also Jesus' method with his own disciples. He too leads his followers to a place of peril.

*On that day, when evening had come, [Jesus] said to them, "Let us go across to the other side." 36 And leaving the crowd, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. And other boats were with him. 37 And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. 38 But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, "Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?"*

Now I want you to note an important implication from this first observation. Sometimes God's leading in your life will take you to places that make you look foolish in the sight of others. Think of the smug satisfaction Pharaoh must have had when, seeing Israel with their backs up against the Red Sea, said to himself in effect: 'Ha! They're lost! They have no idea what they're doing! How idiotic! How ridiculous!' And yet, where they were was *precisely* where God had taken them: to a place they would never have taken themselves because it was too perilous and too outrageous.

### **God Triumphs over Our Peril with His Power**

But why does God take his children to a place of peril? Why does he not make life a little easier for his people? More than that, as was the case with his leading the Israelites in the wilderness, why does he sometimes seem to deliberately drive me into a dead end? Why does he bring me right to the end of my resources, to the end of myself, to that point where there seems to be no point?

*God leads us to a place of peril so that he can triumph over our peril with his power. Our personal peril, our difficult or even dire circumstances, provides the perfect platform on which to make his power known. If you will, God sometimes sets the stage of our lives with peril so that he can magnify the greatness of his power in solving our unsolvable dilemmas.*

One of my favorite singer-song writers is David Wilcox. He describes this drama beautifully in his song, "Show the Way."

*Look, if someone wrote a play just to glorify  
What's stronger than hate, would they not arrange the stage  
To look as if the hero came too late he's almost in defeat  
It's looking like the Evil side will win, so on the Edge  
Of every seat, from the moment that the whole thing begins.*

Glorifying what's stronger than hate—this was God's strategy at the Red Sea. And so he arranged the stage to look as if the hero came too late; in fact, it looked as if he was almost in defeat—and all Israel with him.

This was, as we've seen, the whole point of God's leading as it is described in the opening verses of this chapter. God led Israel into a corner—but into a corner on purpose. And the purpose can be found back there in verse 4:

*And I will harden Pharaoh's heart, and he will pursue them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, and the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD.*

I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host—this becomes something of a refrain through this chapter, the underlying theological perspective that makes sense of what would, to others, look to be not just counterintuitive but downright cruel behavior on God's part. So we read later on in verses 17-18:

*And I will harden the hearts of the Egyptians so that they shall go in after them, and I will get glory over Pharaoh and all his host, his chariots, and his horsemen. <sup>18</sup> And the Egyptians shall know that I am the LORD, when I have gotten glory over Pharaoh, his chariots, and his horsemen.*

The rest of the chapter, then, explains *how* it was that God got glory over Pharaoh and all his hosts. And while the story of God parting the Red Sea is what often makes it into the children's books and the big screen, it is *why* God did it—not *how* God did it—that is the critical thing. To get glory—that is the *why* God did it. This is God's strategy at the Red Sea. This is God's strategy in all that he does.

To get glory—to express outside of himself all that he is within himself. To make known to others who he is and what he's like. To manifest his manifold excellencies: his holiness, his power, his justice, his wisdom, his love, his mercy. That's what it means to get glory. And it is the point of all that God does in creation and in redemption. And this was God's strategy at the Red Sea.

But this was not only God's strategy at the Red Sea, this was Jesus' strategy at Bethany in Nazareth. There too it looked as if the hero came too late, as if he had suffered defeat, as if the evil side will win.

*Now a certain man was ill, Lazarus of Bethany, the village of Mary and her sister Martha. <sup>2</sup> It was Mary who anointed the Lord with ointment and wiped his feet with her hair, whose brother Lazarus was ill. <sup>3</sup> So the sisters sent to him, saying, "Lord, he whom you love is ill."<sup>4</sup> But when Jesus heard it he said, "This illness does not lead to death. It is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified through it."*

Yet here, in this great moment of personal peril, this time of significant need, we see the counterintuitive leading and (one might say) the counterintuitive love of Christ.

*Now Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus. <sup>6</sup>So, when he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was. . . . Now when Jesus came, he found that Lazarus had already been in the tomb four days. <sup>18</sup>Bethany was near Jerusalem, about two miles off, <sup>19</sup>and many of the Jews had come to Martha and Mary to console them concerning their brother. <sup>20</sup>So when Martha heard that Jesus was coming, she went and met him, but Mary remained seated in the house. <sup>21</sup>Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died.*

*Then Jesus, deeply moved again, came to the tomb. It was a cave, and a stone lay against it. <sup>39</sup>Jesus said, "Take away the stone." Martha, the sister of the dead man, said to him, "Lord, by this time there will be an odor, for he has been dead four days." <sup>40</sup>Jesus said to her, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would see the glory of God?" <sup>41</sup>So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. <sup>42</sup>I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me."<sup>4</sup> When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out."<sup>44</sup>The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go."*

Jesus leads his followers to a place of peril—even to the point of death—so that he can triumph over it with his power, sometimes with just a word: "Lazarus, come out!" This is Jesus'

strategy with you and with me. Counterintuitive leading and long delays which look like a lack of compassion or a lack of concern; yet these are the very tools he uses to magnify his power in our lives.

So be careful, then, friends, in questioning the leading or the love of God because of the difficult circumstances you find yourself in. In the words of that wonderful hymn by William Cowper:

*Judge not the Lord by feeble sense,  
But trust Him for His grace;  
Behind a frowning providence  
He hides a smiling face.*

### **God Moves Us From Peril To Triumph To Create Faith**

So our peril becomes a platform for the demonstration of God's glory. But why does he need our peril to magnify his power? Can he not do it some other less costly way? Besides it feels as if God is using me and my hardship to make himself look good. But wouldn't we despise that in others?

In leading you to a place of peril so that he can triumph over your peril with his power God is not using you but doing something profound for you, something profound in you. *For God leads us to a place of peril so that he can triumph over it and create something in you.*

Why did the Lord lead Israel down a dead-end? So that he could show forth his power in routing the Egyptians. And when Israel saw the great power of the Lord, they *feared*. This was, of course, the only natural, the only properly human response in the face of such power. This was, to put it rather bluntly, the only reasonable response to have as they watched hundreds of dead Egyptians bodies wash up on the sea shore.

*Thus the LORD saved Israel that day from the hand of the Egyptians, and Israel saw the Egyptians dead on the seashore. <sup>31</sup> Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD.*

They feared the Lord. But their fear was also *faith*.

*Israel saw the great power that the LORD used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the LORD, and they believed in the LORD and in his servant Moses.*

Their fear gave way to faith. Yet their faith, in turn, gave way to God's ultimate purpose with them on the shores of Red Sea that day: worship! So we read at the beginning of Exodus 15:

*Then Moses and the people of Israel sang this song to the LORD, saying,*

*"I will sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously;  
the horse and his rider he has thrown into the sea.*

<sup>2</sup> *The LORD is my strength and my song,  
and he has become my salvation;  
this is my God, and I will praise him,  
my father's God, and I will exalt him.*

<sup>3</sup> *The LORD is a man of war;  
the LORD is his name.*

What does God's counterintuitive leading do to you and to me, by his grace? It creates in us fear and faith—and ultimately worship. Worship is why God led Israel into an impossible situation at the Red Sea. Worship is why Jesus slept in the boat and delayed at Bethany. Worship is why God will stretch you beyond what you think you can bear. Worship is why God will move you into an impossible circumstance. All these mysterious acts of Providence are ultimately for the purpose of worship: to display God's own glory and win worship from among the nations.

## Conclusion

The message of this passage and the lesson about transitions is this: *during times of transition God is willing to lead you to a point of peril so that he can triumph over it and create faith in you.*

This is a message, this is a lesson we all need to hear. Every one of us has been, or will be, brought to a place of peril at some point. Some of you are in that place right now. You have no job. Or you have no relationship with your spouse. Or you have no prospect of physically ever getting better. And you realize that God has led you to the end of your resources, to a place of personal peril.

Now if you find yourself in this sort of position, remember God has you there on purpose. And his purpose is to get glory over whatever it is that threatens you and thus create faith in you.

Your response, then, should be the response found on the lips of one faithful Israelite who stood tall on the shores of the Red Sea and looked defiantly on the whole Egyptian army. The answer is to be found on the lips of Moses.

*And Moses said to the people, "Fear not, stand firm, and see the salvation of the LORD, which he will work for you today. For the Egyptians whom you see today, you shall never see again. <sup>14</sup> The LORD will fight for you, and you have only to be silent."*

Do you find yourself between a rock and a hard place? At the end of your rope? In an impossible situation? Circumstances you can't imagine or can't handle? Then heed the words of Moses: (1) *Fear not*—God is greater than your circumstances, and has in fact designed the circumstances of your life for his glory and your good. (2) *Stand firm*—don't move, don't waver, don't waffle, but trust in the promises and provision of God. And (3) *See the salvation of the Lord*—it may come to you not exactly in the way you expected, but God will provide, God will be faithful, God will save.

The truth about transitions is this, in the words of the wonderful hymn writer, William Cowper:

*God moves in a mysterious way  
His wonders to perform;  
He plants His footsteps in the sea  
And rides upon the storm.*

*Deep in unfathomable mines  
Of never failing skill  
He treasures up His bright designs*

*And works His sovereign will.*

*Ye fearful saints, fresh courage take;  
The clouds ye so much dread  
Are big with mercy and shall break  
In blessings on your head.*