

Beyond the Horizon

Exodus 23:20-33

Introduction

Journey: “It’s not about the destination; it’s about the journey.” Like many things, there is *some* truth to that (the kind of person you’re becoming is more important than the things you accomplish). But let’s be honest, **the destination is kind of a big deal.**

- This is one of the complaints the Israelites have. **Red Sea:** ¹¹ They said to Moses, “Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? (Ex 14:11). **Rephedim:** ³ But the people thirsted there for water, and the people grumbled against Moses and said, “Why did you bring us up out of Egypt, to kill us and our children and our livestock with thirst?” (Ex 17:3).
- **We learn a lot in the journey, and God is with us in the journey; in many ways, we become the people we are meant to be through the journey, but the goal of the journey is to make it to the destination.**

Finish: “In 1952, Florence Chadwick stepped into the waters of the Pacific Ocean off Catalina Island, determined to swim to the shore of mainland California. She had already been the first woman to swim the English Channel both ways. The weather was foggy and chilly; she could hardly see the boats accompanying her. Still, she swam for 15 hours. When she begged to be taken out of the water along the way, her mother, in a boat alongside, told her she was close and that she could make it. But physically and emotionally exhausted, she stopped swimming and was pulled out. It wasn’t until she was on the boat that she discovered the shore was less than half a mile away. At a news conference the next day she said, “All I could see was the fog. I think if I could have seen the shore, I would have made it.” We can’t lose sight of our ultimate destination. We must persevere, keep going, finish what was started.

- Persist along the kingdom path. Even when it is dark, and God seems hidden, keep seeking him. Even when the door is closed, we keep knocking.
- Whatever we do, we don’t give up (e.g., Rudy, Rocky, etc.).
- It is good and important that we don’t give up. God is greatly glorified by us when we don’t give up. God is glorified when we keep on believing, keep on praying, keep on seeking. **Frontrunning faith is no faith at all.**
- I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith (2 Tim 4:7). We need fewer Christians who start fast and more who finish well.
- “But the one who endures to the end will be saved” (Matt 24:13).
 - Sometimes the final destination is out of sight, **beyond the horizon**, but we trust the promises of God, we follow the plan of God (map).

Motivation: They’re in the wilderness, a brand new nation of former slaves, God has given them rules and regulations of worship, a liturgical calendar, a system of government, etc. It is easy to look around and want to give up. But God has ordained the **ends** and the **means**. **He has given us a final destination and a way to get there.**

- In this passage, God reminds the Israelites of the blessings of their final destination, the Promised Land, to motivate them to follow his path, obey his commands, and keep going.
- We can confidently embrace the journey to which God calls us because our final destination is secure in him and totally worth it.

²⁰ “Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. ²¹ Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him. ²² “But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries. ²³ “When my angel goes before you and brings you to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, ²⁴ you shall not bow down to their gods nor serve them, nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow them and break their pillars in pieces. ²⁵ You shall serve the LORD your God, and he will bless your bread and your water, and I will take sickness away from among you. ²⁶ None shall miscarry or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days. ²⁷ I will send my terror before you and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. ²⁸ And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you. ²⁹ I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply against you. ³⁰ Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possess the land. ³¹ And I will set your border from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates, for I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you. ³² You shall make no covenant with them and their gods. ³³ They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.”

1. Be Careful in Your Obedience

Warnings: ²¹ Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice; Warnings exist for a reason. You can't do things your way and God's way and expect to still have his blessing and result.

- Success requires obedience (e.g., baking; Lego; IKEA furniture).
- Even the grammatical structure is emphatic (hence pay **careful** attention). **This isn't general attention but specific obedience.**
 - Many are lazy in obedience. They don't even know *or care to know* what the Bible says. Sometimes I wonder if they think willful ignorance prevents them from punishment (e.g., still get a ticket even if you don't look at your speedometer).

Will Not Pardon Your Transgression: do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him.

- But God forgives everybody? #False God offers forgiveness to everyone. Forgiveness is not earned, but it's also not automatic.
- If you reject God, you don't receive the benefits of his forgiveness.

- Your sin must be paid for. Either reject his path and pay your own sins, or embrace his forgiveness.
 - You cannot rebel while simultaneously receiving pardon. You can't have your sin and your Savior at the same time. Your sin will destroy you, but you have a Savior who offers rescue and redemption.
 - God can't tolerate transgression, or he would be capricious and unjust.

For Your Good: ²² “But if you carefully obey his voice and do all that I say, then I will be an enemy to your enemies and an adversary to your adversaries... ²⁷ I will send my terror before you and will throw into confusion all the people against whom you shall come, and I will make all your enemies turn their backs to you. ²⁸ And I will send hornets before you, which shall drive out the Hivites, the Canaanites, and the Hittites from before you.

- Why are these passages here in sections on laws and festivals? Because God knows their predilection to disobedience (read what was before and read what goes after). He knows how they will be tempted. He knows their capability to disobey. It never ceases to amaze me the creative ways people develop to disobey.
- He **wants** to bless them. His path, the path of obedience, is not just the path to avoid judgment; it's the path to secure victory. Promise and warning are attached to obedience
- We need to be way more worried about being unfaithful to God than worried about what the rest of the world thinks.
 - God wants to be an enemy to your enemy. He wants to destroy, terrify, confuse, and displace your enemies. He wants to fight for you.
 - **A lot of times, the thing getting in the way of you and victory is you!**

Protect Your From Bad: ²⁴ you shall not bow down to their gods nor serve them, nor do as they do, but you shall utterly overthrow... ³² You shall make no covenant with them and their gods... ³³ They shall not dwell in your land, lest they make you sin against me; for if you serve their gods, it will surely be a snare to you.”

- God calls for **complete** destruction of the false gods of the nations to be conquered.
 - The temptation is always toward syncretism. It always **seems** easier to negotiate with idols than destroy them, but I promise they are not negotiating, they are infiltrating. They will destroy you. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? (1 Cor 5:6).
- Destroy sin or it will creep in and take over (e.g., kudzu). Kill your idolatry, or it will eventually kill you.
 - Hannibal was ravaging Italy in the prelude to the Second Punic War (218-201 BCE). Not enough generals, so the Romans appointed an unproven 24-year-old, Scipio.¹ Every other general was afraid because Hannibal was running through Italy. Scipio took the fight to him (Spain, Africa, etc.) and, shockingly, won! Instead of negotiating with sin or allowing it to persist in your life, there are times when believers must confront it directly, decisively, and without compromise. Allowing it to linger will undermine your long-term spiritual well-being. Don't just accept the influence of sin; you can fight it!

¹ Publius Cornelius Scipio Africanus

- Often God judges us by removing his protection and allowing our sin to destroy us (like a vineyard with no protection being overrun by briars, weeds, etc.).
- We delude ourselves into thinking our sin isn't sin or that it won't destroy us. We think we're the exception ("there are no exceptions"). In the process, in our sin, we are creating the very things that are killing us (e.g., phones, modernity).
 - When we trust in idols (made with human hands), we trust in the thing that will destroy us, rather than the God who can save us.
 - We think our idols will deliver us, but all they deliver us to is our own destruction (Nixon taped conversations to bring fame and ensure a legacy of success, those tapes ended up being the thing that convicted him).
- **Consequences are natural to disobedience.** When Jesus says, "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you" (Matt 6:33), but you seek your own kingdom first, putting your work, hobbies, and personal comfort ahead of God, and it leads to spiritual and relational problems, don't blame God.
 - He could smite you, and sometimes he might, but he can also give you over to your sin, and your world can fall into despair and disintegration.
- Jesus' Lordship leads to an abundant life. But if you stubbornly stick to your sin and stubbornly try to rule your own life, **you will destroy yourself (he won't have to)**. God isn't against us, he is against our sin. He loves us so much that he does not want us to destroy ourselves.
 - Every time we think we can do it our way, it ends in disaster, but when we do it God's way, it ends in blessing.

Covenant Blessing: The goal is to get us to the Promised Land, to the **place where God dwells**. The **real blessing** of heaven is not streets of gold, mansions of glory, or our loved ones who have already passed (as good as those things are); the real blessing is unobstructed, unrestricted, undeterred communion with God. God is the goal; the rest are just extra benefits.

- The reason God wants to keep us from idols is because **we belong to God and God alone**, and anything that gets in the way of that is harming us, not helping us.
- This isn't just a law code; it's a covenant relationship between God and his people.

2. Be Confident in His Presence

Angel of the Lord: ²⁰ "Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared."

- Angel is a representation of God. In what way it is hard to say precisely but the clues are clear. God's name is in the angel. When the angel speaks, God speaks. When the angel acts, God acts. ² And the angel of the LORD appeared to him in a flame of fire out of the midst of a bush (Ex 3:2). Alternately translated (a lot goes into this), "the angel that is the Lord" (Stuart).

God Does the Work (Phil 1): The reason we can maintain hope in the wilderness is because **God is the one who is doing the work**. He will guard us and bring us to our final destination.

- ⁶ And I am sure (confident) of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ (Phil 1:6). Paul's confidence is not in the Philippians' hard work or his own apostolic power but in the God who never fails.
 - If your hope is in yourself, your confidence will always be limited. You know that you are not perfect; you fail all the time. But if your hope is in God, you can be completely confident.
 - We can live with "confident certainty" because the center of our hope is not "in human abilities or achievements but in the character and acts of God" (Hawthorne). **We don't live or lead in fear but confidence that God will accomplish what he intends.**
 - I can **work hard** not in the knowledge that my hard work will guarantee success but in the confidence that God began a good work that he promises to complete!
- Also, in Phil 1, Paul continually has his hope on his final destination (the day of Jesus Christ, v. 6; the day of Christ, v. 10) He talks about dying being a win because he will be with Christ. **It's baffling how many people live their lives as if they won't one day stand face-to-face with their maker.** This always makes Paul work harder. His confidence in God doesn't cause him to be lazy or tentative but to be eager and strive harder.
 - Confidence in God fuels our work for him. If we "fail", no big deal because he never does. If we mess up, no big deal because he never does.
 - If we keep our eyes on Jesus, we will work harder, with more joy, than if we focus on ourselves (which pushes us to hedge our bets and minimize our risk).
- Depend on God and remain faithful. "Without YHWH, they were nothing, could do nothing, and would end up with nothing" (Stuart).
 - You don't need to prove yourself to your enemies, God is enough. You don't need to terrify your opponents, God will. You don't need to punish your adversaries; leave it to God.

God Keeps His Promises: ²³ "When my angel goes before you and brings you to the Amorites and the Hittites and the Perizzites and the Canaanites, the Hivites and the Jebusites, and I blot them out, them and break their pillars in pieces... ³¹ And I will set your border from the Red Sea to the Sea of the Philistines, and from the wilderness to the Euphrates, for I will give the inhabitants of the land into your hand, and you shall drive them out before you.

- ⁷ Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, "To your offspring I will give this land." So he built there an altar to the LORD, who had appeared to him. (Gen 12:7).
- ¹⁸ On that day the LORD made a covenant with Abram, saying, "To your offspring I give this land, from the river of Egypt to the great river, the river Euphrates, ¹⁹ the land of the Kenites, the Kenizzites, the Kadmonites, ²⁰ the Hittites, the Perizzites, the Rephaim, ²¹ the Amorites, the Canaanites, the Girgashites and the Jebusites" (Gen 15:18-21).
- ⁷ Then the LORD said, "I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, ⁸ and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the

place of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites (Ex 3:7-8).

- God is just reminding his people of the promises he made to them long ago. This actually goes back to God's promises in Genesis.²

Trust God's Plan:²⁹ I will not drive them out from before you in one year, lest the land become desolate and the wild beasts multiply against you. ³⁰ Little by little I will drive them out from before you, until you have increased and possess the land.

- Sometimes, we think God can only work to bring about his promises if he does it **our way**. If God only worked the way we wanted in the timing we wanted, then we would be God, and he would not.
- Part of faith is not only trusting he will do what he says but trusting that it can happen the way he wants.
- "God will give you everything you ask for in prayer or everything you would have asked for if you knew what he knew" (Keller). Sometimes God says no. It's always for your good. Like a parent who takes a knife out of the hand of a child.
- God's **plan** and **timing** are often puzzling from our perspective but with time, we see that God is often protecting us and working on us to make us ready for the blessing he has (e.g., protect you from a relationship that will harm you; make you into a person that can enjoy the right relationship well; that lottery win would destroy you, not bless you).

His Promises are Secured by His Presence: He goes before you and with you everywhere he calls you to go. "I'll be with you, right here as you travel toward the promised land, right there as you begin the conquest, right there as you fight, right there as you settle in" (Stuart).

- I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me (Ps 23).
- We all walk through the valley, and many of us understand and are resigned to that, but the promise of God's presence is a powerful peace in the midst. He is with us: whatever darkness you are going through, you can take heart that God is with you. The fuel for our courage is the constant presence of God.
 - God is never hiding or ignoring you. In every up and down, sorry and success, he is there. The point of the cross is that God is here, present in our suffering.
- One distinguishing doctrine of Christian theology is the "with-ness" of God. God is not distant, disconnected, or disinterested. He doesn't send us on a journey and wait to hear from us. He is with us and goes with us wherever he sends. This isn't a general sitting in a war room waiting to hear back from the seal team they sent into battle.
- That's why Jesus says "[He is] with you always" and "[He] will never leave you nor forsake you."³

² The borders would be from Egypt/Red Sea, to the wilderness/desert, up to the Euphrates river, and west to the Mediterranean Sea/Sea of the Philistines (the Philistines were historically a seafaring people renowned for their maritime activity).

³ Matt 28:20; Heb 13:5

- I honestly think one of my main problems when I'm in a difficult situation or a challenging circumstance when I'm suffering or discouraged or defeated, is I forget that **God is with me**. He is with you. **You're not alone**.

3. Count on His Promises

Reward: ²⁵ You shall serve the LORD your God, and he will bless your bread and your water, and I will take sickness away from among you. ²⁶ None shall miscarry or be barren in your land; I will fulfill the number of your days.

- There is an ultimate reward for those who are God's. It is a place of perfect existence, like the garden paradise we were created to live in before it was broken by sin. It is *Shalom*.
 - But even when the Israelites made it to Canaan, they didn't find that blessing. At the height of the Israelite monarchy (David/Solomon), the promised borders didn't really reach their full extent (or if they did not for long).
 - We know that the "land" promised by God points to something greater (he is not just the king of a small part of the Middle East, but the king of all creation, of the entire world).
- ¹⁶ But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city (Heb 11:16).
 - So, if his promises have not been fully realized, then his blessings are still pointing to something yet to come.
 - And it is that promise which **motivates us**, the people of God. There is a place where we will dwell with him, not in fits and spurts, but perfectly and permanently.
- ¹ Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. ² And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ⁴ He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away" (Rev 21:1-4).

Conclusion

- So we **work**, and we **wait**. We **persevere** and **proclaim**. We do **not grow weary of doing good**, for in due season we will reap, if we do not give up (Gal 6:9). Don't give up!