



Living Out God's Plan

August 24, 2025

Exodus 13:17-22

Clint Pressley

¹⁷ When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country, though that was shorter. For God said, "If they face war, they might change their minds and return to Egypt." ¹⁸ So God led the people around by the desert road toward the Red Sea. The Israelites went up out of Egypt ready for battle.

¹⁹ Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because Joseph had made the Israelites swear an oath. He had said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place."

²⁰ After leaving Sukkoth they camped at Etham on the edge of the desert. ²¹ By day the LORD went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. ²² Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.

(Pastor Prays)

If you have been at Hickory Grove for any amount of time, then you have probably heard the name Rosaria Butterfield. Rosaria Butterfield has been a great help to us here at Hickory Grove. We sell her books in our bookstore. But before she was a Christian, she was a tenured professor in English and women's studies at an Ivy League College. She was a leading LGBTQ advocate. She was a very proud lesbian woman. Her life, according to her own testimony, was steeped in the worldview of Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Charles Darwin. She was living out the plan that she had for her life, and she admits that that plan was enjoyable. She was living with her same sex partner. They had a happy life. She taught at a local college. She had lots of friends. She thought her plan was good until she read the Bible. She had written an editorial for her

local newspaper, and a pastor in town saw that editorial and wrote her a letter. That letter was not him accusing her; it was not him yelling at her. That letter included an invitation for Rosaria Butterfield to come to his house and eat with him and his wife. Now that the Christian pastor talked to her, she got to know a Christian, and over the course of time, God, in His goodness, opened up her heart to believe the gospel, and she was saved. She found out that her plan was terrible, but God's plan was perfect.

And in this passage today, what I hope to do is convince you that God's plan for your life is perfect. But if you read the story of God's people coming out of Egypt, you will go into the wilderness, and we'll see that story for the next year or so, we'll read of their wanderings and all that happened. You will see their rebellion, and my hope is for you to avoid that. Because in the Bible, God's plan does not always make sense. Some of you are sitting here, some of you are thinking about what you've walked through, and you would say, 'This doesn't make sense.' And even though it doesn't make sense, I want you to see from this passage that...

God's Plan is the Best Plan

Let me give you a couple of things that we're going to look at. I want to just take you through. We will start over in verse 17. I just want to point out two or three things, and then we'll come back, and I'll seek to make some applications. Join me there in verse 17. It starts out with Pharaoh letting the people go. He finally let the people go. God broke the moral back of Pharaoh, and he let him go. And when he did, God did something unusual. He didn't take them on a straight path. Look what the text says. *God did not lead them on the road through the Philistine country.* That would be by the sea, God didn't take them that way. He didn't take them on the short straight route. God took them on the long, difficult route, and in verse 17, we find out that God actually had a reason. We don't always know the reason, and God doesn't have any obligation to tell us the reasons that he does the things that he does. But here in verse 17, we are told that God actually had a reason. Let me pause and say there is a reason for the things that God does, for the things God allows. He didn't have to tell us, but verse 17 shows us that he's always got a reason. Here's the reason. Although verse 18 says they are well-equipped for battle, verse 17 says they are not ready for battle. So, what does God do? The trip that should have taken 2 weeks for 2 million people to walk over to the edge of the wilderness, God takes them on a route that's going to take them 40 years.

Verse 19 is inserted as a strange promise. Now Moses is trying to manage 2 million people and get them headed in the right direction. For those of you who have more than one child at home, you can imagine how hard this is. So, you are trying to manage all these people, and something happens in verse 19. We are reminded that Moses pauses leading his people, and he remembers, he's got something he's got to do. Verse 19 says, ¹⁹*Moses took the bones of Joseph with him because* (So now we're going to quote Genesis 50) *Joseph had made the Israelites swear an oath. He had said, "God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up with you from this place."* In Genesis chapter 50, Joseph, who had led the people down into Egypt, is dying in Egypt, and he gets all of the Israelites at the time to make a promise. Look, God is going to pull our people out of Egypt; he promises this event, and when he does, you take my bones with you. I want to be buried with my fathers. And in Joshua chapter 24, the people of Israel, when they get into the promised land, they bury Joseph with their father. Hebrews 11 reminds us that it is a means of faith.

So, this little odd burst right here is so unusual because he's been dead 400 years. Imagine trying to find a grave that is 400 years old. Look at my grandparents, who are buried here in Charlotte. I went to both of their funerals. I know generally where they are buried, but it would take me some time to walk around the graveyard to find them. 400 years! Verse 19 is telling us that God actually does keep his promises.

Then you get to verses 20-22. That's where you have the cloud that appears by day and fire by night. It's a pillar of cloud. I think this is one pillar. It is this cloud that is guiding them during the day. There's a fire burning all the time, but you can't see the fire until it's nighttime, when it becomes a giant night light for the people so they can be guided. Whether it's at daytime or nighttime, they're reminded of God's presence with them, that God is taking care of them. And what you have here is a picture of God's plan for his people. It's a reminder that God's plan is the best plan. I would like to offer up three reasons why. I have 3 points today. Here's the first one, number one.

God's way is the best way

God's way is the best way. When you read verses 17 and 18, God is going to take them on a circuitous route. We want a straight line. God has taken them the long way. When you read it,

you find out God has a reason for what He's doing. Verse 18 says they are equipped and think they're ready to do what they want to do. God says no, I'm taking you in a different direction. Let me tell you something about God's way. God's way is the best, but God's way may not be the shortest way. It may take longer for you than you thought. You had a plan, maybe a timeline in your mind of where you would be at this point in your life. You figured that at this age; you would have accomplished this much. God's way may not be the shortest way. God's way is not the straightest way.

Every one of you in here has lived long enough that your life has taken these strange turns. Maybe there have been delays. Something has happened. God has brought things into your life that set you back. Prosperity preachers will tell you that a setback is to set up, it's not. It's God doing something. Maybe it's just taking longer. It's not the straightest way. God's way is not going to be a convenient way. It is not convenient. A lot of you with kids and families, you have to pack your kids up, you do so on a Sunday morning, get them all piled up in the van, and get them here. You get them to their community groups; you get them back into church. You have them sit still. Now I see you feed them all kinds of stuff while I'm preaching. I get pictures of myself; they are drawing me during church. Look, that is inconvenient.

God's way is not the most convenient way for discipleship, for worship, for sharing the gospel. It is awkward to have a conversation about Jesus Christ, him living perfectly, dying in the place of sinners, being raised from the dead, and telling someone that's how you are saved. It's awkward. It's not convenient.

God's way is not the most logical way to young people. They have good jobs, but it's hard to know whether or not they should get married. So what do they do? They live together for a little while before they get married. It makes sense, except in God's economy. That's why sometimes it is not a logical way. When Katrina hit the United States in the Gulf, some of you remember that we were living in Mobile, AL. I was pastoring at Dolphin Way Baptist Church at the time. And my intent was to have our church people, the ones that would do it, to go out on the Interstate. People were coming out of New Orleans and driving through Mobile, and they didn't have anywhere to go. So we took some people in. Several church families, our deacons and their wives, went out to the gas station, and when people stopped there, all piled up. We would say, y'all come stay at our house for a while. We took in complete strangers. So I

decided, I'm going to find myself an older couple. It's probably safer. So we got an older couple. Connie and I put them in our house, we took them to our house, and they were really nice. They spent three days with us, and I got to know them and just thought the world of them. And before they left, the man came up and said, Look, could you marry us? We really like you as a preacher. We wonder if you could marry us. I said, You've been sleeping in the bedroom in my house, why are you not married? And they told me that it didn't make financial sense. God's voice sometimes doesn't make financial sense.

God's way, oftentimes, is not the most exciting way. You know, being a disciple of Jesus, being a follower of Christ, when you are converted, you have turned your attention to following Jesus. It can sometimes be doing the same things over and over again in the same direction, in a way that is honoring to the Lord. It's not exciting. Let's not, you and I, try to dress it up. God's way is sometimes just you plodding and staying at it. Being in the faith. Sometimes, God's ways are not the most fun way. What do we tell young men and women to flee temptation? What tempts us? Something that seems fun.

Sometimes God's way is not the happiest way. Some of you sitting here have been through so many hardships. You've carried so much, you've sought to be faithful to the Lord, to honor God, and the Lord has chosen this path for you. He has taken you on this path, and this path has been so hard. You see so many losses. Maybe you've had betrayals. I mean, in the passage, what's going to happen to the people in the passage? Verses 17 and 18 tell us that God is leading them. And if you read the rest, we'll get there next week. God is getting ready to take them down to the Red Sea and put them between the Red Sea and Pharaoh's army; between a rock and a hard place. God's way is not the happiest way.

Now, how do we apply this? What are the topics? What are the areas I've opened up with the opening illustration? In the era of sexuality that we live in in 2025, we are in the midst of a river of immorality. And if you're a gospel believer, you believe in Jesus, you believe the Bible, and you have put a stake down, if this is your stance, then you also take a stance on sexuality. You take a stance on homosexuality. If you believe God's good design is for a man and a woman to be under the Covenant of Marriage, if you believe that sexuality is something good that God has given to be experienced in a God-given way, then you take that stance. You find out that God's way is the best way, but it's difficult.

You take the biblical way of approaching money; how to earn money, how to spend money, how to give money, you think through what God wants you to do with the income that you have earned. How do you rightly utilize that?

You approach God's way to relationships, who you will go out with, and who you might court as a Christian young man or a Christian young woman. Or how you raise your children. Some of you, the way you are raising your children, people think you are insane. But what's happened is you've sought to honor God and be biblical in your approach to discipline and raising your children.

You approach God's ways when you decide where you work, or what your marriage looks like, or how you understand salvation, how does one become a Christian.

Here's a good place to pause. If you're a guest, when we say the gospel, here's what we mean. That God, in his goodness, has created you in his image. We respect you because you are an image bearer. You bear the image of God. But the image of God in you has been disfigured by your sin. It's covered by your sin. It's barred by your sins, it's almost broken by your sin. That sin is not just you being far away from God; that sin is an offense to God. It's an insult to God. It has angered God. We use the word judgment. That God rightly uses condemnation and anger for people who are sinning and not in Christ. That's trouble. But the trouble has a solution. That solution is called the gospel. We preach that Jesus Christ, as a human, is fully God and fully man. On Earth, he lived perfectly, as a man, earning righteousness in a way that we can't. That's important because he's going to give you that righteousness that he earned. And at the cross, what does he do? He takes that righteous robe off that he earned, and he puts on the sinners who were covered in sin. The Bible says he became sin on the cross. There, the wrath of God was poured out, and it killed him. The wages of sin is death. It kills Jesus; he died in our place. They put him in a tomb, dead, and three days later, God the Father raised him bodily from the dead. This is Easter, he raised him from the dead, and then he ascended into heaven.

So all of that happened, and it's no good to you if you don't trust and believe that God did that for you. Jesus did that for you. You take that and make it your own. Jesus did this for me. God's plan is the best plan. God's way is the best way. That's the first point. God's way is the best way. I'll give you a second point, number two.

God's promises are the best promises

I get that from verse 19. It's an odd verse, verse 19, and it's a remarkable verse. In fact, in verse 19, Moses quotes Genesis chapter 50. In Genesis chapter 50, Joseph said, God is going to save his people, and when he takes the Hebrews out of here, you take my body with you. Then, 400 years later, they're able to find his body, which is remarkable. I don't know why I'm struck by that so much. I think, because last week we were in Columbus, MS., seeing Mac and his wife, Ashley, and the baby turned a year old. So there to celebrate the birthday. They were having a big birthday party for a one-year-old who has no clue what's going. We did all of that, and Mack was working, so we didn't have anything to do. So I thought, you know, there's got to be a good cemetery here somewhere. Columbus is an old town, so my wife, Connie, my Mom and Dad, and I rode over to the Friendship Cemetery in Columbus, MS. There is the most splendid cemetery there. They had Confederate soldiers, unknown soldiers, and we came up on this beautiful headstone of a weeping angel. I researched it real quick, and it was a Southern Baptist preacher from the late 1800s who was employed by the Southern Baptist Convention. I'm the President of the SBC this year, and I have never heard of this guy. And thought how terrible that it's 100 years removed, and I don't even know his name. How do they know where his grave is? They had his bones. There they went because they believed the promises of God. In Joshua 24, when they finally go into the promised land, they took Joseph's bones. Why? Because the promises of God are true and right. When he's giving us roll call in Hebrews Chapter 11, he reaches back to Joseph and this event.

This is a picture of faith in God's promises. What are the things that God has promised to us? I'll give you a couple. Romans 10:9 tells us that if you confess with your mouth, Jesus is Lord, and you believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved. If you're here this morning and you're not a Christian or you're not sure if you're a Christian, this is a promise from God. If you believe and confess, you will be saved.

Every Sunday I stand up here, either me or this morning it was Jacob standing up and reading a passage that speaks to forgiveness. We are promised forgiveness. We are promised cleansing. And our confession is not just confessing sins. When Jacob was reading out of Titus, he wasn't just saying, Hey, you need to confess your sins. What he was confessing is that God has forgiven your sins. Second Corinthians 5:17 says, ¹⁷ *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has*

come: The old has gone, the new is here! What does that mean? That means that you don't put an adjective on your Christianity. You don't have a descriptor for Christianity. You don't say, I am a carnal Christian, I'm a worldly Christian, I am a sanctified Christian, I am a Bible believing Christian. There are some sorry Christians, but you don't use that as your agent. You don't say I am an addicted Christian, I'm an alcoholic Christian, I'm a same sex attracted Christian. Why? Because Christianity is not about having your behavior straightened up. If you are in Christ, you are a new creature. You were at one time blind, but now you can see. One time, you were dead: now you're alive.

You used to have a heart of stone, but God, in his goodness, reached into your heart and pulled out that heart of stone. Don't give your heart to Jesus. He doesn't want it. He wants to give you a new heart. You are now one saved by God's grace. You are a child of God with no descriptor. That's a promise right there.

Forgiveness, that's a promise. Look, you have a promise of the future. There is hope for the future. I would claim that promise. Look, if you're young, you're not afraid to die, you're a Christian. I just want you to have this promise. If God is for us, who can be against us? Be brave in your stance. Be brave in your walk. Be brave in following Christ. If God is for you, who can be against us? If you've been living for some time, you're getting older, and you think about the day when you'll breathe your last, it's good to think about it. Don't be morbid, but it's good to think.

Tomorrow, I will be preaching a funeral for Miss Jones. That's what I call her. Miss Mary Sue Jones. Mary Sue joined this church about the same time my family did. We actually knew each other at a former church. We were all quiet Presbyterians. We got here with you and became loud Baptists in 1985. I've known her for maybe 50 years. I don't know how long. I went to a bunch of camps with her. She was a school teacher. For me, at camp, she taught me how to do a back handspring. Which I can't do anymore, but I used to be good at it. I'm going to stand up tomorrow and preach the funeral and be able to say the promise is to be away from the body and to be at home with the Lord.

My wife got on a plane early this morning to go see her mom and dad. She's gone again. She was there last week. She had to go again. Her mom has the port put in for chemotherapy that

will start this week. The first appointment is 8:00 tomorrow morning, and they'll do the first treatment sometime later in the week. She has to be there, and it's just been a lot, and I'm praying together with her. It's one of those promises we can say, hey, you know, it's going to be okay, and we are not just saying that. I say it because I have this promise in Romans chapter 8, that God is doing something, he is working all of this together for the good of those who love him.

The writer of Hebrews, when he's trying to console the people that he's writing to, is encouraging them to stay faithful. In Hebrews 13:5, he quotes something you can't find in the gospel. He says, the Lord Jesus himself said I will never leave you or forsake you. Look, brothers and sisters, God keeps his promises, on his timetable and for his glory. So, what do we do? We trust him. We surrender our lives to the Lordship of Jesus. We say to God, Lord, here I am, use me any way you want to. Put me anywhere you want me to go. Bring me into any set of circumstances. Give me grace to honor you in every setting. Find ways for me to serve you. In every arena, we surrender our lives to the absolute Lordship of Jesus.

Have you done that? If so, you understand that God cares for you through that. If not, surrender to the Lordship of Christ. Strive to know this God of the Bible. Ask questions. God, what are you teaching me? What are you teaching me now? And how can I use that for your glory?

So, God's plan is the best plan, God's way is the best way. God's promises are the best promises. Let me give you a third one, number three.

God's help is the best help

God's help is the very best help. Do you see that in verses 20-22? God shows himself; it's a theophany. Verse 20 tells us they're on the move, and God takes them right to the edge of the wilderness. In verse 21, the Lord himself, that's Yahweh, that is the God of the covenant, he gives them a theophany. That is God showing himself. That's what a theophany is. He went before them by day in a pillar of cloud, and by night, the pillar of cloud became a pillar of fire to give them light. So, you have God there in one pillar. In the daytime, it looks like a cloud; at night, it is fire. I started thinking about the cloud, and it sounds familiar. And if you read

through the Old Testament, you'll find that oftentimes God shows himself in a cloud where you can't really see him. He's covered, and yet there. Or he shows himself in fire. That is a little bit disconcerting, yet it is purifying. Here, before the people, he will lead them through the cloud and fire.

I started thinking too, that sounds really familiar. And I remembered that when Jesus, after he was raised from the dead, he met with all of his disciples, and when he ascended into heaven, go look at the end of the gospels of Matthew and Luke, when he ascended into heaven, he ascended into the cloud. When you close the Gospels and open up the book of Acts, there the church is born, and when the Holy Spirit descended, Jesus ascended into the cloud, and the Holy Spirit descended with fire. So, cloud by day, fire by night. It's a reminder of God's presence, of God's assurance, and of God's guidance.

So, as I was studying this passage and listening to others preach this passage, I came across Kevin de Young, a local pastor here in Charlotte, Presbyterian, and a great author. I was listening to him preach this passage back when he was a much younger man. And he talked about being thankful for the nevers. I mean, we're thankful for the things we see, but there are sometimes we should be thankful for God's guidance that he took us away from stuff. Like I'm thankful that I never went hungry. I never missed a meal in my house, ever. I probably had too many meals. I never had to guess whether my parents loved me. I wasn't born in Nazi Germany. I didn't have to worry about if I was going to follow Adolf Hitler. I wasn't born in London and lived there in the 1940s when Hitler was bombing. I wasn't alive in the 14th century, when the Black Plague was here. I grew up in a country where somebody was free to share the gospel with me. I could get saved and not be persecuted because I was following Jesus. I was able to experience God's good grace and guidance. And you're living in that same environment, and God has shown himself to you to lead you, to guide you, and to help you. For those of you who are not yet Christians, God's good help is best seen in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, his perfect life, his death on the cross, and his resurrection is offered to you. Give your life, yield your life to God's good plan. Why? Because God's way is the best way. It's at the cross. Come to the Cross of Jesus. God's promises are the best; he'll sustain you through this life and on into the next. God's help is the best. He'll guide you day and night. Yield to him this morning. Come give your life to God's good plan.

(Pastor prays)