

Foreign Faith | Letting God Take The Lead

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Good morning, Menlo Church, and welcome to the final message in our series, Foreign Faith, where we've been exploring the unique elements of God's presence with his people, Israel, as they have been delivered from Egypt in the wilderness. Today, we are going to look at one more lesson that has marked the faith of followers of Jesus for millennia in hopes that maybe we can get back into the normal pressures of this fall, that we can maybe choose to be abnormal a little bit in some special and intentional ways. I think our world needs a little bit more abnormal in the ways of Jesus around us.

I want to welcome those of us in all of our Bay Area campuses, San Mateo, Menlo Park, Mountain View, and Saratoga. Thanks for being

with us. And to those of you joining us online, we're so glad that you're here. We can feel the energy of fall kicking off. We can kind of feel the energy all around us. Maybe we can certainly feel it around here. And we're so grateful that you've chosen to be a part of that. You contribute to that. And today, with that in mind, across all of Menlo, we are celebrating what we call Back to School Bash with special kickoff gatherings for kids and students across all of our campuses. It's going to be a really good time. So, if you're a kid or student, I hope you're there. You can learn more at menlo.church/connect.

If you're a kid at heart, we'd love to have you volunteer and serve with kids. But, these events are really special. And I would say regardless of where you are in your faith, here at Menlo, we believe that hope is for everyone.

And so for our kids and student environments, we want them to be places where everyone can find belonging even before they believe.

They can bring their honest questions and hopefully have a great time along the way.

And if you aren't a kid or you don't have any kids, would you do me a favor this fall, would you join me in praying for our kids, for our students, for the loved ones who care for them as they step into the pressures of a new school year. In just a second, I'm going to pray and I just want you to take this prayer as a reminder.

Use it as a cue in your own life to keep praying that God would grab the hearts and the imagination of the next generation, that God would pour out wisdom and discernment for them as they resume classes and students who are maybe grappling with deep questions of faith and life in a culture without much depth or life to it that they would continue to dig until they find the God of hope that he can provide something that gets them through it. Would you pray with me?

God, I pray that this fall you would do a work in the students and kids here at Menlo that know you, that they would be ambassadors of hope and peace and joy into every place they go. Not perfect, but God, people that have been prompted by you to love others well.

And that because of that, God, you would cultivate curiosity in kids and students and families that are looking for an anchor deeper than the next activity, deeper than the next vacation, deeper than the next accomplishment. That God, the work that you can do in us is eternal work. Would you help us to demonstrate that to a world, a world so satisfied often times with what's just happening right now? Would you be with us now? Would you shape us by the power of your spirit for the work in front of us? It's in Jesus' name. Amen.

So, if you know me, you know this about me. I'm a pretty structured person. I'm pretty efficient. One of the ways that that shows up is I am pretty efficient about driving. I try to only get on the road and get where I'm going when I know I can maximize my drive time with as little traffic as possible. And as school starts, that routine gets

disrupted. Like I don't always get that choice. As a matter of fact, sometimes, well, I know that general times that are different during the day to go get my kids. There are times I can't avoid it. I refer to this era of my parenting as the unpaid Uber driver era of my parenting. Maybe you can relate to that.

But here's the thing. When I get myself into trouble the most is when I've decided I know a shortcut to get where I'm going. And I'm not sure about you, but where I live, it feels like everywhere I'm driving right now is in the midst of the biggest road construction project ever. Like, I don't know what is happening. I have no idea. Just we decided like, you know what, school's about to start. Let's mess up all the roads.

So, that for me is very frustrating. And maybe for you, you're a better person than me. I bet you are. And here's the thing. You may be a more patient driver, but you are probably not much more of a patient person. Driving might not be your thing, but there are probably areas in your life where you are tempted to take a shortcut.

For Israel, not only did God not give them a shortcut in their journey, he took the longest possible route to the promised land. Moving from Egypt to the promised land would have taken about 11 days. But instead, you're like, if you don't know the story, you're like, well, is it a month? Is it six months? No. No. God took them on a national, personal, and spiritual journey that lasted 40 years.

God wasn't just interested in getting Israel to a physical place. He was committed to shaping them into a certain kind of people. This was not a detour. This was the design.

See, God knew that if they arrived without faith, without unity, and without dependence on him, that he was building in them along the way over the course of decades after centuries in captivity, that the promised land would just become another version of Egypt.

Some of us, we need the exact same lesson today as we head into this fall with expectations that can feel so heavy with accomplishments that we're hoping to achieve that will let us down over and over again if we're not careful.

Ultimately, Israel learned the same lesson that we need to, and that is that the long road with God beats any shortcut without him. Our culture may need to hear that. We need to hear that. We often want to take shortcuts because we think that the way that other people around us seem to get ahead must be shortcuts. A lot of it is because we don't know their whole story. We would think differently if we did, but we think, well, I'm already behind. I better take some shortcuts to catch up.

For Israel, God did what we've seen him do over and over and over again. He made it impossible for them to go it alone. Like we've already talked about over the course of this series. Last week we looked at the daily mana, the way that God provided food every single

day as provision for Israel. And this week we're going to look at God's daily development for Israel.

Here's the description of God's daily development for Israel. "And the Lord went before them by day in a pillar of cloud to lead them along the way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light that they may travel by day and by night. The pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night did not depart from the people." (Exodus 13:21-22)

Now remember we are talking about the population of Silicon Valley moving in one big group that is setting up camp throughout the wilderness for 40 years. Talk about a camping trip, right? God would use the two pillars of cloud and fire to show all the people of Israel where and when to move.

Now, if this feels unbelievable to you, maybe this is your first weekend with us. You're not a person of faith. We're so glad that you're here. Here's the thing. While it may feel unbelievable to us, you

have to understand the context that Israel is living in. Here's what they've already experienced in leaving Egypt.

God sent 10 plagues to break the power of Egypt's gods. Protected them during those plagues while Egypt suffered. Spared their families through the blood of the lamb of Passover. Moved Pharaoh in his heart to release them from slavery overnight. Let them leave Egypt carrying silver, gold, and clothing from their former masters, parted the Red Sea so they could walk across on dry ground, defeated the Egyptian army in a single moment when the waters closed in on them.

Then last week, we saw God give daily provision for decades through mana, supernaturally appearing every single day to give them food and giving them the gift of Sabbath, one day a week supernaturally provided where they could rest after centuries where they couldn't.

And so I'm sure the pillars seemed pretty strange to them at first, but these dramatic and visible miracles were probably pretty normal

pretty quick. Remember, the same God that got them all out of Egypt overnight would spend the next 40 years getting Egypt out of them in an intentional, systematic way and a long process that required daily visible and undeniable dependence on God.

And that's where this connects to us because most of us, we don't struggle to believe that God can step in and do something big. Even if you're not a person of faith, I'm guessing you have some context in your life, something that was inexplainable in your life or in the life of a loved one. Where we wrestle is believing that he's just as personal and just as present in the slow, unflashy, day in and day out leading of our life.

See, Israel didn't just need a rescue moment from God. They needed a reforming movement with God. God knew that if he took them the short way, that they would arrive at the right place. Listen to this. They would arrive at the right place, but with the wrong heart. How many of us has that happened to?

The same issue is true whether we want to admit it or not. Many times in our life when we force our way through a shortcut, we live in a shortcut culture, Menlo Church, where quick fixes, instant results, next day shipping. They are the norm. It's easy to start believing that if something takes longer, it must be wrong. It must be inferior. But God takes the long road because he's not just moving us forward geographically. He's moving us deeper spiritually.

Years ago, a friend of mine did a Kickstarter campaign for a product that he was working on. And because I was his friend and it was a good idea, I invested in the first round of being a backer. And if you're unfamiliar, Kickstarter is a website that you invest upfront in ideas that haven't been built yet.

And even back then, I'd already gotten used to Prime shipping and things coming to me very quickly. And so, after a few weeks, I forgot about it. Several months later, when I got a box in the mail, I was surprised to discover that the thing I had forgotten about was being slowly built and developed, even if I didn't see it.

And I think actually that's true for you and me, too. Sometimes the things we don't see, God is doing inside of us through slow and deliberate change. Israel, they had this unique ability to see the pillars anytime they wanted to. They were physically in front of them. And I bet that if you look close enough at your past, especially, you can see places where God showed up in those unmistakable ways, too. Maybe it's why you're here today.

I wonder though, are you still looking for them today? Are you on the hunt for God's direction in your life? Or are you forcing your way to find a shortcut and you'll only see his hand in the rearview mirror? See, the long road with God, it beats any shortcut without him every single time.

For some of you, that time you got fired or that relationship that fell apart, they were just the right things at the wrong time for you.

Sometimes we get so excited about something that we don't notice if we're even equipped for it. Sometimes we're asking God for something that we aren't ready for, and the worst thing he could do is

give it to us. It's been said that gifting and ability will get you in the room. Your dream job, the school you've been praying as an option for you, or the thing that you've been dreaming about, but that character will keep you there.

And God was building character deep into the people of Israel, even though it was going to take a long time.

What if we stopped asking the question of Silicon Valley, which is what's next? And what if more we asked the question, what's left?

Instead of going, God, when I can can I get that promotion? When can I jump to the next organization? When can I upgrade this person?

When can I get that lifestyle upgrade? When can I get the new and better this?

What if instead we said, "God, what's left? What's left for me to learn in the situation that I'm in? What's left for me to grow in where I am or

who I'm with? What's left for me to be shaped by in the season that you have me in? Who is left for me to invest in?"

Because if God hasn't moved you, it's usually because he wants you to dig in, to stay for something or someone that you've been avoiding, that you've been running from, or you've been missing along the way.

Because the truth is, the long road with God protects us.

Israel had been in Egypt for hundreds of years, and without realizing it, they had become more and more inculturated to the practices around them. From making idols to false gods to household idols in their own home to oppressive work rhythms that they had no choice over, to unthinkable sexual practices to unrighteous political allegiance. Israel had a lot to shake off of in these 40 years in the wilderness.

Many of the things that we see God do in the wilderness were direct responses to Israel's disobedience and misplaced loyalty. This wasn't

random. It was a 40year detox. See, one way that God did this through the pillars of smoke and fire, as we've seen in a moments, like what we studied a few weeks ago at the Red Sea.

But it reads like this. It says, "Then the angel of God, who was going before the host of Israel moved and went behind them, and the pillar of cloud moved from before them and stood behind them, coming between the host of Egypt and the host of Israel. And there was the cloud and the darkness and it lit up the night without one coming near the other all night. (Exodus 14:19-20)

At this point in Israel's journey that we explored a few weeks ago, God is moving them from a strategic point to a new strategic place right before the Red Sea. And an angel of God who some believe is a pre-incarnate Jesus, what's theologically called a theophony for when Jesus came to earth before he was born as a man 2,000 years ago in the Old Testament that he was the one leading the people.

Then in a moment, God shifted the pillar of clouds behind them with the angel of God who shifted into a protective role from directive to protective. And the pillar of fire gave visibility for Israel to prepare them and gave them cover so that the Egyptians couldn't see them or reach them all night.

Now, if you were with us when we studied this, you know that God used a very long and confusing path to convince Pharaoh that actually Israel was lost. He used it to lure Egypt into a trap. The same pillars that protected Israel were going to trap Egypt in the exact same physical location.

Now imagine the spiritual realm that surrounds us even now. Imagine it being made visible by the landmark commemorating Egypt's gods of the sea and the storms which protected Israel from Egypt and their own tendency to revert to the enslaving practices of the past. This moment that God was doing was not only going to slow them down for the moment, but once they got across the Red Sea, it would be literally impossible for them to return back.

God's long road, it still protects us today. I wonder what prayer requests weren't granted, milestones not achieved, timelines not met, grades that you grieved over in the moment. That in eternity you will see those delays as gracious shields against greater harm. Unseen detours that kept you from danger you didn't anticipate. Gentle reroutings that prepared you for blessing that you're not currently ready to receive.

If you need a practical example of this, if you're like, "Phil, I'm not sure I believe that. You know, I'm a pretty good judge of what I need and what I want, what I pray for." Can you imagine if the God of the universe granted every one of your middle school prayer requests?

Now, if you're a middle schooler, I'm sorry. You'll get it eventually. But like the hairstyle that you had to have that would now be immortalized in school pictures, some of you are like, "God granted that prayer request." Right? the girl or guy that you dreamed of marrying. The

silly car that you thought you'd drive forever. Life as a runaway from your overbearing parents while you live on Doritos and Mountain Dew.

I mean, God is so gracious to not give us everything we want. Not only to hear us, to love us as we pray, but knowing us more deeply than we know ourselves, that the long road of life and formation is to help us avoid the pitfalls that we would sprint into without his resisting and staying hands. And let me just tell you, this doesn't stop in middle school.

You and I all know it. Some of you, you're in your 20s. You're a young adult. You're having to pivot as technology and culture and life all shift. And what you thought your path was going to be is now dramatically different. I'm telling you, God is so gracious to us to not give us what we want.

Remember, the long road with God beats any shortcut without him.

Every detour with God is designed to keep you from destinations that you'll thank him for avoiding in eternity. Can you think of one right now? I don't know about you, but my shortsighted desires, they didn't stop in middle school.

The other thing that we see God show us with the pillars of clouds and fire in Israel is that the long road with God directs us. You've probably heard that God used the pillar and the clouds and the fire during the day and the pillar of fire at night as a sort of ancient navigational heads up display. But there was something else.

We read it like this. Throughout all their journeys, whenever the cloud was taken up over the tabernacle, the people of Israel would set out. But if the cloud was not taken up, then they did not set out till the day that it was taken up. For the cloud of the Lord was on the tabernacle by day, and fire was in it by night, in the sight of all the house of Israel throughout all their journeys. (Exodus 40:36-38)

Earlier in this same chapter, God instructs Israel to build a tabernacle. This is the portable temple where the artifacts of God's faithfulness would be stored and God's unique presence would be manifested. The tabernacle was more than a worship tent. It was the center of gravity for the Jewish people. And the pillar of clouds and fire, they didn't simply represent God's presence. They determined Israel's pace, place, and priorities for decades.

When the cloud lifted, they packed up and they moved. But for days, for weeks, sometimes for months, it would remain still. And as long as it did, they did. With a shortcut to the promised land, always closer than any of them realized. They waited. When they packed up, it was everything, right? Families, kids. I have like kids that are still in the stuffed animal stage. All the stuffed animals, all the real animals, the tents, all their stuff. Even if they've just gotten settled, they were like, "All right, everything's where it's supposed to be. I like our walk to the bathroom. This is a good situation." Imagine living in a tent like that,

never knowing if you were going to move in a day, a week, or just a few months.

It was a daily invisible reminder of something that is still true today.

We just don't have as clear a reminder of it. Here's the reminder we need that life with God is not self-directed. That's still true today. You don't just follow your gut, Menlo. We follow our God. And when you're not sure, oftentimes the right answer is to wait.

Theologian Dallas Willard puts it this way. He says, "The aim of God in history, I'm gonna need help. I don't have that one memorized." Thank you. You all just realized something like, "Wait a second. He doesn't have all this memorized." The aim of God in history is the creation of an all-inclusive community of loving persons with himself included in that community as its prime sustainer and most glorious inhabitant.

Doesn't that sound great? God wasn't trying to get Israel to the promised land. That was not his only goal. He could have done that in

11 days. He was making sure they didn't just arrive at the promised place, but they became the promised people for the whole world. We needed them to do more than just get to the promised land.

Oftentimes, the moments where God has used pillars of direction in my life, I only understand them in hindsight. Usually because I'm blowing by those indicators, trying to find a shortcut, experiencing unnecessary pain in the process. How about you?

Is there a place maybe that you're charging ahead where God is telling you to wait, you're like, "No, Phil, that's only you." Okay.

Is there a place maybe where you're waiting for direction, but you've already received the direction, you just don't like it? Is there a decision where you're relying on your Egyptian instincts rather than the voice of God in your life?

This is universal. This could be true for any of us. Remember the long road with God. It beats any shortcut without him. The question is, do you believe that? There are so many people throughout Menlo that could come join me on stage right now and share the dangers and the unnecessary pain of taking the shortcuts that they've tried personally or living through the wreckage of the pain caused by loved ones doing the same thing.

After 40 years of detox, God finally led Israel into the promised land. And while there were seasons of great peace and promise, there were also painful shortcuts like when Israel demanded a king like every other nation had. And God wanted them to understand that he was their king. That he wanted them to understand you should always view your politics through the lens of your faith and not the other way around. That you should not worship politicians regardless of which party you voted for. Oh, we're not talking about Israel anymore, are we?

See, God, he was so gracious to Israel and ultimately to all of us through Israel because Jesus would be born to a people who suffered greatly but remained his people. And he would suffer greatly so that we might become his people forever. Back then, Israel had pillars of clouds and fire to guide them. Today, our pillars look more like glowing screens and servers behind the scenes. But just like then, not every guide that's in front of you is worth following.

In the Bay Area, we've never met a hack that we didn't love. Life hacks, growth hacks. We have a set of things we use on our keyboard that we call shortcut keys. I'm familiar with a magazine called Fast Company. I've never heard of one called Slow Company. We have these apps that can deliver food in minutes. All drafts our emails in seconds. And we can code, test, and deploy a new feature to software before lunchtime. The unspoken mantra of Silicon Valley is fast equals good.

But in the kingdom of God, fast can be fatal. Imagine a self-driving car that skipped its calibration phase because the designers behind it

were like, "Well, we'll figure it out on the road. We got to keep going."

It might reach the destination, but likely it will crash on the way.

God's long road, it isn't inefficiency, it's calibration. He's aligning your heart so that when you arrive, you actually know how to live in the way of Jesus. And that takes a long time. Can I get in your business a little bit more? You're like, I don't really have a choice. Great.

A recent study by MIT Media Lab revealed that students who regularly use Chat GPT to write essays have lower brain engagement, poorer recall, and a diminished sense of ownership over their writing.

Researchers have called it metacognitive laziness. I call it spiritual deformation. And it's everywhere.

As a matter of fact, right now where we find ourselves is that the fastest growing use of Al is actually what they call companion apps where people are creating imaginary friends. They're creating imaginary boyfriends or girlfriends. They are replacing real

community with I mean it's it's called artificial intelligence. It's an artificial community. And you know what having your best friend in Al does for you? It makes you worse at real relationships.

You may not know this, but for a little while, some of the largest language models were trying to figure out a way so that they weren't necessarily as complimentary to us. It wasn't like, "You're the best thing ever. That's the greatest question ever." And you know what happened? We didn't like it and so they moved it back. But here's the thing, like you liking something or not liking something doesn't mean it's good for you or bad for you.

Let's be careful. Al can be an amazing tool if we use it to help us think better. If we use it to help us go deeper into a topic or into a conversation. I hope that it does. But if we are not careful, Al will give us the illusion of illumination. We will be illuminated, but it's just a fantasy. It just washes over us. It never goes into us. We actually don't learn it. We just spit it out. You get the grade, you get the promotion,

you get the presentation done, but you're undone. And it's masking our deeper need for delayed gratification.

It's just the latest and loudest example of a broken world trying to move us away from formation into the person that Jesus made us to be and into a microwavable version of ourselves. Fast, convenient, and easily, instantly forgettable. When I was a kid, my parents, they didn't cook very often, but on special occasions, I knew it was going to be a good meal because I would come downstairs and I would see the Crock-Pot out on the counter. And if you're like, "Did you grow up in the Midwest?" I sure did.

And when I saw the Crock-Pot, I knew that we were going to have a good meal, right? It was going to slow cook it. There'd be hours of preparation and marination. The juices had time to marinate the meat. The vegetables would be soft and flavorful. Are you hungry for lunch yet?

See, we're supposed to have a slowcooked faith. Not one that is quickly formed and easily deformed, but that is what the culture around us is trying to create inside of us. It's what we will often settle for as shortcuts available all around us if we're not careful.

This concept is captured beautifully by author and pastor Eugene Peterson who put it this way. "There is a great market for religious experience in our world. There is little enthusiasm for the patient acquisition of virtue. Little inclination to sign up for a long apprenticeship in what earlier generations of Christians called holiness for recognizing that Christianity is a long obedience in the same direction."

Menlo, let's reject microwaved moments and let's choose slow cooking with God in our lives as we walk with him and we make space for the types of rhythm and community and growth that we've been talking about. We will look different. You will have to say no to some good stuff to say yes to the best of for sure. It is inefficient. But remember, it's actually calibration.

The world needs to be a little bit of different right now. The way of Jesus is different. Let's be crock-pot Christians. Notice I did not say crackpot. That's a new series we're doing this fall. That's not this.

As we finish, here's the thing I'd love for us to pray about. I'd love for God to reveal in each one of us places of quiet rebellion. Places in our own soul where we have taken shortcuts with him. Where everything has looked okay on the outside, but on the inside the slow work that God wants to do through deliberately spending time with them, we've just shortcuted.

Taking a day off, we've taken a week off. We've taken a month off.

We've taken some years off. And as long as it looks okay on the outside, we seem fine with it. But God has so much more for us, something so much better for us if we'll simply return back and say, "God, I'm willing. I'm willing to wait. I'm willing to listen to you."

In a world that says, "Mask your weaknesses through technology to have greater strengths." The scriptures say that God's strength is made perfect in our weakness. Will you trust him with that today? It's just as true today as it's ever been before. Would you pray with me?

God, this is not just a theoretical conversation. This isn't just something that we think might be true for somebody. This is personal. This is practical. This is real life for so many of us. And I just ask that whatever it is in our life right now that is holding us back from a deeper walk with you, a more patient walk with you, the longer and deliberate road with you, that God, you would show up as only you can.

That whatever areas of our life we've not let you into, whatever relationships we've kept you at a distance from, whatever parts of our life we've lived as divided followers, God, would you undivide us?

Would you bring us back to letting you in?

And even now as we sing, even now as we come together, would you help us find those quiet places of rebellion and give you leadership over them again? Or maybe for some of us for the very first time. In Jesus name. Amen.

Resources -

Books and Articles

- Using ChatGPT for work? It might make you stupid. The Times.
 https://www.thetimes.com/uk/technology-uk/article/using-chatgpt-for-work-it-might-make-you-more-stupid-dtvntprtk?utm_source=chatgpt.com®ion=global
- A Long Obedience in the Same Direction (1980) by Eugene Peterson https://a.co/d/4XQXhn8
- Walking with God Through Pain and Suffering by Timothy Keller
 https://www.amazon.com/Walking-God-Through-Pain-Suffering/dp/05
 25952454

- The Ruthless Elimination of Hurry by John Mark Comer https://a.co/d/bPYceKN
- Strange New World: How Thinkers and Activists Redefined Identity and Sparked the Sexual Revolution by Carl Trueman https://a.co/d/5Jf2b4q
- A Non-Anxious Presence: How a Changing and Complex World Will Create a Remnant of Renewed Christian Leaders by Mark Sayers https://a.co/d/dc7Kx6m
- Invitation to Solitude and Silence by Ruth Haley Barton https://a.co/d/7re7a0a
- Morning and Evening by Charles Spurgeon https://www.crosswalk.com/devotionals/morningandevening/
- Exodus: God's Kingdom of Priests (Preaching the Word Commentary) by Philip Graham Ryken https://a.co/d/amb2N2e
- NIV Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible https://a.co/d/aNQG6Fv
- National Geographic // Urgency Culture
 https://www.nationalgeographic.com/science/article/urgency-culture-burnout

Online Resources (Videos and Podcasts)

- The Bible Project: Exodus Overview https://bibleproject.com/guides/book-of-exodus
- John Mark Comer Podcast: Fight Hustle, End Hurry (with Jefferson Bethke)
 https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/fight-hustle-end-hurry/id14803
 00467
- Mark Sayers on Cultural Change and Christian Leadership (Podcast: Carey Nieuwhof Leadership Podcast) https://careynieuwhof.com/episode404/
- Rebecca McLaughlin: How Christianity Makes Sense of Suffering (Video)
 - How Could A Loving God Allow Us To Suffer? Rebecca Mclaugh...
- Tim Keller: How to Deal With Dark Times (YouTube)
 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Zk8ZXWDaDgl