

A Downturn Means a Wrong Turn – Exodus 14:1-4

Introduction

A couple of weeks ago we talked about God's will and habits we could form that would help us to know God's will in any circumstance

But let's say you have sought God's will in a major life decision, believed that you discovered it, followed it to the letter, and all hell broke loose – everything went off the rails and you found yourself in a very difficult spot

What would you think? What would you do?

Perhaps that's already happened to you at some point and when it did, you immediately thought you had made a wrong turn – that you must have misunderstood God's will – otherwise things wouldn't have gone so badly

Most of us have an unbiblical view of God's will and God's direction in our lives

Over the past two weeks we've considered the false idea that God has a specific, step-by-step plan for our lives that we dare not mess up by making a wrong choice

And the mistaken notion that following God will result in us experiencing nothing but good fortune – a smooth path through life as it were

And today we are going to take a look at another of those things that we "Sometimes know that just ain't so" as we consider the idea that **a downturn means a wrong turn**

While we accept, as we saw last week, that God means to reward his followers and punish those who reject him primarily in eternity and that what we see on this earth is not all there is, we still pull back from the prospect that God would purposely direct us into difficulty

We don't want to believe that God's divine and deliberate will would steer us into a valley and when, in a sincere attempt to follow God's will, we find ourselves in a difficult situation, we assume we must have heard God wrongly

We just figure that we must have been wrong or else things would have worked out better

And the result is that we try to immediately get out of whatever difficulty we find ourselves in

But the reality is that God has a long-standing practice of directing his people into difficult situations – and even situations where they suffer for a prolonged period of time – through no fault of their own

We can look at servants of God like the prophets Jeremiah, who was rejected completely all during his 40-year ministry and Hosea who God told to marry "a wife of whoredom" and who dealt with her infidelity for the rest of his life

We could look at Daniel and his three friends, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego and many others who endured persecution for doing precisely what God would have them do

Likewise, we could look to Hebrews chapter 11 where we read about those who were faithful and yet were the victims of mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment and those who were stoned or sawn in two and those who were afflicted and mistreated and who walked around destitute living in caves and dens in the earth

Of course, we would be remiss if we didn't cite the greatest example of all – the Son of God who came down from heaven to suffer the most grievous example of a valley suffered for perfectly obeying God's will

Following God's will doesn't always mean traversing the mountain tops – sometimes it leads us right into the valley

And sometimes the valley may be very deep and very long

But not all valleys are created equally and we have to be discerning about the valleys we find ourselves in

So the first thing we will consider this morning is that there are **three types of valleys** that we need to be aware of

Then, we will look at **how we should react** to the valley we find ourselves in

And, lastly, we will consider **the key question to ask in every valley**

So let's begin by looking at the three types of valleys we might encounter

I. Three Types of Valleys

A. God directed me here

The first one is the type I have just been talking about in my introduction – **God directed me here to this valley**

The distinguishing characteristic of a God-directed valley is obedience that seems to have gone amiss

Whenever doing the right thing puts you in a bind or keeps you there, it's a good bet you are right where God wants you

Let's look together at Exodus 14 where we will see this kind of valley

Leading up to these verses we know that Israel had been slaves in Egypt and, in time, the Egyptians who had at first welcomed them enslaved them and forced them into hard labor

And we know that it was in Egypt where God protected the Israelites and enlarged their numbers while he prepared them for nationhood

That was a valley of God's choosing but after 430 years God led the Israelites out of Egypt and, almost immediately, into another valley as we see in the verses before us

Follow along with me as I read **Exodus 14:1-4**

Then the Lord said to Moses, "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. For Pharaoh will say of the people of Israel, 'They are wandering in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.' 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." And they did so.

Strategically, this seems like the worst possible site for God to have directed them set up camp

They were hemmed in by mountains on two sides and the Red Sea on the third with the Egyptian army coming for them from the fourth direction

Of course, we know how the story ended with God coming to the rescue by parting the Red Sea so the Children of Israel could escape

So for us the valley they were in doesn't look so bad – but we have to remember, they didn't know how it was going to turn out

They had to be terrified and confused by their situation that was brought on by doing exactly what God told them to do

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in **Daniel 3** refused to "take a knee" to anyone or anything but God

And for their faithfulness to doing what they knew God wanted them to do they wound up cast into a fiery furnace

That too was a God-directed valley and they didn't know they were going to walk back out of the furnace untouched

But they knew they were doing what God wanted them to do and so the result was they wound up where God wanted them to be

And the same is still true for the believer today

If your obedience to God puts you in a bad place you can know for sure that you are right where God wants you to be even if where you are isn't where you want to be

That reality may not make the valley less deep or long and it may not be any less frightening or frustrating to find yourself there, but knowing that God has placed you there should provide you with a sense of perspective and ultimate well-being

The second type of valley we want to consider is one we don't like to admit to - It's the **I messed up to get here, valley**

B. I messed up to get here

We place ourselves in some valleys because of our rebellious or foolish decisions and in this case a downturn actually does represent a wrong turn

When we read through the book of Judges we see the Israelites repeatedly enter a cycle of disobedience that always led to a valley where they suffered

Those were self-induced hardships that were the direct result of turning away from God and not God-ordained valleys that came from obedience

King David serves as a prime example of the first two kinds of valleys

First, when David was obedient to God and had done nothing to place himself in a valley, he was still pursued by King Saul and was on the run for years – that was a valley that God placed David in

But then when he was king, David decided to commit adultery with Bathsheba and that decision caused him to enter into a valley that he never fully emerged from for the remainder of his life

We can read about David's diversion from God's path in 2Samuel 11 and the consequences of it in 2Samuel 12

The resulting family turmoil, lost opportunities and death were all consequences of David's disobedience

The beauty, if we can call it that, of these kinds of valleys is that it's typically easy for us to recognize what caused us to be in them

And when we do an honest assessment the wrong turn usually stands out clearly

God isn't in the guessing game business – especially where error is concerned – and he doesn't play games by leaving us to guess as to where we made the wrong turn that got us into the valley

And that's true even when the wrong turn wasn't a willful disobedience but more made out of innocent ignorance

God wants us to know where we went wrong because it's the only way we'll ever get back on track

The third type of valley we want to consider is the valley that makes no sense – the **it's a mystery how I got here valley**

C. It's a mystery how I got here

Whereas some valleys are directly connected to our obedience and some are directly connected to our disobedience, there is a class of valley that has no discernable reason – it's just there

Now, there are times when we can solve the mystery by looking back with the benefit of time and distance but, there are also times when we just can't make sense out of the valley

Looking back at the case of Job and his valley which we considered a bit last week

We know the cause of his valley because the whole account is written down for us in Scripture but we have no indication that Job ever understood why he found himself in such a deep, long valley

Job didn't understand, his wife certainly didn't get it, and Job's friends were all wrong with their assessments

And even when God showed up at the end of the matter he didn't tell anyone why it had happened

I have to be honest and say that even though the whole matter is revealed to us, I really don't understand why God saw fit to allow Job to have to endure his valley

Job's valley is a "who knows why" valley that defies explanation and simply has to be accepted

And there are times when God still allows his children to experience valleys that have no clear genesis and whose reasons are known to God alone

Valleys are a very real part of the Christian life so let's next consider **how we should react to a valley**

II. How Should I React to a Valley?

It probably will come as no surprise but how we should react has differences and similarities depending on the type of valley we are in

A. With patience and endurance in a God-induced valley

First, let's consider how we should react to a God-induced valley

We must encounter and endure all God directed me here valleys with **patience and resolution**

When a valley is the direct result of our obedience and we know it the pressure will be great to renege on our obedience

If you've ever taken a step that you know God ordained for you only to have things go sideways you know how strong the temptation is to decide that you must have surely misheard or misunderstood God's leading

God sent me here valleys present a very serious temptation to change course because it's hard for us to conceive that God would allow us to suffer for our obedience

The very real and present danger in those situations is that we can begin to make self-focused decisions for the sake of getting out of the valley we have found ourselves in

And we may well even be surrounded by counselors who advise us to change course because a deep or long-term valley could never be a part of God's plan

And those counselors may be very well intentioned as I think of Peter trying to prevent Jesus from entering the valley of the cross that was before him

But, when you know that the valley is the direct result of doing what God has directed, when God has clearly spoken and worked in the situation, you will be tempted to go against God

Resist that urge and persevere – God is with you and working, even in the valley

The same approach is warranted in the mystery valleys as well – simply continue on the path of obedience and endure until God brings you out the other side – it's the only viable option

B. With confession and repentance in a self-inflicted valley

With self-inflicted valleys our reaction must be radically different

What is called for in valleys that are the result of our wrong turn we must immediately change direction

And that is done through sincere **confession and repentance**

Confession is when we see things God's way and admit that we have erred and repentance is the purposeful turning away from our error

Valleys of our own making require taking personal responsibility and making drastic changes

Both are required because confession without changes only produces unproductive sorrow whereas making changes without confession allows us to ignore our part in the whole affair and what got us there in the first place

Therefore, any changes will likely be shallow and temporary and we might well find ourselves repeating the cycle again

There are a couple of unique problems with *I messed up valleys* that we need to quickly consider

The first is the temptation to blame God for them

This often happens when a person recognizes their own error has placed them in the valley and they express profound sorrow for it but they still refuse to repent and turn from their sin

And the longer they stay in the valley the more they begin to blame God for it thinking that he is being unfair because they actually are sorry

But there is only one way out of this type of valley and that requires retracing one's steps and then heading in a new direction – in God's direction

The second problem is that there is often no quick fix for an *I messed up valley*

And the valley doesn't always go away just because we start heading in the right direction

Sometimes, unfortunately, the consequences of a wrong turn can result in a valley that lasts a lifetime

Thankfully, that isn't always the case or even the case in most instances

Still, there is one rule for all valleys that we need to recognize –

C. The one rule for all valleys – there are no acceptable shortcuts to getting out

There are no acceptable shortcuts to getting out of a valley – and that goes for any of the three types we've considered

And if there is one thing we can count on when it comes to a valley is that Satan will be sure to offer us a shortcut out

Think about facing a predicament where you're in a valley and telling the truth will likely prolong it – Satan is sure to come along to whisper that a lie is an acceptable way to climb out of it

Consider the countless marriage vows that have been broken because a valley got too deep and the enemy came along to claim that it could not possibly be God's will for you to stay in an unhappy or unsatisfying marriage

After all, God wants you to be happy; so "for better or for worse" becomes "until I decide I want out"

The reality is, while we may give intellectual assent to the idea that God uses valleys for his own purposes in the lives of his people that whole idea can sort of go right out the window when it's our valley that is in view

It's hard for us to accept that there is any scenario where God would want *us* to endure a lengthy season of frustration and disappointment and our natural response to pain is to do whatever we can as quickly as we can to make it stop

So we are prime targets for the enemy to come along and tempt us to take a shortcut out of the valley we are in and so short-circuit the work that God is doing there

That leads us to the third and final point of this message – **the key question to ask in every valley**

III. The Key Question to Ask in Every Valley

No matter what type of valley you find yourself in, there is one question you must seek the answer to if the valley is to be productive in your life

What can I learn from this valley?

Or maybe you could frame the question, "What is God seeking to teach me in this valley?"

That might be even better because it acknowledges that God is actively present and working even in the deepest, darkest valley and that he will use the experience for your ultimate good

That's why we read in **James 1:2-4**

Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.

And Paul similarly writes in **Romans 5:3-5**

Not only that, but we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not put us to shame, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.

Notice that neither of these gentlemen addresses the kind of valley his readers might find themselves in

Whether it would be one that came because of God's direction or if it would be one that came from their wrong-doing or if it would just be one that was the product of living in a fallen world

Instead, he focused on the fact that all valleys have the potential to teach spiritual lessons of perseverance, godly character and spiritual maturity

God can and does use all types of valleys to further his purposes in our lives and it's our job to learn the lessons they have to teach us

Let me tell you about a man who went into what we would consider a deep valley of his own making only to discover that it was meant to completely change him and his path through life forever

Chuck Colson

Chuck Colson served as special counsel to President Richard Nixon from 1969-1970 and he was involved in the Watergate scandal that brought down the Nixon presidency –

He was a tough customer who was widely regarded as President Nixon’s “hatchet man” –

Politically, he was not a nice guy

For his part in the scandal, Mr. Colson pled guilty to obstruction of justice and spent 7 months in federal prison

I think we could safely say he entered a valley of his own making as he went from the heights of political power to the depths of a prison cell

But God was at work in the valley

Mr. Colson accepted Christ as his Lord and Savior in 1973 and that alone would have made the valley worthwhile

But, while Mr. Colson was in prison, God laid the burden of prison reform on his heart

And when he was released, Mr. Colson founded the Prison Fellowship ministry which is the nation's largest outreach to prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families today and Prison Fellowship International is the most extensive Christian prison ministry in the world as it is active in 120 countries

Before he passed away at age 80 in April of 2012, Mr. Colson had also written 21 popular Christian books and had become a lasting inspiration and clear example of a life redeemed to many

Clearly, God used Chuck Colson’s valley for good and he will do the same for yours

Conclusion

That’s not to imply that every valley we traverse is in itself a good thing – after all, all of our valleys are painful in some way and some of them are the result of our wrong choices

It only serves to remind us once again that God can use even those things we know to be less than good for ultimate good

God sent his Son to traverse the valley of the cross so we shouldn’t be too surprised when he also has valleys for us to go through – because, remember, God’s goal is for us to be conformed to the image of his Son

And since **Hebrews 5:8** tells us that Jesus himself learned obedience through the things he suffered we know God also has things to teach us in our valleys

Mountain top experiences are wonderful and we would all like to remain there forever – but there are things that can only be learned in the valley

And that’s a good thing to remember and always seek to hold onto

Because valleys are an inevitable part of the Christian journey

And, as long as we have to go through valleys, it helps to know God has a purpose for them

So, when you find yourself in a valley, seek to determine what kind it is and then respond appropriately while asking God to reveal the lesson he means for this valley to teach you

Let’s pray