



EXODUS

W H A T W E M E A N
W H E N W E S A Y G O D

PART EIGHT

God Grows Us the Hard Way





By Pastor Ricky Stephen

God Grows Us the Hard Way

1. Take the Hard Way Home

Kate Bowler is a professor of theology who studies the prosperity gospel. While she doesn't ascribe to the idea that you can be happy, wealthy, and happy if you just have enough faith. She felt challenged when she got a stage four cancer diagnosis.

"I would love to report that what I found in the prosperity gospel was something so foreign and terrible to me that I was warned away, but what I discovered was both familiar and painfully sweet: the promise that I could curate my life, minimize my losses, and stand on my successes. And no matter how many times I rolled my eyes at the creeds outrageous certainties, I craved them just the same. I had my own Prosperity Gospel, a flowering weed grown in with all the rest."^[1]

We often believe that if we live properly, we will prosper and that if God is happy with us it is going to be easy.

^[1] Kate Bowler, *Everything Happens for a Reason: And Other Lies I've Loved*.

But, in Exodus 13:17 we read:

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.

Pastor Anthony Selvaggio comments on this passage: "Israel was not to take the direct route to the land of promise. They were, by God's decree, to take the long road through the desert. While this circuitous route may have first seemed like a way to avoid conflict, since after all they were bypassing the country presently inhabited by the ancestors of the people who would later become known as the Philistines, in the end it would force them to confront an even greater enemy than the Egyptians or the ancestors of the Philistines. *That enemy was themselves*. Israel's struggles were far from over. They were about to battle with their own self-love and the human desire for autonomy. They were headed to the desert. God told them to take the hard road."^[2]

^[2] Anthony T. Selvaggio, *The Gospel According to Moses*, 102. (Emphasis added)

God intentionally leads the Israelites on the long hard way home. He takes them on a forty-year journey to go anywhere between seven-hundred and a thousand kilometres.

God often leads his people on the hard way home because God often grows us the hard way.

2. Hard Things Are How We Grow

Jonathan Haidt and Greg Lukianoff have written a book exploring cancel culture and rioting on college campuses called *The Coddling of the American Mind*. In it, they say one of the myths driving our culture is the myth of ‘fragility’ or ‘what doesn’t kill you makes you weaker.

However, humans are antifragile. Immune systems need exposure to grow antibodies. Muscles grow when torn through lifting weights. Minds expand when introduced to ideas they disagree with^[3].

Hard things are how we grow.

God’s goal for humanity is not just getting them to heaven, it’s making them into the type of people who will rule and reign with Him (Revelation 22:5).

In Israel’s story, God’s goal for their growth is captured in Exodus 19:5-6:

5 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, **6** you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’



Dallas Willard paraphrases and adapts this verse to say it in plain language, a statement which I have quoted before and will quote again:

“...God calls us to a direct and fully self-conscious, personal relationship with him (as priests) in which we share responsibility with him (as kings) in the exercise of his authority.”^[4]

God’s goal is our growth, and hard things are how we grow.

We should be careful about telling other people the meaning of their suffering, though. And God is not the author of pain or evil—He does not like us to hurt. As James writes:

13 When tempted, no one should say, “God is tempting me.” For God cannot be tempted by evil, nor does he tempt anyone; **14** but each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. **15** Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death. (James 1:13-15)

Resistance to our becoming royal priests is what causes the pain—resistance from ourselves, the world, and the devil. God doesn’t want us to suffer, but He doesn’t always save us from it either.

^[3] Jonathon Haidt and Greg Lukainoff, *The Coddling of the American Mind: How Good Intentions and Bad Ideas are Setting Up a Generation for Failure*. Ch. 1. Also available online [here](#).

^[4] Dallas Willard, *Hearing God*, pg. 62.

Because hard things are how we grow.

3.Led Not Carried

One of the most popular Christian pop-art pieces is the poem 'Footprints'[1] It talks about God carrying us through the most difficult times in our lives.

However, the primary biblical metaphor for the life of faith is being led, not carried.

Children can be dictators. But if we give them everything, they want how they want it, they won't grow up to be able to take care of themselves. They beg to be carried and sometimes we have to tell them to walk.

God's answer to Moses in Exodus 14, after the crying of the Israelites, has a similar parental tone:

15 Then the Lord said to Moses, "Why are you crying out to me? Tell the Israelites to move on. 16 Raise your staff and stretch out your hand over the sea to divide the water so that the Israelites can go through the sea on dry ground. (Exodus 14:15-16)

Biblical scholar Chris Wright summarizes is this way:

"...[God tells] the Israelites 'to move on'--when there was patently nowhere for them to 'move on' to, since they were trapped on a beach. The only way to 'move on' was to walk into the sea itself!

Exactly, says God, get moving." [6]

Moses usually received explicit instructions ahead of time for miraculous displays of power. Now God seems to be saying "you know I'm with you, you know how to do this, so do it." He's saying, I've carried you but now it's time to walk.

When God feels distant or we are seeing less of His miraculous power, it's not always because we are doing something wrong. In fact, it may mean we are doing something right.

John of the Cross, 16th century Spanish pastor and mystic, wrote that when God notices someone maturing in faith...

"...God now sees that they have grown a little, and are becoming strong enough to lay aside their swaddling clothes and be taken from the gentle breast; so He sets them down from His arms and teaches them to walk on their own feet; which they feel to be very strange, for everything seems to be going wrong with them." [7]

He puts them down and lets them walk. Sometimes, we are being led and not carried.



[5] You can find the poem here.

[6] Christopher Wright, The Story of God: Exodus, 270.

[7] John of the Cross, The Dark Night of the Soul, Ch. 8

4. Through, Not Around

When reading Psalm 23, people don't often connect 'he leads me on the paths of righteousness' (v3) and 'even though I walk through the darkest valley' (v4). But they are connected, our Good Shepherd leads us on righteous paths that go through dark valleys.

God does not lead us around; He leads us through.

The Red Sea crossing had to be terrifying for the Israelites—they cross in darkness, tripping on coral, with millions of gallons of water threatening to fall down on them while the murderous Egyptians chase them.

God doesn't take them around the sea, He takes them through.

Most of the new Christians I've been meeting don't say God has solved all their problems. Instead, God is inspiring them to face hard things—forgiveness, broken relationships, boundaries, and working on their health.

God is not taking them around their problems, He's taking them through.

Whatever you are facing, God will get you through. It may not be in this lifetime even, but you will reach the other side of the shore.

Because Jesus did.

The one promise of Jesus nobody can question, no matter where they stand with Him, is this: "In this world you will have trouble." Nobody can question it. But the next part is where faith comes in. "But take heart! [have courage, be brave] I have overcome the world." (John 16:33). Our Lord and Master did not go around the dark valleys. He went into the very valley of death itself; He was led there by His Father who loves Him. He rose again and with Him came the promise that this would be the pattern of everyone who follows Him.

He made a way for you and for me, a way that does not go around but through.

So, as one wise person said, "If you're going through hell, keep going."^[8] It might be the path God is taking you on to get to heaven. Because God often grows us the hard way.

^[8] Often attribute to Winston Churchill, but more likely John Randall Done or Douglas Bloch.





Open Up

What are some of the hardest things you've been through? How do you think about them now in your life of faith? How did you think about them while you were going through them?

Prayer

Pray for those who are experiencing difficulty, that God would make a way through

Dig In

1. When do the 'weeds of the prosperity gospel' come up for you (see Kate Bowler's quote above)?
2. What can be dangerous about seeing hard things as opportunities for growth?
3. How have you dealt with God's silence before? What have you done when it feels like He's leading you in circles?
4. What is something that is difficult for you right now? How might you be growing through that experience?
5. Read Psalm 13. How does the Psalmist deal with their experience of God's silence?
6. How can we be honest with our feelings and still move forward?