

THE SHORTEST WAY COULD BE THE LONGEST DISTANCE

Deacon Wilson Tan

In our Singapore society where efficiency is valued, we believe the shortest distance from point A to B is a straight line. “Don’t waste time, what is the most cost efficient and easier way of doing things? How to streamline processes to make it most efficient?” These questions are very much ingrained in our society and even in our own work environment. It is easy to get caught up in the mindset that to be the best and achieve the most, we must be the most efficient. Rev. Srimal’s main point on the sermon on Exodus 13:17-22, “The Shortest Way Could Be The Longest Distance”, was God may take the longer path to fulfil His purposes, but He will be faithful to guide us.

Exodus 13:17a “When Pharaoh let the people go, God did not lead them by way of the land of the Philistines, although that was near.” I imagine if I was part of the group that left Egypt, I will surely questioned God, why did God not lead us via the shortest, most efficient way? What is God doing? Are you sure we are going the right direction?

As I thought deeper about this, I asked myself “What is God most concerned with? Doesn’t He care about efficiency?”

Looking at the narrative of the bible, I realised that God often works in surprisingly “inefficient” ways. God chose to bless the world slowly, generation by generation, through the offspring of one man. He patiently and faithfully brought an imperfect chosen people through cycles of idolatry and ungratefulness. He took the time to live as a human, to suffer as a human and die as a human, in order to bring to full completion His work of justification. Personally, God also works in our lives in an often frustratingly slow pace. He doesn’t just snap His fingers and transform our hearts and minds. Rather, He sanctifies and renews us through cycle after messy cycle of sin, repentance and forgiveness. He doesn’t just reveal himself and His plan of salvation to us in irrefutable ways. Rather, He uses people to shine His light and love and convey His gospel.

As I searched my own heart, the more I think about my own reasons for valuing efficiency, the more I believe that there are many lies and false hopes underlying my desire for efficiency. Perhaps I equate increased efficiency with increased effectiveness, and believe that by being more efficient, I can achieve or contribute more. Perhaps I rely on increased efficiency to improve my standard of living, or to push me higher up the ladder of success as defined by the world. Perhaps I think that being as efficient as possible, doing the best that I can, minimizes the risk of things going wrong, or exonerates us from blame if things do go wrong.

In all these cases, the danger is that the more I chase after efficiency, the further I slide down the slippery slope of self-reliance and self-justification.

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Exodus 13:17b further inform us that God knows His people best – “For God said, “Lest the people change their minds when they see war and return to Egypt.””. The reason why God did not take the most efficient way was because He knew what would have happened if He led His people to the shortest route possible. His people will not look to Him but look at their circumstances and perhaps despair and return back to Egypt.

By God’s grace, He chose to lead the Israelites by the longer path, while giving them His presence – the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night, which did not depart from His people. In God’s kingdom and ministry, God is most concerned about His people and their heart more than efficiency, while promising His presence.

Don’t get me wrong, the Scripture inform us not to be lazy.

Proverbs 13:4- The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied.

Ephesians 5:15-16a- Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men, but as wise, making the most of your time.

It is obvious that wisdom, diligence and good

time management are all part and parcel of being good stewards of the time and resources that God has given us. However, God is most concerned about our heart. He wants spiritual formation to take place as we steward the time and resources that He has gifted us.

In times where we are not as efficient as we think we should be in at work, in ministry or in our life journey, don’t be discouraged.

A painful detour may have ruined your own plans and outlook for your life, but not God’s. What we call “detours”, God calls design.