



HE LEADETH ME: A STUDY OF THE HEBREW WORD NAHAH

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Various Scriptures
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As we approach the end of the year, I thought it would be appropriate to reflect on how God has led our congregation during the past 12 months. We will study the Hebrew word *nachah*, which means, “he leads,” to discover how God leads us. This is why Christ came, of course — to lead us unto salvation — and that was why he was called Emmanuel, “God with us.” He entered our world in order that he might lead us into his world.

During a prayer time at a meeting of our elder board some months ago I came across this word *nachah*. I was glancing at the Psalms and I read,

*Hear my cry, O God:
Listen to my prayer.
From the ends of the earth I call to you,
I call as my heart grow faint;
Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.* (Psalm 61:1-2)

I began to wonder what exactly did David, the writer of this psalm, have in mind when he said, “*Lead me to the rock that is higher than I*”? Later that night I checked my concordance and discovered that the word *nachah* is used 41 times in the Old Testament, more than 20 times alone in the Psalms. In our study this morning, therefore, we will look at four aspects of God’s leading: The necessity for our being led; what motivates God to lead us; the way he leads us; and, the joyous fruits that accompany being led.

First, the necessity for being led.

I. The Necessity For Being Led: Dangerous Territory!

In the OT, God frequently moved his people from one geographical location to another. These moves often necessitated traveling through treacherous wilderness areas inhabited by enemies of Israel. The new-born nation found itself in just such a place shortly after the exodus from Egypt. Israel had entered a vast, untamed territory, without benefit of maps or bearings of any kind. If God had not been with the fledgling nation to continuously *lead* her, Israel would have perished along the way. Thus in the book of Exodus we find the first usage of this word *nachah*:

And the LORD was going before them in a pillar of cloud by day to lead them on the way, and in a pillar of fire by night to give them light, that they might travel by day and by night. He did not take away the pillar of cloud by day, nor the pillar of fire by night, from before the people. (Exod 3:21-22)

God’s leading of his people through that dangerous territory was both continuous (day and night he led them; he never departed from them), and tangible (a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night so contrasted with the elements there never was any doubt as to where he wanted them to go). God did not give his people a compass, a map or an itinerary to help them find where they should go. He gave

them himself; he would lead them.

We have traversed some dangerous territory ourselves this year. It is apparent that our own world is becoming more dangerous all the time. The environment, we know, is deteriorating. Our children’s world is unsafe. Schools are dangerous places, not just because of violence, but the dangerous ideas being taught. My high school freshman daughter told me just last week that two lesbian women addressed her class on what they called “safe sex.” Dangerous ideas, I thought. The danger of becoming unemployed increased in the past year. This was never a problem in Silicon Valley in the past, but now people are having to deal with the prospect of long-term unemployment. Yet in the Scriptures it is clear that the greater the danger we face in life, the more direct and real is God’s leading of us. When times are tough and the danger is real, therefore, we should not be putting our efforts toward trying to change our circumstances, but in finding Emmanuel, “God with us,” in the midst of them.

The territory that we must traverse every day confronts us with dangers of many kinds. Thus we see the necessity for our being led.

This gives rise to the question:

II. What Motivates God To Lead Us?

(a) Compassion

Nehemiah gives us the answer in these words,

*“You, in Your great compassion
Did not forsake them in the wilderness;
The pillar of cloud did not leave them by day,
To guide them on their way,
Nor the pillar of fire by night, to light for them the way in
which they were to go.”* (Neh 9:19)

God leads us because he has compassion on us. “Compassion” comes from the same Hebrew root as the word for womb. It speaks of the deep emotions of a nursing mother for her newborn infant. Just as a mother is moved to action when she hears the cry of her newborn, when God regards our helpless state he is moved to come to our aid. A mother’s emotions run deep; she is always ready to respond to a cry for help. It is the same with God. No matter how many times we fail he never loses his tender feelings for us. They are a powerful force that drive him to swift action.

(b) Loyal-love

We find another reason why God leads us in the story of the servant who traveled to find a wife for Isaac, the son of Abraham. When at last he found Rebekah, the servant blessed God in these words,

*“Blessed be the LORD, the God of my master Abraham, who has not forsaken His loyal-love and His truth toward my master; as for me, the LORD has **guided** me in the way to the house of my master’s brothers.” (Gen 24:27)*

God’s unconditional promises reveal his unflinching loyalty toward us. His promises are like well-driven nails. We can hang our life on these two things, his compassion and loyal-love. And the promises that he has made to us, just like those he made to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, are unconditional. So the name Emmanuel means more than “God with us.” His leading is not just a mechanical thing; in it he communicates his deep affections and loyal-love toward us.

And how does God lead us? I will list but three of the wonderful images in the OT.

III. The Way God Leads Us

(a) Like A Father: Tenderly By the Hand

*Thy way was in the sea,
And Thy paths in the mighty waters
And Thy footprints may not be known.
You **led** Thy people like a flock,
By the hand of Moses and Aaron. (Psalm 77:20-21)*

The same image is used in the psalms of David’s skill as a shepherd:

*So he shepherded them according to the integrity of his heart,
And **guided** them with his **skillful hands**. (Psalm 78:72)*

Here God is likened to a father who takes his children by the hand and tenderly leads them through dangerous territory. In the first case, the Father took his children through the Red Sea, a supernatural deliverance. God stooped down and took his people by the hand and together they made it through the sea. The Egyptians, however, who tried to navigate their own way, perished there.

Isn’t it comforting to know that God stoops down to our level to lead us? He does not demand that we travel faster than we are able, but tenderly takes our hand and walks with us through the danger.

There is a second way in which God leads us.

(b) Like An Eagle

*Like an eagle that stirs up its nest,
That hovers over its young,
He spread His wings and caught them,
He carried them on His pinions.
The LORD alone **guided** him.
And there was no foreign god with him.
He made him ride on the high places of the earth.
(Deut 32:11-13)*

In this text God is likened to an eagle that stirs up its nest, forcing out the young fledglings so they will learn to fly. As they plummet downward her eye never leaves them; she hovers over them then lifts them to safety. Because none can soar as high as the eagle, the young will be carried and *guided* swiftly to the heights of the earth. God at times forces us to “fly” in new ways, but he never leaves us. He hovers over us to take us to the heights of heaven itself. It is here, in that uncharted, secret territory of God alone that believers will eat a rich feast, one that is not adulterated with the foreign substance of idolatry. Here, on top of the earth, with senses purified, God’s people will

enjoy a heavenly banquet.

I visited Bob Murie in the hospital earlier this year following his surgery to have both of his knees replaced. I expected him to be somewhat subdued and in pain, but his face radiated the love of Christ. He told me that all his life he had stood on his own two feet and been very successful in his career. But God finally cut him down. Yet the Lord did his work so gently and patiently that now Bob is enjoying his Christian life as never before. Later with tears of joy he recounted his story at a meeting of our elders. The Lord had led him, making him ride the high places of the earth.

There is a third way God leads us.

(c) Relentlessly

*When my heart was embittered,
And I was pierced within,
Then I was senseless and ignorant;
I was like a beast before Thee.
Nevertheless I am continually with Thee;
You have taken hold of my right hand.
With your counsel You will **guide** me,
And afterward receive me to glory. (Psalm 73:21-24)*

The psalmist confesses that God was leading him even when he did not want to be led, when he had no spiritual appetites and actually was angry with God. To his surprise, however, when he looked back he saw that God had never left him to journey on his own. He had taken hold of him by the hand and led him to his destination. This gave him confidence and assurance that nothing could thwart the resolve of God to completely perfect his subjects unto glory.

Many of us can look back on the past year and say the same. At times we were bitter and angry, we had no appetite for spiritual things and no time for God, yet he took us by the hand and led us to the high places.

Our God is like a tender father who enters his child’s world; soars like an eagle and takes us to his world; and is so relentless in his pursuit of us that our spiritual condition cannot thwart his resolve. This is the God on whom we can count in the new year ahead.

Now as we are being led certain things happen in our souls. Our final destination is the goal of his leading, but there is much joy in the journey as well.

IV. The Joyous Fruits Which Accompany “Being Led”

(a) Quiet and Rest

*He makes me lie down in green pastures;
He **leads** me beside waters of rest.
He restores my soul. (Psalm 23:3)*

*He caused the storm to be still,
So that the waves of the sea were hushed.
Then they were glad because they were quiet;
So He **guided** them to their desired haven.
(Psalm 107:29-30; see also Matt 8.26)*

God wants us to be still so that he can restore and heal us, so he finds tranquil pastures for us. His goal is to take us to that safe harbor for the soul; there in the quiet we can be restored.

And here is the second thing we will experience in our souls as God leads us.

(b) Immeasurable Fertility

*And the LORD will continually **guide** you,
And satisfy your soul in scorched places,
And give strength to your bones;
And you will be like a **watered garden**,
And like a spring of **water** whose **waters** do not fail.*
(Isaiah 58:11)

Here we see that in the process of being led our lives are so transformed they become like a watered garden. They will rival the Garden of Eden, because the writer says that even the “scorched places” will be like a watered garden.

Our journeying with God through the treacherous places of earth provides satisfaction to the soul. Let us enjoy him during the journey lest we become so fixed on our final destination we lose out on the present joy.

Art David taught me the truth of these verses this past year. When I visited him in his home during his illness and watched him and Connie, I likened the atmosphere in their home to the Garden of Eden. Even as his body was being scorched with cancer, Art was radiating the love of Christ, his soul a well-watered garden.

So these are the fruits that accompany being led by God: quiet and rest, and immeasurable fertility.

Now the figure changes from traveling through a geographical wilderness fraught with physical enemies, to the dark, uncharted territory of the soul.

V. Being Led Into New Territories

(a) The Untracked Territory of One's Own Soul

*Search me O God, and know my heart;
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;
And see if there be any hurtful way (lit. way of pain) in me,
And **lead** me in the everlasting way. (Psalm 139:23-24)*

This inward journey frightens me more than any journey through dangerous territory. A painter friend of mine told me he likes to paint impressions of what goes on in his soul. Sometimes the images scare him, he said. But in his integrity he paints them. I find a similar thing in Job. God talked to Job about Behemoth, and Leviathan, ferocious beasts patterned after the hippopotamus and the crocodile, inferring perhaps that similar beasts reside within all of us and only he can tame them. In the psalm, David is beseeching God who thoroughly knows him, having crafted him in the womb, to exhibit the same tender care in leading him through the uncharted territory of the soul as he did when he led him through the physical wilderness. David was saying, in effect, “Be tender with me. Lead me swiftly through the darkness. Let me experience your presence even in these scorched places of my own soul.”

It's not easy to see these problem areas in our own lives, is it? I am thankful to several people in this church who have pointed out to me in the past year things about myself that I needed to see. It takes more than the Scriptures alone to illuminate these areas; our brothers and sisters in Christ can be very helpful in this respect. At times this year people have told me things that I am blind to about myself. In one particular case I caused great pain to someone. When the problem was revealed to me, however, it

was done with gentleness so that I could accept it. God was faithful to show me the darkest parts of my soul. Like a tender Father he led me through the darkness to the everlasting way.

Finally, we come to the most dreaded territory of all.

(b) The Dark Valley of Death

*You are my rock and fortress;
For Thy name's sake You will **lead** me and guide me.
You will pull me up out of the net which they have secretly
laid for me;
For you are my strength.
Into Thy hand I commit my spirit;
You have ransomed me O Lord, God of truth. (Psalm 31:4-5)*

In this text King David renews his faith in the God who has faithfully led him all his days. He gives God his complete trust even as a band of evildoers are secretly hatching a plot which may result in his death. His expression of faith, “*Into Thy hand I commit my spirit,*” becomes the expression of the greater David, the Messianic King, who uttered this phrase before his death on a tree, while below him crowded the band of evildoers who had cast a net for his life. These words would give full expression of Jesus' trust in God to *lead* him through the most dangerous territory of all, death itself. God would not spare him from death, but he would accompany him through his ordeal and lead him out through the other side. Later these words of David and Jesus were to become Stephen's expression at his martyrdom. And through the ages these have been the words of the saints of the church, echoing Jesus' great expression of faith, “*Into Thy hand I commit my spirit.*”

What more do we need than this wonderful God who leads us? Who is a God like this who comes to us in our helplessness and out of loyal-love takes us by the hand, refuses to let go, and tenderly guides us through the dangerous territories of life? Even in the midst of the journey he gives us his full presence to restore us, quiet us, and heal us until we are thoroughly satisfied. And this is but a taste of the full banquet to be enjoyed at journey's end, which in reality is but the beginning.

It has been hard for me to trust God to lead me through the dark valley of death. For most of my years I have flinched at death. I have already shared the stories of the deaths of two of our children. At the death of our first-born, a son, I sensed God's leading me in the midst of the pain. Emily and I were grieving so much we both thought it a blessing when the doctors said they would take care of the burial arrangements. The following year I was so traumatized when our daughter died I couldn't even grieve. I left the hospital, and once more the doctors took care of the burial arrangements. To this day we don't know where either child is buried. That was 16 years ago, but I have always felt I had missed something of God at that second moment of grief. Then, just a year ago this month, I found myself in the same hospital with a couple from this church who were suffering the loss of their child. Like that night years ago, it was a dreary winter's night. I watched in awe as God led them, as Emmanuel came to them and accompanied them up to the grave and beyond.

Christmas, then, is a time that awakens many memories in my soul. Last month, the anniversary of my daughter's

death, I wrote a poem of appreciation for Jessica Lynne, in memory of her 17th birthday on November 30th. To conclude our time together today I would like to share it with you.

LET IT RAIN

O Jessica, nine months we waited
For your precious hidden frame
To break through the darkness
And turn our souls into day.

Unto us it was given,
Morning came, its dawn so bright,
It loosed our sackcloth,
And girded us with light.

Your form so pure,
Yours the sweetest gaze
A mother's dream,
A father's praise.

Then on the third night
While I slept, you cried.
Your mother held you tight,
She knew, but it was hidden from me.

All through the darkness she cared for you
Then gently laid you upon the altar.
She knelt beside those well hewn stones and wept.
Then I heard the shophar's ringing cry...

Terror struck, "Impossible!" I cried,
"Could it be to walk this way again
Conception to pain, never to regain
When the first born, has already paid?"

I pulled back, withdrew,
Traumatized by the pain I already knew.
I could not stay and watch
For now I knew.

My eyes could not gaze on your little tent
Which would all too soon
Be broken down and laid to rest
In the earth rather than upon a breast.

Waves of grief came crashing down,
Heaven was calling through the rain,
"Pour out your heart like water,"
But I turned and left, numb from pain.

O Jessica, nine months we had waited
For your precious hidden frame
To break through the darkness
And turn our souls into day.

O Jessica, O Jessica, where are you now?
Where did the Sower plant the seed?
I long to know
But it is hidden from me.

O could I now go back,
And that dark hour relive,
When you lay limp and still,
I would be your papa and give.
I wanted to forget, it was easy to forget
but I could not forget

You my first precious daughter,
Jessica Lynne.

Sixteen years past,
And in my wanderings here
I came across that valley again.
It was raining.

This time I did not turn away
But obeying heaven's command,
I knelt beside the stones
And stayed until dawn's early light.

O Holy night, Angels sang,
The grip of night grew limp,
He appeared
And each soul felt its worth.

He did not turn away
Traumatized by pain
But stretched out His hand
And placed it into the flame.

Beyond His hand I saw
The wrist - impaled by my spear
Pierced so deep with wounds
Yet draws me near.

Beyond the wrist, His gaze,
O that gaze, ablaze ablaze
With such love it burst my breast
Evoking deepest praise.

O death where is thy victory,
O grave where is thy sting?

Captured with awe, I stared and stared
And then I knew,
That when I left,
He had cared for you.

O Jessica,
Hardly thy life clear forth of heaven was sent,
Ere it broke out into a smile and went.
So swift thy days, a gift to us was lent
Thou, now a daughter and saint inextricably blent,
Wilt one day teach thy father in some heavenly tent.¹

*In appreciation for my daughter
Jessica Lynne Morgan
November 30, 1976 - December 4, 1976
A bright morning star.*

¹ The closing five lines were adapted from George MacDonald's tribute to his child in the *Diary Of An Old Soul*.