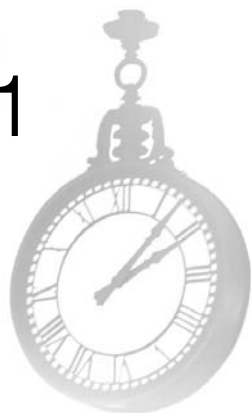


One

# PRINCIPLE 1

**Expect some  
frustrating  
detours if  
you're going  
to follow God.**



**MY FRIEND JILL** is one of the most committed Christians I know. But when God called her into full-time ministry, she fought Him. The call made no sense to her. She said, “I was moving up the corporate ladder when I surrendered my heart and life to Christ. I loved my career, and it gave me a sense of fulfillment. God was blessing me with the necessary skills to be successful.” Why would God want her to be a pastor? She got tongue-tied whenever she had to speak in public. She had no theological background or education. She was a single woman in a denomination where female pastors were rare. Why couldn’t she serve God more effectively right where she was?

She resisted the call, but she could not escape it. She prayed. She sought advice from counselors, pastors, her non-Christian boss, her parents, and anyone else who would listen. She spent weeks making excuses, but in the end she trusted God, quit her job, and started down the long path toward becoming a pastor.

Jill walked away from everything familiar and enrolled in a theology program at a Christian university. While a full-time student, she eked out a living in the only jobs available to her there, which were low-paying and outside her field. After four hard years, she earned a bachelor's degree and was uprooted again, this time to a seminary in a different state. Once again, supporting herself while going to school full-time was not easy, but she worked at it semester after semester, guided by her call.

By the time she had finished her seminary degree, Jill had spent the better part of a decade pursuing her goal. She had worked twice as hard as before, had accepted a lower standard of living, and had twice gone through the process of establishing a new home, new friends, and new jobs. But she had also gained a wealth of knowledge about how to minister to people in a church. She had learned more about theology than she ever imagined existed. Her faith had grown ever deeper. More than ever before, she was ready to serve. She put herself forward for potential associate pastor positions.

And then—nothing.

No positions opened up. No calls came. At first Jill was not worried. Waiting a month or two or three is not so unusual. But then six months passed. Then a year. What was wrong? She tried to keep up her hope and trust in God, but her frustration grew. She said, “The rush and excitement that comes from getting ready and then *nothing* was unbearable. I had sacrificed, worked hard, done all I believed God asked of me, so why the dead end? Did I miss something in the interpretation of the call? Was God angry with me for some sin I didn't confess?”

Jill waited a second year.

Then she waited a third year.

Her life had been sidetracked onto a painful detour. She had no explanations, only questions: Why is this happening? How long will it last?

## Moses Takes a 40-year Detour on the Road to Becoming a Leader

Detours are nothing new. The Bible is full of them. Consider the life of Moses. If the Promised Land was Moses' ultimate destination, then it's hard not to see his life as a series of long and no doubt baffling detours.

I'm not referring only to his most famous detour, those 40 years he spent wandering the desert with the Israelites on their way to Canaan. What about before that? After being rescued as an infant by Pharaoh's daughter, Moses grows up in Pharaoh's household. When he's 40 years old, however, he takes a huge step toward being the liberator of the Hebrews. In Exod. 2 he decides to identify himself not with his privileged Egyptian upbringing but rather with his fellow Hebrews, who are slaves: "It happened at that time that Moses grew and went out to his brothers and saw their burdens" (Exod. 2:11, Alter). When he sees an Egyptian striking a Hebrew man, Moses takes the audacious step of siding with the slave and killing the Egyptian.

Does this act launch Moses' career as a freedom fighter? Does it trigger the other slaves to rise up in support of Moses and throw off the bondage of slavery? Do they shout, "Hooray! Go, Moses! Let the revolution begin!"?

No.

In fact, Moses does everything possible to conceal his deed. He doesn't even strike until he turns "this way and that" and sees that "there was no man about" (Exod. 2:12, Alter). Then he hides the body in the sand.

No one steps up to support him. The next day after he goes out again and tries to break up a brawl between two slaves, one of the "brother" Hebrews sarcastically dismisses him with the question "Who set you as a man prince and judge over us?" (Exod. 2:14, Alter). Talk about a put-down! This story is starting to sound decidedly unheroic.

But it gets worse. Pharaoh learns about the slaying of the Egyptian and decides to kill Moses. Not only has Moses lost hope of leading the Hebrews, he can't even retreat back into the luxury of Pharaoh's court. He has to flee, never to return. Where does he go? To some pampered life in exile? No. To a dusty desert land called Midian. The picture is sad: "and Moses fled from Pharaoh's presence and dwelled in the land of Midian, and he sat down by the well" (Exod. 2:15, Alter).

What must Moses have thought about the direction of his life at this moment? Could he have envisioned that he was on the way to becoming one of the most important figures in biblical history?

Certainly not. He was on the run, a wanted criminal. Who could blame him if he felt abandoned by God?

Moses' life had seemingly taken a dangerous and possibly irreversible detour. We know that this period in Midian is only temporary, but Moses doesn't know that. A digression is far more bearable if the person knows it's a temporary delay. For all Moses knows, he's stuck in Midian forever. This detour stretched on for *40 years*. How must Moses have felt two years, three years, five years, or 27 years into this diversion? What would we do in his place? Would we give up on God? Assume He was finished with us?

## **A "Spoiled Brat" Takes a Detour**

Of all the people in the Bible who faced being side-tracked, few had as many detours as Joseph, and few provided a better example of how to handle them. Like the bold young Moses, who killed the Egyptian overseer, Joseph also started out brash, neglecting to weigh the full consequences of his words and actions. Old Testament scholar Robert Alter refers to the young Joseph as a "spoiled brat."<sup>1</sup> The first story we're told about Joseph as a teenager is that he brought his father "a bad report" about his brothers (Gen. 37:3). Alter writes, "The

first revelation of Joseph's character suggests a spoiled younger child who is a tattletale."<sup>2</sup>

Joseph was their father's favorite, and his brothers hated him for it. Heedless of their feelings, Joseph told his brothers of two dreams he had. In the first, he and his brothers were binding sheaves in the field, and his sheaf rose and stood up, while their sheaves bowed toward his. In the second dream the sun, moon, and eleven stars bowed to Joseph. Both dreams indicated that he would eventually reign and rule over them (Gen. 37:5-11).

Even though Joseph fueled his brothers' resentment by rubbing these dreams in their faces, his arrogant attitude did not change the fact that the dreams actually did eventually come true. They were an accurate description of what was in store. Amazingly, this self-absorbed, narcissistic kid would become Pharaoh's right-hand man and help prevent a whole nation from perishing in a famine.

But not yet. Before he was called upon to run a nation, Joseph would have to endure a series of detours well beyond even what his vivid mind could have dreamed.

First, his brothers flung him into a pit (Gen. 37:24). Lying in that dark hole, he was stripped of his colorful tunic, deprived of food and water, and left to die. His grandiose dreams of the bowing sheaves and bowing stars must have seemed a cruel mockery.

Before long, however, he got pulled out of the pit! Great! Was it time now for the dream to come true? Not so fast. He was hauled out of the hole only to be sold into slavery and dragged away to Egypt (Gen. 37:27-29). A slave in a foreign country! That was about as far from his dream as he could get. How could he hold on to any hope that God was still at work in his life?

But his life was about to get thrown even farther off course. He did the best he could as a slave, but then his mas-

ter's wife accused him of sexual assault. He was innocent! Far from assaulting her, he had actually rebuffed her sexual advances. No matter—he was a slave. Nobody believed him, and he was thrown into prison (Gen. 39:7-20). For all he knew, he would spend the rest of his life there.

Slave. Prisoner. Neither one was hinted at in his dreams! What was God up to?

### **Detours: Some Hints for Survival**

Jill. Moses. Joseph. Three followers of God stuck in long detours beyond their control.

What do we do during our own detours? My own temptation is to focus too exclusively on the circumstances I'm in and to fear that perhaps that's all there is or will ever be. The big picture of my life is beyond my range of sight, so it's hard to imagine how God can take a bleak present and make it fit into a story that is ultimately triumphant. I mistake the detour for a final destination.

All three people whose stories have been told in this chapter emerged from their detours even stronger than when they entered them. How? They never lost track of two important points:

**1. Detours are not a time to shut down. They're not what we expected or wanted, but God can use them to make all the difference in our journey if we make the best of them and don't give in to discouragement or cynicism.**

How did Joseph react to his detours? Did he give up on God? Get bitter? Rage against the unfairness of his circumstances and plot revenge on those who put him there?

No. Instead, he treated these times not as detours but as if they were a part of his life's plan. Even in the worst of circumstances, he made use of whatever skills and talents he was allowed to use. He tackled his unwanted assignments with the enthusiasm of a young man who had just been hired for his dream

job. Furthermore, he succeeded. Genesis 39:2 says, “The LORD was with Joseph, and he was a successful man” (NKJV).

A successful man? Is this talking about later, when Pharaoh promoted him to run the country? No, it’s when he was a *slave* in Potiphar’s house.

And his master saw that the Lord was with him, and all that he did the Lord made succeed in his hand, and Joseph found favor in his eyes and ministered to him, and he put him in charge of the house, and all that he had placed in his hands. And it happened from the time he put him in charge of his house and of all he had, that the Lord had blessed the Egyptian’s house for Joseph’s sake and the Lord’s blessing was on all that he had in house and field (Gen. 39:2-5, Alter).

What about when Joseph was in prison? Surely his life would be characterized by resentment and exasperation for being jailed for a crime he did not commit in a country where he did not belong. Not Joseph. Scripture says,

And he was there in the prison-house, and God was with Joseph and extended kindness to him, and granted him favor in the eyes of the prison-house warden. And the prison-house warden placed in Joseph’s hands all the prisoners who were in the prison-house. . . and whatever he did, the Lord made succeed” (Gen. 39:21-23, Alter).

This is not to say that Joseph was *happy* to be a slave or a prisoner or that he understood how those detours fit into God’s purposes. He didn’t want to prolong these detours one minute longer than was necessary. But while he was in these places, he didn’t allow himself to be overtaken by resignation or self-pity. He *behaved* as if he were fulfilling God’s plan.

Joseph was pushed into his painful circumstances by others—his brothers, Potiphar’s wife, the forgetful cupbearer—but he trusted in God to make it right. Later, in a moving

scene of reconciliation with his brothers, Joseph uttered some of my favorite words in Scripture: “While you meant evil toward me, God meant it for good, so as to bring about at this very time keeping many people alive” (Gen. 50: 20, Alter).

**2. Detours are temporary. To us, God’s timing and methods often look strange and meandering, but He’ll get us to our destination if we trust Him to do things His way.**

After finishing seminary, Jill waited three long years for a church position to open up. Finally a church called her to be an associate pastor, a position in which she served in a thriving ministry for five years. She said that a turning point in that long period of waiting happened one Sunday when she heard a message on Jesus’ raising Lazarus from the dead. “In that sermon the pastor expounded on the idea that sometimes our hopes and dreams appear to be dead, that Christ lollygagged and came too late to rescue us, that the death of our hopes had even rotted in the grave and began to stink.”

The way everyone *expected* Jesus to help Lazarus—to heal him *before* he died—had passed, but Jesus surprised everyone by using His own unusual timing and method to solve this seemingly unsolvable problem. He waited until Lazarus died and then resurrected him. The pastor urged his listeners to “roll away the stone from the entrance to your hearts and let Christ perform a miracle.”

She said, “I realized I had put my life on hold until God gave in to my pleas. God did not work through me until I was willing to let go of my agenda, my personal desires, and my need for answers. I had to be willing to let God perform a miracle His way. It was about three months later that I received my first assignment in ministry.”

Are you stuck in a detour right now? Consider this: What if this detour is not a dead end but is instead a crucial part of the journey you and God are making? What if God is working in your life in ways you can’t see at the moment? These



issues are part of another important principle of waiting, which we'll consider in the next chapter.

### Questions for Reflection

1. Think of a period of your life you considered at the time to be a detour but that you now understand was a necessary part of your journey with God. How did that detour change you in ways you now see as beneficial?
2. Put yourself in Joseph's shoes. God gives you a dream for a bright future, but then you get tossed into a pit, sold into slavery, and unfairly imprisoned. How would you hold on to your hope and trust in God? Have you faced detours like this in your own life? How did you work through them?
3. In Gen. 50:20 Joseph says, "While you meant evil toward me, God meant it for good, so as to bring about at this very time keeping many people alive" (Alter). Can you think of other examples in which God turned evil intentions into good results?
4. Imagine that your Christian friend Mary comes to you for advice during a time when she feels stuck in one of life's long detours. Your friend feels tempted to simply shut down spiritually and do nothing until her life gets back on the path she thought she was following. What lessons from the lives of Joseph or others in this chapter might help your friend keep spiritually alive during this period?