

The Golden Detour

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'Take off the gold earrings of your wives, sons and daughters!' the man yelled to the people. 'This God who brought us out of Egypt has obviously forsaken us. Let us take matters into our own hands: make a god for ourselves; let us bow down to what we can see. Then we will get to the Promised Land sooner: Moses doesn't care about us and will prolong the journey uselessly!'

Thousands of years later, I stared at a long, steep track meandering into the distance: the snake path with many detours. We had tackled Mount Sinai just a few days prior and were now grasping for the prize of Mount Catherine, just a few kilometres away. Our trail mix and 'medicine', a large packet of coloured snakes, coated our teeth with sweetness. We frequently rested on sandy brown boulders, lest we grew weary and our ambition melt into grumbles of lassitude. The smell of dust was in the air, the breeze on our faces, my far-from-ostentatious but favourite pair of sneakers crunching the gravel beneath my feet. We examined with interest the flat-topped stones with the markings of ancient roots. It was a labyrinth of thin black scars branching out to hundreds of dead ends, with only one that reached the other side.

Our guide, a Bedouin man, wore a faded cream-coloured long galabeya and a checked keffiyeh, rather similar to the garb we wore as shepherds in our church's Christmas pageant. He and Dad were a few steps ahead of us, their conversation exploring other tourist sites in the area. My focus was the rugged rocky summit; the path was hidden from view as the mountain dared me to conquer it. As I gazed at the track behind me it screamed affirmation of the progress I had made, then I peeked at the peak ahead of me to measure my current strength against the journey ahead.

The route we would evidently take slowly moulded into shape in my mind's eye and I could see it as clearly as a large print book. It gradually trailed behind us and we reached the shoulder of the mountain, where I knew we would turn left to mount the final leg of the journey to the summit.

But we did not. The guide led us on a detour.

He led us *down*.

Aware that my perseverance was hanging by a single thread, my anger raged like heat from a furnace. How dare he waste the motivation we had because we were nearly there, by extending the path so we were not? I was certain he was out to get us, sure that he just wanted us to walk unnecessarily further...

My futile complaints led to nothing but a dead end of frustration, bubbling in the cauldron of my voice. If the guide was not going to lead us the *right* way then I would diverge from the track and get to the top myself. Much quicker than I would with them. I turned around and did just that, the rocky slope off the track calling my name in a low, melancholy drone, gleaming in lustrous allure. My parents yelled my name in a much louder, more alarmed tone.

‘Follow the guide, he’s the expert!’

‘Get back here; you’re going the wrong way!’

My determination to defy the guide who had antagonised me fired me up the mountain, the opposite direction to the rest of the group. My slow weary trudge had become an impassioned strut as I dodged the rocks around my feet to reach my goal.

Then the hot cloud of anger that hung over my mind began to lift and the fog that had blurred the senselessness of my actions melted away into a clear solid picture. Who was I to think I knew better? The guide was here to lead us to the summit and I had gone the wrong way.

I reluctantly reunited with my family on the guide’s route. It was roundabout and much longer than I had anticipated, but we reached the summit in the end. We later found out that the route I had mapped out in my head led to unscalable cliffs and a military base.

This light and momentary journey brought me to a highway of realisation that far outweighed it all; a lesson that was more precious than all the gold in the world. Despite the less severe consequences, my episode of obstinacy was not dissimilar to the event that occurred nearby thousands of years prior. Like the Israelites, my impatient lack of trust caused me to irrationally turn my own way, pursuing the gold-plated road I could see rather than trusting the guide to lead us to the destination laden with diamonds. For *in their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps* (Proverbs 16:9 NIV).

Who are we to challenge his guidance?