

Roads Taken and Not

“Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

“Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

“And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

“I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I - -
I took the one less traveled by,
And that made all the difference.”

(Robert Frost: 1874-1963)

All of life is a journey filled with decisions, decisions of roads taken and not. Which class? Which school? Which date? Which mate? Which job? Which house? Which path? The choices are lived on the outside but they are made on the inside. It is on the inside that we choose to go left or right at every fork. And, it is on the inside that we seek to cope with the consequences of our choices. Those decisions, as Robert Frost has said, make all the difference.

I doubt that there is even one of us who has not at some time or another wondered, “What if?” What if I had done better in school? What if I had married someone else? What if I had taken that job? What if I had gone to the doctor sooner? What if we had raised our children differently? Let’s face

it, one of the major barriers to inside-out living is coming to terms with the regrets and uncertainties of life’s major decisions.

It is not an easy matter and I think I would do you a great disservice were I to give you the impression of simplicity, but what I would like to suggest to you is a possible perspective for the inside you, a new and different way to look at the roads taken and not. That perspective begins with reading the right map.

There are many different maps of the United States. One will chart the topography of the land with many lines and many different colors in a ridge that extends from Montana in the north to Arizona in the south because that is the location of the Rocky Mountain range. But if you were to pick up a demographic map most of the activity would be clustered along the coasts and in the northeastern part of the United States because that’s where most people live. A third map will emphasize meteorology with air flow lines waving across the top of the nation because that’s where the jet stream is. All of these are fine if you are making decisions about altitude, population density or weather movements, but none are helpful if you are looking for an interstate highway to get you from St. Louis to St. Paul.

You must read the right map!

And so it is for reviewing the roads of life already traveled and in plotting a future course. We must read the right map. I believe that many people are mixed up from the inside-out because

they have traveled much of life simply reading the wrong map.

God says more about how we walk than about the route we take, but often we ask the wrong questions. We wonder if we married the right person but God asks if we show love to the person we did marry. We ask if we have employed the right person for the job when a better question might be are we treating justly the person we have already employed and are we paying them a fair wage. We question what church we should join while

God is concerned about the integrity in which we walk in whatever decision is made.

God asks us if we are loving and kind to the people in whatever church we attend. Too many people agonize over the absence of clear counsel in the Bible on the major decisions they make; yet, there is plenty of counsel there that we don't take.

Often we have right answers if we will simply ask the right questions. This was greatly impressed upon me some years ago by a couple considering marriage. There was a significant difference in their ages and family members were concerned. Both were committed Christians and careful students of the Bible. They painstakingly researched all that the Bible had to say about marriage and reached a significant conclusion: The Bible says very little about whom we should marry but a great deal about the way we should treat each other after we're married. The right answers were there but the wrong questions were being asked. That couple changed their questions to fit God's answers. Smart thinking!

We need to note something here. I am not saying that it doesn't matter whom you marry, where you work or what directions you choose. Obviously, these are very important decisions, but they are often not the most important. What we really should do is put our energies into living for Jesus Christ wherever we work and stop putting so much energy into worrying if we are with the right company. Let's no longer fantasize about what life would be like if we had married someone else and start demonstrating Christian virtues to the person to whom we are married. Am I saying that it may not matter at all what road we take? In a sense, I suppose I am.

Two major highways go from Minneapolis to St. Cloud—Highway 10 and Interstate 94. Suppose you decide to go on Highway 10. Somewhere just west of Elk River you are pulled over by a Minnesota State patrolman for exceeding 85 miles per hour, driving on the left side of the road and not having a license plate. You explain to him that you prayed about which road to take and decided on 10 but you think

you made a bad decision and should have taken I-94. Somewhere between reading you your rights and putting on the handcuffs he may mention that you are supposed to drive by the rules regardless of which highway you are on.

It makes no practical difference whether you take 10 or I-94 to St. Cloud. One may be a few yards shorter or longer and the scenery may vary slightly. Beyond that it just doesn't matter. What does matter is the way you drive on whatever road you take.

Chapter after chapter and verse after verse in the Bible tell us how to drive through life; yet comparatively little is said about what highways to take. That should tell us something about the answers God has given and the map he has laid out for us to chart our future and evaluate the past.

The Bible does tell us that we should choose the path of righteousness. The choice is not between medicine, ministry and music for a career. The choice is between living wickedly and living righteously. In Proverbs 4:10-19 we find these insightful words:

Listen, my son, accept what I say, and the years of your life will be many.

I guide you in the way of wisdom and lead you along straight paths.

When you walk, your step will not be hampered; when you run, you will not stumble.

Hold on to instruction, do not let it go; guard it well, for it is your life.

Do not set foot on the path of the wicked or walk in the way of evil men.

Avoid it, do not travel on it; turn from it and go on your way.

For they cannot sleep till they do evil; they are robbed of slumber till they make someone fall.

They eat the bread of wickedness and drink the wine of violence.

The path of righteousness is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day.

But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble.

God's map is different from ours! We've got to decide if we are going to choose the roads to take and not take by human mapping or divine.

Let's try to be really practical about this. At the end of life Fred the Factory Worker stands before God and says, "Oh Lord, I made some wrong choices. I chose the wrong road. I should have been a surgeon and that would have been so much better for my life." And God answers, "Fred, you've got it all wrong. I don't measure your life by your job, titles or income. I measure your life by the way you lived for me at that factory. I saw your love and kindness every day for 45 years. I heard you tell others about me and my love for them. I watched as you responded righteously to temptation. I delighted to give you my strength when you were weak. Well done, good and faithful Factory Worker!"

By contrast, at the end of life there may be a similar conversation with Paul the President.

He says to God, "I sure made some good choices. I went to the best college and graduate school. I worked my way up through a Fortune 100 company. Then I entered politics with successful campaigns for local, state and federal office. Life was good because my choices were correct." Then God answers, "Paul, life was bad. You walked on the helpless. You hurt people every step of the way. You ignored every principle of justice and righteousness that I gave you in the Bible. You were a sinful and an unfaithful servant."

The question is which map we use to evaluate the roads that were taken and not taken. Inside-out Christians read the right maps, they listen when God says more about the way they walk than the route they take and they choose the path of righteousness. That's their perspective on the roads taken and not.

There is another perspective and that is to trust God for directions. How do we do that? It begins by utilizing the light and the leadership God has given to us. Psalm 119:105 says, "*Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.*" The

Bible gives light to the roads we take. The light helps us not to stumble, to see what's coming and to walk with confidence. We need light for any path. I can barely make it across my bedroom in the dark without walking into a piece of furniture!

We need to saturate ourselves with the Bible. The Bible will give illumination to whatever career we choose, whatever house we buy, whatever vacation we take, whatever path we follow. Without God's light we are sure to stumble even on good roads.

In Psalm 119:35 we find this prayer to God: "*Direct me in the path of your commands, for there I find delight.*" God does give leadership on the roads we take. That leadership comes through the Bible, the inner witness of the Holy Spirit, the counsel of other believers and even through circumstances around us. The point is that we can trust God to lead us, but remember that

his priority is more on the way we walk than the route we take!

Imagine that you are trying to choose between two job possibilities. You gather data, write out the alternatives and pray for divine direction. The decision will effect where you live, the money you make, the people you will meet and

the church you will join. Much of life hinges on the decision. Certainly God cares and leads in these choices. But most all, God is concerned about the integrity in which we walk in whatever decision is made. God is more concerned that we represent him well in the interviews with prospective employers. He cares about the issues of honesty, justice and fairness in whatever company we choose.

It is stupid, if not sacrilegious, for us to seek God's blessing on the roads we choose and yet ignore the light and leadership he promises and provides. Trust God and utilize his light and leadership.

But there's more to it than that. Part of the perspective on roads not taken is to recognize the need for course direction. Navigators on ships and planes know that it is virtually impossible to con-

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sistently stay on a true course. Regular readings are required and adjustments must be made. Sometimes in new territory it is possible to get far off course. You may even go in the wrong direction for a long time. It's part of the journey; it's part of life. Recognize the reality and correct the course.

At time major course corrections may be needed. You entered a business you shouldn't be in. You lost money. You treated people sinfully. You need to stop. Close the business. Make amends. Start down a different path. Yes, that's a difficult and painful course correction.

On the other hand, minor course corrections are frequently needed. You wandered away from righteousness. You did something stupid. You knew better on the inside but acted sinfully on the outside. Everyone does that every day. Recognize that it's one of the realities of life and make the necessary adjustments.

We need to understand something very important here. We are prone to mope around in regret over getting off course, but God is more concerned about what we do when we recognize we are off course and need a correction. The big present issue is not what's gone wrong but what you are going to do to fix it. Often that takes a great deal of faith. We need to trust God to get us back where we need to be and to travel forward on course from there. We need to trust God for direction.

When you utilize the light and the leadership and make the necessary course correction you can expect God to take the rubble and transform it into stepping stones. One of the most significant verses in the Bible is Romans 8:28: *"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."* One of the most amazing revelations of the Bible is that God can and does use bad to accomplish good. I don't think we could ever have figured that out for ourselves if it were not for divine revelation.

Chapters 42-50 of the book of Genesis are a great example of this. Joseph's brothers sinfully sold him into slavery and told his father he was killed. The consequences for Joseph were terrible. He suffered as a slave and prisoner, but God used it to make him Prime Minister of Egypt and the

instrument for saving the fledgling nation of Israel from death by famine. Joseph summed it all up in Genesis 50:20 when he told his sinful brothers, *"You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good."*

This in no way is meant to condone or encourage sin. Of course not! That would be as stupid as shooting yourself in the foot in order to see a good surgeon at work! But at the same time, don't underestimate the powerful reality that God can use all our mistakes, sins and roads wrongly taken—God can use the rubble of our lives—to become stepping stones for supernatural success!

How can this work? Suppose you married the wrong person. God can use the rubble of your marriage to showcase how a Christian can live victoriously in what otherwise would be an unhappy home. Or, you've made a lifetime of bad choices in raising your children and you are plagued with regrets. God can prove himself through you by giving you forgiveness and new purpose which no other source could provide. You can become a model of a parent who went far off course whom God has put back on track even after the children are grown. Or, you failed to take care of your body and the consequence now is disease or even impending death. God can use even this rubble to become a stepping stone to dying victoriously as no one without Christ could ever do.

Only those who really trust God can overcome the regrets and correct the course. Only those who fully trust God can make the very best of the way things are and live joyfully on the road taken and use it as a route to the destination of God's glory.

My friend, there is no going back. So, there is really no good reason for regret. But, there is always going forward! So, there is every reason to trust God. Will you make God's perspective your inside perspective? Will you read the right map and trust God for your direction? May God bless you mightily on the road you have taken!

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