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Signposts On the Journey

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You haven't really had an adventure until you rent a car and drive alone through the backroads of New England. The roads twist and turn in directions you wouldn't think possible. Even the locals can get confused.

Last month riding with some friends, we tried to get from Route 140 near Upton to Sutton, Massachusetts without a map. Previous experience had warned me that even though it was less than 10 miles as the crow flies, it was almost impossible to get there from where we were. So, even though it violated the sacrosanct rules of manhood, we stopped to ask directions--four times!

Each time we were given a confusing list of landmarks to look out for and turns to make. Then, in the middle of their explanation, each person we asked paused, looked at us quizzically and asked, "Where did you want to go again?"

It got to be so comical we ended up exploding in laughter as the last man did the same thing, despite our best efforts to not to. We could barely choke out a 'thank you' as we pulled away laughing so hard our stomachs ached for the next 20 minutes. (Which, by the way, is why men don't usually stop and ask directions. We know that the guy we're asking isn't able to say, "I don't know!" and will offer nebulous directions to take you further away from him.)

As bad as word-of-mouth directions can be, however, highway signs can be worse. In fact there are places you can end up driving west on SR 6 East. One interchange on Interstate 95 south of Boston will tell you to turn both west and east if you want to go to north to Manchester, New Hampshire.

Sometimes the spiritual journey can be like that, can't it? We think we know what God wants, but the markers we have used for confirmation, don't seem to line up with that. What do you do then? Discount what God seems to be saying, and trust our markers? Only if your markers are God's markers. Regretfully, however, I'm finding many of the markers we use are in direct conflict with Scripture and the model Jesus left us.

The Markers We Use

One of the most shocking lessons I've had to face in the last few years is how many of the signs I have used to affirm God's will in my life were actually markers inviting me to wander further from him.

Like a traveler on a road, I would hear him calling me to follow him. But when I looked in the direction of

his voice I would see signs warning of danger, risk and conflict. Turning another way I could see signs offering convenience, gratification and security. How easy it was to tell myself that the voice had come down the more appealing path. However, when I set out in that direction, I would find God's presence growing more distant and my spiritual life more dry and empty.

One does not have to twist Scripture far to think that following Jesus will lead down the most comfortable path, or the most popular, or the most financially rewarding, or the most secure. We never even consider that those who don't know how much their Father loves them, seek those same things. So, like them, we pursue our own self-interest thinking it to be the way God works, but only find ourselves further from the depths of knowing him and missing out on the incredible adventure that comes by following the Lamb wherever he goes.

They are false markers, leading us toward the American dream not to the kingdom of God. If we only obey his voice when its easy, brings us the applause of others or benefits us financially we will find our spiritual life dry, empty and boring. While it offers the illusion of joy, it cannot give us the real thing, where God inhabits our heart, freeing us from the tyranny of darkness and releasing us to true joy and freedom that can only be found in living life God's way.

Jesus warned us about that. He told us the life of the kingdom awaited those who walked a narrow road, apart from their own self-interest. Don't forget that this is a kingdom in which everything works backwards from the natural way we would do things. "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will find it." (Matthew 16:24-25)

If you're confirming his voice off of the wrong markers, you will be confused when he speaks to you and you'll find your decisions taking you further away from the life in him you desire.

So every once in a while it wouldn't hurt to take a look at the markers we're seeing on the journey we're on. They will tell us whether our journey is drawing us to him along the narrow road, or back to the broad road of complacency and ease that we left on the day he touched our hearts and invited us to go on a journey with the Living God:

Religious Busyness or Deepening Relationship?

There is no end to the number of good things you can do in God's name in our religious-based culture. Everywhere people are begging for money and volunteers and it is easy for the conscientious believer to get caught up in a whirl of wonderful activities and miss out on what it means to build a deepening relationship with him.

It is true that the busiest people with religion, are often the most unfulfilled spiritually. Rather than being

changed by his life, they are often short-tempered, demanding that others follow their example. They do not understand how religious activity can dull our hunger and distract our passion to know him. They pursue the latest program, observe demanding disciplines, seek out being 'fed' by teachers they enjoy, but never grow closer to the one who loves them so deeply.

The surest sign that you are walking the road God has for you is an ever-deepening friendship with him where you grow to know his heart better and are increasingly transformed into his image. It is helpful to pause regularly in your journey and ask whether or not you know him better today than you did a month ago. If the answer is no, or you're uncertain, then you might consider that you're moving the wrong direction. He wants nothing more than for you to learn to abide in him every day, and doing that everything else on God's heart concerning you will be fulfilled.

Acclaim of Others or Being Misunderstood by Them?

"Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ." (Galatians 1:10)

Wouldn't it be great if everyone around you could affirm God's voice in your life and applaud you for following it? In the real world, however it is rarely true. People, especially those who care about you, often want the same things for you that your flesh does--back to that which is comfortable, safe and satisfying.

They may mean well, but Paul knew that walking with an eye to the approval of others will always take you far afield of the kingdom. Jesus said the same thing. He said to take stock when men speak well of you, for that's how they treat false prophets. He went on to say you are blessed when people lie, insult, and exclude you because of your obedience to him. He knew the same crowd shouting 'Hosannas' on Sunday would be screaming "Crucify him!" only a few days later.

Even our Christian culture tells us that increased attendance, best-selling books, and growing audiences await those who obey Jesus. In fact, those who misunderstood Jesus the most were those most passionate about religion. You will even find other Christians calling you back to the broader road thinking they are helping you follow God. Don't be fooled. He's the only one we can follow. Even if that means you are misunderstood, God will be faithful to provide other believers at just the right moment to encourage you on the journey.

Fitting in with Religious Leaders or Perhaps Disappointing Them

In our day, many who claim to lead in the body of Christ are not much more than well-intentioned program managers. They have an organization to run and personal goals to meet and often view people around them as simply part of that process. If we confuse a submissive heart with following their instructions, we will often find ourselves moving away from the path God has chosen for us.

We all know how important it is to glean God's wisdom from other believers, including those who might be further along the journey. However, make sure those are people who are on the journey to knowing God, not those imbedded in religious institutions and who have a vested interest in you doing things their way. Religious leaders are those who lead people into religion. Weren't these types always at odds with Jesus? Did he put their directions above his Father's?

Of course not! But how can you tell the difference between religious leaders and mature believers God has put around you? True leaders won't tell you what Father's will is for you; they will instead help you grow close enough to Jesus to understand that for yourself. I find it curious that most of the latter I've met in recent years rarely waste their time in management positions of institutionalized Christianity.

Being Served or Serve?

Isn't it the natural inclination of our natural mind to get things in order the way we want them, even if we disguise that as doing what we think is best for all? When God's leading seems to put you at the center and use others to help you get what you want--be suspicious.

If, however, his tug on your heart leads you to lay down your life for someone else, helping them discover what Jesus is doing in them and freeing them to do it, then that just might be God's will for you.

Convenience or Risk?

For those of us who regard God's will lying down the path of least resistance, we find Paul's words to the Corinthians to be quite disturbing, " But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me." (1 Corinthians. 16:8-9)

Open door--great conflict! What a perspective! When Jesus invites us to live by faith he invites us to live in the security of Father's love with an eye to his wisdom, his power, his abilities, not our own. If as a believer you are not finding yourself in situations far beyond your own ability to handle, you're probably not growing.

Because he so desperately wants to free you from the bondage of self, he will invite you beyond what is convenient and secure in your natural mind. Remember, when he led Israel through the wilderness they grew so insecure that they preferred slavery in Egypt to living as free men and women in God. Regretfully many make that same decision today.

On the other hand, look at the list of those who walked by faith. What faith led them to do almost always looked irresponsible to human wisdom. But it wasn't, because they were learning to follow God and rely on him, not man's ways of doing things. Though it took them into greater conflict, put them at incredible risk, and at times cost them more than they ever dreamed, it also took them into the very heart of God.

They learned to rely on him and not themselves, and that is true security.

When you're looking at the sign that reads 'Personal Security' you're looking the wrong direction. Turn around. Be willing to risk something so awesome at God's leading that there's no way it will work without him. That's how God's invites his people to live.

Financial Security or Contentedness with God's Portion?

"The Son of Man has no place to lay his head." "You cannot serve both God and Money." "But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that." These words certainly don't sound to me like following God insures upward financial mobility. Yet we easily pursue such ambitions thinking they represent God's blessing.

Paul warned us that only "men of corrupt mind?think that godliness is a means to financial gain." (I Timothy 6:5). Isn't it difficult for us to admit that the best financial decisions aren't always the most Godly? How many people have not followed God's voice, because they couldn't trust him to provide for them, or because it didn't make sense financially?

God's path doesn't always draw us to financial gain, though he promises to take care of every need. If Paul had only made decisions based on how it would secure his financial future, I'm afraid he would have missed so much that God had for him. Instead he learned to be content with God's provision and realized it might vary season to season. "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want."

He knew that God's ability to "do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine," had to do with the inner life of joy, not the securing of material wealth. Follow God, or follow money, but you cannot do both!

Following Routine or Following Him?

I like having clear insight into the long-range plan before I do anything. I want to know how it will turn out and what my contingencies are if something goes wrong. Jesus, however, is more interested in teaching us to live with a daily dependence on his voice, willing to follow him even if we have no idea what the outcome might be.

There's nothing more Jesus wants to teach us than how to depend on him every day, and follow him even when we don't understand the outcome. There is nothing we want to learn less. We like being self-reliant, able to trust sound principles and routines rather than need to hear his ever-present voice.

I've been working through this very thing with publishing decisions. I want a principle to guide me

through ever future decision, rather than simply listening to what he wants me to write next, trusting he'll make a way to make it available when we get there. Following him most often means we only see the next step, not the next ten. Follow anyway, and you'll see the wonder of his plan unfold in ways you could never have contemplated.

Shunning the World or Hanging Out with Unbelievers?

There was a time in my life that I had no meaningful relationships with people who were not believers, and only knew other believers that gathered in the same group as me. I looked with suspicion on those who had too many friendships with people in the world.

That's what Jesus faced when he was constantly accused of hanging out with the wrong crowd--those who caught in sin or those who ignored the protocol of the religious crowd. Father's heart had drawn him to be with the lost, helping them discover the joy of God's life. So, don't think when God invites you on opportunities to love those left out of his life that you are somehow abandoning him or his body. God has called us to be light in some of the darkest places.

And the Point Is... Follow Him!

Christianity is living in relationship to the Living God. You can't do that if you're not free to follow him wherever he leads you. Of course anyone who sets their course by running from busyness, trying to be misunderstood, offending religious leaders, taking absurd risks, living carelessly or finding company only among sinners will not necessarily be walking God's pathway. In fact all of those can be used as excuses for arrogant and destructive behaviors against God and his people. But I am not writing to people like that.

Ultimately Jesus has not asked us to live our life by following signs, but by learning to listen to his voice and to trust him in every situation. We can, however, find ourselves missing out on his life because we ignore his voice if it doesn't align with our false notions about what living in God really means. These markers only have value if they free us to follow the Lamb wherever he goes, so that you can be like him in the world and available for all he wants to do in and through you.

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