

WHICH WAY AT THE CROSSROADS?



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Standing at the Crossroads

Stand at the Crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is and walk in it and you will find rest for your souls (Jeremiah 6:16).

It may be in our career, at church, as the result of some pressing problem or it may extend to the whole way that we relate to the Lord and other people.

This crossroads that we face will have implications far beyond ourselves. Because the decisions we take will affect many other people, it is important not to rush our decision-making. God is watching how we handle this crossroads - whether we are seeking where 'the good way' forward lies, or whether we are merely looking back regretfully to how things were.

What do you do when you approach a crossroads? Slow sdown of course! It is much the same when we reach a crossroads in our life. then God may well have been is slowing you down too - or even bringing you to a full stop. Why? Because He wants to show you a new way forward! God has brought you to this crossroads in order to wait on Him.

Before driving on it makes supremely good sense to seek the Lord as to which direction you should drive off in. Scripture urges us to 'Stand at the crossroads and look!'It is no accident that you are at this place. The Lord has either initiated it or He has allowed it. He has a purpose for it and it will be well worth our while taking time to discover what that purpose is.

For those who are facing deeply perplexing issues - or who are simply seeking greater clarification - this teaching booklet will help you to consider some of the

implications involved in ‘standing at the crossroads.’ Every section contains points to ponder, and signposts to the place of renewal that lies beyond

Asking the Right Questions

The crossroads is an obvious time for seeking the way forward - but we need to ask the right questions. ‘Is this the way you would have me go Lord?’ may be a sensible question (at the right time) but the follow-up question, ‘How should I set about doing this, Lord?’ may prove to be much more dynamic. It puts the focus more on God’s power and strength than on our own.

When the Israelites were on the verge of entering the Promised Land, Moses inadvertently encouraged them to ask the wrong questions.

The Lord said to Moses, ‘Send some men to explore the land of Canaan, which I am giving to the Israelites’. But Moses said, ‘Go up and see what the land is like and whether the people who live there are strong or weak, few or many. Num. 13:2, 17.

Do you see what happened? God said one thing but Moses said another. Moses’ words introduced a dimension of uncertainty which the spies took hold of and reinforced - namely the possibility that their opponents might be too numerous and too strong for them. Only Caleb and Joshua had hearts of faith to see things differently. Forty years later, they alone of that generation were still ‘up and running’ when God brought the Israelites to the same place again. Can you trace occasions when the Lord has allowed you a ‘rerun’ of a particular situation to see whether you would respond differently this time round?

The Israelites had to wait a long time to recover from their earlier lack of faith, but this was a new day and the outcome

would be entirely different. Using all the benefit of his previous experience, Joshua encouraged the people to believe that they could take the land. He provided the people with a decisive lead; words which equipped them to find the right way forward at that most important crossroads (Josh. 1:6-11). May we ourselves be equally as clear and confident in our leadership skills and decision-making.

Overcoming Fears

The Israelites were undoubtedly afraid of the obstacles and uncertainties that they faced - but their enemies were even more afraid of them (Josh. 2:11). This had probably been the case forty years earlier too, but the Israelites had allowed their fears at that time to stop them from taking any decisive action.

Fear can turn our crossroads into the very worst kind of a cross. Can you think of occasions when fear has not only tormented you but has effectively paralysed you into inaction? Or caused you to step out in inappropriate directions. Even more to the point, is fear holding you back now from doing what the Lord has been calling you to do?

Slowing down to make the right choices

Not all drivers slow down at cross roads. Some drive straight through them, greatly increasing the likelihood of causing an accident.

Shortly after taking Jericho, the Israelites faced another crossroads when they were ignominiously repulsed at Ai. Faced by this unexpected defeat, their hearts turned to water. Joshua flung himself flat on his face, and poured out his heart in one of the most unbiblical prayers of all time: 'O God, wouldn't it have been better if we had stayed on the other side of the Jordan and all died there!' (Josh. 7:7). Joshua's faith was in his boots - a million miles from how he had been when he

had exhorted the people to go in and take the land that God had given them.

Elijah would later respond in just such a way when he sat down underneath a tree and asked to die. As Luis Palau put it, 'When you're out of touch with God, you begin to pray ridiculous prayers.' (*The Moment to Shout*).

Scripture records numerous 'mistakes' by even God's finest servants, but for a moment let's allow ourselves to speculate. What would have happened to God's plan if Joseph had not been such a man of integrity, and had yielded to the repeated advances of Potiphar's wife? Or if, years later, when he met up with the brothers who had betrayed him into his prolonged time of suffering he had chosen to take revenge on them?

So many emotions must have assailed him at that moment. In the circumstances it made a lot of sense for him to pretend to be a stranger for a while to give himself time to come to terms with this utterly unexpected turn of events (Gen. 42:7). It gave him the chance to ask the Lord where the good way lay at that particular crossroads. The conclusion that he came to is one that has helped countless people ever since: 'It was not you who sent me here but God.' (Gen. 45: 8) Joseph could see now that even his brothers' treachery had played its part in bringing about God's wider purposes - and famine was averted in both Egypt and Israel as a result. Can you see how the Lord has used strange circumstances to further His purposes in your life?

Take Time to Reflect

It is wise to give ourselves time to think. Otherwise we end up jumping to respond to Goliath's shouting instead of waiting for the Shepherd's leading. When we move on too quickly from our crossroads we are liable to make false starts. We mishear God and we misread scenarios. What happens next? We get egg on our faces! It is good to be enthusiastic, but why

be reckless? It takes time to hear God's voice and to discern His leading.

Beyond this crossroads that you face lies the leading of the Lord. Many will be the fellow travellers who will receive God's grace and comfort simply because you were willing to pay the cost of discerning His leading and choosing to obey it.

It is strengthening to remember the specific ways by which the Lord has led you - but less than helpful to look back in such a way as to induce regrets and uncertainty. 'How would things have been if only I had done (or not done) such and such?' 'Why didn't I . . .?' 'Perhaps I should have?'

It is right to face issues from the past (not least in order to minimise the risk of making the same mistakes again in the future) but we cannot afford to start living in the past in case we find ourselves trying to perpetuate a phase of our lives that has gone for good. Be warned: nostalgia isn't what it used to be! The Scripture tells us to look ahead to discover e His path for us.

Sometimes as we look back we can spot trends - repeated patterns that highlight particular ways by which He leads us, or specific character weaknesses. We need to heed these carefully because we may have more to learn from them. This may not be the last time that we go through this kind of episode - but it may well be God's time for dealing with the underlying issues. Don't be afraid. We can trust the Lord's dealings with us.

So far from being tempted to look back, however, some people are only too keen to keep looking to the future. They prefer to keep their eyes fixed in that direction to save them the inconvenience - and the challenge - of having to look back and face the past. This is when people begin to live in a mythical never-never world 'when it will all start to happen.' What surer recipe could there be for missing what God has in store for them today?

There is a right sense, however, in which we are called to live 'beyond' the present horizon. You cannot lead a church (or a victorious Christian life either for that matter) without this 'visionary' quality. It is those who are full of vision who can discern what the Lord is saying and where He is leading, whereas those who are lacking in hope and vision remain continually at risk of becoming spiritually stuck or even mentally ill.

For those who are aware that they have taken a wrong turning, and fear that they have 'blown' their walk with God, the Lord would say, 'In My sovereign purposes for your life, I have allowed for this mistake. If you will humble yourself and learn from it, I will make up for the missed opportunities and bring something fresh to birth, even from your failure. Whatever you have done, the gate of repentance remains wide open. Your repentance and humility will attract My forgiveness. Don't let the awareness of your faults and failure keep you from seeking Me.'

Standing at the Crossroads

Let me ask you. What do you see and how do you feel at your crossroads? Are you looking to see God in everything - in the sunshine, the mist - the beauty around you which draws you to the Lord of creation? Can you express your gratitude to Him for the friends and family and opportunities He has given you? Or are you so preoccupied with your problems and responsibilities that you are unable to appreciate them all?

Look a bit longer. Let the Lord restore your sense of perspective and fill your imagination. His grace and love are always sufficient - but you must cry out to Him and ask Him to move on your behalf. This is why we are called to stand at the crossroads - not to stop and lie down at it. To stand and look rather than to advance at top speed - is not an easy option. It is only horses who find standing comfortable!

When we are at a crossroads, it is the most natural thing in the world that we turn to people in the hope of getting good advice. Sometimes their words will be the very thing to get us moving again - but they may also be too quick to tell us what we should be doing. God doesn't deal primarily in 'oughts' and 'shoulds' - He deals with us in the secret places of our heart. He has plans and strategies that He may choose to share with none other.

One word from God is better than all the advice of others - however well intentioned. If the Lord speaks (and confirms) something which sets you on a course that others, for whatever reason, cannot readily follow, don't waste too much time looking over your shoulder to see who is following you. 'Whatever He says to you - do it!' (John 2:5)

Listening for His Voice

Christianity is all about knowing God, yet many of us complain that we rarely hear Him saying much. Let me ask you then: how much are you really listening? I don't mean just with your ears, but with all your senses. Sometimes the Lord will speak when you are at your most relaxed. At other times, you will need to focus with all your heart to try to discern what He is saying about a situation.

Do you remember the slogan you were taught when learning to drive - "Mirror, Signal, Manoeuvre?" It is very much like that in our walk with the Lord. Rather than just driving on we should "Consult, Hear, Act." Even if we don't get all the details of our hearing right (and we often won't!) He will make sure that we will hear what we need to hear when we really need to hear it.

Sometimes the Lord asks questions of us not to get something from us (which is often why we ask questions of each other) but to develop our intimacy together in order to realign our perspective to His. Have you experienced this?

Write down what the Lord says and store these precious insights in an easily retrievable form. They will be an excellent antidote for your fears.

If you sense that you have been asking the Lord the same question for too long, and are not getting any answer, try 'loading' the question in one direction or the other. There is a time for going beyond asking, 'Lord, what should I do?' to saying, 'Lord is there any reason why I shouldn't do such and such ...?' Or try asking a different question altogether. No matter how long the 'answer' takes, it will assuredly come in God's good time.

How do you see God?

Crossroads test our relationship with the Lord. We can either become frustrated and bitter when little appears to be happening, or we can open ourselves to the Lord's fresh direction for our lives. It is here that any sense of being indispensable or 'special' is stripped from us; here too that we become increasingly willing to honour and value other people above ourselves. Even our apparent inability to do anything to bring about God's purposes actually works together for good.

The Bible uses powerful pictures and images to describe our relationship with Him: the picture of the Bride and the Bridegroom for instance. Don't let the sexual overtones get in the way - we are talking about spiritual intimacy, not sex. Jesus lives in us and He has chosen us to be His friends. Friends know what the other is feeling. What does being His friend mean to you? God longs to share His love with us. There is no 'quota' of love we can ever exhaust. 'We' ourselves, and the choices we make, are the only limitation.

People at the crossroads are inclined to say: 'I've got to batten down the hatches until I've made a decision - weigh the pros and cons - analyse this and evaluate the other.' All of these things may have their place, but Jesus comes to us and

says, 'I want to show you what is really going on. Let's sit down and have a chat about it. I want to release you from this oppression and to fill you with Myself.'

Here is something that may really help you to understand what is happening at your crossroads: what you are facing and how you are feeling. Take a large piece of paper and draw your crossroads. It doesn't have to be a work of art. I am the world's worst artist. I think in words rather than in pictures - but a picture may be just the thing that will help you right now. Draw something which depicts where you are right now, or which points to where the Lord may be leading you.

Next, take your drawing to a couple of friends. They are not there to judge what you have produced - or to judge you either. They are there to draw out the deeper meaning of what you are going through. Let them ask questions of clarification and share their perceptions and perspectives. They can act as a mirror to help you understand what you have drawn.

You may well feel a considerable reluctance to embark on doing this - but I can almost guarantee that it will prove helpful. God will speak to you through what you draw.

Goals and Visions

How much thought have you given to fulfilling the goals or visions which God has placed in your heart? Are you devoting enough time to see them come to pass - or have you allowed them to be crushed by people's cutting words? The powers of darkness may have inspired those words, because he saw how beautiful and powerful the vision was. As a result, God's original intention may never have seen the light of day. Perhaps you stepped out to fulfil your dream or goal and something happened to crush it, and all you are left with now is the pain and disappointment.

God loves our dreams and aspirations - especially the ones He has put in us - but He does want to refine and fulfil them.

What has He planted in your heart? Don't let these goals be suffocated by the weights and cares of daily responsibilities, or by the fears and negative expectations of onlookers. Speak with a bold and godly confidence. With God you can take ground and do exploits –and this will change your perspective regarding many things. A man visited a building site and asked two builders what they were doing. One replied, 'I'm putting one brick on another and building a wall.' But the other replied, 'I'm building a cathedral!' Which perspective do you veer towards?

Stepping Out

America does not have roundabouts, but four way crossroads abound. Priority is determined not by the 'minor' road giving way to the 'major,' but according to the order in which cars arrive at the stop sign. It is not usually difficult to work out who should go next. When the Lord shows us that the time has come to 'step out,' however, it is easy to allow underlying doubts to hold us back. The pressure of uncertainty and inner resistance builds up inside us like a pressure cooker. We make excuses and insist that we have 'earned' the right to rest. If we give up and go back on what we have said we are like a car returning by the way it has come.

It is only when we step out that we experience the grace and the power of the Lord – just as the priests had to walk into the Jordan before the waters stopped flowing (Josh. 3:15-17).

What happens when two (or more) ways seem equally good? Wait until the issue becomes clearer! Ask for the ancient paths. The word 'ancient' in Hebrew includes the concept of something hidden and timeless, something of eternity. These are God's ways that we are asking for – and we know that He has 'set eternity in our hearts' (Ecc. 3:11). His ways, as the Good News Bible puts it, are 'agreeable, and prosperous'.

Why can't we discern these ancient paths more easily? Well, the Lord is not the only one who has plans for our lives. The deceiver of the brethren has his own 'ancient paths,' and he does all he can to draw us into them too. Some of the things he tries to make us believe about ourselves are out-and-out lies. No wonder that we chaff against these things which never were from God! And when we are tempted to suppose that God has got it all wrong, what we may really be saying is: 'Lord, you're not big enough to sort this one out! I'm not precious enough for you to help me!'

Can you recognise yourself standing at the crossroads and responding in such ways? Some of the doubts you have come to believe about God or about yourself have been planted by Satan and they are reaping a bitter harvest in your mind sets and mental outlook. Such things need to be first identified and then renounced. Quickly!

Some of these ancient paths are hidden because the Lord chooses not to reveal them until His time for us is come and we ourselves are fully ready. Remember, it is nothing less than the revelation of God we are looking for. It is quite possible to be a 'mature' Christian in everyone else's eyes yet still to be doing far too many things in our own strength. To be in close partnership with the Lord means remaining quiet and submissive - not stubborn or dogmatic. God loves it when we depend on Him entirely. Ask yourself: what aspects of your life do you need to yield more fully to Him?

At each crossroads that you face, the Lord has a way forward for you. By one means or another, He will not fail to speak and lead you on. He will send people to help you and guideposts to direct you so that you can find and follow in His footsteps.

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