

THE COMPASS

God's Map for My Mess

Untidy Christianity, Part 1

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It's a new year, and may I just say, "Thank God!"

Because for me, the old year was messy.

In fact, while I really want my life to be a straight line, an unbroken trajectory gliding from victory to victory, if I look back over recent years especially, I don't see a straight line.

I don't even see a creative zigzag that might be mistaken for modern art.

The line of my life is broken, in places it's smudged or blotched. I have failures and mistakes and hurts, and I can't even explain them all.

I would love to be able to make sense of everything I've gone through, so at least I could impress you with my wisdom.

But I can't.

I was feeling pretty badly about all of this until my friend Bill Rhoades in Pittsburgh emailed me.

Bill is the single best spam filter on the planet.

He sends me only the most wonderful little nuggets.

And one day several weeks ago he sent me an excerpt from a book called *Messy Spirituality*, by Mike Yaconelli.

Yaconelli was in ministry for decades, until he died in a car accident a couple months ago.

Messy Spirituality was his last book.

The book begins with the words, "My life is a mess," and it goes downhill from there.

"For as long as I can remember," Yaconelli says, "I have wanted to be a godly person.

Yet when I look at the yesterdays of my life, what I see, mostly, is a broken, irregular path littered with mistakes and failure. I have had temporary successes and isolated moments of closeness to God, but ... most of the moments of my life seem hopelessly tangled in a web of obligations and distractions."

He goes on to say, "When I was younger, I believed my inconsistency was due to my youth. I believed that age would teach me all I needed to know and that when I was older I would have learned the lessons of life and discovered the secrets of true spirituality. I am older, a lot older, and the secrets are still secret from me."

A little later on he says, "I have been trying to follow Christ most of my life, and the best I can do is a stumbling, bumbling, clumsy kind of following. I wake up most days with the humiliating awareness that I have no clue where Jesus is. Even though I am a minister, even though I think about Jesus every day, my following is...uh...meandering."

And as I'm reading this email, I'm yelling to myself: "He's me! He's me!"

And then I thought, with horror, "Oh no ... He's David G. Brown!"

I forwarded the email to David, David was as stunned by it as I was. He bought the book, he read it — and by the first meeting of The Compass Fellowship, a quotation from this book, *Messy Spirituality*, was on the cover page of our handout.

Because Yaconelli, in all his confusion and discouragement, went on a quest to figure out how God could still love him, when he was so inconsistent and imperfect.

And what he discovered was life-transforming. Faith-transforming. Relationship-transforming.

He discovered that God really does still love a person who drops the ball, trips over his own feet, gets gunked up with sin, you name it.

Here's how he puts it:

“Spirituality is not a formula; it is not a test. It is a relationship. Spirituality is not about competency; it is about intimacy. Spirituality is not about perfection; it is about connection. The way of the spiritual life begins where we are now in the mess of our lives. Accepting the reality of our broken, flawed lives is the beginning of spirituality not because the spiritual life will remove our flaws, but because we let go of seeking perfection and, instead, seek God, the one who is present in the tangledness of our lives.”

As I began asking God what he wanted me to teach here at The Compass on Wednesday evenings, he guided me to somebody a lot like Mike Yaconelli.

A guy who messed up, a guy whose life wasn't a textbook of spiritual quality and high character, a guy who *wanted* to love God and love people but in actuality he kept dishonoring God and treating people like garbage.

His name was David. (Not David G. Brown; I'm talking about the *original* David.)

As I began thumbing through David's life story in the Old Testament, I sensed that God could show us ourselves in this man's life, and show us how to experience God's love even in the tangledness of our lives.

So over the next few weeks, we're going to go on a remarkable journey together.

We're going to walk the road that David walked in the books of 1 and 2 Samuel. If you want to read ahead, start in 1 Samuel 16; it's a fascinating story.

There are going to be giants and kings and bad guys. There's going to be hilarious comedy and heart-wrenching human drama.

There will be births and deaths and, I'm sorry to say, lots of blood.

There will be secret agents and double-crosses and even some sex scenes.

Maybe you grew up in Sunday school and you feel like you know David already, because everybody has heard of David and Goliath, David and Bathsheba, David and Jonathan, David and Absalom.

But we're going to meet a whole cast of characters you probably haven't heard of — we'll visit David and Abner, David and Ahimelech, David and Achish, David and Abiathar — and those are only the A's!

Along the way, I have confidence that God is going to speak into our actual, imperfect, Monday-through-Saturday lives.

If you thought the Bible was full of perfect people offering total solutions by way of tidy formulas, you'll be surprised.

But I think we're going to be comforted too. We're going to be reassured — because the life of David will allow God's love all the way down into the secret places of our hearts, where we know we're imperfect, and needy, and just plain messy.

David's story begins with an old guy named Samuel.

Samuel was the head of the nation of Israel, he was God's man, but the people were embarrassed to have a religious government; they demanded a king so they would look sophisticated, like the other countries in the neighborhood.

So God finally threw up his hands and said okay, and (this was years before David was even born), Samuel anointed Saul, a tall, good-looking guy, as the first king of Israel.

But Saul had such deep character flaws that God finally said, Look, this guy has got to go. This is what happens when you let yourself be concerned with what other people think of you instead of focusing on my plan for you.

So now we're going to lose this "people's king," Saul, and I'm going to replace him with my own king. "God's king."

Well, Samuel was devastated.

He knew Saul was a loser but he just felt the pain of this whole situation.

Until finally, in **1 Samuel 16**:

1 The Lord said to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way...."

God is at work in the background of David's life, preparing the way.

We often talk about "God's plan for your life," but I tend to think about God's plan for my life in terms of whatever is happening to me right now, today. Stuff I can see and sense.

God's plan for my life is to be teaching at Compass Fellowship on January 7.

But **(1) God's plan for my life is elaborate.**

He is orchestrating events on various levels, invisible to me.

God says to Samuel,

1 "...I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem [5 or 6 miles from Jerusalem]. I have chosen one of his sons to be king."

2 But Samuel said, "How can I go? Saul will hear about it and kill me." [You can see what a stellar character Saul was, to have a reputation like this.] The Lord said, "Take a heifer with you and say, 'I have come to sacrifice to the Lord.'

God is talking to Samuel here like we talk to our teenagers: "Natalie, change the baby's diaper." "But I'm watching a video!" "And while you're at it, put a fresh shirt and pants on her."

Samuel says "Saul will kill me!" God says, "Don't forget to take a cow with you."

I tend to think of God's plan as passive. It's a blueprint, you know; it's all laid out on some cosmic parchment paper in heaven.

But God is not just a planner. He is a promoter. He doesn't just make his plan and then sit back and hope somebody makes it happen.

He makes his plan and then he pushes his plan.

Even Job, after all of his suffering, and then about 40 chapters of confusion, finally said to God,

“I know that you can do all things; no plan of yours can be thwarted” (Job 42:2).

God’s plan is not a passive process; it is active. God won’t wait if something is crucial to his plan; he’s impatient.

(2) He will push people, shape circumstances, move mountains if he has to, to get his thing done in my life.

So he says to Samuel, “Be on your way.” It’s risky? Stop yer belly-achin’. I gotcha covered.

3 Invite Jesse to the sacrifice, and I will show you what to do. You are to anoint for me the one I indicate.”

4 Samuel did what the Lord said. When he arrived at Bethlehem, the elders of the town trembled when they met him. They asked, “Do you come in peace?”

They were nervous because sometimes Samuel had to administer punishment to bad guys, and it usually wasn’t very pretty.

5 Samuel replied, “Yes, in peace; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord. Consecrate yourselves and come to the sacrifice with me.” Then he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

This consecration was a ritual washing they went through to make themselves ceremonially pure before going to God.

It was a tradition — not magical or anything; it was simply intended to express honor and reverence to God.

6 When they arrived, Samuel saw Eliab and thought, “Surely the Lord’s anointed stands here before the Lord.”

Eliab had all the advantages.

He was the firstborn, which in that culture was enormously important.

He was tall.

Even his name was an advantage: Eliab means “God is my Father.”

An obvious choice to be the new king.

7 But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.”

This is an amazing response — because Samuel was the spiritual leader of the whole country.

He heard from God, he spoke for God to the entire nation.

He is one of the 3 most outstanding characters in the entire Bible for consistency, morality, faith, righteousness.

And yet he got it wrong. He goofed up.

If it had been up to Samuel, David would never have become king. They would have had King Eliab.

God’s plan for my life will not be interrupted, sidetracked, or adjusted, even if great godly people don’t believe in it.

Of course God can speak to me through wise, longtime Christian people.

But even the most impressive Christian leaders are not infallible, and when God calls someone, it doesn’t matter who disagrees.

Our ministry in the former Soviet Union is technically illegal, but the objections of the

authorities don't factor in if God has really called us to that work.

I have to be reminded: it doesn't matter what people say.

God's plan for my life isn't based on my goodness; it's based on God's goodness.

His plan isn't based on my intelligence; it's based on his omniscience.

It doesn't matter whether I'm educated enough or even smart enough.

It doesn't matter what color I am or what kind of an accent I have.

It doesn't matter if I have a questionable history, or if other people think I'm funny-looking.

Are you too Scottish or haven't been a Christian long enough or too quiet or too talkative or too emotionally unstable or too fearful or...?

God isn't impressed by any of those limitations.

Do you have a heart to live out God's dream for you? God's impressed by that.

(3) If God calls me, then no matter who objects, God is committed to fulfilling his vision for me.

8 Then Jesse called Abinadab [some scholars translate this name as "father of nobility," another really good name for a king] **and had him pass in front of Samuel. But Samuel said, "The Lord has not chosen this one either."**

9 Jesse then had Shammah pass by, but Samuel said, "Nor has the Lord chosen this one."

10 Jesse had seven of his sons pass before Samuel [these guys will do anything to avoid choosing David], **but Samuel said to him, "The Lord has not chosen these."**

11 So he asked Jesse, "Are these all the sons you have?" "There is still the youngest," Jesse answered, "but he is tending the sheep." Samuel said, "Send for him; we will not sit down until he arrives."

In other words, no dinner till we settle this.

12 So he sent and had him brought in. He was ruddy, with a fine appearance and handsome features. Then the Lord said, "Rise and anoint him; he is the one."

Now we see that David is not only the youngest, which could be the most wretched position in a family in that culture, but he also has the junkiest job.

In fact, we see that sometimes, even in that culture, the baby of the family was spoiled, just like we do today (I can't imagine it, personally; we are BRUTAL in dealing with Lydia Charlotte, I assure you); but in David's case they decided, no, let's stick him out in the field with the livestock.

Scholars can't agree on how old David was at this point, but they have narrowed it down — and I was surprised by this:

Do you think of him as 13, or 17? No. Historical scholars calculate that he was at least 20, maybe as old as 25 — and still doing the sheep shift.

I imagine him sitting out there with the animals, cursing his luck — being born last in a string of 8 brothers, and then getting stuck with sheep duty.

But God hadn't forgotten him. God was preparing him.

(4) The junk I go through on my way to God's goal will help me later.

Many of the psalms that David wrote were inspired by his long hours of sheep-tending.

The adventures he had while protecting his flock from animals set him up for his

encounter with Goliath.

Even the fact that he was absent when Samuel arrived set the stage for God's choice to be made absolutely clear.

13 So Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the presence of his brothers...

So there would be no question from the older siblings.

No arguments, no doubts.

Then finally, as this first scene from David's life story comes to a close, we have this remarkable factoid:

13 ...and from that day on the Spirit of the Lord came upon David in power....

The Spirit of the Lord wasn't on him before. That kind of spiritual power that he became famous for later on wasn't part of his makeup until now.

This gives me hope!

(5) God will equip me today for whatever he calls me to accomplish today.

Yesterday's lack of power doesn't factor in today.

This is shockingly good news to me, because my yesterday's are so pockmarked with failures and errors of judgment and lapses of righteousness and, well, immorality.

I was talking with a friend of mine who was trying to make a business decision.

It involved another guy that both of us had had a bad experience with about 15 years earlier.

My friend said, Well, that guy will screw me.

But I just happened to have a rare moment of clarity — and I said, Well, maybe so, but I wouldn't want to be judged today for the kind of person I was 15 years ago.

I had issues back then that I don't have today.

God has helped me in some areas that I don't want to be identified with anymore.

God changes people.

The bottom line of David's life is encouraging to me:

My flaws, my defects, my deficiencies, my limitations, my shortcomings do not disqualify me with God.

I can be too short, too tall, too smart, too dumb, too rich, too poor, too bold, too sickly, too quiet or too in-your-face, and God is still going to do his thing in me, and for me, and through me!

God was still trying to get through on this point to the nation of Israel through the prophet Jeremiah about 500 years after the life of David.

Jeremiah 29:

11 "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.

12 Then [he's talking about a time when the people would have just about had their fill of trouble] you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will listen to you.

13 You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

I thank God he didn't say, "You will seek me and find me when you have faithfully read your Bible every morning for 30 days in a row without one miss."

He didn't say, "You will seek me and find me when your pastor judges you to be ready."

He didn't say, "You will seek me and find me when you fully understand me."

No. He just said, "seek me with all your heart." That's all.

David's brothers had better names.

But "David" just means "beloved."

By the time Jesse and his wife got to naming the eighth kid, they had run out of big highfalutin religious symbolism.

They had run out of classy names that would get attention for the boys on their first day at Hebrew school.

All that was left was to say, We love this child.

It is the perfect name for David.

He is not perfect. He is not consistent. He is not a model of good behavior every day of his life.

He's just loved.

God loves him.

He loves God as best he can, which isn't always the greatest — but the day comes when Samuel says, you know what?

When God **sought out a man after his own heart...** the guy he found was David (1 Samuel 13:14).

Just a guy who wanted to love God, didn't always know how, didn't always feel like it, but even after he screwed up, he kept coming back and trying to love God well again.

God knows I'm a dumb old human. A broken machine. A bundle of contradictions and embarrassments. Inconsistent like crazy. Incoherent a lot of the time.

When I try to get my act together and fail, he's not surprised. He's my father; he knows me. He loves me anyway.

When I fail and try to pretend, he's not fooled. He's my father; he knows me. He loves me anyway.

Tomorrow is another day. I'll have another opportunity to learn and grow. And I may get something right — but then I'll get something else wrong.

That's the nature of life.

We're going to eavesdrop while David gets into junkyard dogfights and then wonders, "How in the world did this happen?"

Man, I've been there myself.

But then we're also going to see David have opportunities to do really vengeful stuff, and by God's grace he has a moment of integrity.

I've been there too.

And then we're going to find David feeling like he's really on top of things, only to get tripped up again, and stumble, and do something stupid or sinful.

The road zigzags.

I'm on that road.

But Jesus has committed himself to walk this winding road with me.

Matthew 28:20 "...Surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

I do not have to be afraid that I have somehow slipped out of the realm of God's plan and provision.

Six times God says to his people through the prophet Jeremiah, "I am with you."

"Do not be afraid ... I am with you and will rescue you," declares the Lord (Jeremiah 1:8,19) ... "

"...I am with you to rescue and save you," declares the Lord (Jeremiah 15:20; 30:11) "and deliver you" (Jeremiah 42:11).

"Do not fear ... for I am with you," declares the Lord...." (Jeremiah 46:28).

God has already mapped out my life.

He has seen me sitting out there moping in the field with the sheep.

He has seen all the guys who got in line ahead of me, the guys who are taller and better looking and who have better names.

He has seen all the spiritual leaders who have judged me all wrong.

And he is still with me. His plan still stands.

My purpose will stand, he says in Isaiah 46:10, **and I will do all that I please.**

And just by loving him, wanting him, trusting him — even imperfectly — I please him!