

THE COMPASS

Stages

Untidy Christianity, Part 4

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Legend has it that Albert Einstein, the “Father of Relativity,” was asked, “Why did the chicken cross the road,” and the great scientist replied, “Did der chicken cross der road, or did der road move under der chicken?”

Of course we know the answer. The earth is rotating constantly, it’s revolving around the sun, we’re hurtling through space — and there’s a bunch of other cosmic movement going on that I don’t understand.

So the correct answer is: both are true.

The chicken crossed the road, but the road was also moving under the chicken.

I’m that kind of a chicken.

I am going through life, day by day, just trying to cross the road.

But the road keeps moving under me.

In fact, in real life, I have a more difficult job than the chicken. I am not just trying to cross the road. I am trying to go down the road — and the road keeps moving.

One day I’m making good progress; the next day I stumble around and look down at my feet and find I’m in the ditch.

How did I get here?

In one stage of my life, I’m like the drum major leading the parade; I’m a hero, I’m doing great; people love me.

In another stage of life I’m getting honked at by people in hot cars because I’m moving too slow; seems like every two minutes I’m having to move to the right to get out of the way.

In one stage I find I’m in a funeral procession.

In another stage I’m flying down the road, top down, cool as the proverbial cucumber — and then I see those flashing lights in my rear-view mirror.

We go through stages in life.

The road shifts under us, our situation morphs — and we morph too.

I may be in a stage of life that I really like, and I want it to stay like this forever! But it doesn’t. The road moves under the chicken.

Or I may be in a stage of life that really frustrates me, and I want it to change NOW! I don’t like the way it feels to trudge down this stretch of road. I don’t like what I look like on this part of the road. I don’t know where it’s leading me. I don’t feel like I’m making any progress.

But even when the road bends and a new stretch of the journey unfolds before me, I have to admit, it’s stressful to go through the change.

At the very least, I want the stages of life to be orderly.

John Ortberg and the teaching team at Willow Creek Church in the Chicago area taught about “the inevitable cycle of seasons in the human soul”:

Spiritual autumn is a time when it's necessary to let go and move on.
 Spiritual winter is a time of loss, and trusting God to usher in new beginnings.
 Spiritual springtime is a time of new opportunities.
 Spiritual summer is a time of abundance and stability and fruitfulness.

Cindy Jacobs, in her book *Women of Destiny*, also talks about life being a series of seasons:

She refers to Winter “Wonder Why It’s Not Happening” Land, when you feel dead and unproductive.

She talks about the spring “bursting out all over,” when you have a sense of great anticipation.

She says “summer’s fruit is sweet, but some days can be hot” — meaning you can be going great guns in your spiritual life, but you may also encounter spiritual warfare at the same time.

And she says the autumns of our lives are harvest times, busy times, when we may feel frazzled, overworked.

I’ve experienced all of these stages; maybe you have too.

But they don’t necessarily come in order. They don’t last the same amount of time.

Way more times than I want to remember, I’ve been humming along in a springtime of new opportunities and *BLAM!* It’s the wintertime of loss! We’re going backwards here!

And I’ve been stuck a long time in seasons of life that I would just as soon be finished with.

Well, we’ve been following the path that King David took over the course of his life, asking God to speak to us through David’s life story in the Old Testament, and we find that David went through stages too.

He starts out as a SHEPHERD. It’s a crummy job, but somebody’s got to do it, and David is the baby of the family, so he gets stuck with it.

Then he gets called to the palace to be the king’s personal musician. Saul wants him fulltime, but David’s father apparently negotiates a part-time position for him, because the Scripture says he went back and forth from the fields to the palace.

When Saul has a bad day, David plays music and settles the boss down.

David shepherds the sheep over in Bethlehem, and then he shepherds the king, emotionally speaking, in the palace.

Have you been in the shepherd stage? Feel like you kind of have to take care of everybody in your life — at home, at work, your parents, your children, some friend who just hangs on you and drains the life out of you?

You feel kind of alone out there in the fields?

Maybe it feels like everybody in your care at this point really is like a sheep — kind of helpless, can’t seem to make any progress....

Then, last week, we saw that David shocked both Israel and the Philistines by using a slingshot to knock out Goliath and then using the giant’s own sword to cut off his head.

In the stage-by-stage history of David’s life, we might call this a “transition moment.” Life

will never be the same for this young guy.
 I have a feeling we're not in Shepherdland anymore, Toto!
 This is SOLDIER land!
 David has entered a new stage of life.

Have you been in the soldier stage of life?
 Feel like you're facing big challenges? Maybe your business is at a critical point, or
 you're in a high-stakes situation in a key relationship.
 Adrenalin pumping every day, you go to bed at night and your heart is still pounding,
 your mind is still racing....
 That's the soldier stage.

When David entered his soldier stage, things looked pretty good for him.
 In fact, from the look of the situation, we might expect things to be rosy for David from
 here on out: we've seen already that God has equipped him to be strong in battle
 — and hey, he's going to get great PR from this accomplishment.
 In fact, the historical record of 1 Samuel 17 gives us a glimpse of how David is being
 noticed behind the scenes as this drama is occurring....

1 Samuel 17:55—18:14

55 As Saul watched David going out to meet the Philistine, he said to Abner, commander of the army, "Abner, whose son is that young man?"

[In the culture of the day, Saul was basically saying, "Where did we get this kid?"]

Abner replied, "As surely as you live, O king, I don't know."

[Modern translation: "I have no pickin' idea."]

56 The king said, "Find out whose son this young man is."

[In other words, "Get the skinny on him. Check his credentials. If nothing else, we're gonna need to know where to send the body" — because at this point Saul has no confidence that David is going to win this crazy confrontation.]

57 As soon as David returned from killing the Philistine, Abner took him and brought him before Saul, with David still holding the Philistine's head.

[What a pretty sight! But David wasn't trying to be gross; this was the military custom of the day.]

58 "Whose son are you, young man?" Saul asked him. David said, "I am the son of your servant Jesse of Bethlehem."

[David has actually gone over this ground with Saul before, back when they first met and Saul hired David as a palace musician — but Saul is a busy guy and has hundreds of people working around him all the time, so it's totally understandable that he wouldn't remember the conversation from months or maybe even years earlier.]

In the very next chapter of the Scriptures, we learn that from that day, Saul kept David on fulltime; he didn't let him return to his father's house — just sent for his clothes, his toothbrush, his laptop.

And David now enters another stage of life.

1 Samuel 18:

1 After David had finished talking with Saul, Jonathan became one in spirit with

David, and he loved him as himself....

3 And Jonathan made a covenant with David because he loved him as himself.

4 Jonathan took off the robe he was wearing and gave it to David, along with his tunic, and even his sword, his bow and his belt.

These are actions heavy-laden with meaning.

Jonathan is next in line for the throne, so this is significant.

David is no longer just a pal. He has moved from SOLDIER to SON.

He is in the inner circle.

He is beloved.

Have you been in the SON stage? It's delicious.

You fall in love with a wonderful person, and then — that person falls in love with you too. Mmmmm...

You apply for the job, and they're so impressed with you that they insist on starting at you at a higher salary than the job was listed at. Aaaaah...

One time we moved into a new house and the first thing we heard was how terrible the previous owners of the house were. We were the heroes of the neighborhood just for moving in!

We were beloved.

The son stage is where you can do no wrong.

David is in the son stage, definitely. 1 Samuel 17:5 says:

5 Whatever Saul sent him to do, David did it so successfully that Saul gave him a high rank in the army. This pleased all the people [perhaps better translated *troops*], and Saul's officers as well.

6 When the men were returning home after David had killed the Philistine, the women came out from all the towns of Israel to meet King Saul with singing and dancing, with joyful songs and with tambourines and lutes.

This was the common response to a military victory in those days; like our tickertape parades after the Super Bowl.

7 As they danced, they sang: "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands."

It may seem to us today that the dancers were airheads; they should have known better than to insult the king like this.

But in fact, the way Hebrew music and language were constructed, they were not insulting King Saul at all.

In the tradition of the day, whoever you named first was more important, and they appropriately named Saul first.

Furthermore, the terms *thousands* and *tens of thousands* are what is known as a "stock parallel pair."

It's a pair of terms used in poetry to indicate an idea.

These singers aren't actually counting bodies. They're painting the poetic picture of large military victories.

These aren't mathematical terms — so the women aren't saying David is ten times as hot as Saul.

In the tradition of the times, *thousands* and *tens of thousands*, used in this way, are actually equal.

The women are lavishing equal praise on the old guy and the young guy.

But there's a problem: Saul is paranoid. He's spiritually flawed; he's emotionally fragile. He has character issues. So he "reads in" something that isn't there. He's telling himself an ugly story.

8 Saul was very angry; this refrain galled him. "They have credited David with tens of thousands," he thought, "but me with only thousands. What more can he get but the kingdom?"

9 And from that time on Saul kept a jealous eye on David.

David, through no fault of his own, has transitioned from SON to SUSPECT. Have you ever been in the suspect stage? I don't even want to talk about it. It is horrible to be thought ill of, and to KNOW that you're thought ill of, and to have no way of convincing the people who think ill of you that you're really a good guy — it's maddening and disheartening and just wretched.

David here hasn't done anything wrong. He didn't have an impure motive. In fact, he has been God's guy and he's done everything right. And yet, the road has veered out from under the chicken. Big-time.

10 The next day an evil spirit from God [the negative *ruwach* we talked about on January 14] came forcefully upon Saul. He was prophesying in his house, while David was playing the harp, as he usually did.

The term "prophesying" here doesn't refer to telling the future.

It's used in this way several times in biblical history to refer to an altered state of consciousness — suggesting that when Saul got like this, he was either sort of in a trance, or he was blathering like an idiot, or both.

In short, he wasn't verbalizing as if he were in his right mind.

And as we're about to see, it appears that he wasn't:

Saul had a spear in his hand

11 and he hurled it, saying to himself, "I'll pin David to the wall." But David eluded him twice.

(I'm impressed that David came back after "once," but I guess he was just a loyal, faithful guy.)

What was going on here?

12 Saul was afraid of David, because the Lord was with David but had left Saul.

13 So he sent David away from him [—couldn't stand to have him around all the time—] and gave him command over a thousand men [—get him out of town, get him out of my sight—], and David led the troops in their campaigns.

14 In everything he did he had great success, because the Lord was with him.

The road kept moving under him. It seemed like he couldn't stay in one stage.

We're in the same situation David was in.

The road keeps moving under us. We can't stay in one stage either.

It seems like nothing is constant.

But if we put David under the magnifying glass, we can find one constant.
 Through all the stages of his life, one factor stayed the same.
 What did one of Saul's assistants say about David in 1 Samuel 16:18 before David ever arrived at the palace? "The Lord is with him."
 Why was Saul afraid of David, in 1 Samuel 18:12? "Because the Lord was with David."
 How was it that no matter what stage he was in, David had "great success"?
 "Because," according to 1 Samuel 18:14, "the Lord was with him."

God didn't gravitate to the older boys in the family and leave David alone out there in the fields.
 God was with him in the shepherd stage.
 God didn't look at the Las Vegas odds against a youngster with a slingshot knocking off a human T-Rex.
 God was with him in the soldier stage.
 When David became Saul's fair-haired boy and the prince's best friend, God didn't say "Okay, David, now you're 'in.' You don't need me anymore; you're on your own."
 God was with him in the son stage.
 God didn't abandon him when the most powerful man in the country turned on him.
 God was with him in the suspect stage.
"In everything he did ... the Lord was with him."

We could fast-forward through David's story and find other stages of his life.
 There's a SINNER stage.
 But God was with him all the way through that stage.
 I'm grateful, because I've been in the sinner stage myself (from time to time — nothing too serious, of course).

There's a SPINELESS stage in David's life.
 But God was with him all the way through that too.
 I'm thankful, because I've been in the spineless stage of life myself sometimes.

There's a SAD stage in David's life.
 Yet God was with him every step of the way.
 I'm glad to know this, because I've been in the sad stage of life a few times.

God is with you no matter what stage of life you're in.
 He is on the journey with you, no matter how twisted or bumpy or narrow your road may be this evening.
 If you feel he's forgotten about you, he's with you.
 If you're angry with him, he's with you.
 If you're doing fabulous, he's with you.
 And he'll be with you when the road veers out from under you and you're not doing fabulous anymore.

This is not just wishful thinking. It is God's well established pattern to be with people who go through even the most awful stages.
 The people of Israel were way out of God's plan in 1 Samuel 12, and when they figured it out, they were terrified that it was too late for them to get right with God.

But Samuel told them, Don't worry...

1 Samuel 12:22 ...The Lord will not reject his people, because the Lord was pleased to make you his own.

Are you screwing up? (Are you in the SCREW-UP stage?) God is not going to reject you — you don't have to worry that he's going to abandon you — because he was so pleased to make you his own!

A thousand years after David, God was still at it.

We find Paul the apostle sitting in a Roman prison, writing to his young friend Timothy. Paul is getting old, he's thinking back over the stages of his life — he started out as a religious fanatic, he became a professional hit man for the Pharisee Mafia, he killed a bunch of good people just because they were Christ-followers — and now the amazing truth kind of dawns on him, all over again: that God has been with him, that God has loved him, through it all.

Here's what he says:

1 Timothy 1:

13 Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man...

14 The grace of our Lord was poured out on me abundantly, along with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.

15 Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners — of whom I am the worst.

16 But for that very reason I was shown mercy so that in me, the worst of sinners, Christ Jesus might display his unlimited patience as an example for those who would believe on him and receive eternal life.

God doesn't just have an affectionate oh-isn't-my-baby-cute kind of love for me.

He doesn't just have a tenuous you-better-not-make-another-mistake-like-that kind of love for me.

He has "unlimited patience."

When I goof up, it breaks his heart; but he wants to keep walking with me and working with me because he wants me to be a SHOWCASE of his love for goofballs like me!

Because he loves all the other goofballs too!

If God had "unlimited patience" with Paul ... if God would show mercy to him, and stick with him, and make something new of him, and work through him in the lives of other people ... I have hope!

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, Hebrews 4:16 says, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Let's trust God to be there for us as we go from stage to stage, as we find ourselves jerked off to the side of the road, as we're wondering where we're going or how we're going to get there!

* * *

Of course, the fact that God is with me doesn't mean it's easy.

It's work. It's wearing, to go from one stage to the next.

In a treacherous patch of road, you can feel exhausted.

Even in a pleasant stretch of life's journey, it can be kind of wearing just trying to maintain the scenario, keep everything status quo.

It takes effort, it takes our attention and our energy, to stay on the winding road.

No wonder David poured his heart out in songs. No wonder he was emotional. With the way they wrote in ancient times, his life story reads kind of cut-and-dried; it's rather straightforward — not much comment on David's frame of mind. But parallel to 1 and 2 Samuel, the historical account, is the book of Psalms, the emotional account.

Dozens and dozens of the songs David wrote as he went through the stages of his life.

When someone is sad or troubled, I've often heard Christians suggest reading the Psalms.

But I say Whoa! Wait! These are not 150 songs of sweetness and light. David had a real life, with real problems, and he wrote very direct, truthful lyrics about the stages of his life.

You can get depressed reading some of the psalms!

"...My bones are in agony" (Psalm 6:2,3). "My soul is in anguish."

"I am worn out from groaning" (Psalm 6:6,7); all night long I flood my bed with weeping and drench my couch with tears. My eyes grow weak with sorrow...."

All of this from just one song — one of the shortest psalms in the Bible!

But what does David finally realize?

Psalm 6:9 The Lord has heard my cry for mercy; the Lord accepts my prayer.

In spite of how the road kept moving under him, David knew who was on the road with him.

In Psalm 118 he sings,

Psalm 118:

6 The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?

7 The Lord is with me; he is my helper. I will look in triumph on my enemies.

Again and again, in song after song, David pours out his heart, pours out his anger, his helplessness, his confusion, his frustration — but again and again, he winds up landing on the same bedrock truth.

In Psalm 41:11, I can almost see him grinning with the joy of the realization, when he says to God:

Psalm 41:11 I know that you are pleased with me....

What is the psalm that Christ-followers have recited and clung to for centuries? Psalm 23. Why?

It's beautiful poetry, yes — but it's also full of crucial truth that we need in order to get through the day.

It's a song about the road of life — we're in the pastures, we're by the water, "he guides me in paths."

And it's a song about who's with us on the road.

Who is with us in the transitions of life.

Who is with us in the stages of our lives.

There is comfort, there is power, there is hope in that classic passage from the 23rd

Psalm:

**Psalm 23:4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will
fear no evil: for thou art with me....**

You are WITH ME.

Thank you, God, that I don't have to be in a good place first. I can be in Death Valley.
You are with me.

I don't have to be a good traveling companion. I don't have to know where I'm going.
You are with me.

I can be in the sloppy, apathetic, worn-out, cynical stage. You're with me.

I can be ugly, I can be clueless, I can be secretly laughing at someone else's trouble,
you're with me.

I can be just plain old unvarnished Doug Brendel, you're with me.

No matter how the road moves under me, you're still with me!

This is cause for celebration!