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# Changing Lanes

For twenty-five years my life has been lived in the church lane. It is the lane to the far left. The fast lane. As I think back about life in the church lane, I have to wonder if I made the right choice. The choice looked simple – God’s will. After all, shouldn’t all believers live in the lane God has chosen for them? It seemed so simple 25 years ago.

I remember the excitement in my heart when our first church asked Eddie to be their pastor. He had only preached five messages. We had no experience. We were 23 and 25 years old respectively. But we were so intoxicated by God’s call. God could use us. Wow – two failures who loved Him. We took on the challenge with our sleeves rolled up. We ate, drank, and slept in the church lane. The applause of the people was enough for us. We couldn’t believe it when we found out they would pay us \$100 a week. We would have paid them! I had died and gone to church lane heaven!

Five successful years there ended as we found we had given ourselves fully to “God’s work” and not very fully to each other. But the spectators applauded. We struggled through and moved on to seminary.

We sold our home and land which were paid for and moved our family of four. I didn’t know how consuming the church lane could be until we discovered seminary life. I worked and Eddie worked and we struggled to stay afloat in the busy, busy world of academia. We took on the challenge to build a young married Sunday school class at the largest church around. Successful again. The spectators applauded.

Then undaunted by the task and starving to pastor again, we moved after seminary to a church in the midst of a great trial. The pastor, assistant pastor had resigned and all the deacons resigned. But somehow God blessed and the church began to heal and doubled while we were there. And the spectators applauded.

Then on to bigger and better. The largest church in my home county called us. We had truly arrived. Country club membership, good salary (now we didn’t have to silently groan at benevolence meetings when the people who came for help made more money than we did) status in the community, nice house, etc. I was to be someone for the first time. Success followed. The church grew. And the spectators applauded but we found ourselves empty. The fuel in the church lane gets very few mpg. Encountering the Holy Spirit was the fuel we found to change everything.

Encountering God filled us. Filled up the need for approval. Filled up the need for success. Filled up the empty places. Ministry changed. It became life-giving. A season of itinerant ministry followed with missions at the heart of everything.

But then the church lane called again. And we answered because of God’s will. And the people applauded – for a while. But somehow life in the fast lane swallowed up life with God and we crashed. Sadly, not many seemed to care. I found once again that satan is the most subtle enemy. He is willing to take years to lay out the perfect plan to defeat us. And he is smart. A formidable enemy. As the carnage of the wreck lay in the church lane, most flew on by in their own lane never stopping to help. And the emptiness of sacrifice for others became bitter. The message surely seemed to be, “Give it all for the church but we can’t slow down enough to help get you to the body shop. Don’t ask us to pull you off for a pit stop to be refueled and get your tires changed. The church lane is too fast for that.”

So I've changed lanes. Not forsaking the church as the living body of Christ, but forsaking the fast lane of activity and empty promises and the fumes of success. I found that they, just like life in general, dissipate so quickly and are gone. Most don't even recall the race – just the winners. Maybe that is why my heart broke so last night as I witnessed the US female gymnast as she failed to succeed after years of training and diligence and sacrifice. She missed the bar. It was over for her. No one applauded at that moment. The years didn't count – only the failure.

And this time I didn't win the race in the church lane. So I don't have any floral crowns to put on my head or Olympic medals to put around my neck. But there are a few jewels no one can take. Some lives significantly changed of which I had a part. But most just keep circling the track in the fast lane of church – thankful when the wrecks are pulled off the track and out of the way so they won't be slowed down from their own races.

Twenty-five years of racing ends in a great crash and the Levite and the priest walk on by because they are on their way to church. But I have met some Good Samaritans – a few. They are taking time from their own races to bind up my wounds and the wounds of my family. They are paying for the expenses of surgery needed to repair the damage. They are rubbing oil and wine into the ripped up flesh.

And maybe I know Jesus more than before. Sometimes, I'm not even sure he is in the church lane. Maybe he is in the slow lane. Taking time to help the ones who are struggling to stay on the track, fueling them up, repairing their dents, repainting their scratches and showing them the lane which they couldn't see before. The lane that makes frequent stops to pick flowers and listen to the birds and hug hurting people and listen to the story their lives really tell. The lane that takes time to engage the engine of the heart with the fuel of the Spirit. The lane that doesn't travel mindlessly round and round but goes in all directions because success is not the trophy the church lane gives. Success is learning to hear God's heart and see with His eyes and handle the broken lives as He does. Supergluing them back together. Even if it takes a long time. Viewing restored broken lives with the cracks still visible beneath the glue as beautiful treasures for they are the real prizes, the real measures of success and one day being able to stand before Him and offer them to Him as the treasures worthy of not being discarded. Treasures which bear His image....

For he was wounded for our transgressions, bruised for our iniquities, the chastisement of our peace was upon him and by his stripes we are healed.

Could we say He was wrecked so we can be repaired?

So the forced change of lanes is becoming a most bittersweet change. A change which allows me to slow down enough to hear and see and smell and taste. A change that allows me to see other wrecked lives and have the time to help repair them. A change of lanes which has taken me into the desert only to find beauty in the driest dead places. For in this desert, I recognize my thirst and the water gushes forward from the Rock and fuels me. I find I was built for this kind of fuel. Living water. I'm not listening for applause of the people anymore but for Jesus' applause. The lane worth living in.

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