

“Two Paths”

Introduction: You can't wander far into the Story of God and his people without recognizing that this God of Israel, the God who reveals himself personally in Jesus, not only holds us dearly in his arms of love, but also holds us accountable for the way we choose to take. At each major junction in Israel's history, culminating in the arrival of Jesus, God summons his listeners to hear his will and commit to walking in his way.

Let's hear how he summons his people through Moses, as they stand of the brink of entering the Promised Land, and then how Jesus summons his listeners as he begins the conclusion to his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. God's call is that we choose the path that leads to life, but it's not a choice he forces upon us. [READ]

I. The Choice

A. The time for decision has come, says Jesus. His teaching has been given and now those who have been listening are called to respond, either to pursue life as a citizen of the kingdom of God, or as a citizen of the kingdom of this world. Which will it be? Which path will we take? What is immediately striking about these little verses is the absolute nature of the choice Jesus puts before us. I think we'd all prefer to be given several choices, or at least the ability to walk in a "third way," but Jesus doesn't allow for that seemingly more comfortable path. Instead, he insists that there really are only two basic possibilities: Following Jesus, or not following him. How do you feel about that? How did you feel when you heard it in our reading of Psalm 1? Jesus is elaborating the picture we get in Psalm 1, which contrasts the way of the righteous, who delight in God's law, and therefore bear fruit, with the way of the wicked, who the wind blows away like chaff. One path leads to prospering; the other path leads to perishing

B. To help us in our deliberations, Jesus gives us a picture of two gates that lead us to paths with vastly different destinations. It's almost as if Jesus is standing there with us, helping us look at two different entrances and then down two different paths. What are they like and where do they lead?

1. One gate, as Jesus describes it, is wide and the road it opens onto is broad. It is a simple matter to begin down this path. One just plunges ahead. You can be an atheist, an agnostic, a new ager, or a mixture of each. You don't need to leave anything behind. As John Stott puts it, there's no limit to the luggage you can take with you!

Illustration: Our way home from England had us changing trains at London's Piccadilly Station, a very busy place complete with the clock from Harry Potter fame. However, we weren't heading to Hogwarts but to the express train to Heathrow and our plane. Getting on that express train with us was a family of 5 or 6 and each person in that family had multiple, and incredibly large, suitcases, such that they took up at least a dozen seats. I frankly do not know how they made it home! But it did seem certain that they had all had a difficult time choosing what to bring, or not to bring with them and had just decided to bring it all!

On this broad path, we need leave nothing behind for there are no boundaries. We don't need to give up anything, not our pride, nor our anger, nor our lust, nor our desire for revenge, nor our greed, nor our selfishness...it's easy; we can bring it all with us! The problem is, as we keep on looking down this path,

that when we make these kinds of choices chaos results and people get hurt. This way, as Jesus puts it, though it may seem easier and even more fun, leads to destruction, it leads to the opposite of what the God who creates wants for his creation.

2. On the other hand, looking through the small gate and down the narrow path, we see at first glance what appears to be a confined and restricted and challenging way. And it is challenging. There is no room for large, awkward luggage! Taking up a cross is difficult. It's a path of purity, honesty, forgiveness, sacrifice, service, and humility. There's a lot, in other words, we'll need to take off as we go on, a lot Jesus asks us to leave behind in order to continue down this path. But though it seems a great deal more difficult than the broad path, it actually leads to life, to living in the way the Creator intended us to live.

C. The gate to the broad path swings wide. Lots of people and lots of things can enter through it. The gate to the narrow path is small. It probably refers to Jesus, who in another place calls himself the gate through which the sheep, if they enter it, will be rescued and find pasture. It's narrow because turning to Jesus and following him requires the humility of repentance and faith, but it's a humility that leads to a life that is full. As Jesus describes himself:

I am the Gate. Anyone who goes through me will be cared for—will freely go in and out, and find pasture. . . A thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of. [Jn. 10:9-10 Msg]

D. Jesus says a lot of folks will follow the broad path but only a few the narrow. This may tempt us to conclude that the final number of those who populate God's new creation will be relatively small, yet we also have a beautiful vision in Revelation of a great multitude standing before the Lamb, from every nation and tribe and people and language, that no one can count (7:9). So perhaps better than speculation about numbers is having this choice put forth by Jesus lead us to self-reflection to make sure we're on the right path.

D. One of the challenges of the choice Jesus puts before us is that the broad path, through the wide gate, can look so very attractive. At one point on our Cotswold Way walk we had this sinking feeling that we'd missed a trail marker, but a woman we met in the street said to just keep going and we'd see signs. Well, we never did, but we did see a beautiful cathedral we had passed about 30 minutes earlier, which led me to realize we'd been walking in a big circle. So, we cut up to the church and got back on the path and in a while discovered where we had gone astray. It turns out that we had missed the sign (on the right) because we had become distracted by an appealing little red sports car (on our left)!

It reminded me of Psalm 73 in which the writer, a man named Asaph, wrestled with the fact that those folks walking on the broad path seemed to prosper. They were often healthier and wealthier than the people of God walking on the narrow way and had sporty cars to drive when they weren't walking! Asaph reflected: "When I tried to understand all this, it troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary of God; then I understood their final destiny" (v. 16-17). This didn't necessarily make Asaph happy, but it brought him the perspective he needed to keep going, and motivated him to share the life he had come to know with those going down the wrong path:

You guide me with your counsel and afterward you will take me into glory. . . I have made the sovereign LORD my refuge; I will tell of all your deeds (vv. 24- 28).

As we think about the paths before us, Rama has some additional reflections from our walking the path called The Cotswold Way, which may prove helpful.

## II. Rama's Reflections

The Cotswold Way is a 100-mile journey through a region in central-southwest England known for its outstanding natural beauty made up of rolling hills and meadows in a rural setting that meanders through stone-built villages. It is the third largest protected landscape in England covering 787 square miles. And it was indeed beautiful! We walked for ten days anywhere from 8 to 13 miles per day.

Going on these walking pilgrimages is something we thoroughly enjoy. We love being outside in nature enjoying the fresh air and exercise, meeting people and hearing their stories, eating good food, and living off-line. One of the reasons we chose the Cotswolds was because of the description of "rolling hills" as opposed to some more strenuous walking choices. However, rolling felt relative as we surprisingly hiked some steep inclines only to be rewarded, as Tim's slides last week revealed, with long ridge walks looking out over pasture land, grazing animals, and stone walls and hedges dividing a patchwork of fields.

On a side note, you do walk through pastures alongside the grazing animals. Sheep I am ok with, it is the cows and horses that can be a bit intimidating. Tim likes to tease me saying, "I thought you were a farm girl!?" And I reply, "yes, and the animals were big and intimidating then too when we tried to sneak across the fields hoping they would not notice!" I have a healthy sense of fear and respect for farm animals.

There were many life lessons/metaphors on this walk. I will continue with the grazing animals. The path for the Cotswold Way is marked out for you like a hiking trail, and so we are careful to pay attention and not miss the markers. When you come to a marker that points to the path in the next field and it just so happens that a herd of cows are grazing in the middle of the path, it is a moment of pausing and searching for a different way! I wonder how often this happens in my spiritual life. God has marked out my path and I am confident of His guidance and yet... "Lord, there is something in the path that feels intimidating and scary. Is there another way, or another path that will get me to the same place?"

In the case of the cows, I chose to circle around them, braving brambles and nettles coming out on the other side with scratches and burning, itching skin! But I avoided those cows! I wonder if God was laughing and saying, "Rama, the cows would have been a whole lot easier." How many times are we on the path marked out for us by God and then get scared or intimidated by something standing in the way? How many wounds and scratches do we add to our journey trying to protect ourselves, and not trusting in God's presence and protection? We had a few more large animal moments (not to mention the sign saying "Caution: bull in field"), but we made our way safely without any injuries and, for the most part, stayed on the path marked for us.

The morning of our fourth day, I injured my hip. The rest of the day I limped along wondering if I would be able to continue. Long into the night I prayed that I would be able to finish the walk. It appeared that I had what is called a hip flexor strain and I could walk, but I could not flex, meaning I simply pulled my leg forward on each step. I walked a day at a time not knowing if it would get worse or better, and I experienced mixed emotions. My first and overwhelming emotion was one of gratitude that I could keep walking! Secondly, a bit of sadness as I missed being able to feel the freedom and stride that came with my love for walking.

Somewhere in there, I realized that I had probably been walking with a limp this whole past year. It was a long year of transitioning my Mother from independent living into a retirement community. It was a year of hospital stays and surgeries, selling her home of over 40 years, and seeking an affordable retirement community that ticked all of the necessary boxes. Plans were made and remade as clarity came through waiting. I truly learned to go a day at a time not knowing if the situation would get better or worse with my Mother. But I could walk even though it was with a heavy limp of exhaustion and times of feeling overwhelmed. I am so grateful to have been able to finish that walk with her. And, although not ideal, it is ok to walk with a limp; God is good, and His grace is sufficient. But here is the bigger surprise/lesson. After my injury, we met some doctors and began walking with them. As I described my symptoms, one said that walking (along with a few ibuprofen) would actually help it to heal! There is healing in the walking...a day at a time.

The last lesson I will share with you is around the people we meet on these walks. One group consisted of two couples, and of the four, three of them knew each other from medical school and were English, the fourth was Belgian. They were delightful. Each day we were excited when we found each other on the trail and/or shared a meal together. And this is how it goes i.e. some of us walk faster or slower and at times we will walk at our own pace, while at other times we try to stay together and find a mutually comfortable pace. What was reinforced for me is that it is good to respect our unique ways of walking and pace on the path. But it is also good to learn to walk together.

It was in these together times that I was able to hear about their life stories and to share mine. Whether American, English or Belgian, we discover our connectedness as human beings; we discover and share in some of the same joys and sorrows in life. A mutuality and bonding develops that is genuine and precious as we walk together. At the end of this walk, we visited with friends in England we made on a similar walk five years ago. Again, there was a sharing of where we were in life and stories to catch up on. We shared with a sense of vulnerability and intimacy. My lesson was a reminder that it is good and ok to find our stride and go at our pace; but it is also good and necessary to adjust our pace and not miss out on walking with others. Here is where we find the relational companionship of compassion, kindness, wisdom, vulnerability and intimacy that brings joy in life.

This coming year I want to pay attention to adjusting my pace. I don't want to miss out on the grace of the companionship I need as I walk with a limp, and the obstacles that confront me on the way marked for me. The years are short and the gift of life is found in our love for one another. Tim had a liturgy that he would recite for us at the beginning of each day of walking. It ended with, "...in the midst of the cares and occupation of this world, may we not forget you [God], but may remember that we are ever walking in your sight." God sees you, loves you, and walks with you into life as we make our way on the path he has set out for us.