

WHAT TOOK YOU SO LONG?



I staggered up the hill and sank to my knees at a door in the face of the rock. With all the strength left in me I knocked. The door opened, and before me stood a luminous being that could only be described as an angel. “What took you so long?” said the angel as he lifted me from my knees and helped me stagger down a long passage into a dazzling dining hall. Gathered around an immense table piled high with food, a joyful crowd was eating and chatting with great delight. The angel led me to a chair with my name engraved on a gold plate. The woman sitting next to me said, “Well, you finally got here. What took you so long?” Looking back over my sad life, I ask myself the same question. What took me so long? I feel like the Prodigal Son who finally found his way home after wasting years of his life.

The True Road was always calling out to me; but I kept chasing down roads that looked more appealing. Through all my hopes and disappointments the True Road haunted me, followed me, kept calling. But I had to learn the hard way.

CONTROL BOULEVARD

I will never forget the day the words **CONTROL BOULEVARD** flashed through the fog in bright blue letters above a broad avenue divided by well-kept shrubs.

CONTROL BOULEVARD! This was the road I was looking for! All my life I had been dominated by other people. Everybody had control but me! So I started walking down this boulevard with fresh determination.



“Hey!” cried a voice behind me. “Come back here and clean up this garbage.” “Clean it up yourself,” I shouted and kept right on walking. I was learning how to take charge--how to make things go my way, for a change! “Who gave you permission to walk on this boulevard?” said a man leaning on a shovel. “Who gave you permission to lean on that shovel?” I replied and kept walking.

It’s a great feeling to be in control of your own destiny. To say “Yes” when it suits, and to say “No” when it doesn’t. But as I kept walking, I noticed that *CONTROL BOULEVARD* was no longer a boulevard. It was getting ever more narrow, until one day I found myself on a path so overgrown I could hardly walk. Finally it came to a dead end at the foot of a rocky cliff. What do I do now? I’ve lost control!

Off to my right was the True Road. It seemed to be following me. “Come this way,” cried a man standing at the entrance.

VINDICATION AVENUE

“Thanks anyway,” I said, and took off through the tangled woods until I came upon a beautiful sign which read **VINDICATION AVENUE**. There before my eyes, bordered by flower beds and grassy banks was a smooth road lined with all the people who ever told me I was stupid, all the people who called me a fool. I walked past them with my head held high. “You people called me a fool; look at me now, and weep!” What a great feeling to be vindicated in the eyes of your critics!



As I kept strutting down **VINDICATION AVENUE** the crowds began to thin, until I was alone in an eerie desert. What happened to my critics? Why am I all alone? I began to weep with loneliness when off in the distance appeared a sign in bright pink letters, **HAPPINESS LANE**. Now I’ve really found what I’m looking for! Happiness!

HAPPINESS LANE

But wouldn’t you know? The messenger from the True Road was at my side, pulling at my coat. “Don’t be fooled by that phony sign!” he said, “Please, please, come with me on the True Road!” I gave him a little shove and took off toward that beautiful pink sign. After all, happiness is what we’re all trying to find.

Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness, here I come! A band was playing Take Me Out To the Ball Game, dancing girls and acrobats and magicians lined the road. And food! You never saw such an array of mouth-watering food. I sat down at an outdoor café and ordered a rack of ribs. It was the most beautiful platter of ribs I'd ever seen. But when I went to pick them up, they melted away between my fingers. I picked up my coffee cup, and the coffee turned to warm water in my mouth.

And that was just the beginning. HAPPINESS LANE turned out to be a bitter disappointment.



They can talk all they like about “the pursuit of happiness.” Happiness is just another butterfly that always gets away when you chase it.

\$ECURITY \$UPERHIGHWAY

I was trying to figure out how to escape this road of disappointments when a gigantic sign loomed up before my eyes. **\$ECURITY \$UPERHIGHWAY**, read the sign. I noticed that the “S’s” in the sign were dollar signs. This is the road I’ve really been looking for, the road to financial security! But to travel this superhighway I needed a car. So I set off in search of a BMW dealership. Might as well go for the best. Before entering the dealership I pulled out my bankbook, and my heart sank. I didn’t even have enough in the bank for the down payment on a BMW. Now what do I do? Just then a stranger addressed me by name.

How did he know my name? He not only knew my name, he understood my need.

“You’re looking for a way to make money,” said the stranger, “and I’m looking for someone to help me with a little fundraiser. Come with me. We’re going to make ourselves a nice pile of cash.” In no time I was back at BMW with all the cash I needed. Half an hour later I was cruising down **\$ECURITY \$UPERHIGHWAY**, happy as a clam. It’s amazing what you can do when you have a few bucks!

A beautiful plaza loomed up on the right so I pulled up, parked my BMW, and went in and had me some lunch. When I came out to get in my car it was gone! My BMW was gone! Stolen! I reached in my wallet to find a phone number, and my money was gone! All of it. I pulled out my bankbook. Nothing left in the account! What’s going on?

And they call this **\$ecurity \$uperhighway?**

Security rip-off! No security here! Now what do I do?



True Road

“This is the last time I’m going to make the offer,” said the man who drew me aside and pointed once again to the True Road opening off to the right. “Come this way,” he said in a voice that made me tremble. There was no sign above this road. No flower beds, no bands playing. At the entrance was a narrow gate. And the road itself was narrower than any of the roads I had traveled. But a strange light seemed to shine upon this road.



“Okay, I’ve tried everything else, and ended up with nothing. What can I lose?” So I passed through the narrow gate and started my journey on the True Road. “On this road you will never be alone,” said my guide, “I will be with you all the way to the end. There will be mountains to climb and valleys to pass through.

You will often come upon signs offering short-cuts to glory. Don’t get side-tracked; stay focused. I will give you all the help you need.” So off we went. It was a journey like no other. There were joys and disappointments, suffering and comfort. My guide never left me until at last I staggered to that door in the face of the rock and met the angel who said, “What took you so long?”



The Way

In the early days, they didn't call it Christianity, they called it The Way. They understood that it's more than a set of beliefs we cling to; it's a road we walk.

It begins by leaving all other roads behind, and passing through a narrow gate.

That's what baptism means. Baptism is the narrow gate where I die to all those phony roads and rise to walk on the road that God opens up for me.

Maybe I didn't know what was going on when I was baptized. But now I make it real. "Here I am Lord, I'm coming through the narrow gate. I'm dead to all those other roads, alive only to you."

Now I begin to walk on the narrow road, the only road that leads to life. On this road I'm no longer busy trying to take control. I'm learning that God is in control. And every time I try to control things, I have to repent and give it over to God, and just trust him.

On this road I no longer waste time trying to vindicate myself, trying to prove I'm right. I turn over all my stupidity and all my sins to the Lord who washed them away at his cross. I can't vindicate myself; only God can vindicate me---when he's ready.

"And will not God vindicate his elect, who cry to him day and night? Will he delay long over them? I tell you he will vindicate them speedily."

Luke 18:7

On this road I no longer wear myself out pursuing happiness. On this road, for all its bumps, I have something better. I have the joy of heaven. Inner joy, straight from God, that burns like a flame in my soul day and night.

And best of all, on this road I'm no longer a slave to Mammon---always worrying about money. At last I'm learning to trust the heavenly Father to provide, as the Master keeps reminding me,

"Seek first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

Matthew 6:33

On this road, I'm breathing the air of heaven.

The Spirit of the Lord is right here, sustaining me, showing me the way.

This road, of course, is Jesus himself.

And here's a fact that is rarely taught in our churches. So pay attention.

Everybody who has ever lived on this planet gets a chance to walk this road.
Everybody. No exceptions.

"And I, when I am lifted up from the earth (on the cross) will draw all people to myself."
John 12:32

All people.

He died for all. He opens the way for all.
Not just for Christians. For Muslims, Buddhists, atheists, anarchists.

Sooner or later everybody gets the chance to walk the True Road.

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me."
John 14:6

Once you hear those words---really hear them,
you have to decide whether they are the words of a madman or the words of the Incarnate God.

"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but by me."

If those words sound to you like the words of a madman, ignore them and choose whatever road appeals to you.
But if those words sound to you like the words of the Incarnate God...

What are you waiting for?

Listen to Jesus' final conversation with Peter in the gospel of John. It's after the resurrection. Jesus has just finished serving breakfast to a few of his disciples on the shore of Galilee.

He points to a pile of fish they've just caught and says to Peter.

Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?
Lord, you know that I love you.
Feed my sheep.

Three times Jesus says in effect to Peter, “If you love me, forget about the fish, and start feeding my sheep.” And then Jesus tells Peter how he’s going to die.

Peter says,

“What about John? What’s going to happen to him?”

Jesus says,

“If it is my will that he remains until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!”

John 21

“Listen Peter, don’t worry about what’s going to happen to John or anyone else.

You just follow me. Focus on walking in my footsteps. Stick with me on the True Road all the way to your cross, and the glory beyond.”

“Follow me!”

“Follow me.”

I’m not following Martin Luther. I’m not following John Calvin or Billy Graham or Franklin Graham or Moses or Elijah. I’m following Jesus---only Jesus.

Every morning I pass through that narrow gate afresh and present my body as a living sacrifice to the Master.

“Here I am, Lord, I’m here to follow you through this day. I’m turning my mind away from all those other roads to walk in the light of your Spirit.”

Today again the Lord is going to teach me how to love God with all my heart, and my neighbor as myself. He’s going to cause names to come into my mind---people he wants me to pray for. He’s going to send people across my path who need an encouraging word or a helping hand. My phone is going to ring with a soul who just needs someone to talk to.

It’s a daily walk in the light of God on the only road that leads to life.

Perhaps some of us right now are walking along CONTROL BOULEVARD, still trying to control the universe. And some of us may be marching down VINDICATION AVENUE, still trying to prove how right we are. And some of us may be doing a little dance down HAPPINESS LANE, blissfully chasing butterflies. And some of us may be cruising along SECURITY SUPERHIGHWAY in our BMW, clinging to our credit cards and bankbooks as if they were indestructible.

But off to the right, the Narrow Gate is wide open. And the Lord of the Narrow Road is calling us once again to turn away from all those other roads and come with him on the only road that leads to life.

All we have to do is answer his call and follow.

And if we stay with him on this road, one day soon we'll find ourselves at the Banquet of God, sitting on a chair with our name engraved on a gold plate. And the lady sitting next to us will say,

“Well, you finally got here. What took you so long?”



Prayer

Lord Jesus, may we stop wandering from the Way, the Narrow Road. Lead us away from the roads of control, vindication, the pursuit of happiness and financial security. Lord may the cry of our hearts be, “Lord we love you more than these.” Help us to daily offer ourselves to you, following the path to your burning presence. Thank you Kind and Loving Lord, that as we walk the true road, we aren't alone, you are with us, you sustain us, you lead us to a joy that burns day and night, and into eternal bliss.

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