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THE WAY AND THE WORD

Psalm 119:9–16

Life's No Joke

Your life as a teenage young man is an exciting and vigorous one, full of possibilities, hopes, dreams, and ambitions. You have many things you want to see and do, places you want to visit, things you want to know, things you want to own. In fact, you want to have it all. It's in your nature. All of this requires you to make many decisions, to make daily choices about what you are going to do, what you are going to become, where you are going to go. Some of these are big and some seem small, even inconsequential.

Which brings to mind Bill Watterson, creator of monster-in-miniature Calvin. I wonder if Watterson may not be the quintessential philosopher humorist alive today—perhaps in any day. He so memo-

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rably tickles the funny bone in our house that my sons and I frequently compare things going on around us with some crack-up episode from Calvin and Hobbes.

Watterson's hilarious, to be sure, but it's hilarity with a purpose. His periodic flashes of insight are skillfully packaged in witty perceptions about the relationship between sons and parents and about the human condition. After Watterson has made his fans bust up laughing, however, he gently prods thoughtful readers to pause and consider the enduring things.

In one such place Watterson has Calvin muse, in witty lines of verse, "I made a big decision a little while ago," but poor Calvin then admits that he's a bit unclear about just what it was that made the decision so important. As the poem progresses, Watterson perceptively observes that even the simple choices, the seemingly inconsequential ones, at the last, may "prove to be essential"; they may make all the difference in a young man's life.

If Watterson's Calvin is right, then young men need to be far more careful about the decisions they're making. Big or small, decisions have consequences.

Who Are You?

You're young. You're probably healthy, strong, active, fascinated by many things around you, eager to take on the world, to seize the day, to live life to the fullest, to have fun. Some of you love sports, the squeak of tennis-shoe rubber on the gym floor, the blood and sweat of the gridiron, the crack of the bat on the ball, the thrill of victory. You're so into sports, you're intoxicated by the smell of the guys' locker room. Some of you love fast cars, the mall, pop music, designer clothing. Others of you like the outdoors, guns and shooting, stalking game, pickup trucks, and country music. Others of you fall somewhere between all of these, or in a category all your own. In fact, some of you just love being an individual. You say and do and wear things, at least in part, simply because others do not.

Most of you also claim to be Christians. Many of you have grown up in the church and in Christian homes. All of you are growing up with various degrees of exposure to popular culture. It may seem to some of you like there's a tug-of-war going on between your father and the pop culture that surrounds you. It probably seems this way to your father, too.

My guess is that there are times when your parents' beliefs and the things of God come into clearer focus, when all that they have taught you makes sense and, at some level, you believe it. I am equally certain that there are other times, perhaps many of these, when you are swept away in the tidal wave of enticing experiences offered you by the world, by your own flesh, and by the devil.

How do you find your way through all this? How do you navigate the winding, twisting, enticing way of life? How do you answer the great questions of life? How do you make the big decisions of your life?

Young man, you stand before a great divide, and it is absolutely essential that you take your heart in your hands, that you "make a big decision," as Watterson's Calvin put it, or as Joshua of old put it, that you "choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve" (Josh. 24:15).

The Real Question

In Psalm 119, the psalmist asks an important question about young men and their way. Teenage men are bombarded with choices about sports, jobs, money, girls, school, and ambitions. You are faced with consequential questions about how you will spend your time, with whom you will spend that time, what you will choose to think about, and who and what you will become.

All these questions and choices lie before you, but the psalmist cuts through them all to the real question: "How can a young man keep his way pure?" (Ps. 119:9a). The young man who gets so distracted by the tyranny of the immediate questions that he fails to ask

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this fundamental question, and keep asking it throughout his days, will not keep his way pure. He will be put to shame; will be cursed, not blessed; will not walk in God's ways; and will make decisions that lead him astray—decisions likely to bring a measure of grief and sorrow to his life now, but immeasurable grief and sorrow in eternity.

On the other hand, the young man who genuinely desires to know how to keep his way pure will hear the psalmist's answer, "By living according to [God's] word" (Ps. 119:9b). The young man who lives according to the Bible will walk in God's ways, will never be put to shame, and will be blessed in all he does. Because of God's grace and forgiveness, he will find happiness and contentment even when his way is strewn with sorrows and difficulties.

But many will try to tell you that you don't need the Bible to guide you in your way. Follow your heart, they'll tell you. After all, critics of the Bible insist that it's no different from other old books, that it doesn't give inspired information about your way, that it's full of inconsistencies and errors, and that it is thus not a reliable road map for your way in this world. Whomever you listen to, what you believe about the Bible will profoundly affect your way in this world—and in the next.

Throwing Rocks

Imagine one dry, hot afternoon in 1947. A teenage herder named Muhammad, napping on the shady side of a boulder, woke with a start. He may have detected a slight change in the rustling, bleating, and munching sounds that his herd of goats made as they foraged in the desert wastes near the northwestern foothills of the Dead Sea.

Hastily counting the scruffy backs of his goats, he frowned, and counted again. One of them was missing. It wasn't the first time. And he knew which one it was. Shuddering at the thought of explaining to his father that he'd lost one of the family goats, Muhammad cleared the drowsiness from his brain with a shake of his head. He sprang to his feet, calling for the goat.

His voice echoed off the rocky cliff that jutted into the cloudless blue sky above. *Stupid goat*, he thought as he scanned the cliffside. Two small, dark shadows caught his eye. He studied what looked like cavernous eye sockets on a sun-bleached skull high on the cliff face. Snatching up a stone, Muhammad cocked his arm and took careful aim at the bigger of the two voids.

Bedouin goatherds needed to be good at hurling stones. With a well-thrown rock Muhammad had often driven off wild dogs who stalked his herd for strays. With a heave, he released the stone and watched and listened as it flew toward the dark opening. He smiled as the rock soundlessly disappeared into the cave. Then came an odd sound—not the expected stone-on-rock collision. This was a hollow, shattering sound, the sound of breaking pottery.

Later, Muhammad scrambled up the cliff face, the dense blue waters of the Dead Sea stretching far below. Deep into the cave he crawled, feeling his way with his hands. Suddenly he felt before him the rounded shape of a tall clay jar. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light, he saw ten or more jars. He lifted the bowl-shaped lid of the nearest one. Hoping it wasn't home to scorpions, he cautiously pawed at the mysterious contents. Then he caught his breath. It was filled with scrolls.

Muhammad edh-Dhib, teenage goatherd, had stumbled across the most important archaeological discovery of the twentieth century: the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Pure in All Ages

Searching in eleven nearby caves, archaeologists unearthed 870 scrolls, meticulous copies of almost the entire Old Testament. Jewish and Catholic scholars, however, decided to keep the scrolls to themselves, barring Protestant scholars from studying them.

Until 1991. My friend and mountaineering partner, Hebrew scholar Martin Abegg (a.k.a. “Smarty Marty”), while working on his Ph.D. at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, had come across a

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concordance on the Dead Sea Scrolls. Arduously, he had lifted every Hebrew “jot and tittle” of the scrolls out of the concordance, eventually making a copy of the scrolls available to all scholars.

Skeptics lined up, sifting through the scrolls, hoping to find substantial discrepancies and expose what they were certain would prove to be the fallacy of biblical inerrancy. Surely Christians, who claim that their Bible is the Word of God, would be silenced by this modern discovery.

To grasp just how significant this discovery was, it is helpful to consider certain facts about biblical manuscripts. Most English Bibles were translated from the Masoretic Text, a multigenerational copy of a copy of the originals, dating about nine hundred years after Christ. The Dead Sea Scrolls, however, were copied over a thousand years before the text used for most modern Bibles. How could versions of the Bible copied more than a thousand years apart possibly agree?

Three hundred years before the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, the Westminster divines had affirmed the Bible as “immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages,” thus concluding that the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts from which the English Bible comes “are therefore authentical.”

But surely, wouldn't Muhammad's accidental discovery of these scrolls prove that those seventeenth-century Puritan preachers were a bit naive to have had such confidence in the Bible?

With all the dust having settled on the Dead Sea Scrolls, however, scholars generally agree that there is only 1 percent inconsistency between manuscripts of the Old Testament copied a thousand years apart. Moreover, the inconsistency has no material bearing on the historicity of the Bible or the Christian gospel. In fact, the much older Dead Sea Scroll version of Psalm 22 actually clarified ambiguities in verse 16, rendering it “they have pierced my hands and my feet,” a still clearer prophetic reference to Christ's Roman crucifixion than that found in the Masoretic Text.

Fit Witness

All of this serves to confirm confidence in the authority, accuracy, inerrancy, and infallibility of the Bible. But if the archaeological jury is in, why do unbelievers still refuse to live according to God's Word? Why do they not care to keep their way pure?

Men remain in unbelief because God, as he reveals himself in his Word, is known and embraced by faith. If Muhammad had never stumbled upon the Dead Sea Scrolls, living according to God's Word would still remain the way to keep your way pure. Other discoveries will come and go. God's Word is self-authenticating and, therefore, not more true or less true because of new discoveries.

"God alone," wrote John Calvin, "is a fit witness of himself in his Word." Your confidence in the power, the trustworthiness, the absolute authority of God's Word does not derive from the confirming evidence found in the Dead Sea Scrolls. It's by faith that we understand that the world was framed by the word of God (Heb. 11:3). Thus, you may be absolutely certain that if you, by faith, heed the Word of God, you will keep your way pure.

What happened to Muhammad's goat that lost its way? I have no idea. But young men who are careless of their way, who neglect the Word of God and go their own way, will most certainly lose their footing and be forever lost.

Slippery Road to Hell

"There is not such an icy, slippery way betwixt you and heaven as youth," wrote Samuel Rutherford, one of the Westminster divines. His caution appears in a letter written June 16, 1637, to Earlston the Younger, a Scottish gentleman, probably a teenager.

Thousands of young men like Earlston would take up claymore and musket against the enemies of Christ and against the tyrannical persecutions of the Stuart kings. Many who fought also shed their blood for the "Crown rights of the Redeemer in his Kirk." Rutherford

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knew, however, that a young man could be on the right side, full of righteous indignation, defending the defenseless, fighting for the cause of truth, and yet slip into evil motives such as pride and revenge.

Ice is slippery stuff, as I learned while commuting on my bicycle one winter morning. As I banked into a left turn across traffic, my tire suddenly hit a patch of ice. Next thing I knew, I felt a bone-jarring blow on my left hip. Hopelessly tangled in my bike and book bag, I skidded across the pavement.

Moments before, I had felt the cold breeze on my face, had exhilarated in healthy morning exercise, and had probably even entertained some deluded sense of my own strength. But as I careered toward the grille of an oncoming school bus, all of that was gone. Everything was out of control. There was nothing I could do to stop things.

Similarly, patches of ice lie on every side of your way. But if you slip and fall on this road, the extent of the damage is far greater than a binged-up hip. Physical hurts generally heal, especially when you are young and healthy. But mangle your immortal soul, and you'll regret it for eternity. You must beware.

Slippery temptations that Rutherford could never have imagined line your way. If his observation about youth and young men was true four hundred years ago, how much more ought you to be careful how you walk today, how much more must you diligently and daily take heed of the words of God.

Byways to Hell

Young man, you're on the road that has more byways to hell than any other stretch of highway you'll encounter throughout your days on this earth. With every breath you draw, you are developing the habits of mind, heart, and body that will shape who you will become in your adult life and that will shape your eternal destiny.

And everything in the world is against you. The road is lined with worldly enticements that "drip honey" and that are designed to allure you with words "smoother than oil" (Prov. 5:3). Around the next bend

in the way, powerful giants, armed with weapons specifically designed to destroy you, lie in wait for your life. To top all, your greatest enemy is within the gates. Your own flesh is eager to sell all to the world and the devil.

Rutherford was right. You are on a slippery road. The more honest you are with yourself about this, the more skillful you will become in maintaining your footing, in standing fast. But you must beware.

Look Down the Road

Moreover, you should not delude yourself; what you are now as a teenager is in all likelihood what you will be throughout your life. Bill Watterson's Calvin didn't remember whether he turned left or right when he left his house, but he was certain that whichever it was, "I never veered: I walked in that direction." So it is with you, young man. Start down a pathway in your youth, and like it or not, you will probably be on the same path in your adulthood. How can a young man keep his way pure? Start on the right pathway today. Take heed of God's Word. Read it; study it; delight in it; obey it.

None of this comes naturally to you. Young men are fallen and so prefer pursuing pleasure today, having a good time right now, and enjoying all the excitement of immediate gratification. Young men, more than any others, are prone to presumption, to living thoughtless, careless lives, so long as they have their enjoyments right now. This is a critical part of the slipperiness of the way you are on.

"Young man," wrote nineteenth-century English pastor J. C. Ryle, "do not be deceived. Do not think you can willfully serve your self and your pleasures in the beginning of your life, and then go and serve God with ease at the end."

Wise young men know this, so they plan ahead; they look down the road. How shall a young man keep his way pure? Stand fast on God's Word; know your great need of him, and seek him with all your heart; hide God's Word in your heart; praise him; learn from him; speak to yourself about all the wonderful things God has done for you;

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rejoice in obedience more than in gaining wealth; meditate on and delight in God's law—and do it now. Keep your way pure. Know that seemingly simple choices make big differences in where you will find yourself as an adult.

Watterson's Calvin is bewildered by where he finds himself today, and he's compelled to admit at the last, "I've wandered far astray." Don't wander astray. Make the big decision, and say with the other Calvin, John Calvin the Reformer, "My heart I offer Thee, Lord, promptly and sincerely."

Resolves

- To pray regularly together as father and son
- To make decisions, even seemingly inconsequential ones, with a greater sense of the long-term effects of those choices
- To cultivate a more heartfelt desire for a pure life
- To live according to God's Word, every step of the way

Scripture Memory

"How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word."

Psalm 119:9

For Discussion

1. What does the word *pure* mean?
2. What is the role of the Bible in your day-to-day life right now?
3. Discuss changes you need to make to live "according to [God's] word."

“Join All the Glorious Names”

Thou art my Counselor,
My pattern, and my Guide,
And thou my Shepherd art;
O keep me near thy side;
Nor let my feet e'er turn astray
To wander in the crooked way.

Isaac Watts, 1707

For Further Study

Psalm 1; Proverbs 2:12–15; 4:23–27; 16:17