

# THE MAP FOR A CHRISTIAN

Deuteronomy 6:4-9; Hebrews 12:1-17

May 27, 2001

Wesley J. Gabel

After college, I spent time working for an ambulance firm in Minneapolis and St. Paul. When I arrived, the firm was making changes. Shoddy leadership had left ambulances in poor repair and morale low. One of my partners had been involved in a lawsuit. His partner drove to a medical emergency. The patient went into cardiac arrest, and the partner insisted on attending rather than driving. Because my friend had not watched when his partner drove and because it was dark, the tangle of cul-de-sacs and streets became an endless maze. The trip to the hospital dramatically lengthened, and the patient died.

How tragic! Something as small and inexpensive as a map may have saved the patient. By the time I entered the picture, each employee was required to purchase and carry a Hudson Atlas of the Twin Cities metropolitan area. It was our duty and responsibility to be so equipped. When an emergency call came, we were given the address. The dispatcher would then radio with the exact map coordinates. If the driver didn't know the location, the attendant would navigate with the map open. Even though directions could be helpful, a map was critical. When one missed a turn, the map would reorient the crew.

If a map is so vital to saving lives that it is required equipment, how useful and important might it be for your life journey? How do you know that you are not simply going in circles? How can you be sure that you are properly headed? How do you know that you're making the right choices? How do you know that you've chosen the right road?

Twice, King Solomon wrote:

***There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death*** (Proverbs 14:12 and 16:25).

Solomon twice emphasized that the right way for us isn't always obvious. People don't want to destroy their marriages, torpedo their careers, devastate their families, damage their health, or defile their souls. The right way is not always easily discerned. Face it: *if faith was obvious, wouldn't everyone believe? If the right decision was easy, would there be any sin?*

The Bible teaches that we need help. We will suffer dearly if we try to negotiate the streets of this life alone. We'll become lost in a tangle of bad decisions. King Solomon declared:

***The way of a fool seems right to him, but a wise man listens to advice*** (Proverbs 12:15).

Some of you, especially women, might be noting with relish the masculine tilt of this language. "The way of a fool seems right to him!" "A wise man listens to advice!" It's not much of a stretch to think of your husband, is it? The biblical language includes females too. We could paraphrase the verse by saying that the ways of foolish people seem right to them, but wise folk look at a map. Advice isn't good enough. The nature of the advice or directions is critical. Are they reliable? Are they understandable?

I once badly misled my wife. I misunderstood her beginning point. My directions took her away from the destination. Only a map would help her understand my directions. She needed a map. We need one too. Our destination is not readily seen. About our journey the Bible says:

***Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.*** (Hebrews 12:1, NIV)

According to the Bible each of us is in a race. It's not a sprint where you can see the finish line. The Bible says that it's a race that must be run with perseverance. It's like a cross country run with hills, valleys, turns and different kinds of terrain.

In this life-long race, we often run in a pack. Generally, we begin our race with our parents and siblings. In time that changes as we go away to school, get married or move because of a job. The pack also changes when our children strike out on their own. Sometimes, the pack we enjoy may not be headed down our course. Leaving some companions is hard, but necessary. Most of us go through that when we graduate from high school or college. Some must go through it, however, because their pack is on a fast-track to self-destruction. In life, you may not always find yourself running the proper course with the right pack. Some runners are pursuing rabbit trails that dead-end. Run long with them and you'll expend a whole lot of effort and time getting nowhere. Or even worse, you may eventually find yourself with them in terrain that brings injury after injury.

Although it is helpful to run in packs, it is just as necessary to be guided by a map. That is because there is a race marked out for each of us. Like it or not, we each are in a personal race. Those of you, who have lost your mate, know that very well. You may have run with your mate and for many years drew encouragement from each other. You are alone

now, however, because each of you have your own course. You can't depend upon a pack or a person. You need a map.

When my daughter Debbie participated in high school cross country, I visited golf courses all over Minnesota watching her run. Frequently, there was a map of the course; but as I surveyed the map, I realized I would run tenuously if I had to depend only on the drawing. The events were staged, however, to display the athletes' ability to run not map-read. Although the course was plotted and marked, the lead runners followed a golf cart the entire way.

The map for a Christian isn't a series of drawings we have to decipher. It is a person to watch and follow. It's not a golf cart. It's a person.

***Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*** (Hebrews 12:1-3, NIV)

Even as a runner looks to the cart ahead, our eyes must look to Jesus. Where is Jesus running? How is he taking the hills? How does he handle hardships? What is his focus? What does he reveal? Lose sight of Christ and the course disappears. You wander aimlessly with no assurance that you're approaching the goal. Focus on Christ and the markers become visible.

As a cross country parent, I learned some things. *First, on a two and a half mile course, proper shoes can cut your time by a half minute.* You might be running in your favorite sneakers, the most comfortable shoes you own, but with no increase in energy, cross country shoes will cut your time. They are light and grip rather than slip. *Second, it was absolutely necessary to shed any restrictive clothing.* Your muscles shouldn't fight your clothing. They need to focus all their energy on negotiating the course. Even in the cold and snow, I saw no parkas or sweat pants during races. *Third, as much as possible, you run in a pack.* You run in a pack so that you encourage one another to keep moving at a faster pace than you would alone. Only when the pack slows, do you advance alone.

The Bible tells us that in our race we must cut loose that which hinders. For one, that means our shoes. Too often we opt for comfortable shoes over appropriate ones. We're comfortable with a home, a job, a hobby, or a habit. But those things don't advance God's work in and through us. Maybe, we are comfortable being alone. Whatever the case, these comforts get in our way. What comfortable thing hinders your relationship with God?

Some of us need to shed some restrictive clothing. We have bad attitudes that sap our energy. We carry guilt or bitterness. We're afraid of rejection or failure. These attitudes cause us to give up or give out. Pride is a heavy pack. It rises from a wounded psyche. It doesn't come with achievement. Healthy achievers know that much of their achievement is a gift. They were given ability, coaches, friends and mentors. They were blessed with passion to pursue achievement; they were blessed with a positive attitude; and they were blessed in the time and circumstances of their achievement. A fine edge exists between success and failure. They're confident, but they are also grateful. Pride, on the other hand, rises from filling the hole of hurt and self-doubt. Pride seeks the acclaim of others to fill the hollowness we feel. Pride burdens us with the task of feeding our self-worth. It steers our vision away from Jesus. Instead, we look to immediate success and immediate accolades to give us value. We must shed that baggage.

Third, we run with people who follow Jesus and passionately love God. We need to run with friends who have their eyes fixed on Jesus. We need that encouragement. This pack not only includes the warm bodies of motivated Christian friends, it includes a cloud of witnesses who already have run their race. Let the lives of godly people who have now finished their race on this earth spur you on. Let the endurance of that sainted grandpa or friend call you onward. Let the triumph of saints strengthen you. Let them be part of your pack, but keep your eyes on Jesus.

Jesus is the map for a Christian. Jesus is the way. Jesus said, "*I am the way, the truth and the life.*" Believe it and fix your eyes on him.