

Knowing When To Take The Off-Ramp

By Alan Bain



Then the LORD opened Balaam's eyes, and he saw the angel of the LORD standing in the road with his sword drawn. So he bowed low and fell facedown. The angel of the LORD asked him, "Why have you beaten your donkey these three times? I have come here to oppose you because your path is a reckless one before me." (Numbers 22:31-32)

Walking a dog isn't nearly as easy as it looks. I've been walking a dog regularly the last few weeks - Isaiah, the beagle my son got as a Birthday present. And honestly, walking was the part of dog ownership I thought I'd be best at. After all, I've walked nearly every day of my life for the last 35 years or so. I didn't think adding a puppy that doesn't even weigh ten pounds connected to my hand by a 4-foot leash would make it that much more difficult. Besides, I've seen people walking their dogs. The dogs look happy and obedient, trotting along nicely at their master's side. Most of the time the people doing the walking look content enough. They hold the dog's leash, now and then stoop down to pick up a mess - what could be easier? It's not exactly nuclear physics.

Turns out that sub-atomic particles behave much more predictably than dogs.

Beagles are all nose, you must understand, so they love to sniff. And whenever they smell something new, they want to follow the scent. And that's why it is that if you ever see Isaiah and I out for a walk, you're likely to wonder who's walking who. Isaiah wants to track every squirrel, visit with every dog, be petted by every human being, investigate every bush, and go into ever house we encounter. He wants to dash into the street on one side of the sidewalk, dig in the mud on the other. Other people's dogs walk in perfect step with them. When Isaiah and I walk, it looks like some weird dance. He zigzags back in forth in front of me, then turns abruptly to check out THAT THING WE MISSED BACK THERE. Meanwhile, I'm spinning in circles and stepping over the leash, trying not to get tangled

up or trample on the silly mutt.

The problem is really very simple: the dog and I have different agendas. I would basically like to stay on the sidewalk. I want the dog to get some exercise and take care of his toilet needs without wandering into traffic or digging a hole in the neighbor's yard that's the envy of any oil prospector. Isaiah's agenda, on the other hand, has more to do with sniffing, eating, chasing, and exploring. The world is wide-open when we go on our walks, and there's a lot for a young pup to experience.

Now for a little dog in a big, busy city, my way is the best way. There's a lot that can hurt him and a lot of trouble he can get into if we get off the beaten path. But there's something for me to learn from our walks, I think. God doesn't always lead us on straight paths. And sometimes being too single-minded, too straight-ahead and focused on our own agendas is the quickest way to get off track and into trouble.

If you doubt it, look no farther than the story of Balaam, the best prophet money could buy. Apparently, Balaam would for a price come up with any prophecy you wanted from any god you preferred - a service that would have been highly in demand in a culture that valued prophecy. A king named Balak who felt a little threatened by God's people Israel, offered Balaam a nice payday for a curse against Israel, so Balaam hopped on his donkey and headed for Balak's place, seeing dollar signs.

Apparently he wasn't seeing much else, because he completely missed the angel standing in the road with his sword drawn - apparently ready to relieve Balaam of his noggin. (Since he didn't appear to be using it anyway...) Balaam's donkey, being a little less greedy and a little less dense, did notice the angel. The first time the donkey saw him he turned off the road into a field. Balaam got him back between the stripes, but then the donkey saw the angel on a narrow path between two walls and pressed so close to one of the walls that he smashed Balaam's leg. And when the donkey saw the angel a third time, he just gave up and lay down under the for-profit prophet. When Balaam beat the donkey to get him up, the donkey actually spoke to him. It was at about that point that Balaam noticed something unusual was going on.

God doesn't always lead us in straight paths, and sometimes it takes extraordinary events for us to be shaken out of our self-absorbed plans and self-directed journeys. Sometimes it takes a talking donkey. Sometimes it's the tears of a spouse or the disappointment of our children. Sometimes it's a lost job or a flunked class. It can be a fractured church, a broken heart, a shattered dream. It can be as relatively painless as a lost opportunity, or as dire as a life-threatening illness. Point is, God will go to whatever lengths necessary to get us to see that the road we're on is reckless and leads to our inevitable destruction.

Understand this: God was under no obligation to give Balaam's donkey a voice. A seer, a prophet who can't see an angel standing in his way probably deserves whatever fall he's riding for. Same holds for us: whatever blindness we might have for spiritual realities does not obligate God to intervene and try to turn us from the road we've chosen. There's only one reason for him to do so: he loves us, just as he loved Balaam. It doesn't give him any pleasure to see us driving recklessly toward our own destruction, and so he stands in the way and tries to turn us back.

But not always with drawn sword. Also with arms spread wide and nailed to rough lumber. However else God may try to get your attention, what he'll always be turning you to see is a dying figure on a Roman cross and an empty tomb in a Judean garden. Ultimately, God chose to turn us aside from our own paths by showing us in his Son the road he wants us to take. **"I am the way and the truth and the life," said Jesus. "No one comes to the Father except through me." (John 14:6)**

Balaam still didn't listen. I pray I won't be as obtuse when God tries to let me know that I'm headed the wrong way. I pray you won't be either. God doesn't always lead us on straight paths, and if your journey is leading you in a direct line toward anything outside God's agenda, I have a hunch he's trying to let you know. Maybe not through a talking donkey, but I suspect he's saying something.

Why don't you pause and sniff around a little, like Isaiah? You might be amazed at what you discover.