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Isaiah 42:16, NRSVue.

*¹⁶ I will lead the blind
by a road they do not know;
by paths they have not known
I will guide them.
I will turn the darkness before them into light,
the rough places into level ground.
These are the things I will do,
and I will not forsake them.*

By Paths We Have Not Known.

Some years ago, when our three kids were in eighth and tenth grades, and one out of state as a freshman in college, Wendy became very sick and spent a certain amount of time at Boulder Community Health, the hospital where I would later end up as a chaplain. I spent several nights there with her. I had an advanced corneal disease, and had not had corrective surgery yet, and so I couldn't easily come and go from the hospital. Wendy's nurses were very accommodating. I fell asleep one evening in a chair next to her bed and woke up in the morning on the sofa bed in her room, tucked under a blanket, with a pillow under my head. Very early one morning I went down to the lobby of the hospital to get a latte at the coffee cart. I remember descending the stairs from the second to the first floor,

and then as I stepped off the last stair, I did what I always did in public places when I couldn't see properly: I tried to gauge the number and location of people. I could see color and motion. I could hear voices and very roughly judge distances. I inferred – quite incorrectly – that there were only a couple of other people in the lobby and that they were standing right in front of the coffee cart. So, I slowly strode across the floor and walked up to within perhaps fifteen feet of the cart. I was in truth stepping into the middle of a fairly long line at the coffee cart; the queue was made up mostly of extremely quiet, motionless early morning workers. At that moment, a woman, who turned out to be two people behind me, started yelling in a loud, shrill voice that I had cut into line and that I was to drag my blankety-blank ass back to the end of the line. I turned to face her voice and said loudly, but calmly: "I'm sorry, ma'am. I'm almost legally blind and can't see you." She did not apologize. She remained silent. I felt abused and mistreated and humiliated. I'll get back to this.

A few days later, we were told that Wendy needed some delicate surgery and that it would be best to have a specialist at Rose Hospital in Denver perform it. They packaged Wendy up and put her in an ambulance. When the EMTs found out that I couldn't see to drive, they let me ride along. I saw her into her room at Rose. That evening I called home and talked to Isabelle. Now, if you have ever

had kids, you know that they can turn out quite different from each other.

Martina is a doctor and she has always been somewhat fearless when it comes to traveling, academics, and pursuing personal and professional goals. The same is very much true of Isabelle, with two exceptions. First, she hasn't always been the best when dealing with blood that has appeared outside of the human body. Second, although she's a very confident street and freeway driver now, and zips around in her turbo charged Subaru the way I did when I was young, she was a bit hesitant about learning to drive. Wendy was at Rose in Denver and Isabelle had just gotten her license – just gotten it. So, when I called home, I told her that I would get a cab from Denver to Boulder and would see her in about an hour. But she said, "No way, Pops, I'm coming to get you." Her mom was in the hospital, extremely sick, and she was determined to do her part, even though she really wasn't all that comfortable making a drive like that. I tried to talk her out of it. I was unsuccessful and she did indeed come and get me. It was not the only time that Isabelle drove me around during Wendy's hospitalization. And sometimes it was late on school nights.

I'd like to look at three Bible quotes. I'm using various Bible translations, as I rooted around finding translations that seemed most accurate for each quote. The first one is from Deuteronomy, Chapter 27, taken from the ESV:

¹⁸ “ ‘Cursed be anyone who misleads a blind man on the road.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’ ”

In this part of Deuteronomy, Moses is preparing his people to enter the Promised Land, although he himself will die first. In previous chapters, Moses has covered in detail the history of the Chosen People, so that this new generation, born during the desert wanderings, will understand the weight of the commitment they have inherited. Moses is giving a sermon to his people, laying out rules about how godly people must live. After they enter the Promised Land, they are to set up an altar to God, and they are to refrain from making idols, dishonoring themselves, perverting justice or committing moral crimes. Our quote consists of some basic ethical advice: If you want to be in God’s graces, be kind to people who are in need, like blind people. There is a broader meaning than this. The people who enter Canaan are to treat each other with respect, especially if they encounter someone who has less, and they must guide anyone who needs help.

Let’s consider a second Bible passage, from Isaiah, Chapter 42. I took this from the NRSVue. Isaiah is one of the major prophets of the Old Testament, and the Book of Isaiah is quoted perhaps 75 times in the New Testament. The Bible reveals only very basic facts about Isaiah’s personal life despite the significant length of the Book of Isaiah. We conclude that Isaiah was a Temple priest before

God called him to be a prophet. His name translates to: “*God gives salvation*”. He served in the southern Kingdom, Judah, when Israel was divided, and in fact, when the northern Kingdom, due to the control of Assyria, no longer truly existed. We put Isaiah’s service as between 742 and 687 B.C., approximately a hundred years before Babylon would conquer the Assyrians, and then destroy Jerusalem and the First Temple, Solomon’s Temple. The first section of the Book, Chapters 1 to 39, are prophesies directed toward the people of Jerusalem. He focuses largely on social justice, putting one’s faith and full trust in God, and in knowing that God will reward the faithful and punish the unfaithful. The rest of the Book comes from a later period and was probably recorded by followers of Isaiah, who are often referred to collectively as the “School of Isaiah”. Or this material could have been written by a second prophet, someone scholars call the “Second Isaiah”. The material in this latter part of Isaiah was probably written a hundred years later, during and after the exile to Babylon. This Second Isaiah might have ministered to the exiles in Babylon, not to people in Jerusalem. This part of the book offers prophesies about the eventual restoration of God’s people spiritually and about their restoration to their homeland of Israel. The passage I want to look at, while it seems to be about God helping the blind and the disabled, is using

blindness as a metaphor for being lost spiritually or physically. Our passage is about the promise that God will lead God's people home from exile in Babylon.

Here is the passage from the second part of Isaiah:

*¹⁵ I will lay waste mountains and hills
and dry up all their herbage;
I will turn the rivers into islands
and dry up the pools.
¹⁶ I will lead the blind
by a road they do not know;
by paths they have not known
I will guide them.
I will turn the darkness before them into light,
the rough places into level ground.
These are the things I will do,
and I will not forsake them.*

Out of context, this can be difficult to interpret. Remember that this is from the second part of Isaiah, where our prophet is predicting that God will see his people out of Babylon and to restoration in Jerusalem. This passage is both literal and metaphorical. God will help his people pass through mountains and hills, and across rivers. This also means that God will help them overcome all obstacles in their spiritual and physical lives, like enemies and temptation. We are also told in this passage that God will lead us, the spiritually blind, by paths we have not known. This means we must be open to new ideas, to unfamiliar ways

of finding our way. There will be mysterious times, but God will fill darkness with light, and God will level all obstacles before us.

From our quote from Deuteronomy, with Moses instructing the Chosen People on how they are to treat one another in their new home, we see that we have an obligation to help vulnerable people, that we must assist those in need, whether it's a physical or a spiritual issue. In Isaiah, we see that God will do likewise. So, we have our fellow believers helping us, and we also have God rescuing us when we are in need. In fact, God often uses other people to serve us. God's help often comes through human hands. But we must remember that we must do our part when we discover those who are spiritually blind or in need of worldly help. God might call upon us to serve.

Certainly, God looked after me through my daughter, by motivating her to step forward and provide what turned out to be more than a physical benefit. When someone you care about helps you, it is uplifting emotionally and spiritually. But that woman who yelled at me at the coffee cart. The man behind me in line told me she was a nurse. She certainly wasn't gracious with me, even after she learned that I had trouble seeing. However, I must be gracious, too. I must look at the world through the eyes of people who are suffering. That nurse had a stressful and very important job. She kept people from dying, eased their

pain, and calmed them when they were in a panic. When she was on duty for a twelve-hour shift, she was under constant pressure to never make a mistake and to remain compassionate. She offered solace to anxious patients and to frightened family members. She helped the bereaved manage sudden loss. She witnessed horrible suffering. The morning that she snapped at me, I'm sure she was simply reacting to the stress of her job. She wasn't trying to treat a blind man cruelly: she was reacting to a job that was filled with grief and pain and that offered no rest. At that moment, she was out of grace and had nothing to offer.

Let's look at a third, last passage, this one from Ecclesiastes, Chapter 2. Initially, we'll look at it from the NIV. There is a word in the passage that has been translated in various ways, and exactly how we translate it can more than subtly change the apparent meaning of the overall quote. Ecclesiastes is perhaps the oddest book in the Bible. It presents a conflicting theology. It seems jaded, in that the author tells young people to honor God and live by the rules of God, while also saying that "*the dead have no reward*". The author identifies himself as the son of King David, as well as a king himself, which means that the author would have to be King Solomon. As we have seen before, ancient writers often attributed works to famous people to show respect or to gain legitimacy for their work, so we cannot conclude Solomon wrote it. True, the writing in the book is

just the sort we might expect of King Solomon, given what we know of him. The book shows a very scholarly knowledge of the Wisdom literature, and indeed, Solomon was closely associated with the works of the Sages. The book seems to be written by someone with a lot of worldly experience, and someone who has seen the dark side of humanity and has lived out the struggle to follow God's laws. In the book, traditional, theologically based wisdom statements are juxtaposed with very theologically jaded, negative statements about the author's experiences in life. However, the bottom line is that Solomon lived in the tenth century B.C., but Ecclesiastes was probably written seven hundred years later, around 250 B.C. We base this on vocabulary in the book and the sorts of philosophical references in it, both of which appear to relate to the period when Greek speakers were controlling the Holy Land. The book tells the reader that morality should indeed be unconditional and not based on any perceived rewards from God – but the writer does not appear to believe that humans hold an exalted place in God's mind. Our pseudo-Solomon also does not seem to believe that God will necessarily be quick to punish evil. In the part of the book where our passage appears, we are advised to accept life as it is, and to not expect to uncover the meaning of its mysteries. God hands us this world as we see it. But

even if it is not at the hand of God, the righteous will receive their reward – and evil people will also get theirs. We should just relax and live. Here is our passage:

²² What do people get for all the toil and anxious striving with which they labor under the sun? ²³ All their days their work is grief and pain; even at night their minds do not rest. This too is meaningless.

Superficially, this passage seems to say that our hard work on earth will not be rewarded, that our days will be filled with grief and pain, and at night we will be restless, never finding peace or calm. So, it is meaningless to work hard. But this is where a subtle translation, a single word, comes into play. The word “meaningless” in the NIV translation is perhaps not the best word. Here are first the ESV and then the CSB, the Christian Standard Bible, versions:

²³ For all his days are full of sorrow, and his work is a vexation. Even in the night his heart does not rest. This also is vanity.

²³ For all his days are filled with grief, and his occupation is sorrowful; even at night, his mind does not rest. This too is futile.

We see that the ESV uses the word “vanity” and the CSB uses the word “futile”. Both are better translations of the original Hebrew word “he-vel”. We see that this passage really says that it is futile for us, even vain for us, to hold God hostage, to insist that if we live right and work hard, then God must reward us.

Let me finish the coffee cart story. After the nurse got angry with me for cutting into line and then appeared to not care when I said I couldn’t see well,

that man immediately behind me in line appraised me of the situation. He told me that there was a long line and that he was behind me and that the nurse who had just yelled was behind him. He then offered her his place in line and told me that he would buy my coffee for me. I never heard the nurse's voice again. When I got to the front of the line, the young woman at the cart gave me my coffee for free. I thanked her and thanked the man behind me. I ended up blessed by multiple people after having someone get angry at me when I had done nothing wrong.

So, God did indeed look after me. I had no business feeling insulted or mistreated or like a victim. I had expectations, and my immediate response was to not be patient while God's plan unfolded. There are many times in life when we must wait a lot more than a handful of minutes for God to make his presence known. We all need to be gracious and kind. And we can't expect everything to immediately turn out the way we want. The ultimate ending of a situation might be very different than we could ever have imagined. We must trust God. In fact, if we relax, live our lives, see the world through the eyes of others, and let God run the world, it can be rewarding and warming to let God lead us by paths we have not known.