

# The Learning Curve

By Don Toshach

It was one of those teenage nights that you don't tell your parents about until you're in your 30s, if ever. I was in the backseat of a Ford Maverick, heading home from an Angels baseball game. My friend Eric was behind the wheel. In a burst of testosterone bravado/stupidity (a requisite combo plate for young adult males), he headed for the 405's Bellflower Blvd. freeway exit. Instead of slowing down, he punched the accelerator. The ramp was a familiar one to all of us—a sweeping right turn, a short straightaway, and sharp left at the end. An eighth of a mile Grand Prix course. The tires screamed through Turn 1, and the car careened toward the second and final turn. Eric ignored the brain impulses to slow down. The boys in the Maverick were whooping it up in that twilight zone between invincibility and mortality. We were all going to die, but what a rush!

Eric cranked the steering wheel hard as the Maverick entered Turn 2. I thought for a second that we were going to make it through the thrill ride unscathed. Physics, gravity, and un-Porsche-like Ford engineering wouldn't hear of it. Eric hit the brakes, the back end got loose and the right side of the car had an intimate encounter with the guardrail. I still recall the sickening metal-to-metal bang and scraping sounds. The guardrail won. The car bounced off and came to a stop. Eric took it through the intersection, and found a deserted side street as we all looked around for the police. Hopping out to inspect the damage, we saw the Maverick was wearing a new dent and crease, but it wasn't as bad as we thought. We lived to tell about it. For years, I'd exit Bellflower Blvd. with a renewed level of respect, not to mention a bit of amusement and lower velocity, as I paid homage to the victorious guardrail still sporting the cruel smile of Maverick red paint.

Which leads us to my point: A season of acceleration means our learning curve in God's regime requires some guardrails as things get out of control.

It is well-documented to the point of cliché that our global culture is accelerating in conjunction with the spiritual world. Responding to his disciples regarding the end of the age, Jesus said that there will be “an increase of wickedness and the love of most will grow cold” (Matt. 24:12). As well, there is a positive increase: The gospel of the kingdom will be preached to the whole world before the end comes (v. 13). “The days will be shortened” otherwise no one will survive them (v. 22).

Peter said that “with the Lord, a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years like a day.” (2 Peter 4:8). Our God is lightning-fast and turtle-slow at the same time. Scripture warns us to be ready for the Lord's coming—no matter the rapture and millennial persuasion—but not to get caught up in specific dates. No one knows. Jesus could come in the next second, or centuries from now. Today we long for His appearing, both now via His manifest presence and in the future in hopes of receiving a crown of righteousness (2 Tim. 4:8).

Still need more evidence of acceleration? If you've been around new believers, you've no doubt observed a marked increase in their spiritual development. What took us 20 years to learn is taking two years for many of the newly saved. Not fair! But things are speeding up. The kingdom of God is near. It's not time to move to Montana, but to discover how to live in a season of acceleration without killing ourselves and other members of the body of Christ. Everyone's learning curve is customized, but some similarities emerge.

## OVERRIDING THE OLD

Solomon's unifying theme in Ecclesiastes was that there is “nothing new under the sun.” It may be new to us, but nothing is new to the Creator, who has conceived of everything new under the sun before any brainstorm appears on the Doppler radar. “See, the former things have taken place, and new things I declare; before they spring into being, I announce them to you.” (Isaiah 42:9) As creatures of the old and comfortable, the tried and true, most of us don't actively seek the new that God delights in. We are squeamish about the ramifications of looking behind the curtains. We like the spiritual comfort equivalents of syndicated sitcoms and movie sequels. To follow a course of divine mystery in daily life would mean that our doctrines of convenience and logic have to be rewritten. However, our so-called resistance to change belies our actual

experiences. The God of the new is busying overriding the old ways and thoughts often without us knowing it, until we have an “ah-ha” moment when brilliance trumps our ignorance.

Have you ever dragged an old sermon tape out of a box and listened to it? Only rare teachings stand the test of time and cross-over the various seasons. The Christianized behavior and attitude adjustment templates of five or ten years ago don’t have the same grace on them. What seemed challenging then is elementary now. How does meat liquefy? Got milk? This is not dissing on your favorite teacher. Your spiritual diet has changed. The tape is locked in time, but you aren’t. You have progressed to a new place. You are not the same person you used to be. Jesus Christ is the same—yesterday, today, and forever, but that is the only godly characteristic God never intended for us to emulate. There are few things more saddening than stuck, stagnant, stationary Christians. Our first, middle, and last names should read: Transformation in Progress.

Spiritual acceleration does not mean keeping up with fast-lane cultural shifts and flashy church trends. It means countering them. Only in God’s economy can one develop faster while going slower. Among the watchwords: Rest. Unplug. Listen. Embrace grace. Simplify. Become more unencumbered. Stop trying to figure God and life out. Unsubscribe from the endless e-mail lists and choose carefully the books you read. Quit living your Christianity vicariously on second-hand information. What is the Lord saying to *you*? Bounce it off a trusted friend if it seems strange or you’re unsure you’re hearing correctly. Just because it isn’t purpose-driven doesn’t mean it isn’t from God.

God’s best pitch is the curveball. Hanging, sliding, sinking, and dancing, the divine curves He throws brush us back, keep us off balance, and have us swatting at air. At times His “stuff” seems to be as unhittable as Randy Johnson’s and Roger Clemens’ on their best days. How do you get wood on the ball? Hitters will tell you that the key is to study the pitcher and learn how to “read” the pitches.

God’s learning curve shouldn’t surprise us as much as it does. Consider the following familiar spiritual curveballs we’re seeking to “read” and put into play.

## THE HIGH AND TIGHT CURVE

“**For My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways My ways,**” declares the Lord (Isaiah 55:8, emphasis mine). Why is it that we’re so shocked when things don’t go the way we might have imagined? In this verse, the Hebrew word for “thoughts” means “contrivance or intention,” while “ways” depicts “a road (as trodden), a course of life or a mode of action.” By definition, God conceived far in advance our life journeys, engineering them with ingenuity and intricacy. No happenstance, no miscues, no accidents. No detail has been missed, even when we “miss it.” It scrambles our molecules and blows our finite minds. This is so *not us*! Our thoughts are often random and haphazard; our best attempts at logic and reasoning hit the glass ceiling more quickly than we would care to admit. We cling unto promissory Scriptures like debris from a shipwreck, and are dismayed and dumbfounded when no rescue helicopters appear. Left to ponder the whys for which there is no answer, finally the clenched fist of anger is replaced with raised hands of surrender. We learn it again and again, over and over, that He’s God and we’re not. It’s the bottom-line of the human-divine relationship dynamic.

Verse 9 goes on to express that as the heavens are far above the earth, His ways are “higher” (*gabahh*), which means “soar.” At face value, we nod our heads in agreement that God is infinitely great, vast, powerful and mysterious, and we’re not. That’s part of it. Another aspect, though, is that the context of Isaiah 55 urges us to “come, buy, and eat” and “seek the Lord where He may be found.” The God of awe is not aloof, but inherently and irrevocably approachable. We are made to mount up with wings as eagles and not be stuck in earthbound pursuits. We are hard-wired to explore, and flight is a God-desire placed in the minds, hearts, and spirits of men, women, and children. One can get to nearly any part of the globe in a day via airplane. We’ve conquered the moon, and sent spacecraft to the outer limits of the solar system. All to say, spiritually speaking, is that the learning curve begins when things don’t make sense. Many a day I’ve mouthed the words of Simon Peter: “Where else can [I] go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68). Following the higher thoughts and ways of the Most High is not supposed to make sense! If it lines up neatly, sounds logical, and others agree with it, I’m more reticent than ever to implement it. Rest assured, God *will* have His way.

## THE AWESOME CURVE

**“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and knowledge of the Holy One is understanding”** (Proverbs 9:10). A few weeks back in a worship meeting, I motioned for one of the women in our fellowship to come over. I was going to ask her about the terrific worship CD she brought that was presently playing—how long it was, when would be a good place to break, etc. I was sitting on the floor and as she leaned down, I opened my mouth, but no words came out. I couldn’t speak. The power and fear of the Lord came over me. He said to me, “Can I lead the meeting?” What else could I do? I was immobilized and speechless, and stayed that way for another 15 minutes. The fear of the Lord became very real to me again that night.

I lead church gatherings much different than I used to, allowing room for God’s manifest presence and for others to participate with their giftedness. However, we are finding that these are days in which the Lord is “messing up” meetings that we thought were plenty messy already. Of course, man’s definition of a mess, chaos, or seeming disorder is not always God’s. Read Revelation 4-11 and consider all of what is and what will be going on in the heavenly realm. Thunder and lightning. Loud voices of angels and elders. Weird-looking creatures. Crowns placed at the throne. Seals being broken. Worship. Proclamations. Singing. Silence for about 30 minutes. It’s not what you’d normally find in most church services (perhaps with the exception of the weird-looking creatures!) The Lord often disorders to bring His kind of reordering and revelation.

In our gatherings, components of worship, teaching, testimony, prayer, prophecy, intercession, fellowship are interchangeable, out of traditional order, and even disposable week to week. Warning: I’m not following the average formula for connect-the-dots church life, so don’t try to do this in the comfort of your own mainline, traditional format church unless you’re prepared to be strapped into an ejection seat. But in our little corner of Christendom, we are grappling with how NOT to clean up the “messes” that the Lord makes in a Spirit-led meeting, even if it makes people uncomfortable at times when undefined elements and varying emotions surface in the flow of it all. In the River of God, we are being carried with the current, which is quite fun until we start getting banged against the rocks. Then it is easy to react, get tweaked, and be angry, suspicious, and isolative when it is confusing. This is why the wisest man to ever live wrote that the fear of the Lord is the *beginning* of wisdom. Solomon knew that accumulated knowledge and advice-dispensing were not going to be sufficient for life guidance. He picks up the theme in Ecclesiastes 5: “Guard your steps when you go to the house of God. Go near to listen rather than offer the sacrifices of fools, who do not know that they do wrong. Do not be quick with your mouth, do not be hasty in your heart to utter anything before God. God is in heaven and you are on earth, so let your words be few” (vv. 1-2).

I wrote in my journal recently about my encounter with the fear of the Lord: “I am dancing on the whimsy of Your wind, a rope lashed around my ankle, heading into the Holy of Holies. Is it so bad to be consumed? How many useless fires have I lit? I’m on the other side of choice—His choice, not mine. I am a mess and He delights in messes. I have no idea what all of this means. I am afraid to move.” One can’t work up the fear of the Lord; it is a unique, sudden encounter that renders one speechless, prostrate, and paralyzed in the sacred moment, wrapped in the terror of God’s unquenchable love.

## THE INSIDE CURVE

**“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He will make your paths straight”** (Proverbs 3:5-6). The biggest problem with God’s new things that are each day being released upon the earth is this: They are new. Instruction manuals are not included or they are in some type of encrypted spiritual code. Where is the cheat sheet? Here, a different kind of leaning is required. Jesus said, “Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in Me” (John 14:1).

The mental assent of trust won’t cut it. A whole-hearted heart exertion is needed, which challenges us to the core because most of us aren’t in touch with a heart response in a society and church that has trained us to flex our intellectual muscles, educationally and spiritually. Note the language of these verses: “*all* your heart” and “in *all* of your ways” and “make your *paths* straight.” There is not a lot of wiggle room. Talk about a learning curve! It’s hard enough to think about a single personal path, not the management of multiple individual paths.

Leadership is changing in the body of Christ—too slowly, but at least there is progress in some circles. Guiding God’s people along prophetic pathways that cannot be located on a spiritual Mapquest will demand more grace and reliance upon God than ever before. Many believers are already fully equipped and are receiving their kingdom marching orders. Yet, there is hesitancy and tentativeness because they have been relegated to spectator roles for far too long in the church. This new leadership thrust is as old as the largely unimplemented Ephesians 4:11 mandate: come alongside people to coach, equip, encourage, and send them into their kingdom assignments. As dominant leaders lay down their lives, agendas, and control defaults, and permit others to shine and eventually break free of their orbit, they will become spiritual fathers or mothers. As “their kids” grow up, they will find joy in letting them go to fulfill their destinies. Mistakes and failures are part of the learning curve, and these reborn leaders will support God’s people nonetheless in these passageways. Leaders: Welcome your people to lead. When they feel like they’re ready (not when you think they’re ready), send them out with overwhelming blessing and continued relationship. Watch with gladness as some of them surpass you in visibility and stature. A new identity and security will be formed for true end-times ministry—in you and in them. Is this the kind of church that will change the world? You think?

As God’s new things are pursued, we’ll need to extend extra kindness, patience and consideration to everyone in the body of Christ in this experimental, forerunning process of becoming kingdom people instead of merely church inhabitants. The one-another of “ministry” that no one talks much about is the “biting and devouring one another” (Gal. 5:15) that ultimately destroys the parties involved and affects everyone around them. Disagreements and conflicts are inevitable. God’s church and kingdom are in the hands of humans, for better or worse. However, by virtue of Jesus Christ, we are overcomers, more than conquerors. Therefore, our ability to listen and ask questions rather than jump to conclusions is the way to promote redemptive body life together. Our capacity to love and forgive must be expanded. As we recently discovered again our church setting, there is unspeakable life-giving power in humbling ourselves first before God and also before one another. The simple, symbolic act of washing one another’s feet (John 13) has demolished walls of hidden offense and disunity, and ushered in the spirit of mutual servanthood through a basin of water and a towel.

## **THE DAVID IN US**

The cleaning of Michelangelo’s famed statue of “David” in Florence, Italy is now complete. It wasn’t without some conflict and controversy over the methods of restoration. The original restorer quit after a disagreement over how the work of art should be cleaned. He was concerned about using water on the statue’s surfaces, and proposed a form of dry cleaning to brush away the dirt. His successor chose a mixture of distilled water and rice paper, plus mud packs of cellulose pulp and clay to soak up the imbedded grime that had darkened “David.” Some discoloration and spots remain, but according to the new restoration expert, “what has changed is his luminosity.”

That is our assurance for the season of acceleration: the restoration of the “David” in each of us. Luminosity. Negotiating the learning curve may be harrowing, the guardrails unforgiving, but it’s that new glow of an unveiled face that is going to make all the difference.

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