

The
NARROW ROAD

*Turning neither
Left nor Right*

DAVID W. F. WONG

The Narrow Road: Turning Neither Left Nor Right
Copyright © 2018 by David W. F. Wong

Originally published in 2015 by Finishing Well Ministries.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

Published by Graceworks Private Limited
22 Sin Ming Lane
#04-76 Midview City
Singapore 573969
E-mail: enquiries@graceworks.com.sg
Website: www.graceworks.com.sg

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the *Holy Bible, New International Version*. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved.

Cover design by Onya! Design

“Postscripts” edited and reprinted with permission from IMPACT
Christian Communications Ltd, Singapore.

ISBN 978-981-11-6484-2

Printed in Singapore

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 • 27 26 25 24 23 22 21 20 19 18

ENDORSEMENTS

In today's confusing world, we find ourselves torn in different directions: hearing different teachings on all sides and uncertain which to follow; aware of the dangers of extremes but unsure what the middle course might look like. What attitudes should we have towards pride and humility, guilt and grace, poverty and prosperity? Where do we draw the boundaries in our lives between secular and sacred, work and rest, head and heart? Should we be formal or casual in worship? What's the difference between leadership and management, between love and romance?

In *The Narrow Road*, David Wong offers sensible and biblically-based guidance, drawing on years of pastoral experience and teaching. Writing simply, crisply and clearly, and illustrating his points with many anecdotes and personal experiences, he introduces deep issues of faith and Christian living in a straightforward and helpful way. There are no quick fixes or 'magic bullets' here, but much truth to reflect on. I recommend this book: it can do its readers nothing but good.

Dr Philip Satterthwaite
Principal, Biblical Graduate School of Theology

In *The Narrow Road*, Rev Dr David Wong once again masterfully expresses deep spiritual insights accessibly and practically. The book's 'middle path' concept is helpful because it is not a foreign idea, even to other philosophies, for example, Confucianism's *Doctrine of the Mean* (中庸). This makes this book more relatable to a wider audience. Yet, the narrow way David espouses is unique, coming from his excellent expositions of God's Word and accompanied by everyday illustrations and applications, effectively drawing readers to understand and live out Biblical principles. This is critical for us today, as we live in an age increasingly filled with divergent opinions. A must read!

Rev Ezekiel Tan
General Secretary, The Bible Society of Singapore

I write as a brother and friend who, along with two others, have been meeting with David regularly for three decades. He has on many occasions stimulated our discussions by surfacing some of these issues and I am pleased to see him address these thorny issues in a book.

Earlier generations have faced their own issues of what it means to follow Christ. The present older generation had wrestled likewise to translate faith to practice. Younger generation Christians today live in an age where commitment is a term needing re-definition. They live in a warp-speed world with many conflicting views and values competing for legitimacy in their hearts and minds. This book will help them sort through the complexities and confusion.

I am drawn to his use of the metaphor of the tightrope walker who requires balance and commitment just as it is required of Christian discipleship. Total commitment and cross-bearing are necessary components of *The Narrow Road*. There is no compromise in this regard. Passion for God and love for Jesus have no prescribed limits. It is all or nothing. However, balance is needed in practical issues of time management, problem-solving, maintaining rhythm in living and serving, and the like. Readers will recognise the element of commitment worked out with wisdom, balance and sensibility.

I commend this book for its depth in treating the subject of discipleship in following Christ along *The Narrow Road*. The wealth of illustrations and stories makes reading engaging and memorable. It is theological, yet practical with specific questions addressed. It is thought-provoking yet very readable. There is depth and simplicity. Young believers and mature disciples alike will be challenged in their thinking and commitment.

Wong Kim Tok
Senior Staff

Former National Director, The Navigators Singapore

The Narrow Road is a captivating exposition of the choices we make in life and their eternal consequences. It reminds me of *The Road Not Taken* by Robert Frost, a moving poem about two roads that diverged in a wood. Taking the road less travelled made all the difference to him.

If you are at the crossroads of your life, wondering which path to take to make sense of life, this book will help you make the right choice. You

will find the reasoning cogent and persuasive. You will be convinced that it's the narrow road, less travelled, that leads to a life of purpose now and meaning beyond the present.

Dr William Wan
General Secretary, Singapore Kindness Movement

The Narrow Road is stimulating, enlightening, and inspiring. It has many captivating stories and is much about David's own journey, experiences and thoughtful observations of life. The book provides a glimpse of life's journey, like a GPS from a biblical perspective. It gives young people a head start in understanding life. I plan to use this book as a training curriculum with my family members and market place leaders to guide and stimulate our discussions on life's challenges. I highly recommend this book.

San Wee
Chairman, Halftime Asia
Chairman, Learning Point Group

Living in a world that is prone to extremism, Pastor David Wong lovingly but firmly calls on readers to walk *The Narrow Road* of the discipleship journey. This call is anchored upon the biblical promise of the Lord who graciously directs our paths: "Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, 'This is the way, walk in it.'" (Isa. 30:21)

The book seeks a biblical balance in negotiating the competing challenges of life along complex terrain. In the face of discipleship choices, challenges and controversies, *The Narrow Road* maintains a biblical perspective and humble posture in seeking to live out a life worthy of Christ. It teaches us how to nurture radical disciples and forge ministry effectiveness in a culturally relevant manner, yet without compromising on biblical integrity. This book is worth reading because Pastor David Wong's voice is certainly worth hearing.

Rev Tony Yeo
Senior Pastor, Covenant Evangelical Free Church
General Secretary, Evangelical Fellowship of Singapore

CONTENTS

Prologue	Walking the Narrow Road	IX
Acknowledgements		XIII
Chapter 1	Mountain Ridge	1
Chapter 2	Middle Path	7
Chapter 3	Tension on a Tightrope	13
Chapter 4	False Choices	19
Chapter 5	Sovereignty and Freewill Postscript: Acts of God?	25
Chapter 6	Natural and Supernatural Postscript: Commitment Or Surrender?	33
Chapter 7	Pride and Humility	41
Chapter 8	Guilt and Grace Postscript: Popular Spirituality	47
Chapter 9	Son and Servant	57
Chapter 10	Secular and Sacred Postscript: Worship Style	63
Chapter 11	Head and Heart Postscript: Song Lyrics	73
Chapter 12	Work and Rest Postscript: Vacations	83

Chapter 13	Excellence and Perfectionism	93
Chapter 14	Numbers Big and Small Postscript: Mega Churches	99
Chapter 15	Time and Timeliness	109
Chapter 16	Past and Future Postscript: Obsolete Commands?	115
Chapter 17	High Tech and High Touch Postscript: Mobile Devices	123
Chapter 18	Formal and Casual	133
Chapter 19	Romance and Marriage Postscript: Internet Pornography	139
Chapter 20	Poverty and Prosperity Postscript: No More Tithing?	149
Chapter 21	Leadership and Management	159
Chapter 22	Good Works and Good News Postscript: Finding Favour	165
Chapter 23	Truth And Love Postscript: Same-Sex Attraction	175
Chapter 24	And a Few More	185
Epilogue	Finding The Narrow Road	193
Endnotes		195

PROLOGUE

“Go with the flow” seems like a good idea. Why swim upstream when you can float downstream?

On an Alaskan cruise some years ago, we stopped at a town not far from the breeding ground of salmon. As we walked the street next to a river, a powerful stench hit us. Instinctively we looked over and saw in horror hundreds of dead salmon drifting downstream. So ends the life cycle of the fish – they swim upstream to breed and then die. That was when I learned that “Only dead fish go with the flow.”

Going with the crowd is easy – a lot more space and a multitude of people. The open boulevard throbs with an air of festivity. We stroll along, feeling good and feeling safe. We must be moving in the right direction. So many people cannot be wrong.

But what if they are?

For some years, I write a regular feature for a Christian magazine in Singapore called IMPACT. In the column “Faith Seeks Understanding” I answer questions which people ask. As the title suggests, faith has to be matched and undergirded by understanding.

Our understanding comes from Scripture, what God has revealed, and through our minds, what God has given us to know his Word. We are free to draw from all sources but they must be filtered through and tested by Scripture. We are free to use all our faculties but truth must be distilled through the disciplined and sanctified exercise of the mind.

Not all things we hear and read are true. Only what God endorses

by the sum of his revealed Word is true. Not all conclusions and verdicts are valid. Only what we have carefully thought through, based on sound presuppositions and arguments, is acceptable. Hence the path of truth and truth-finding is narrow, bounded by revealed Scripture on one side and sound mind on the other.

Regrettably, the trend today lists in the opposite direction. Anything goes. In the name of open society and with vogue words like *inclusiveness*, *diversity* and *democracy*, we are expected to accept anything as true, as long as someone says it is so. Or when the majority says it is so.

We need to buck the trend. For as the followers of Jesus, we cannot afford to ignore his warning:

Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.¹

The contrast is stark: the wide gate opening to a broad road, leading to destruction; and the small gate opening to a narrow road, leading to life. On one road there are the many, and on the other, there are the few. When we call Jesus our Lord, we leave the crowd and follow him along the narrow road.

What does it mean to walk the narrow road? Do we become narrow-minded people? What does it mean to be among the few? Do we become paranoid people? What are other hang-ups and hazards along the narrow road?

There are a number of reasons for this book. Firstly, I believe we need to think right before we can act right. Thinking right involves seeing the right pictures in our mind's eye. Is the narrow road like a mountain road? If so, the safest way to go is to stay as close as possible to one side. What if the picture is different and the road is not on the side of a mountain? Getting the picture right sets our thoughts in the right frame.

Thinking right often means snatching truth from the jaws of falsehood. God places what is precious like gold and diamond in the bowels of the earth, and extracting them does not come easy. Blasting, excavating, smelting and refining are long and tedious processes to reach the elements.

Likewise, arriving at what is truth, precious above all things, takes us along a long and narrow route with no shortcut. Lazy thinking will not take us there, especially when it conveniently conforms to the mood of the masses along the broad road.

Secondly, I believe that thinking right and acting right will save us a lot of trouble. Many of the issues we fight over would be better resolved if we think clearly from the start. Poor thinking leads to prejudice which draws lines and builds walls. Stepping back helps us see the big picture, and appreciate different perspectives. As someone niftily put it, we have to think about the way we think.

Leighton Ford suggests a helpful picture of an arrow head, based on Isaiah 49:2 where the servant of the Lord says of God, "... he made me into a polished arrow."² The arrow head is narrow and sharp on one end, broad and flat on the other. Hence, God's servants need to be "sharp in vision like the point of an arrow, broad in understanding like its base".³ In our life's journey, we become narrower and more focused in some ways, and yet broader and more magnanimous in other ways. The difficult part is determining what to become in which situation.

Travelling on the narrow road need not make us narrow-minded people. Neither does having a broad mind put us on the broad road.

After we establish some important parameters for thinking rightly, we address different issues. I hope we will see where we can be the pointed end of the arrowhead and where we can be the other end.

**Travelling on
the narrow road
need not make us
narrow-minded
people. Neither
does having a
broad mind put us
on the broad road.**

We call for purity in the essentials; in the non-essentials we allow liberty. In our pursuit of and insistence on the truth, our maturity shows in “speaking the truth in love, we will in all things grow up into him who is the Head, that is, Christ”.⁴

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My heartfelt gratitude goes to

Zion Bishan Bible-Presbyterian Church in Singapore for giving me time off for a brief sabbatical;

Tyndale House in Cambridge, England, for offering me a “hot desk”⁵ surrounded by books for me to think and write;

my wife Jenny for providing a thermos flask of hot coffee by my side to keep me alert, reminding me of her love always.

The final draft was completed at Bethlehem Bible College in Palestine where Jenny and I enjoyed the warm hospitality of our hosts. Most of all, my utmost gratitude to God for creating us with minds to think his thoughts after him, and for calling us to walk the narrow road with his Son, Jesus, a journey leading to life and life more abundant.

CHAPTER 1

MOUNTAIN RIDGE

A story is told of a wealthy tycoon who bought land on the highest point of a city with plans to build a mansion on it. From the mountain top he hoped to enjoy a breath-taking view of the entire area. The only drawback was the narrow road winding up and down the mountain with treacherous ravines on its side. The tycoon advertised for a chauffeur to drive him safely to and from his home.

Considering the challenge the job posed, only two men applied for the position. To test them, the tycoon had each applicant drive him up the mountain and down again. The first man, once a race car champion, decided to show off his skills. He drove the car close to the edge. Several times when it seemed that the car would tip over, he skillfully manoeuvred it and brought it safely back. He was sure that he had impressed his passenger when he brought him safely up and safely down again.

The second man, a retired taxi driver, had no such skills. He drove the car as close to the side of the mountain as possible, and stayed as far as he could from the edge. He completed the test wondering if the tycoon would hire him since he could not match the driving skills of the champion before him.

The tycoon hired the second man. The reason was obvious. He was more concerned for his personal safety than for the show-off skills of the driver.

I once heard this story told (in different words) to illustrate how we should stay as close as possible to the “safe” side. Applied to theology, we should be as “conservative” as we can. Applied to life, we should be as “strict” as we can. Only then can we avoid falling into heresy and sin. Only then can we pursue the truth, and holy living.

In my final year in Bible College, when our teacher assigned us to read the works of liberal scholars, he was taken to task for leading us astray and putting us in danger of imbibing liberal theology. His response was: How can we know and defend the truth unless we know what error is? In the safe and cloistered life of the Bible

College, we were warned against the “poison” of the world, to avoid it at all cost – much like the second driver who kept his distance from the edge.

On another occasion, a medical doctor told me he had to handle and study all kinds of poison in order to know how to treat patients who suffered from the effects of poison. He said this in the context of our discussion about playing safe with theology and life. That really got me thinking. After years of theological reflection and engagement with people in the pastoral ministry, I have come to this conclusion: our life is *not* a mountain road.

When my family and I lived and served in Maui, Hawaii, one of my joys was taking friends on a hike up Mount Haleakala, the largest dormant volcano in the world. Part of the hike took us along a ridge from which we could see both sides of the mountain. The path was narrow, and we had to be extremely careful not to fall on either side. To be safe, we had to stay in the middle of the path.

Could this picture be closer to the truth? Not a mountain road but a mountain ridge. Not trying to keep as far as possible from one side, but to keep as far as possible from both sides. Not finding safety on the other side, but finding it in the middle.

Consider the words of the Lord to Joshua:

Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go.⁶

Joshua was commanded to obey the Lord, not turning to the right or to the left. The injunction not to veer one way or the other is enshrined in the Law of Moses and the Wisdom of Israel:

So be careful to do what the LORD your God has commanded you; do not turn aside to the right or to the left. Walk in all the way that the LORD your God has

*commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess.*⁷

*Make level paths for your feet and take only ways that are firm. Do not swerve to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil.*⁸

Turning aside one way poses as much danger as turning aside the other way. As any rider knows, you can fall off the horse on either side — it makes little difference.⁹ The same may be said of the tightrope walker.

When Jesus came to his people, the ones he found most difficult were the religious leaders who believed in veering to one side. They stayed as far away as they could from the other side, represented in Jesus' parables by the prodigal son, the wounded man on the road to Jericho or the publican in the temple who cried, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner."¹⁰

When Jesus told the parable about the prodigal son, both the religious leaders and the people they despised and avoided were there. It was obvious to the hearers that the younger son was lost, since he took his father's money, went away and squandered it. Not so obvious, but equally vital to Jesus' story, was the fact that the older son was also lost. Though he remained at home and served as a filial son, he refused the father's invitation to celebrate his brother's return. In the parable, while the younger son called his father "Father" three times, not once did the older son address his father that way.¹¹

Both sons were lost, one outside the home and the other, inside. It does not matter on which side we fall, we are equally fallen. The apostle Paul faced a similar challenge. He had to contend on the one hand with the legalists and on the other hand, the libertines.

As any rider knows, you can fall off the horse on either side — it makes little difference.

The legalists kept to the law, and insisted on it as the only way to salvation. The libertines claimed they had been saved and delivered from the law so that they could live as they wish. Both the “lawful” and the “lawless” had fallen off the ridge, on opposite sides.

To one side, Paul declared,

Where, then, is boasting? It is excluded. On what principle? On that of observing the law? No, but on that of faith. For we maintain that a man is justified by faith apart from observing the law.¹²

To the other, he cautioned,

What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ... You have been set free from sin and have become slaves to righteousness.¹³

Like the two sons, both the legalist and the libertine are lost, one in his self-righteousness and the other in his unrighteousness. Whether it was Jesus in the gospels or Paul in his epistles, the narrow path took them between treacherous ravines on both sides of the ridge. They did not walk a mountain road and find safety on one side.

Neither should we. The narrow road does not provide refuge on one side, away from the other. Threats come at us from both sides. Such are the subtle perils on the narrow road. No wonder we are warned not to turn aside to the right or to the left. But is the middle path a guaranteed safe option?

CHAPTER 2

MIDDLE PATH

The middle path beckons as the safest way to journey in life. Avoid extremes. Stay in the middle. At all times, be moderate, and sometimes, be neutral. Greek philosophy extols the “golden mean” which is best represented by Aristotle:

For both excessive and insufficient exercise destroy one's strength, and both eating and drinking too much or too little destroy health, whereas the right quantity produces, increases or preserves it. So it is the same with temperance, courage and the other virtues.... This much then, is clear: in all our conduct it is the mean that is to be commended.¹⁴

Buddhist teaching likewise commends such a path:

The Buddha's message was simple yet profound. Neither a life of self-indulgence, nor one of self-mortification can bring happiness. Only a middle path, avoiding these two extremes, leads to peace of mind, wisdom, and complete liberation from the dissatisfactions of life.¹⁵

Conventional wisdom would agree – even Hebrew wisdom in Scripture:

Do not be overrighteous, neither be overwise – why destroy yourself? Do not be overwicked, and do not be a fool – why die before your time?¹⁶

Despite overwhelming consensus, the middle path is not as simple as it appears. Dangers lurk there too. While it encourages balance, moderation can descend to compromise. Taking a stand in the middle can mean, for some, sitting on the fence. Avoiding the extremes can lead us to commitment to no side at all. In matters of faith, we can believe, but not commit. We can decide to get serious

but not too serious. We can choose to have the best of both sides. We can be people with minds open and hearts set in neutral gear.

Both Joshua and Elijah met such people in their generations. When Joshua took the people of Israel into the Promised Land, they found themselves caught between the gods of other nations and the LORD God of Israel. To tread the middle ground would mean worshipping a little of one and a little of the other. But Joshua threw out this challenge:

Now fear the LORD and serve him with all faithfulness. Throw away the gods your forefathers worshiped beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your forefathers served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.¹⁷

For Joshua and his family, there was no middle path: it is either the LORD or the gods, and they chose the LORD. The prophet Elijah confronted his generation with the same challenge: “How long will you waver between two opinions? If the LORD is God, follow him; but if Baal is God, follow him.”¹⁸ The people were wavering and faltering between two loyalties. Elijah called on them to choose one, any one — but not both.

We speak of the path we walk as a mountain ridge with ravines on both sides, and so we tread carefully between them. But we must not mistake the middle ground for a place of compromise. Jesus was uncompromising when he presents the choices in his Sermon on the Mount. He calls us to find the small gate and walk the narrow road.¹⁹ Jesus goes on to present the choice between the good tree and the bad tree, the wise builder and the foolish builder.²⁰ Earlier on, he makes it clear,