

ANDY STANLEY



How to get from where you are



THE PRINCIPLE OF THE PATH



to where you want to be



PRAISE FOR
THE PRINCIPLE OF THE PATH

As Billy Graham's son, and a preacher myself, I have seen firsthand the devastating consequences of choosing the wrong path in life. Andy Stanley writes about the importance of following the path that is set before us as stated in the Bible. Proverbs 3:5-6: "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He shall direct your paths." May all who read these words be obedient in their daily walk with the Savior.

—FRANKLIN GRAHAM
President & CEO, Billy
Graham Evangelistic
Association and
Samaritan's Purse

As a young man, I did a lot of stupid things. Those dumb decisions and bad behaviors led me straight into bankruptcy and heartache. But once I changed directions and started doing smart things with my life and money, I started winning. It's really that simple. If you don't want to learn this life-changing principle like I did—the hard way—then you need to read Andy Stanley's *The Principle of the Path*. I just wish I had a copy of it twenty years ago!

When working with financially distressed families, one of the biggest challenges is getting them to see the series of bad decisions that got them into trouble in the first place. If everyone really understood—and applied—Andy Stanley's *The Principle of the Path*, I believe the whole financial landscape of America would change practically overnight.

I tell people every day, "If you keep doing what you've been doing, you'll keep getting what you've been getting."

Divorce, bankruptcy, foreclosure, failed businesses . . . these things don't happen overnight. They're the result of a consistent pattern of bad decisions. Usually all that's needed to turn someone's life around is an intentional change of direction—and that's exactly what Andy Stanley's *The Principle of the Path* is all about.

—DAVE RAMSEY,
host of *The Dave Ramsey
Show* and best-selling author
of *Total Money Makeover*

Every once in a while a book comes along that causes me to adjust the way I see myself and the world around me. This is one of those books. The subtitle pretty much says it all. This book will help you get from where you are to where you want to be! Andy Stanley's practical, biblically-grounded wisdom, self-deprecating humor, and personal example are why he is one of my favorite communicators.

— JONATHAN RECKFORD,
CEO, Habitat for Humanity
International

If you know where you want to go, this book will help you get there.

— MARK RICHT,
Head Football Coach,
University of Georgia

In what has immediately become my favorite “Andy Stanley book” (and that is saying something) the author provides proof that the choices one consciously makes today will revolutionize your life and leave a lasting impact upon the world. This book encouraged and energized me. It will allow you to see your own path with new vision.

Andy Stanley is one of three people on this planet whose words—both written and spoken—have most shaped the person I am today. While I still have miles to travel in becoming who I am supposed to be, I continue to be excited about the influence Andy has in my life and my role as a husband, a father, and communicator.”

— ANDY ANDREWS,
speaker and best-selling
author of *The Traveler's Gift*

THE PRINCIPLE OF THE PATH

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How to Get from Where You Are
to Where You Want to Be

ANDY STANLEY



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO BEIJING

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Stanley, Andy.

The principle of the path : how to get from where you are to where you want to be / Andy Stanley.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-8499-2060-8 (hardcover)

1. Success—Religious aspects—Christianity. 2. Christian life. I. Title.

BV4598.3.S72 2008

248.4—dc22

2008050270

Printed in the United States of America

09 10 11 12 13 QW 5 4 3 2 1

To Louie Giglio

Our mothers must have prayed a lot!

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INTRODUCTION

In the category of Top Three Dumbest Things I Ever Did is my decision to ignore an oversized Detour—Road Closed sign and drive down a stretch of I-20 between Birmingham and Atlanta before that particular section of highway was officially opened. But I was eighteen and knew everything there was to know about anything.

Well, almost everything.

I was not alone. My good friend Louie Giglio and I had some “business” in Birmingham, Alabama. Somehow we overlooked the fact that Birmingham is on Central Standard Time, and consequently, it was an hour later at home in Atlanta. I’m not sure how we overlooked that piece of trivia. We had driven to Birmingham that same afternoon and arrived at our appointment an hour early. Granted, we should have logged that detail away and planned our trip home accordingly. But we didn’t.

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We had promised our parents we would be back by midnight. That was after a long discussion about whether we should even go on this little jaunt across the state line. So we departed Birmingham at nine thirty, thinking we had plenty of time to make the return trip. But about twenty minutes down the road, it dawned on us that it was an hour later than we thought it was. And as fate would have it, that was about the time we arrived at the detour sign.

Back in the day, there was a twenty- or thirty-mile stretch of I-20 between Atlanta and Birmingham that for some reason the Department of Transportation just could not seem to finish. So vehicles were detoured off the interstate onto a single-lane road that meandered through a couple of small towns and a whole bunch of pasture, forests, and lowlands. The road eventually would dump back out onto the completed section of I-20, and off you would go. On our way to Birmingham that afternoon, we couldn't help but notice that the closed section of I-20 looked perfectly navigable . . . at least the section we could see. From what we could tell, all it lacked was stripes and guardrails.

So at 11:00 p.m., two hours from home with only an hour to get there, we made a really bad decision. We drove right between the words *Road* and *Closed* and headed on down the highway. Two things happened as we crossed into the great unknown. First, the notion of doing what nobody else was doing created an immediate adrenaline rush. Louie cranked up the radio, and we both rolled down our windows and began singing at the top of our lungs. I won't tell you what we were singing because that would date this story beyond recognition. There wasn't such a thing as a high five back then, so I doubt there was any actual

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body contact, but we were totally sure and full of ourselves in those initial moments. The second thing I noticed was that someone was following us. Fast.

My first thought was, *police*. But there weren't any blue lights. In fact, whoever it was seemed content to just follow along. That was too freaky, so I slowed down and motioned for whoever it was to pull up beside us. Turns out it was another guy from Atlanta, looking for a shortcut. We assured him that the road was completed, just not open, and off we went—side by side, lights on bright, radio blaring. Since there was no posted speed limit, we assumed there wasn't one at all. Besides, the point of a shortcut is that it is shorter. Or at least faster.

Twenty or thirty minutes later, our initial burst of enthusiasm began to wane. The farther we drove, the less sure we became. We even started slowing down. Then up ahead on the right shoulder we caught a glimpse of a black sedan. As we flew by, the headlights came on, and it pulled out onto the highway. Our stomachs dropped through the floorboards. We were sure it was the police. But once again, there were no blue lights. And the driver, whoever or whatever, was not content to follow. He was planning to pass.

Now we were really scared. At this point it would have been comforting to see blue lights. Instead, we were being chased by . . . well, we didn't know. To add to our anxiety, we were in the middle of serious nowhere. And the only things we could think about were *Walking Tall Part 2* and *The Trial of Billy Jack*. (If neither of those movie titles rings a bell, check with your father. He saw 'em.) I thought about trying to outrun the black phantom, but I knew my mom's four-door Catalina was not up to the challenge.

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So we began slowing down. But our pursuer didn't. With headlights flashing, he flew by us in a cloud of dust and gravel and almost disappeared into the darkness. As he passed, we could see that there were two people in the car, and one of them looked rather female.

That was a good sign.

But our fear suddenly changed to confusion when the driver stopped in the middle of the highway, got out of his car, and began waving his arms over his head. Clearly this guy was crazy.

Louie suggested I slow down enough to make him think we were going to stop, and then keep going. I agreed. But then we saw that the passenger in the car was, in fact, a young lady; and the driver looked to be no more than sixteen or seventeen years old. That's when it dawned on us what they were doing out in the middle of nowhere. But what we didn't know was why they interrupted their date to chase down a couple of strangers.

The guy in the other car rolled down his window and waved the kid over. He slid in between our two cars and blurted out, "What are you doing out here?" Actually his question was a bit more colorful than that, but that was the gist of it. And though it really wasn't any of his business what we were doing out there, it seemed like a fair question now that we knew what *he* was doing out there. But why he had chased us down remained a mystery.

Before any of us could answer, he informed us that in another mile or so the highway ended at an unfinished bridge. If we had kept going, we would have driven off the bridge into a swamp.

That would have really made us late.

Fortunately, our new friend and his girlfriend offered to lead us

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back to an exit ramp, and from there he told us he would show us how to get back to the county road that would eventually take us to where the completed stretch of I-20 began. We expressed our sincere gratitude, and off we went. Looking back, the decision to follow this guy over the river and through the woods was about as stupid as ignoring the Road Closed signs. For all we knew he could have been the grand dragon of a local cult. But our only other choice was to drive all the way back to where we started this misadventure. So we followed along.

True to his word, lover boy guided us through a series of back roads and state highways until we finally reached a legitimate on-ramp for I-20. And at around 1:30 a.m., we rolled into my driveway. I don't remember what we told our parents about why we were so late. I do know we didn't tell 'em the whole story. Some stories are better left untold.

And some roads are better left untraveled.

That's what this book is about.

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>> ONE

SWAMP MY RIDE

Now, if Louie and I had not been rescued by the stranger in the black Monte Carlo; and if we had, in fact, driven through the next set of barricades into a swamp, we would have done so for two reasons. And neither reason has anything to do with IQ, education, goals in life, net worth, looks, or church attendance. We would have ended up in the swamp because *that's where the road led* and *that was the road we chose*.

Anyone, regardless of race, creed, color, or sex, would have ended up in the same place had they chosen that stretch of highway. It didn't dead-end in one place for one kind of person and somewhere else for another kind. That unfinished stretch of highway was no respecter of persons. Everybody got the same treatment. And that's true of every highway, freeway, driveway, or path. It leads where it leads, regardless of who's on it.

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Nothing new or original about that.

But here's where you may need some convincing. The principle you employ every time you look at a map or fire up your GPS (i.e., roads lead to the same place every time) applies to other arenas of your life as well. But what's perfectly obvious in the realm of geography is not so obvious in those other arenas. And, as we are about to discover, what's true geographically is equally true relationally, financially, physically, and academically. There is a parallel principle that affects parenting, dating, marriage, our emotions, our health, and a host of other areas as well. Just as there are physical paths that lead to predictable physical locations, there are other kinds of paths that are equally predictable.

Realizing that we are only a few pages into our time together, I don't expect you to accept my premise just yet. But before you start pushing back, consider this: What if I'm right? What if there really are financial paths that lead to predictable financial destinations? What if there are relational paths that lead to predictable relational destinations? What if there are emotional and spiritual paths that lead to specific emotional and spiritual destinations? I don't have to convince you that there are dietary paths that lead to specific health destinations. And we all know people whose lifestyle decisions led them to predictable predicaments. But what if those we-all-saw-it-coming scenarios reflect a universal law? What if there is a single unifying principle that governs what happens not only on the highway but in every area of life? I believe there is. I call it the *principle of the path*.

PRINCIPLE

I refer to this as a *principle* because this isn't a rule you follow. Truth is, the principle of the path follows you. It's not a law. You can break a law. But the principle of the path has the power to break you. It is not an idea or concept you choose to apply. As we will discover, it is being applied *to you* every moment of every day. Principles are different from rules or laws. Perhaps an example will help.

When you were in high school, you probably studied Archimedes' principle. Ring a bell? No? It ought to, because every time you get in a pool, a boat, the bathtub, or a cruise ship, you are being impacted by Mr. Archimedes' principle of buoyancy. "But wait," you argue, "that's impossible; I don't even know what it is!" Maybe not, but you are impacted just the same. And to be fair, so is everybody you know. That's the nature of a principle. You don't have to know it or apply it to be impacted by it. And that's just the beginning. The principle that explains why a drowning man sinks is the same principle that explains why the flotation device the lifeguard throws in his direction floats. Go figure.

When the principle of buoyancy is leveraged, things float. When this principle is ignored or misapplied, things sink. According to Archimedes' principle, a body immersed in liquid receives an upward thrust from the bottom toward the top, equal to the weight of the displaced liquid. So five-ounce pebbles sink, and a fifty-one-ton battleship floats. Now, Archimedes was an inventor as well as a mathematician, but he did not invent this principle—he *discovered* it. Things were sinking and floating long before he came on the scene. He simply gave the world an explanation for something that

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had been happening since the first duck spotted the first pond. Knowing about his principle won't keep you from sinking, but learning how to leverage it will. That's the nature of a principle.

Like Archimedes' principle, the principle of the path is not anyone's invention. It is a discovery. A discovery that explains patterns that have been observed since the beginning of time. Specifically, the principle of the path explains why many people's dreams don't come true. It explains why intelligent people with admirable goals and ambitions end up far away from where they intended to be relationally, financially, educationally, emotionally, even spiritually. It explains why people who seemingly have everything end up with nothing.

But this same principle also explains why other individuals are able to attain the life and lifestyle they have always dreamed of. As Archimedes' principle explains both why rocks sink and boats float, so this principle explains why some people do well in life while others don't. But the principle of the path is more than an explanation. Again, it is a principle, which means that once it is discovered, it can be leveraged. To leverage something is to borrow or use its power. The principle of the path is a powerful principle, and its power is available to anyone who is willing to leverage it.

WHAT FARMERS KNOW

If you grew up around church or on a farm, you may be familiar with the principle of the harvest. As is the case with Archimedes' principle, whether or not you are familiar with it, you've been impacted by it. The principle of the harvest states that we reap

SWAMP MY RIDE

what we sow. Sow apple seeds and you will reap a harvest of apple trees. Sow watermelon seeds and you get—you guessed it—watermelons. Nothing new there. This cause-and-effect relationship is in place whether you know about it or not. And it is in place whether you agree with it or not.

Chances are you've heard the principle of the harvest applied outside the realm of agriculture. The principle of the harvest applies to friendships, finances, and marriage. What you put into something impacts what you can expect to get out of it. Neglect your marriage or your health and the outcome is predictable. You experienced this principle at work throughout your time in school. What you put in determined what you got out. This principle operated in the background of your life whether you were aware of it or not. And if someone had brought it to your attention and you refused to accept it as true, it really would not have mattered. You were going to reap what you sowed anyway. That's just how principles work. And the principle of the path is no different. But whereas I've never met anyone who disputed Archimedes' principle or the principle of the harvest, I've talked to dozens of individuals and couples who refused to accept the principle we are going to focus on in this book. And the tragedy is, believing it or not believing it doesn't change the fact that it operates in the background of our lives each and every day.

COMING UP

At the beginning of the next chapter, I'm going to introduce you to and define the principle of the path. This one powerful

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principle, if embraced, will empower you to identify the paths that lead to the destinations you desire in a multitude of arenas. This same principle will aid you in identifying the paths you should avoid as well. Let me be specific. If you're married, this principle will help you stay married. If you and your partner embrace this idea, your marriage will get better. If you have kids, this principle will position you to hand off your values and worldview to your children. I've seen this principle heal broken relationships. Better yet, this simple idea protects relationships from being broken to begin with. If you're single, this insight will maximize your potential for healthy and enjoyable relationships.

When applied to the realm of finance, this principle will ensure that you live with more margin and less pressure. I've seen individuals and couples take this idea to heart and within a few months dramatically change the way they handle and view their finances. Sandra and I adopted this idea early in our marriage. We've never—and I mean never—had any consumer debt of any kind. And we've never argued over money. Granted, we've only been married eighteen months but . . . Not really. We just crossed the twenty-year mark.

But that's just half of the story.

Embracing the principle of the path is the key to avoiding regret. All kinds of regret. Relational, professional, academic, moral, marital . . . as a pastor, I've heard more stories of regret than I can recount. Hundreds. I've walked with individuals and couples through bankruptcy, divorce, custody battles, lawsuits, partnerships gone bad, and kids gone wild. I've listened to countless people tell me how badly they wish they could go back and

do it all over: marry differently, date differently, spend differently, parent differently, live differently. But, of course, you can't go back. Anna Nalick is right: "Life's like an hourglass glued to the table." And for all you country music fans, Kenny Chesney is correct as well: "When your hourglass runs out of sand, you can't turn it over and start again."

Perhaps you've heard someone make the argument that experience is the best teacher. That may be true, but that's only half the truth. Experience is often a brutal teacher. Experience eats up your most valuable commodity: time. Learning from experience can eat up years. It can steal an entire stage of life. Experience can leave scars, inescapable memories, and regret. Sure, we all live and learn. But living and learning don't erase regret. And regret is more than memory. It is more than cerebral. It's emotional. Regret has the potential to create powerful emotions—emotions with the potential to drive a person right back to the behavior that created the regret to begin with. If regret can be avoided, it should be. And the principle of the path will empower you to do just that.

Now, I realize that's a big promise. I wouldn't blame you for being a bit skeptical. I'm well aware that the discount table at your local bookstore is filled to capacity with books making similar promises. But if you will indulge me for one more chapter, I think I can connect enough dots to convince you that this is not hyperbole. This is not a self-help book. I'm not offering a formula. I'm not going to provide you with seven steps. My intention is to bring to your attention a dynamic that is operating in the background of your life and the lives of the people you love. And if you accept my premise and keep reading, you will discover what

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I've learned about leveraging this powerful principle for your benefit. Because like the other principles to which I've referred, the principle of the path impacts your life every single day. And like any principle, you can leverage it for your benefit or ignore it and reap a harvest of regret.

Thirty-two years ago, a stranger in a black Monte Carlo raced ahead of me on a deserted stretch of highway and saved me from driving my car into a swamp. He kept me from ending up precisely where I didn't want to be. But he did more than that. He took the time to lead me to the road that would take me where I wanted to go. My hope is that this book will do the same thing for you.