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3 Things to Do When You Are at a Divine Red Light

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Red Lights Are Not Always Permanent Even a small child knows that a red light means to stop. But what does the word stop mean? It seems to be such a simple word, but the word stop actually has two inferences that are quite different from each other. On one hand, the word stop means to quit. If a father said to his son, "I want you to stop telling lies," we would rightly assume that he means to quit lying...permanently. On the other hand, if a father saw his son about to run into the road, he may yell, "Stop!" That doesn't mean for the rest of his life he is forbidden to leave the yard or cross the street. His dad was not calling for a permanent stop, but a temporary stop. In other words...wait. When a traffic light turns red, it does not mean the drivers are to quit their journey. It doesn't mean they are to give up, turn around, and go home. It doesn't mean they are never again to travel this road. It simply means to wait. It is a temporary stop, not a permanent one. Honestly, it would be just as appropriate to call a red light a wait light as a stop light. There are many examples of divine red lights in the Bible. Take Abraham for instance. After receiving the promise from God that he would be the father of a great nation, he promptly got stuck at a red light. No son. Perhaps for the first few months after God made that promise to him, he kept thinking and expecting that his wife, Sarah, would conceive a child. But of course, she didn't bear Isaac until decades later. But if you think Abraham's red light was long, what about Noah's? God set him on a life journey that included a 100-year red light! Of course, if the light had turned green after 10 years or even 50 years, Noah and his family would have drowned. Have you ever been perfectly situated to go through a green light only to have someone else make a lane change, or a pedestrian step into the crosswalk, and cause you to miss your green light? That happened to Joshua and Caleb. They were revved up and ready to go. The light was green, and they were ready to roll. Then due to someone else's bad decision, they had to sit through 40 more years of a red light. Then there is Joseph. Poor Joseph. His life was reminiscent of that big boulevard that goes through the middle of pretty much every town and has a stop light every hundred feet. I'm sure your town has one. Go. Stop. Go. Stop. A dream and a vision...green light. Sold into slavery...red light. Favor and promotion in Potiphar's house...green light. Falsely accused and imprisoned...red light. Divine appointments and opportunities in prison...green light. Forgotten...red light. Remembered...green light. You get the idea. I want to direct your attention to a divine red light in the New Testament, encountered by the early church in the days immediately following Christ's ascension. They had been commissioned to take the gospel to the entire world. Notice the specific wording: Go ye therefore, and teach all nations—Matthew 28:19 Go ye into all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creature—Mark 16:15 Ye shall be witnesses unto me in Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.—Acts 1:8 But before they could even get up a full head of steam...BAM! A divine red light! Acts 1:4 reads, "And, being assembled together with them, commanded them that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait..." When I read that verse in my Khmer Bible, it jumped out at me as a red light because it used the Khmer word haam which means to forbid. Jesus commanded them to leave Jerusalem and spread the gospel to the uttermost part of the earth, then turned right around and forbade them to leave Jerusalem! Doesn't seem to make sense, does it? But Jesus had a very definite reason for this red light. The red light didn't mean to abandon the mission, and it certainly wasn't an order to permanently stay in Jerusalem. Rather, it was a wait light. Jesus had them waiting for the Holy Spirit to be sent from the Father. Jesus knew that without the Holy Spirit their attempts at obeying the commission would be futile. So let's talk about divine red lights. Divine red lights are every bit as much a part of our lives today as they were in the Bible days. It's not a matter of if, but when. Nobody likes red lights, but as Christians we need to remember that God is God, and we are not. We need to remember that He knows what He is doing. We need to remember that His thoughts are not our thoughts, and His ways are not our ways. Sometimes He sets a red light in our path to protect us. Sometimes it is to give us patience or develop more faith in us. There are myriad reasons why God may bring us to a red light, either in our ministry or personally. There are also myriad circumstances in life that could be classified as a red light. By a red light, I simply mean anything that seems to stop your forward momentum, slow you down, or force you to wait on God for a period of time. Here are a few examples: A missionary arrives on the foreign field with a passion to win the country for Christ. Language school and culture shock often brings his forward momentum to a screeching halt. A church is excited to win their city...then loses some key people or suffers a church split. Nothing like a good old-fashion' church split to bring a church to a stop. Health problems can be a major red light. Obviously health problems are a red light to the person who is ill or injured, but some health problems can cause an entire family or church to have to wait on God. For example, a pastor friend in California has been in a coma for the past nine months. That's been a major red light for his church and for his wife and children. The death of a loved one can stop a person in their tracks. A good friend and fellow-missionary here in Cambodia lost his dear wife recently. I don't think he knows at this point what the future holds for him. He is at a divine red light. Sometimes a church faces a logistics problem like finances or a facility. They want to go forward for God, but good intentions don't pay the bills. They want to reach more people, but if they did get more people, they wouldn't have any place to put them. Red light. Some red lights are hard to put your finger on exactly what the problem is. God just doesn't seem to be doing anything. It seems like the wind is out of your sails, and the air is out of your tires. I suppose the examples of divine red lights are virtually endless. What's yours? Are you sitting at a divine red light right now? As we read the account of the Jerusalem church, we see a good example of what we should be doing if we are stopped at a divine red light. 1. Stay in the Car and Keep the Engine Running Our culture is so obsessed with success that oftentimes people see a rough patch or a red light as the perfect time to bail out. For example, in the world of professional sports, many athletes will start to abandon ship and look for a new team if their season goes belly-up. Their team may have had a really good year, and they may have potential for some more really good years if they'll just stay together. But because they didn't win the championship, they feel like they failed. Time to move on! Sadly, some people are like that with their church too. As long as things are going well, good attendance, exciting services, forward momentum...they are in! But as soon as there is a red light...as soon as some families leave, the attendance dips, there is a dry season with few new converts or baptisms, a favorite staff member moves on, etc...they bail out. Sadly, sometimes it's the same way in a family. Many marriages have fallen apart while sitting at a divine red light. Notice the early church at Jerusalem and how they handled their red light: And when they were come in, they went up into an upper room, where abode both Peter, and James, and John, and Andrew, Philip, and Thomas, Bartholomew, and Matthew, James the son of Alphaeus, and Simon Zelotes, and Judas the brother of James. These all continued with one accord in prayer and supplication, with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren.—Acts 1:13–14 Notice also how chapter 2 opens: And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place.—Acts 2:1 They survived their red light because while they were stuck at it, they stayed together. Imagine if they had all begun to scatter (like after the crucifixion). Imagine if the 120 had dwindled down to 12 because they were discouraged, disheartened, or disoriented by the stop light. But no, they just stuck together. The divine stoplights of life are not the time to walk out on your spouse, your family, your friends, your pastor, your church, or especially your God. When we come to a red light on the road, we don't get out of the car and walk off. Why would we do that at a divine stop light? 2. Take Care of

Whatever Business You Can While You Wait Suppose a person needs to readjust his seatbelt, pick up a pen that fell to the floorboard, turn to the back seat and scold a child, adjust his mirrors, or send a text message. In those cases, a red light really isn't the end of the world. In fact, a red light can be an opportunity to take care of a few important things. The problem is that many times in our lives and ministries, when we are sitting at a divine stop light, we tend to get lazy. After all, every week just seems to turn out the same as the previous week, so why try. It feels like God's power has been shut off. We've lost some people, and the ones who are still coming seem to be wavering. Be careful! That's a prime time for Satan to move in and convince you to slack off. When the apostles were stuck at a red light, not only did they stay together, but they also stayed busy. Notice what they did: And in those days, Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples, and said...Men and brethren...of these men which have accompanied with us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us...must one be ordained to be a witness with us of his resurrection. And they appointed two...and they prayed...and they gave forth their lots; and the lot fell upon Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.—Acts 1:15–26 They had a business meeting which was, incidentally, combined with a prayer meeting! But the point isn't the business meeting itself. The point is that they were busy at the red light. The task at hand, the job that needs to be done, will vary from person to person and from church to church. But it is a mistake to let things slide because “well, we're just kind of in a rut right now.” There are a couple of important principles found here in Acts 1 from which every church could benefit. First, notice that while they were sitting at a red light, they got busy replacing one they had lost. Sometimes we lose people due to death. (Sometimes I joke with our church people and tell them that if they die, then they have permission to quit coming to church.) More often than death though, we lose people to backsliding. This young church lost one of their friends to both backsliding and death, back-to-back. And his death was not of the “precious-in-the-sight-of-the-Lord-is-the-death-of-His-saints” variety. It is easy for us to write off Judas as a devil. We never knew him other than through the pages of the Bible, in which he is an obvious villain. On the other hand, I believe it was a very difficult time for the apostles and the rest of the disciples when they lost Judas. He was undoubtedly a friend, a companion, and a confidante. Losing someone from the inner circle hurts. In fact, losing someone from the inner circle often goes hand-in-hand with a divine red light. But the church realized that as much as they hurt in their hearts, the work of Christ was bigger than one man, and it had to go forward. Therefore, they replaced him. Sometimes the most important thing a church can do while idling at a red light is to work to replace those they have lost. Don't be discouraged when you don't reach 100 in a month. Just work and pray to replace that one whose loss caused so much heartache. Not only were they replacing who they had lost, but they were also establishing new leadership. This is definitely related to the replacement principle but takes it a step further. New leadership needs to be constantly developed and trained in the church, even in the times when it seems the church has stopped moving. It can feel pointless to train a Sunday school teacher when you are stuck in a small facility (i.e. red light) and don't even have a room to hold another Sunday school class. It is vital that we look for opportunities to train new leadership, because when we train leadership, we are investing in the future. Red lights don't last forever.³ Keep Your Eye on the Light Sometimes it's funny to see a person who has no clue that their light has turned green. Perhaps they're engrossed in a conversation with someone else in their car or perhaps they are playing a game on their phone. I saw a guy recently who fell asleep while sitting at a red light! Sadly, the same thing happens at divine red lights. The Jerusalem church did not allow that to happen. Though they were taking care of some business, they were keeping their eye on the light, fully expecting it to turn green soon. Acts 1:14 tells us what they were doing: they were praying! The question is, for what were they praying? I believe they were praying for the Holy Spirit to come. Prayer should be based on the promises of God and the Word of God. I like what E.M. Bounds said about prayer. He said that God's Word is like an orchard, and each of God's promises are like pieces of fruit up in the trees. Prayer is climbing up one of those trees and picking a piece of fruit. There is no doubt in my mind that there was a very special promise at the forefront of every one of their minds. Notice what Jesus had repeatedly promised them just a few weeks previously. And I will pray the Father, and he shall give you another Comforter, that he may abide with you forever.—John 14:16 I will not leave you comfortless: I will come to you.—John 14:18 But the Comforter, which is the Holy Ghost, whom the Father will send in my name, he shall teach you all things, and bring all things to your remembrance, whatsoever I have said unto you.—John 14:26 But when the Comforter is come, whom I will send unto you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth, which proceedeth from the Father, he shall testify of me.—John 15:26 Nevertheless I tell you the truth; It is expedient for you that I go away: for if I go not away, the Comforter will not come unto you; but if I depart, I will send him unto you.—John 16:7 Howbeit when he, the Spirit of truth is come, he will guide you into all truth.—John 16:13 And, behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you: but tarry ye in the city of Jerusalem, until ye be endued with power from on high.—Luke 24:49 But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you.—Acts 1:8 They had definitely been walking in the orchard of God's promises, and one particular promise had caught their eye! They were looking for God's Holy Spirit! This orchard is still in full bloom today, and God invites His children to climb a tree and partake of His promises. When we are waiting for God to give us a green light, we must take great care not to get distracted by the toys and trinkets of the world. We must beware of spiritual drowsiness, too! The light will turn green, but we need to stay in sync with God. We must stay in the Word and prayer. When we are waiting on God, the answer is never less Bible and prayer. It is always more Bible and prayer. Get in the Bible and find God's promises to you. Then go to God in prayer, believing. Claim His promise. Remind Him of His promise. Plead with Him for His power and blessing. Time spent communing with God and pleading for His Spirit to work is never wasted and is always rewarded. So that's how the church at Jerusalem handled a divine red light. And boy, did their light ever turn green a short time later! I encourage you, whatever the divine red light is right now in your life or ministry, remember the early church at Jerusalem. Stay together, stay busy, and stay praying.