

Keep On Growing: The Importance of Journey - 23rd July 2023

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Date: 23 July 2023

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[0 : 00] So I wonder how you got here today. Did you get in a car and drive over to church? Maybe you cycled, maybe you scooted along or segued or did you, like me, just take the short walk over in this quite unpredictable weather, to be fair?

However you got here today, we all made a journey, didn't we, to meet together this morning. And so I thought we could explore this concept of journey as we conclude the series that we've been doing called Keep On Growing.

Many times over the last few weeks we've heard our experience of growing with God likened to a journey, this idea of travelling, moving from one location to another.

So let's start there, looking at physical journeys. There's ones that we take every day, aren't there? To work, to the shops, to school, to other people's houses and we probably don't even think about them.

But all of these enable us to engage in something different to what was at the starting point. We move, don't we, from one activity to another.

[1 : 12] Then there are special journeys that we go on in this season of holidays. Maybe you're planning a journey to the seaside for some beach fun or maybe you're flying off to somewhere exotic if you're very lucky.

Next, there are extra special journeys that we might think of. Those once in a lifetime memorable journeys like maybe travelling home with a new baby or journeying to your first day at university. Or like me two years ago, travelling for your first day at a new job. I think my most memorable journey physically like that was a mission trip that I did to the Holy Land in 2000 to take part in a short-term project in Bethany.

So indeed there are those journeys that people make for that deeper, more profound reason, aren't there? Where there's some sort of higher motivation perhaps.

A journey that we might describe as a pilgrimage. So this word pilgrimage can mean different things to different people. For Elvis fans, maybe they go to Graceland to see the King of Rock and Roll's Golden Toilet.

[2 : 31] Or if you're a motorbike rider like my husband, you might go to the Isle of Man so that you can ride over Aggo's Leap. There he is. The routes of pilgrimage though are obviously religious.

So Muslims go to Mecca on Hajj while Christians might walk the Santa de Compostela. On that I'd highly recommend the film *The Way* if you want to explore that a little bit more.

Closer to home, we recently picked up a pilgrim passport which encourages you to get a stamp from every Anglican cathedral in the country. So we thought that might be fun to try and collect them all.

So why do people make these physical journeys for spiritual reasons? Is it something about the specific location that we go to?

Or is it more about moving from one place to another? Is it about the destination? Or is it more about the journey itself?

[3 : 38] So to help our thinking, I'm going to share a time that I climbed Snowden with my mum. So she'd got it on her bucket list and my husband Neil had done it lots of times.

So we agreed to take her. If you know me, this is very, very far away from any idea of fun that I can ever imagine.

I distinctly remember getting to the top and after the extremely physical demanding hours and hours of trekking, seeing the train arrive at the same time.

And I thought, why didn't I just buy a ticket? They got the same amazing view and they hadn't had to do all that hard work.

So I hadn't valued the journey, had I? I hadn't recognised that maybe there was benefit in seeing the steady progress, the chance to spend time with my mum, the details that I saw on the way, the achievement of overcoming the physical tiredness, the resilience developed by pushing through the bad bits when I was utterly exhausted and I didn't give up.

[5 : 00] I was fixated on the destination. So at the risk of stretching the analogy a little bit, I feel in some ways that mirrors my journey with God these last few years.

My walk with God sometimes felt like a hard slog, doing so much at the church that we used to go to, the children's work, the transport duty, sitting in crazily long eldership meetings and trying so hard to get it right.

Reading the Bible when, quite frankly, I found it boring. Praying when I felt it made no difference. Striving to live like I should.

It felt like a tiring journey, to be honest, to, quite frankly, a rather sketchy idea of a destination of heaven that I wasn't sure was worth all that bother or, dare I say, exists at all.

So various factors have meant that I've now got to a point of realising that getting to Jesus wasn't about the activity, the striving, the trying.

[6 : 19] He was already there with me. I could then focus on seeing him in the whole of my journey and I could relax knowing he already loves me and just being with him is enough.

Jesus is the journey, not the destination. Rather than give people a destination to reach, Jesus instead calls people on a journey, saying to them, follow me.

Equally, Jesus says that he is the way, the truth and the life. Yes, Jesus is obviously leading us somewhere, but he seems to be much more interested in the journey that we take to get there with him.

Apparently, the earliest name for Christians was followers of the way. So they evidently seem to grasp this concept from the word go. I can now see that the journey is everything focusing on the moment, who we meet on the way, how we can help them on their journey, what we see of God on the way in often the most unexpected places.

So the good news is that the Bible contains many stories that we can learn from, drawing on the experience of others on their journeys to inform and inspire our own journeys with God and with each other.

[7 : 54] So for example, we can think about the Israelites travelling to the promised land. They often didn't go the way that God led them, but he stuck with them anyway.

So maybe that's a reminder to us that even when we choose to go our own way, God will never give up on us. We could look at Paul's dramatic encounter with God on his journey on the road to Damascus in Acts 9.

Jesus appeared to him in a vision and told him to stop persecuting his followers. Again, for us, it could be a sign that sometimes God can give us pretty direct instructions in unexpected ways.

In Acts 8, the journey the Ethiopian took, Philip drew alongside him, studied scripture and then baptised, is maybe a lesson in being prepared to ask for and accept help when we're confused about the right way ahead.

And as you'd expect of someone who calls themselves the way, we can see the life of Jesus as a series of journeys too. From his coming to be with us on earth as an unborn baby in his mother Mary's womb, his fleeing Herod by going to Egypt, his journey to the temple as a boy, his journey from living in Nazareth to settling in Capernaum, going into the desert to be tempted, his journey from Galilee to Jerusalem as he faced the ultimate journey to the cross and his ascension into heaven.

[9 : 48] But the one journey I want to explore in a little bit more depth today is in Luke 24. So let's have a watch of that. They were going to a village called Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem.

They were talking with each other about everything that had happened. As they talked and discussed these things with each other, Jesus himself came up and walked along with them.

But they were kept from recognizing him. He asked them, What are you discussing together as you walk along? They stood still, their faces downcast.

One of them, named Cleophas, asked him, Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem who does not know the things that have happened there in these days? What things, he asked.

About Jesus of Nazareth, they replied. He was a prophet, powerful in word and deed before God and all the people. The chief priests and our rulers handed him over to be sentenced to death, and they crucified him.

[11 : 03] But we had hoped that he was the one who was going to redeem Israel. And what is more, it is the third day since all this took place.

In addition, some of our women amazed us. They went to the tomb early this morning, but didn't find his body. They came and told us that they had seen a vision of angels who said he was alive. Then, some of our companions went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said, but they did not see Jesus. He said to them, How foolish you are!

And how slow to believe all that the prophets have spoken! Did not the Messiah have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?

And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself. As they approached the village to which they were going, Jesus continued on as if he were going farther.

[12 : 17] But they urged him strongly, Stay with us, for it is nearly evening. The day is almost over. So he went in to stay with them. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. When he was at the table with them, he took bread, gave thanks, broke it, and began to give it to them.

Then their eyes were opened, and they recognized him, and he disappeared from their sight. They asked each other, were not our hearts burning within us while he talked with us on the road and opened the scriptures to us?

They got up and returned at once to Jerusalem. There they found the eleven and those with them assembled together and saying, it is true, the Lord has risen and has appeared to Simon.

Then the two told what had happened on the way and how Jesus was recognised by them when he broke the bread. So I just want to pick out three things which occurred to me from this passage which we could use to consider our journey with God and with each other.

[13 : 56] So firstly, who you journey with is important. These two disciples walked together in a pair on what we now know was Easter Sunday afternoon.

I imagine they knew each other pretty well. They had similar experiences and they both wanted to go back home after quite the full-on few days.

They had just seen Jesus crucified, buried and then heard reports of him coming back to life. We don't know if they were friends or siblings or partners.

We only know the name of one of them, Cleopas. But in a way, the nature of their relationship doesn't really matter as much as the fact that they were obviously really close.

there was a sense of honest sharing, of solidarity, of mutual support between them. Now there's a privilege which comes from being able to journey with someone else in such an honest, supportive way.

[15 : 04] Finding a companion or companions for the road that we're on isn't a given, but different companions might come and go and come again in our life.

So I wonder, during those rollercoaster times in life with all the ups and downs that you've been through, who would you say have been the significant companions in your life journey so far?

And how would you say perhaps is the closest companion or companions to you now? I do love house groups for giving us a small group of fellow travellers on the road.

But I, for one, really benefit from sharing stretches of my journey on a one-to-one basis. One particular person I can completely trust and who knows me and is also travelling the same way. Again, there's a privilege in having that kind of companion either for a season or for longer in life. Someone who you can be completely honest and open with.

[16 : 19] And I'm not necessarily thinking here of a spouse, but it could be maybe a friend or a church buddy, a relative, just someone who you're happy to share the detail with, the everyday God stuff.

It could be a more formal relationship like a spiritual mentor or counsellor. There are lots of examples elsewhere in the Bible of these companions.

So David had Jonathan, Mary had Elizabeth. I heard recently Ray Simpson of the Northumbria community call these soul friends and I really liked that.

I reckon we all find walking alone quite hard so it's much easier with someone else. So I wonder if we're struggling to identify or find the right person or people to share with, maybe that would be a good prayer to pray today.

Asking God to provide us with a true travelling companion or maybe even a braver prayer is to ask God to help us realise, surprise us even, that someone we're already travelling with might just be the someone we could develop a more honest or real friendship with.

[17 : 48] so next up these two disciples talked with each other about everything that had happened. They talked it out.

They discussed their whole experience of Jesus. I imagine this included how they felt and a whole load of questions that they had.

What happened as they talked? Jesus turns up. So it's not that Jesus by his spirit isn't always present with us in some way but the act of talking, sharing, being vulnerable it does seem to open our eyes in new ways to how Jesus is present in our midst.

This doesn't have to be in a church or house group setting. I believe that wherever there is love and concern then Jesus is and then thirdly they didn't know that it was Jesus.

They were kept from recognising him. These two disciples only realised who he was when they stopped and relaxed and ate which I quite like and reflected.

[19 : 08] it's interesting that the teaching happened on their journey not at the destination and this makes me really excited actually that in this life journey that we can learn as we go on the way it isn't about striving for that destination.

We've been promised we'll understand it all anyway eventually in 1 Corinthians for now we see only a reflection as in a mirror then we shall see face to face.

The two disciples asked each other were not our hearts burning within us when he talked with us on the road and opened the scriptures to us?

I love that Bible study learning about God and getting to know him more can be an as you go experience maybe a one to one experience not confined to a set day or place or group of people a big part of my journey recently has been around this I could describe it maybe as a journey from the sacred to the secular so that God is in all things not only things we see as Christian but in the most unexpected ways and people and places the things that we might call the secular if you want to explore this more I found this little booklet great it's produced by the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity and it's called The Great Divide you might want to check that one out then this passage that we looked at speaks to me about the need to listen and learn and ask God to get my heart burning within me in the everyday experiences I've also been walking towards the idea that God uses us wherever we are I used to spend so much energy stressing am I on the right path when actually it is the focus on every step that he wants and the question is more how am I experiencing Jesus on this path life again in life with Jesus in so many ways the journey is the destination so as we come into land on this one I would suggest that those inner journeys that we go on the spiritual walk with Jesus can take us to somewhere better than where we started so we can learn

[22 : 06] Jesus' perspective and journey from fear to freedom from insecurity to confidence pain to healing from despair to hope hate to love from unforgiving to forgiveness from rejection to acceptance from doing to being weary to strengthened from powerless to powerful so to finish off here's a quote that I really liked from that pilgrim's passport that we picked up speaking of physical journeys Sally Welsh in every place is holy ground says this those journeys of discovery will bring us back to where we started we may no longer be the same people with a refreshed mind and enhanced way of seeing we may discover

God where he has always been right in the midst of the everyday day Amen miss Wahrtak a winner and see lavender