

“Going to Jerusalem”

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... from Jerusalem and as far around as Illyricum I have fully proclaimed the good news of Christ. ²⁰Thus I make it my ambition to proclaim the good news, not where Christ has already been named, so that I do not build on someone else's foundation, ²¹but as it is written, “Those who have never been told of him shall see, and those who have never heard of him shall understand.”

²²This is the reason that I have so often been hindered from coming to you. ²³But now, with no further place for me in these regions, I desire, as I have for many years, to come to you ²⁴when I go to Spain. For I do hope to see you on my journey and to be sent on by you, once I have enjoyed your company for a little while. ²⁵At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; ²⁶for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. ²⁷They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things. ²⁸So, when I have completed this, and have delivered to them what has been collected, I will set out by way of you to Spain; ²⁹and I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

³⁰I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in earnest prayer to God on my behalf, ³¹that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, ³²so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company. ³³The God of peace be with all of you. Amen.

(Romans 15: 19-33)

The entirety of Jesus' adult ministry took place out on the road. Traveling on foot, he went from town to town, preaching and teaching. It was hard to discern exactly where he was going, there did come a day when Jesus sent a clear signal about his ultimate destination -- a moment when, in Luke's words, Jesus first “set his face toward Jerusalem.”¹ And while he continued to heal, teach, challenge, and serve out on the road, that final goal was always on his mind. The whole time, it turns out, he was “going to Jerusalem.”

Interestingly, Paul has a parallel moment on his own journey. It comes toward the end of his own ministry. After telling the church in Rome how much he longs to visit them, he explains that there is something he needs to do first. “*I do hope to see you,*” Paul writes, and “*[enjoy] your company for a little while. At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem.*”

The similarities of these moments in the ministry of Christ and the ministry of Paul are striking. They are also instructive for anyone who is on a journey of faith... for all of us who are trying to figure out our spirituality -- where we are headed and how best to arrive at our destination. In Christ and Paul, we see a clear, four-fold pattern for our own journey, a pattern of separation; anticipation; trepidation; and destination.

Let's begin at the beginning. Every journey, in some way, is motivated by **separation**. We feel disconnected from someone or something important to us. It could be a goal that

¹ Luke 9:51.



has eluded us. It could be a relationship that has been broken or strained. The journey begins with a gorge that must be crossed, a distance to be closed.

Paul's letter makes it clear that his separation from the church in Rome is a painful thing. He misses the camaraderie of people he loves. He misses their sense of shared purpose. He misses the support he felt in that community, both materially and spiritually. He says it clearly – that he would much rather go directly to Rome -- but pressing matters prevented him from doing so. That leaves Paul feeling lonely and missing his friends.

Jesus shared the same emotions as he set his own sights on Jerusalem. He, too, was feeling a deep sense of separation. He gives voice to that pain at the Lord's Supper. He knows that a betrayal is imminent, a fracture in the bonds of friendship and shared mission. Later, in the Garden of Gethsemane, when he most needed the support of close friends, they cannot even stay awake for him.

But there is an even deeper sense separation that Christ has been carrying throughout his earthly journey. It is the rift between earth and heaven, the staggering divide between human imperfection and God's perfection, the separation of sin. In one of the most influential sermons of the 20th century, the theologian Paul Tillich said that all human sin, no matter what shape it might take, can be described in one word. "[S]in," Tillich said, "is separation. To be in the state of sin is to be in the state of separation."²

According to Tillich, we experience that separation in three ways: (1) Sin separates from one another; (2) Sin separates us from our true selves; and (3) Sin separates us from God, the very Ground of our Being. "This three-fold separation," Tillich writes, "constitutes the state of everything that exists; it is a universal fact; it is the fate of every life."³ The foundational purpose of Christ's incarnation and mission was to end that separation in all three of its forms. That is why he came, and that is why he had to go to Jerusalem. Separation is the beginning of every spiritual journey. We set out to bridge a gap that separates us from something or someone we love.

And what drives us to bridge that gap? **Anticipation.** What drives us is the hope of ending the separation. Even though Paul was prevented from reuniting with the people he loved in the short term, it did not stop him from imagining a time just a bit farther down the road when they would be together again. That future was very clear in Paul's mind. It not only involved a joyful reunion in Rome, but the beginning of a new chapter in his ministry. The churches he planted in Asia, Macedonia, and Greece were up and running, and Paul was feeling a call to a new frontier. In Paul's heart and mind, that new frontier was Spain. It was Europe. And his homebase for that new mission could be Rome. The anticipation of that dream becoming a reality gave Paul energy. He was driven by that hope.

Anticipation also inspired Jesus as he turned his face to Jerusalem. Terrible, gruesome things awaited him there, but he had already hinted at what would come after his suffering. "*The Son of Man must be delivered into the hands of sinful people and be crucified,*" he had said, "*but on the third day he will rise.*"⁴ The road would be hard, but once it was walked the shackles of sin and death on every human life would be broken. The painful separation would be ended; heaven and earth would be reunited.

² Paul Tillich, "You Are Accepted," chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcgclefindmkaj/https://wedgeblade.net/files/archives_assets/20810.pdf

³ *Id.*

⁴ Luke 24:7.

We cannot overestimate the power of anticipation in our own journeys. There is always something to look forward to. There is always a vision of something new – something better -- that can give us energy to keep moving and hope to carry on.

Even so, as we all know, there will be moments of doubt. A third reality of every journey of faith is **trepidation**. Paul knew that, when he arrived back in Jerusalem, there would be plenty of enemies ready to greet him. The Jewish population of that city saw him as a traitor, an apostate who had abandoned faith in the covenant law. Even among the Christian faithful there were people very upset with Paul. They thought Paul's teaching on things like circumcision and kosher adherence were just dead wrong. In Jerusalem, Paul had good reason to fear for his safety, even his life. So, Paul specifically asked his friends in Rome to pray for his bodily safety. "*Join me in earnest prayer to God,*" Paul wrote, "*that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God's will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company.*"

Jesus obviously had these same concerns. He knew that walking into Jerusalem meant certain suffering and death. In the Garden of Gethsemane, Luke tells us that Jesus was deeply grieved, that he was in agony over what he was facing. "*Father, if you are willing,*" Jesus prayed, "*remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done.*"⁵ On every real spiritual journey – every one that can actually take us somewhere and change us for the better – is going to involve some fear and trepidation.

Our prayer, therefore, is that God will help us push through those fears and keep walking. We ask God to strengthen us and convict us to keep our eyes on the prize and make it to our final **destination**. Paul had to do this, because before he could realize his dream of Rome and Spain, he had one last task to complete. He had a delivery to make.

You see, Paul recognized that the Christians back in Jerusalem were the trailblazers. They took the initial risks. They founded the church. They were also chronically poor. They needed help – material help – to buy food, shelter, the basic needs of life. So, whenever Paul planted a new church, no matter how many miles away it might be, Paul instilled in every member a core ethical principle: we will take care of one another.

In 1963, while imprisoned in a Birmingham jail, Martin Luther King, Jr. endorsed this early Christian ethic to the brave people who were walking the painful journey of the Civil Rights Movement. "I cannot sit idly by in Atlanta," King wrote, "and not be concerned about what happens in Birmingham. Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere. We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly."⁶ In other words, we are all called to take care of one another.

In that spirit, Paul's churches all across Macedonia and Achaia took up a love offering for the poor in Jerusalem. People in Corinth, Galatia, and Thessalonica could not sit idly while people were suffering in Jerusalem. So they gave: generously, willingly, joyfully. "*They were pleased to do it,*" Paul said. "*Indeed, they knew they owed it to them.*"

Make no mistake: Paul didn't relish the thought of going to Jerusalem. He wanted to go to Rome and Spain. But Paul knew that he could not cut corners on his spiritual journey.

⁵ Luke 22:42.

⁶ https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html

Yes, there was danger in Jerusalem, but there was also great need there. There was important work to do there. There was a debt to be paid there.

Of course, Jesus also faced danger in Jerusalem. But Jesus knew that his journey had to pass through that crucible. While he had the power to evade the pain, he went to it willingly. While he could have avoided the sacrifice, he was not only looking out for himself. He was always going to Jerusalem for us – because he needed to show us the Way to walk in faithful obedience, and because there was a debt to be paid there.

The same is true of our spiritual journeys. If we want to arrive at our true destination, we have to go about it the right way. We cannot arrive safely home without first rounding first, second, and third – without touching all the bases. The Christian journey has always been about more than ourselves. Whatever may come, we must agree to take care of one another. Not just the people who live in our house, or in our community, or in our country. Everyone is our sibling. Everyone is our responsibility. This is what we do, or at least it is what we are supposed to do: we take care of one another.

In other words, every journey is a shared journey. Every stage of the journey is shared. If any separation exists, then we are all separated. If there is any vision worthy of our anticipation, then all should be invited in... everyone should be able to anticipate and participate in that vision. If anyone, anywhere is fearful or feeling trepidation. then we all need to be afraid. And if a destination is worth striving for, then all God's people should be welcomed into that striving. If our journey is not shared, then we are on the wrong road. Full stop.

Why? Because we take care of each other. Amen.