

Finishing Strong... *Journey Wk. 3*

For those of you who haven't been around, for the last two weeks we've been working through this series entitled "Journey". Our basis for this series is that many times in life people are so concerned with the beginning or the end of a journey that they miss out on the "in between". One quote I heard stated that, "It's not just the end or where we begin, it is everything in between, slowing down, learning how to live life in moments like these" Life is full of moments and when we are so concerned with getting to a destination it usually results in one of two things. We either get there so fast that we miss out on experiencing the trip itself. We miss out on the lessons we were supposed to learn, we miss out on the people we were supposed to influence and be influenced by. At times we are working so fast and so hard to reach the destination that catastrophe strikes. We hit a speed bump, a guard rail and we put ourselves and those we care about in danger. Other times we go so slow that we never reach the destination that God has called us and again we miss out on what God has for us.

So for the last two weeks we looked at the two different paths presented in scripture, straight and level, or crooked and unlevel. The type of road or path you are on determines your speed and danger in which you are in as you head for the final destination. Last week we focused on the road signs in life, the different types of signs which tell us where we are and where we are headed. We said that there were really three types of signs that God uses. The first is a person, like a cop who directs traffic pointing people in the right direction. We talked about Mary and how she was the sign that Jesus had come. The second type of sign we talked about was scripture itself and how it points us in the right direction. We talked about the guy who was headed to that woman's house, "like an ox to the slaughter" is how scripture describes him. This picture and others like it in the text, give us a sign to which way the dude was going. Finally the last sign we talked about was the event sign, how we are sort of like spectators who are watching others on their path and something huge happens in their life and we're sort of like "I will never make that decision". I gave you the example of the person killed by a drunk driver or the person who got pregnant, we are so used to hearing these things that we allow them to role by, but it's a whole different deal when it happens to someone we know. God uses these types of events to get our attention in such a big way that we draw a line in the sand and fully decide that we are not going there. We closed by saying that no matter what types of signs are on our path, we still have to make the decision to believe them and follow them. A stop sign is completely useless if I decide it's not real.

As we close out this series tonight I want to focus in on the end of the journey or path. You're close to your destination, but you're not there yet. Maybe it's the end of school, or the end of High School. Maybe it's the end of the season and on the horizon you see that you're not

going to have to practice every day, or you're not going to have to get up as early. Maybe it's near the end of a relationship, a grandmother or grandfather is getting ready to pass away or you know that you are about to break up with your boy friend or girl friend. Maybe you found out that a friend talked about you behind your back and instead of forgiving them, like Christ forgave you, you've decided to end the relationship. Whatever the road or path in your life is, at some point, it's going to end. Not always, but usually our tendency is to slack off when things are coming to an end. To a certain extent society and culture sets us up this way. I know with my kids, they take the CRCT in like March or April. That means for a little over a month they really don't do much in school. Especially the last week, it's like all fun days. We see this in sports as well, when a team is eliminated from playoff contention, most of the time their demeanor changes. The same can sort of be said when a team secures a playoff spot, a lot of times they will put their back-ups in. Why? They no longer need to win, only to finish. They don't finish strong. If I'm driving up to retreat, and let's say I'm like 30 minutes away, and I'm tired, I'm bored, maybe even a little annoyed or frustrated. So I'm like, "Well I'm going to take a little nap. I mean, whatever, these kids are all awake and the cruise is on". There's a problem, isn't there? It doesn't matter if I'm 30 minutes away or 3 minutes away, no one wants me or anyone else asleep at the wheel. Why, because we all want to get to our destination in one piece, the way we were intended too.

The kicker for us is that many times we don't arrive at the destination of our path or road the way God intended for us to. Some of us go so far down a twisted and rocky road that many give up and don't attempt to turn around even though they can. Others of us are so used to and comfortable with the road we are on, whether it's crooked or straight, that we just don't want to finish. Still there are many of us, in fact most of us here, who finish the path we are on by the skin of our teeth. It's so close that no one knows if we'll make it until the last minute. Very few of us though finish the path, the road the way God intended for us to. Most of us survive, very few of us thrive. You want to know how to tell whether you're a survivor or a thriver? Think about how close you are to the next phase of your journey, the path or road ahead and ask yourself this question? Are you prepared for that road? I'm not asking if you have all the answers, or if you've done all the detail work. All I'm asking you, all the question is stating is this, do you have a clue what's ahead of you? For those of us who are at the place where we can't make a decision, do we have any idea the decisions ahead of us? If I'm in middle school and I can't decide whether or not I want to listen to a teacher or coach or blow them off, then how in the world am I going to be able to decide who I should or shouldn't listen to in H.S. If the teachers and coaches that I know now in M.S. clearly have my best interest in mind and I can't or won't decide if I want to listen to them or blow them off, what will I do when I don't know if those who advice me have my best interest in mind? If I'm in H.S. and I am on the path of a

druggie. I'm thinking it's no big deal, most of my friends do it, I'll quit after H.S. when it's time to get serious. Am I going to be prepared to deal with life apart from drugs? The same can be said of so many different things, if I blow off school, blow off God, sleep around, use people, cheat, do whatever I can to get by, to survive. Then how in the world will I be prepared for the next journey, the journey of college, the journey of marriage, the journey of integrity, when I not only need to, but want to thrive? I won't, you won't, and the results can be catastrophic and painful. On the other hand, if I thrive now in the current situations that I'm in, how much more am I prepared for the next path, the next road, the next journey? That is why it's so important that no matter how close you and I are to ending our journey, we finish strong.

Tonight we are going to look at two people who both finished their journey, one finished strong and they thrived, other didn't finish well or only survived, which one will you be?

In 2 Kings 10:18-31 we read about a King by the name of Jehu, Jehu followed God and did what God told him to. At the time, the people of Israel were following idols, fake gods and of course God wasn't thrilled about it, in fact he hated it. Scripture tells us that God is a jealous God; the same God who we follow is the same God delivered the Israelites out of Egypt. The same God we follow is the same God who had provided for them and yet they ignored him and instead followed Gods they made. It's sort of like me using this play dough, building a snow man and saying "Ah, snow man you are so great". You guys would look at me like I'm an idiot. But you know there are a lot of things built by people, that we give a lot more of our time, energy, and effort to than we do to God. It is he who saves us and redeems us, not American Idol. It is he who loves us unconditionally not a boyfriend or girl friend. It is he who sacrifices and gives over and over again, without taking anything in return. Think for a second about how much you give, to people, to TV, boy friend/ girl friend, and then think about how much they take and never give. Christ isn't like that though, and He sees the Israelites with all their idols and he says "time to clean house" and he uses Jehu to do it. Sure enough Jehu does it; he takes out all the followers, he takes out all of the priest who were following this God named Baal. He does it all for God and God is praised. But even though Jehu did what he was asked, and he did it right, and he did it well, but he didn't finish strong. He only survived. Listen to what scripture says...

^{2Ki 10:30} The LORD said to Jehu, "Because you have done well in accomplishing what is right in my eyes and have done to the house of Ahab all I had in mind to do, your descendants will sit on the throne of Israel to the fourth generation." ^{2Ki 10:31} Yet Jehu was not careful to keep the law of the LORD, the God of Israel, with all his heart. He did not turn away from the sins of Jeroboam, which he had caused Israel to commit. ^{2Ki 10:32} In those days the LORD began to reduce the size of Israel.

You see that as good as a job that Jehu did, he didn't prepare for the next journey. He didn't prepare the people he was called to lead for the next journey. As a result their numbers dwindled, again, it doesn't seem like a big deal unless you put yourself in their shoes. Over time, less people, equals a smaller army, a smaller army leads to, a loss of land, a loss of land leads to being conquered and being conquered by another country leads to slavery. You see even though Jehu did what was required, that's all he did. Are you only doing enough? Are you only doing what is required? Or are you finishing strong, thriving, preparing for the next thing that God has for you and those who are close to you?

I'm not sure about you, but when most of us think about surviving we think about doing just enough to get by. Earlier this week there was that earth quake in Haiti and I don't know how much of this you have seen, but these people are really surviving. They don't have the *option* of doing the bare minimum to get by, all they have *is* the bare minimum. Check out this clip...

Video Illustration 1

King Josiah, on the other hand, thrived (2 Kings 22-23). He was in a similar situation, except that no one had even heard of God for a number of years. God's way hadn't been taught, God's love hadn't been experienced, in fact as far as the people of Israel were concerned in the days of Josiah, God was as big of a deal as George Washington is to us, he had a great impact but was no longer in the picture. But Josiah refused to survive, instead he chose to thrive. Josiah did a lot of the same things that Jehu did, he took out idols and the people who followed them. The thing was he started all this when he was 8. Josiah didn't stop with what was required of Him; he went beyond what was required. In the OT God would dwell in a building called the temple, and it had been so defiled that he no longer did. Josiah cleaned it out, got rid of all the idols and in the mean time found the book of the law, which is actually the first 5 books of the bible we have. You know what he did with it, he read it and then he actually followed it. He is faced with all the sin of himself and all the sin of the people and he repents, not just like "God I'm sorry" but they have a fast (they give up food and instead pray) to show God how sorry they are. God see's all this and is like blown away, he hasn't see a person like this in a while. They are thriving on their present journey, making a difference, and preparing themselves and those around them for future journeys. Listen to what God says about Josiah...

^{2Ki 22:18} Tell the king of Judah, who sent you to inquire of the LORD, 'This is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says concerning the words you heard: ^{2Ki 22:19} Because your heart was responsive and you humbled yourself before the LORD when you heard what I have spoken against this place and its people, that they would become accursed and laid waste, and because you tore your robes and wept in my presence, I have heard you, declares the LORD. ^{2Ki 22:20} Therefore I will gather you to

your fathers, and you will be buried in peace. Your eyes will not see all the disaster I am going to bring on this place.'

^{2Ki 23:25} Neither before nor after Josiah was there a king like him who turned to the LORD as he did—with all his heart and with all his soul and with all his strength, in accordance with all the Law of Moses.

You see it didn't matter to Josiah how close or how far away he was from the end of his journey, what mattered to him was that he finished strong. He gave it all he had and he thrived, those around him thrived and the people were better prepared because of it.

I want to show you a clip of what it looks like to thrive, what it practically looks like to finish strong, despite how you finish.

Video Illustration 2

How are you going to finish the journey that God has called you to, are you even on the right one right now? Look at your path is it crooked or straight, when was the last time you got tripped up? What signs are in your road, are you supposed to do a "uey" or are you headed in the right direction? Lastly how will you finish, and will you be prepared for what's ahead, will you help out the others around you or hurt them?

Suggested Questions for Discussion:

1. In your current situation are you thriving or surviving?
 - a. Why or why not, what can you do to change?
2. If your path or road ended today, are you prepared for what's next? Do you care?
3. Jehu did what was required but didn't love God with his all, is that where you're at?
4. Josiah did what was required and beyond because of his love for God, when was the last time you went beyond what was required because of love? Have you ever done it for God?
5. Think back to the beginning, how many people do you know who never finish their journey, refuse to start a new one, or finish strong? Do you want to be like any of those people, if so which one(s)?