

## Let The Journey Begin

Matthew 3:3, Proverbs 3:5-6

### Slide 1

How many of you woke up one day, got in your car, went to the airport, and randomly bought a ticket to a place you never heard of? Or maybe just got in your car and drove to a random city?

Usually, when you go on a trip or a vacation, you've picked a certain place and made certain plans, but where you go is important. Why? Because it determines what you'll pack.

You pack one way if you're going to Florida and another way if you're going to Alaska. The time of year also affects your plans. Are you going somewhere in the dead of winter or the middle of summer?

How long you're going to be gone also affects your plans. Are you going to be there for one night, a week, a month?

Are you staying in a hotel? Camping? Staying with relatives or friends? Is it a vacation or a business trip?

We travel for all kinds of reasons and each trip requires its own preparation and planning. When you woke up this morning, whether you realized it or not, you were planning to take a journey.

Your destination was 3801 McCart Ave. After checking the weather, you thought about what you were going to wear.

You also had a timetable. You may not have pictured it, but you knew that at some point you would arrive at the church, park, and walk into the sanctuary.

You expected to greet and be greeted by friends, sit down, look through the bulletin, and settle in.

As you thought about coming to church this morning, you had a physical destination in mind, but did you have a spiritual destination in mind?

Coming to church is like getting on a train and then asking the conductor where you're going. You're just along for the ride waiting to see where the train stops and hoping you like where it took you.

That's how we often look at our spiritual journey. We're just along for the ride. We come to church. Maybe we read our Bibles, go to Sunday School, or get involved in some special activity.

We may even pray every morning and every night. We "do" a lot of things on our journey, but how much time do we actually spend thinking about our journey, about where we're headed?

We assume that we're going to Heaven, but what does that mean? How does that inform and shape our plans as we head home?

## **Slide 2**

For many people, life's only a journey from birth to death, with death being the final destination.

Since many people believe there's nothing after death but annihilation and oblivion, all their plans are focused on the here and now; their day-to-day existence.

All they're concerned with is what and how much they can get out of life. What a contrast to those of us who have an eternal sense of life.

Those of us who believe that death is not the final destination. Those of us who know that we're just passing through and there's so much more beyond this world.

The problem is that we're headed to a place where none of us have ever been. All we know is that we'll pass from the physical world to a spiritual realm.

We'll leave these physical bodies behind and take on new "bodies" or new spiritual forms, but we don't know what that will be like until it happens.

This is why we can't just sit in the pew and passively and let life sweep us along until we arrive at the Gates of Heaven.

We can't do that because, when we arrive at our final destination, we'll find that our journey isn't over but has only rounded the bend and reached a new level.

We'll be in the Promised Land with infinite mysteries to explore. A Paradise where we'll spend eternity with an Infinite Creator Who's always creating and inviting us to explore what He's creating.

I don't know where I got the idea, but for years I thought of Heaven as some kind of Heavenly retirement community.

A reward for a life well-lived, where all I'd do would stand around singing and praising God for all eternity.

John paints a wonderful picture of Heavenly worship in Revelation, but I don't believe that that's all that we'll be doing.

I believe Heaven is a wonderful, fascinating, dynamic place because God's wonderful, fascinating, and dynamic.

### **Slide 3**

When God appeared to Moses, He appeared as a flame, a fire, which is a perfect description of God.

Was He actually fire or did He appear as dancing light that looked like fire? When Moses asked Him what He was to be called, God said: “I Am Who I Am!”

I’m not going to delve too deeply into the breadth and scope of His name because His name is as wonderful, fascinating, and dynamic as He is.

The best approximation for God’s name, Yahweh, is: *“I Am Who Is Constant and Always Changing.”*

Fire is a perfect example. Fire is fire. It is hot. It burns. It is and will always be the same thing, the same substance. But if you look at it, it’s always changing.

One of the fascinating things about sitting around a campfire is watching it. It’s never the same from one second to the next. It never repeats itself.

It dances. It moves. It’s always fire but it’s always in a state of constant change, and so it is with God.

He’s always Who He is. He was and is and always will be God, but He was, is, and will always will be in a constant state of change.

We can watch Him; we can study Him for ever and ever, but He’ll never repeat Himself and we’ll never capture Him. We’ll never arrive at a point where we know everything there is to know about God.

We’ll never be able to lock Him into a single image. That’s a beautiful and exciting thing.

Because the Bible says that we’re created in His image, which hopefully means that we’re never static but always growing and changing and evolving.

Think about it. Who you are right now is not the same person you that you were yesterday or even five minutes ago.

In the time that you've been here, your body has been changing. Cells have died. New cells have been formed.

The thoughts that you're having right now are not the same as the thoughts that you had yesterday nor will the thoughts that you'll have tomorrow be the same as the thoughts that you have today.

We may have common experiences from day to day, i.e. going to bed, eating, getting dressed, but it's never the same from day to day because every day is different, no matter how much they might seem the same.

You're not the same. The world, the universe around you, is not the same, and that can be frightening, but it can also be very exciting.

I wouldn't want to live in a world where every second, every minute, every day was exactly the same as every second, minute, or day before it. Would you?

Even though we plan our trips, i.e. where we're going, what to pack, how much money we think we might need, or how long it's going to take to get there, things can happen.

The flight could be delayed. Your luggage gets lost. Your car could break down or there might be a traffic jam due to construction or an accident.

Your reservation may have gotten lost or the place you chose to stay at isn't as nice as the pictures on the internet.

Things might cost more than you expected, or you experienced some unforeseen expense that cut into your travel budget.

So, whether you acknowledge it or not, we're on a spiritual journey. We may not be starting from the same place, but we're all heading towards the same destination.

#### **Slide 4**

That's why, as we venture into the future, we need to make sure that we have "trust."

We need to trust the One Who'll guide us towards our ultimate and final destination, and Who is that, God!

Proverbs 3:5a, "*Trust in the LORD with all your heart.*" So, the question that needs to be answered is: "*Who is God to you?*" I'm not being silly or rhetorical, I'm serious.

If I'm going to trust God, it's important that I know in whom I'm putting my trust.

Remember, we don't pack the same for a trip to Florida as we would for a trip to Alaska and our impression of Who God is affects the level of trust that we put in Him.

Is God an impersonal force; someone Who's distant and uninvolved? Then I'm going to feel that I'm pretty much on my own and will have to plan and live accordingly.

In other words, am I going to have to take on the scary burden of all the "what ifs" and possibilities of what could happen? Am I going to have to accept the responsibility for the all the failures and mishaps?

Is God a task master? Does He set up roadblocks and obstructions to challenge and test us?

Are we lab rats, with God watching us to see how we respond or how long it takes for us to work our way through the maze? Rewarding us with cheese if we do good or shocking us when we do bad?

Is God someone Who follows along, like a nervous parent, waiting to pick us up and kiss our boo-boos should we fall?

As author and pastor Trevor Hudson observes: *“There is a picture of God drawn inside each of our hearts and minds. This picture, formed over the years through various influences, significantly shapes the way we live our daily lives.”*

During this series, I going to give you some homework. Today I’m asking you to draw a mental picture of God and then we’re going to talk about it some more next week.

For now, let me help you get started by using Solomon’s mental picture of the One in Whom he called us to put our trust.

Proverbs 3:5-6, *“Trust in the LORD with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.”*

Most of the proverbs contained in the Book of Proverbs are “conditional clauses,” i.e. *“If you do this, God will do that”* or *“If you do this, then this is what will happen.”*

This proverb tells us that if we meet three conditions:

1. If we trust the LORD with all our heart
2. If we do not rely on our own insight, and
3. If we acknowledge God in all our ways

Then God will make straight our paths.

None of us starts on a journey by stepping out blindly. Our steps are guided by faith. The question is, *“In whom or what do we put our faith?”*

Do I put my faith in my own wisdom? My own strength? My cunning? Or, do I put my faith in God? Do I allow Him to guide my steps?

Matthew 14:28, *“Lord, if it’s you,” Peter replied, “tell me to come to you on the water.”* Peter stepped out of the boat and walked on water because He put his faith in Jesus.

But he only walked on water for a few steps because, when he looked down, when he leaned on his own understanding, it told him he shouldn’t be doing this and down he went.

When Peter swore that he’d never leave nor forsake Jesus, again, he was leaning on his own strength and his own understanding. When the chips were down, he denied having anything to do with Jesus.

When we trust in the LORD with our whole heart, then our hearts and our thoughts are focused on Jesus.

When our hearts and our thoughts are focus on Jesus, then it doesn’t matter what’s going on around us or what’s going on up ahead of us because we know that He’s ahead of us making straight our paths.

The word that Solomon used is *“yashar”* which means *“to make straight”* or *“to direct.”* The LORD will *“yashar,”* direct our path. God will *“yashar,”* make our path straight or smooth.

## **Slide 5**

Try to imagine God directing or making your path straight and smooth.

Whenever a king or dignitary traveled, a road crew would go before them and make smooth and straight the path that the king or dignitary would be traveling.

Potholes were filled in, bumps were scraped down, bends in the road were made as straight as the terrain would allow so that nothing would hamper the progress of the king or inconvenience him.

Besides, his 'business' was important and he needed to get to where he was going, to do whatever important thing he needed to do, as quickly as possible for the benefit of the kingdom and its people.

This was the image John the Baptist used to describe his mission in the wilderness.

Quoting Isaiah 40:3 in Matthew 3:3, John proclaimed that he was "*A voice of one calling in the wilderness, 'Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight [yashar] paths for him.'*"

In Proverbs 3:6, it's not us making straight the path for the Lord but the Lord making straight the path for us: "*In all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight.*"

God's the one who goes before us and removes the pot holes, the bumps, the obstructions that hinder our journey if, IF we trust Him with our whole heart.

He'll direct our ways. He'll make straight the path of our journey to where? A city? A country? No. He directs our way to Him.

He makes the path straight. He removes any obstacles so there's nothing to impede our relationship with Him, both in the future and in the here and now.

He wants to make it possible for us to be with Him as quickly as possible and He wants to make that as easy as possible.

So, why does God insist on us trusting Him with our whole heart BEFORE He directs our path? Well, if we don't believe that God exists, then we're not going to let Him guide our path.

How can something that doesn't exist guide my path? Or, let's say that a person believes that He exists but they don't trust Him?

That's why I gave you that homework assignment. There are a lot of people out there who believe in God but they don't trust Him.

Ted Turner claimed to be an atheist, but the truth is he believed in God and God let Him down.

When he was growing up, his sister came down with a fatal disease. Every day he prayed and begged God to heal her, but she died.

Therefore, God wasn't to be trusted. Ted Turner's deaf ears and hard heart would never listen to Solomon's advice.

Think about the logic of the situation. If you believe that God can't be trusted, it logically follows that the only understanding that you have to lean on is yours or that of the world.

People who don't trust God may acknowledge Him, but they don't trust Him.

They trudge through life making their own way either accepting the path they're on as it is or trying to fill the potholes, smooth out the bumps, and straighten the road themselves.

Then, if they should meet with any success in this life, they take all the credit for themselves, "See, look at what I've done."

They don't acknowledge the work of God in their lives because they don't believe in or trust God, but the truth is that it's still the work of God even if they don't want to acknowledge it.

## **Slide 6**

The word Solomon used for "acknowledge" in verse 6 is "yada." You've heard it before. *"I ran into Mabel at the grocery store yesterday and ... yada, yada, yada ... you know how she likes to gossip."*

It means *"to know."* Again, we need to pause here and really get to "yada" what Solomon's saying.

*Yada* goes both ways. If you need some kind of specialized surgery, who do you want performing the surgery? Someone who just got out of med school and has only performed the surgery once?

Or do you want someone who *"yada"* the procedure? Who studied for years and has done the procedure hundreds of times, and *"yada,"* knows everything there is to know about the procedure and who *"yada,"* knows you?

There's a story told of a man who was on the side of the road trying to fix his Model T Ford that had broken down.

He'd been working on it for a long time but he wasn't having much luck as cars were a new technology at that time and he didn't have much knowledge about fixing cars.

Nothing seemed to be working when a car pulled up behind him and a well-dressed man got out and came over to where he was working.

He watched the fellow for a while and then suggested that he make a minor adjustment to the carburetor.

The young man was skeptical, but figuring he had nothing to lose by humoring the man, he made the adjustment and to his surprise, the car started right up.

The young man was amazed. *“How did you know?”* he asked the gentleman. *“Well,”* said the gentleman, *“I’m Henry Ford and I made that car, so I know all about how it works.”*

I can trust in God with my whole heart because nobody knows me better than my Creator, my Father in Heaven. And I *“yada,”* I know the Lord because He’s given me the Owner’s Manuel.

Right here in today’s scripture, Proverbs 3:5-6, we’re told how to walk through this life with God in very clear steps. We trust the Lord because we acknowledge His existence.

Our faith comes from our personal experience with God and from the experience of His people as recorded in the Bible. Each step of faith leads to another step of faith.

As we continue to walk in faith, our faith continues to grow. As He directs us, as He goes before us and makes straight the way, we acknowledge that this is the result of His work and not our own.

The fact that the way is made straight is proof that He’s with us every step of the way, guiding and directing us.

Those who don’t believe, who don’t seek Him out, who don’t listen for or listen to His counsel strike out on their own and tough their way through life.

They tout their victories as their own and blame God or the world for their failures.

Yet, when we acknowledge God's presence, when we listen to His council and follow His guidance, we find that He does indeed direct our path.

A path that leads us home. A path that leads us to a deeper and closer relationship with Him. He'll remove any obstacles that get in the way of that relationship.

## **Slide 7**

### Conclusion

So, let the journey begin. Every day, Jesus invites us to "*Come, follow me.*" As I said, we may not all be at the same place.

Some of us may be embarking on the first steps of our journey. Some of us may be well-seasoned travelers only requiring fresh resources for our journey.

Some of us may be discouraged and weary, ready to pull off the road.

Some of us may be disillusioned by the ever-changing spirituality that passes for much of Christian practice today and want to discover the true course.

Others of us may have taken a few side trips and found that the attractions of the world aren't as glamorous as the billboards advertised them to be.

We're all at different points and places in our spiritual walk, but we all share a yearning for vital and real spirituality.

*"Wherever you may find yourself along the Way," says Trevor Hudson, "a real and vital spirituality always stretches toward the transforming of our personal lives and of the societies in which we live."*

Our journey towards a deeper and closer relationship with God isn't something that just happens.

We don't just passively float through life and hope that we end up somewhere wonderful or nice. We have to be intentional. We have to be engaged in the process.

As we fall into step with Jesus, through prayer, through our knowledge of His Word, He'll show us His way to live and provide us with the strength to follow Him.

He goes with us and before us, directing our way and making straight our path.