

The Great Journey

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Sermon Audio file

Scripture Text: Hebrews 12:18-29

Are you planning a trip or going on vacation? If so, the planning is likely going to involve a laptop and/or a smartphone. For our parents and grandparents, the planning was totally different. When they planned a summer vacation, they'd go to the local auto club and pick up a stack of maps, guidebooks, and brochures about a potential destination. If it was a road trip, they likely obtained an additional map that outlined construction along the way.

If it wasn't the auto club, it was a travel agent. Every strip mall had a little travel office in those days. On the walls were huge murals of sun-drenched beach-es, glistening cities and invariably a gondolier working the canals of Venice.

The agent gave your parents or grandparents a guidebook listing reviews of hotels and sights to see. Those reviews were often written by auto club employees who gave a place either stars or diamonds based on their specific, expert criteria. Mom and Dad wouldn't necessarily see a photo of the place in the guidebook, nor would they know much more about it than what the little paragraph included.

Of course, most of these reviews and prices were out of date by the time they were in print, but at least it was something. Unless a friend or relative recommended a particular place, our parents and grandparents were really flying blind. Not until they reached their destination would they know what they had gotten themselves into.

Today, we don't plan trips this way. The internet changed all that. A new website called TripAdvisor was launched in 2000, and travel planning has never been the same since. TripAdvisor used innovative technology changing how we travel, where we travel, and how we plan to do it. The website inspired additional apps that fit hand in glove with the new approach to seeing the world.

With the advent of GPS, maps got stuffed into glove boxes or tucked into drawers. The reviews of "experts" were replaced with the fresher perspective of ordinary travelers who offered their reviews and recommendations to their fellow adventurers. On TripAdvisor or similar websites like trivago, Booking.com, and Wander, we can book a particular hotel or flight, rent a car, get advice from a forum, and look at dozens of user pictures of the places we want to go.

Granted, you must be somewhat discerning when reading reviews. One person's trashy hotel is another person's budget gem. Complaints from a Texan about tiny hotel bathrooms will seem ridiculous to someone from Europe, where hotel bathrooms are often so small that you have to go outside just to change your mind.

Some people are never satisfied with anything and complain constantly about little things, while most folks are easier to please (most of the reviews on TripAdvisor are 4 or 5 "bubbles"). A place getting a lot of reviews doesn't necessarily mean it's better or more popular than a similar place with fewer reviews; it just means that more people wrote about one than the other. Bottom line is that despite all the advice you can now get on a particular destination, you still need to go there and experience it for yourself.

The TripAdvisor logo is an owl, the definitive symbol of wisdom, but you may have never noticed that the owl's eyes are two different colors: one red and one green. The two colors symbolize the way travelers choose where to go (green) and where not to go (red). Choosing wisely is an art form that can make all the difference in the quality of the journey.

The writer of Hebrews offers us a kind of TripAdvisor review of two different destinations that are stark contrasts in quality. The writer recognized that the Bible is really the story of a journey – a journey that begins in the first Eden and ends in the second. Thus, the metaphor of the journey and the hero's quest is constantly in play.

In Genesis, we encounter a man who leaves his home and travels to a country about which he knows nothing. He does it on faith alone – no advice from AAA or TripAdvisor! Abraham and his family tramped from Ur to Canaan, took a side trip to Egypt and came back again. His grandson, Jacob, also went to Egypt, not to see the great pyramids under construction, but to be reunited with his long-lost son, Joseph.

Centuries later, Jacob's descendants journeyed from Egypt into the wilderness and 40 years later landed in what they called the Promised Land. In this case, there were several so-called "expert" reviews – mostly negative. But Joshua and Caleb brought back positive reviews and the emerging nation pushed on to the Jordan River. Still centuries later, their descendants were unwillingly carted off to Babylon and about 70 years after, they were allowed to return.

And then there's Jesus. The gospel readings for this Sunday are from Luke, and his travel narrative (9:51 to 19:47), which chronicles Jesus' steady, "great" journey to Jerusalem and certain death.

Finally, the journey motif is highlighted in Hebrews 11 where the journey of the Christian and the church is compared to a sojourn in a strange land. Believers understand that the world is a temporary home, that their true citizenship is in

heaven and that it is heaven and the New Jerusalem toward which they travel.

The American folk and gospel song of the 19th century expresses it poignantly: I'm just a poor wayfaring stranger / A traveler through this world of woe / But there's no sickness, toil nor danger / In that fair land to which I go // I'm going there to see my father / I'm going there no more to roam / I am just going over Jordan / I am just going over home // I'm going home to see my mother / She said she'd meet me when I come / I'm only going over Jordan / I'm only going over home / I'm just a-going over home.

Before we get there, however, we must do a red/green comparison (in reference to the red and green eyes of TripAdvisor's owl). In verses 18-24, the writer contrasts the quality of Israel's physical and material journey to encounter God at Sinai during the Exodus with the quality of the spiritual journey made by Christians toward encountering God in "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (v. 22). One is a journey where the reviews reveal a sense of fear and foreboding, while the other is a destination that gets five stars every time.

In verses 1-2, after reciting a litany of the faithful in Israel's history, the writer urged his readers to repeatedly press on with the journey of faith; to "run with perseverance the race that is set before us" (v. 1) with Jesus – who endured his journey to the cross (v. 2) – as the ultimate example. In verse 12, the writer encourages his people to "lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed." In other words, the journey is going to be a rough one, but the destination is worth it.

It's important to keep that sense of perseverance in mind, but not see it as a burden. It's not a repeat of the old Exodus, says the writer, which was a journey that earned mostly bad reviews from the Israelites. The

journey to Mount Sinai via the desert was toward “something that can be touched” that was characterized by “blazing fire and darkness, and gloom and tempest” (v. 18). These aren’t generally the kind of descriptors you want to see in a TripAdvisor review!

The Israelites heard the voice of God at Sinai and it so terrified them that they begged that “not another word be spoken to them” (v. 19). God had ordered that no one could touch the mountain, nor could their animals go near it, under penalty of death (v. 20) and even Moses was shaken by the experience (v. 21). The review the writer offers here is of a journey where access to God was restricted. It’s like planning a trip to a dream destination only to find out when you get there that the place is closed – like the Griswolds discovering a padlocked Wally World after a fantastically awful journey to get there in National Lampoon’s Vacation

God gave the people the Law through Moses on Mount Sinai and while it gave them specific directions for how to live, it didn’t provide a way to overcome their sin for good. They were thus prone to wander, prone to complain and prone to fall short of the destination. Even when they reached the Promised Land, they were still searching for the ultimate destination. They were still blocked from full access to a holy God by their sin and by the curtain in the temple that separated them from God’s holiness.

But this trip was a necessary step along the road to full access to God. Just as you can’t really appreciate a good hotel unless you have a bad hotel with which to compare it, so the writer of Hebrews describes the journey of Israel and the giving of the Law as an experience in need of an upgrade – an upgrade that was freely offered through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ on the Mount of Calvary (a vitally important stop along the way).

To appreciate that upgrade, however, we need to know what sin is before we can overcome it; we need to know that God is serious about dealing with sin before we deal with it; we need to know that God is holy and just and set apart before we can really worship him. God had to put in some red lights to keep the people of God from choosing poorly until he could give them the ultimate green light by coming in person and saving them from sin once and for all.

The death and resurrection of Christ opened the way for not only God’s chosen people but all people to reach the destination of “Mount Zion ... the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (v. 22). Notice the contrast between the reviews. Going to Sinai? Well, according to the expert reviews, we can expect to find fear, darkness, gloom, and tempest. Okay, maybe we’ll try something else!

Oh, here’s something interesting: It’s called “the heavenly Jerusalem.” Looks like we might have some powerful experiences and see some incredible sights. Look at this! First, we’ll meet “innumerable angels in festal gathering.” Then we see “the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven.” Then to “God the judge of all” and the “spirits of the righteous made perfect.” Finally, we meet Jesus, “the mediator of a new covenant” whose blood “speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (vv. 22-24). This is the review of the ultimate destination for those who persevere the great Christian journey and have faith in Christ.

But it’s not enough to just read the review. To experience the destination, we must heed the advice and journey there ourselves. And we might want to pick up some tips about the culture. The writer of Hebrews urges us to hear the voice of God, just like those who heard it at Mount Sinai, and to heed what he says. Rejection of God’s word, on the other hand, has dire consequences (v. 25). God’s voice shook the earth back then, but God will soon shake both heaven and earth, removing the material barriers between God and the people of God and revealing a “kingdom that cannot be shaken” (vv. 26-28).

Living in such a kingdom will require a change of culture. When we’re traveling, we need to learn the local

customs, language, and ways of living. The same is true for God's kingdom, and the writer of Hebrews gives us some things to practice in anticipation of reaching this ultimate destination. First, in this new culture, it's bad form to interrupt God or not listen to God. "See that you do not refuse the one who is speaking; for if they did not es-cape when they refused the one who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven!" (Hebrews 12:25) This tip reminds us that when God spoke from an earthly mountain, the people didn't lis-ten. Look what happened to them. Let's learn from them and listen when God speaks.

Second, we should express our thanks. "Let us give thanks, by which we of-fer to God an acceptable worship with reverence and awe" (v. 28). Listening to God and offering our thanksgiving are two very important tips for getting the full experience on this Christian adventure we call the great journey.

No doubt, the Christian life is a tough journey, but the destination is more than worth it. Jesus provides us with a joyful approach to God and his kingdom if we heed his word and follow his advice. Whenever we worship together "with reverence and awe," when we encourage one another on to the perfection of holi-ness and when we give thanks to God always, we are practicing living in the cul-ture of God's heavenly kingdom. It's the one destination on our great journey where all the reviews will be spectacular!

Therefore, fellow travelers on this great journey, my best trip advise to you is to journey on - no matter the potholes, detours, obstacles, and offramps life throws your way - because the ultimate destination - the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem - is more than worth it ... and, in fact, is indescribably wonderful!

Oh, and in case you're wondering what rating the New Jerusalem has. All the experts agree: It doesn't have a 3, 4, or 5-star rating, but rather a countless stars rating. Now, with a rating like that, don't you think it's worth checking out yourself?