

THE JOURNEY TO
JERUSALEM

A Story of Jesus' Last Days



John Pritchard

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Welcome to the journey

I've always loved the words 'Let's go.' They've invariably promised adventure: everything has been packed in the car for the start of vacation; the passports are in the bag; the newspapers have been canceled—'Let's go.' Or, we've finished lacing up our boots at the foot of a Lake District mountain; we've checked our backpacks; we've got the map—'Let's go.' For me, those words are always full of anticipation and promise. They're the trigger for action.

And so it was for Jesus.

For nearly three years, Galilee had been the main focus of his ministry. It was home turf. He knew and loved the way dawn crept silently over the lake. His heart warmed when he spied a field carpeted with wild flowers. The reassuring contours of the hills over the water, the greens and browns of the generous earth, the paths scratched purposefully between the modest villages—it was all his own familiar landscape.

But it was edgy too, in more ways than one. On the edge of Israel, Galileans were an independent-minded people, unhappy both with their Roman occupiers and the foreigners' Jewish puppets. Galilee was often on the edge of revolt. The bucolic serenity of the fields and orchards that sloped down to the shimmering lake was deceptive. It was a restless territory, always on the move, with traders traveling through from Mesopotamia with their heavy loads of cloth and spices on their way to the sea. But with their produce they also brought dangerous ideas.

In this abundant but uneasy context, Jesus had been brought up with his brothers and sisters. Joseph had taught him all he knew about the building trade, carpentry, and stonework.

Welcome to the journey

He and his older brothers had most likely gone with their father every day to Sepphoris, the Roman town being built a few miles away, to ply their trade and earn the money that the growing family needed back in Nazareth. Their home village nestled in the valley a few miles from the lake, on the road to the great sea. It wasn't anything special, just a clutch of houses, each with its own vegetable patch and piece of land. There were probably no more than two hundred inhabitants.

But there Jesus learned not only lessons about wood and stone but also the lessons of God and destiny. He bided his time, but eventually he knew he had to make his move. It was like a compulsion within him, irresistible and awesome, something he could no longer deny was an overwhelming call on his life. He talked to his family, packed a small bag of food and water, and set off for the Jordan, where his cousin John was baptizing.

We know what happened then—it's in the Gospels. He taught and healed; he talked with people on the road and listened to their stories; he went out for meals and debated with his hosts; he told mesmerizing stories and chatted late into the night as the fire turned dark red. He gathered a group of young friends to travel with him. He made some enemies, but, to a much greater extent, he made friends and followers all over Galilee as crowds flocked to see the young, dynamic teacher whom everyone was talking about. And they weren't disappointed. He had a way of speaking that turned everything upside down in a way that made it seem the right way up. He cut to the heart of faith, bursting through tired ideas and pointless rituals. Sometimes he fretted over the slowness of people's response, but still he kept his patient program of travel, teaching, healing, and prayer.

Until the time came for him to turn toward Jerusalem and to say to his friends, 'Let's go.'

And that's where this book picks up the story. In Luke 9.51, there's a sentence that's easily overlooked: 'When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem.'

Welcome to the journey

The rest of the Gospel account in Luke has to be seen in the context of that simple statement. He turned deliberately and momentarily toward Jerusalem. The days of innocence, such as they were, were over. It was time to go to Jerusalem and put his message about the kingdom of God, now breaking into Israel's life, up against the religious politics of the high priests. It was a high-risk strategy, but until he took that step the crucial showdown was postponed.

I've taken nearly all the incidents on that journey and tried to enter into them with what Southern Baptists might call 'baptized imagination'. In other words, I've put my imagination to work within the framework of the story as Luke tells it. I've tried not to stray too far from what it is reasonable to imagine might have been the thoughts and feelings of the characters involved, but in the end it's informed imagination that I've been using. It's what preachers do every week to make the gospel come alive to their listeners; I've just developed the style a stage further.

I've chosen in nearly every section to tell the story through the eyes of the disciple John. I wanted someone close to Jesus, someone about whom we know a reasonable amount, and someone with whom I feel some empathy. John fits the bill, and on only two occasions do I leave him behind; he's young, he's still learning, and he has many years ahead in which to reflect on the significance of these three seminal years of his life.

I've written sections for each weekday of Lent, but I've used a poem for Saturday and left Sunday as a day of Sabbath reflection in church or elsewhere. But of course the sections can be used at any time of the year, not just in Lent.

At the end of each section I've used the technique of asking 'I wonder . . .'. This approach seems to me to open up many more possibilities of insight and learning than would more straightforward questions of fact or left-brain understanding; it allows us to ponder and ruminate; it opens up heart knowledge as well as head knowledge; it allows the imagination to come

Welcome to the journey

out to play and discover a deeper, integrated wisdom. But wondering requires a slower speed than that required for quick-fire answers to sharp questions. If you are reading *The Journey to Jerusalem* by yourself, please give yourself space to wonder, and if you are reading it as a group, then at the end of the book I offer some guidelines that might help.

I hope you're still with me. If so, welcome to the journey.

'Let's go.'

Ash Wednesday



Leaving home: Luke 9.51–62

I suppose we should have expected it. But even then I'm not sure we'd have realized how significant this moment was. We—that's me, John, and a group of friends—were getting ready to set off after breakfast, as we had done so often before, saying good-bye to our hosts and checking we hadn't forgotten anything, when Jesus called us together in the yard and said, quite calmly but looking each of us in the eye in that penetrating way of his: 'We've been here long enough. Let's head for Jerusalem.'

We nodded. We'd been to Jerusalem before of course so this wasn't too remarkable. But there was just something about the way he said it. James and I looked at each other. 'What's he really saying?' we wondered. Looking back we could see that he was setting off on the most important journey of his life, to see how the Temple intelligentsia, the top priests and the smart lawyers, would receive the message that had set so many hearts on fire in Galilee. Jerusalem had to be the final destination. Every prophet had to make his mark there.

But at the time, most of us just thought it was a five-day trek to Zion, the holy place that held our reverence and affection. It turned out to be a lot more than that; in a sense we never came back. We were young and, OK, we were naive as well. In retrospect, you can see it was bound to end in tears. (Or was it laughter? Just three days separated the two.)

So off we went that fine morning, with the sun sparkling on the lake and the olive trees gleaming silver-grey on the hillsides. We were an odd bunch in many way: two pairs of brothers,

Ash Wednesday: leaving home

Peter and Andrew, James and me; one or two of our friends, such as Philip and Bartholomew; and then there was Matthew, the former tax collector, whom we'd come to accept in spite of his past. We'd picked up Thomas along the way; he was a bit of a loner, who often wandered off by himself. And we found Judas to handle the day-to-day expenses. Simon, Jude, James ('the less' we called him, poor old James, to distinguish him from my brother, who was older). It was a great group. There were close and less close friendships in there, of course, but there was energy and fun and rivalry and endless chat. I loved it.

Jesus sent a couple of us ahead to let villagers know we were in the area and to ask if they could prepare some food for a small crowd coming their way. So it was more than a little disconcerting when our two came back, all hot and bothered, and told us we weren't welcome. Again, we should have known. We were going to head straight through Samaria, to avoid the long trek down the Jordan valley, and the Samaritans were always pretty hostile. How Jews and Samaritans could argue so passionately over which mountain to pray on always puzzled Jesus. He constantly drummed into us that religious things like the Sabbath were made for human beings, not the other way round.

James and I were furious at the rudeness of those Samaritans, who were rejecting the simple rules of hospitality. Remember, we were young; we had red hair and the temper that went with it. So we told Jesus he should summon fire from heaven to destroy this annoying little village. In our defense, Elijah had done something similar when King Ahaziah had proved particularly trying. But Jesus tore us off a strip, quite rightly. He reminded us that only a few weeks ago he'd sent us out to various villages to talk about the kingdom and (with wonderful trust) to heal people who were ill, and he'd specifically said that if a village didn't welcome us we should shake the dust of the place off our feet and go on to the next village.

James and I seemed to have forgotten that instruction. Somewhat ashamed, we dropped to the back of the group.

Days and times get a bit hazy. But on the early part of the journey it seemed as if a number of young people kept coming up and wanting to join us. It made those of us whom Jesus had already invited to join him feel special, because Jesus wasn't pulling any punches. One young guy was longing to join us, but Jesus said pretty bluntly that foxes and birds have got homes to go to but the 'Son of Man' (that strange title he kept giving himself) had nowhere to put his head down at night. He was right; we never really knew who would give us a meal and a bed for the night, which isn't surprising given what a crowd we were.

Another youngster had sadly just lost his father and not unreasonably wanted to bury him first. After all, that has top priority among our people. But Jesus was pretty brutal, if he wouldn't mind me saying so. 'Let the dead bury their own dead,' is what he said. It was the same with someone who just wanted to say good-bye to his family. Jesus said that if you look back when you're ploughing, the furrow will go all over the place. He was right, of course, but he gave these would-be followers quite a hard time.

But Jesus knew what was waiting for us, happy innocents that we were. We were heading for a baptism of fire, a furnace, where every ounce of courage would be required of us. If we were to compromise at the start, we would cave in before the finish. He wasn't playing games. He was looking for total surrender to the cause of the kingdom. Why he expected this particular group of friends to deliver that level of commitment I just don't know. And we let him down so often and so spectacularly he must have despaired at times.

But it was still early days and we were still having the time of our lives roaming the paths of Galilee with this most amazing teacher and friend.

Jesus had only just turned his face toward Jerusalem.

Ash Wednesday: leaving home

I wonder what you might have felt if you had been setting off with Jesus that morning, heading for Jerusalem?

I wonder how you feel about those who reject the Christian faith?

I wonder how you feel about Jesus' strong words to those who wanted to delay a while to take care of their family duties?

I wonder what it is that holds us back from making the kind of commitment we'd like to make? What could we do to make that possible?

Thursday

The mission: Luke 10.1–24

It was a risk, and he knew it. In spite of doing his best to build up their confidence and give them some basic ground rules, sending out a crowd of seventy or so friends and followers, some of whom he'd hardly even gotten to know, was putting them—and him—on the line. They were to go on ahead to the places he would visit as he journeyed toward Jerusalem. They were the advance party. Nevertheless, he worried as he saw them go, some clearly feeling vulnerable and unsure, others jaunty and, if anything, overconfident. He watched them straighten their tunics, pick up their rough wooden sticks, and disappear down the various tracks away from the village.

He suddenly wanted to run after them and say, 'No, no, come back, let's talk some more. Maybe we'll be ready next week or next month or sometime . . .'. How could they possibly manage? Would they have the words? When someone said 'What on earth are you on about?' would they know what to say? Would all his teaching about the kingdom of God, the new world breaking in on them with its radical demands of love and justice, would that teaching have entered their hearts sufficiently to express itself clearly through what they said? When they sat by the bed of a sick child whose mother pleaded with her eyes for them to make well, would they have the faith to pray and rely on his loving Father? Or would their faith shrivel up and leave them mumbling platitudes? What had he done, sending them out like this?

But he knew that you only learn to swim when you get in the water. He had to trust. He had to believe that what he spoke about in terms of God working through our words and our touch

and our prayers was not just true for himself but for all who tried to live in God's way with God's help. He had to let go.

The last pair disappeared round the corner of the path, and Jesus was alone. He sat in the shade and thought of what he'd told them. He'd said they'd be scared, sent out like lambs into a pack of wolves. Was that image a bit too vivid? He'd said they must be completely dependent on the mercy of God and the kindness of strangers. Shouldn't he have let them take a day's food, just in case? He'd said they should receive people's hospitality, cure the sick, and tell people that the kingdom of God was within touching distance. Shouldn't he at least have given them a script?

It's true his message had gotten a bit darker near the end. Those villages of Chorazin and Bethsaida had gotten under his skin. Even his own home town of Capernaum had been disappointing. It wasn't as if they hadn't seen what powerful things God can do when you let him. They had witnessed such things for themselves, and yet they were more resistant to the rule of God in their lives and practices than Tyre and Sidon, and that was saying something. But to be realistic, this was the last time he would be passing this way, and if the villages failed to respond to God's message of peace, then sadly there would be a reckoning. The stakes were high, and yet Jesus had sent out these young innocents to do the job. It was obvious why he was restless.

Time passed . . .

But when they returned it was like a group of schoolchildren coming back from their first week away from home. They were thrilled, laughing, joking, talking over each other, desperate to share what they'd seen and done. And Jesus, like a mother welcoming her brood home, was bubbling over too. He told them that what they'd done, he too had seen mysteriously in prayer; he'd seen Satan, the accuser, streaking down to earth, defeated by the power of God. And this, he thought to himself, is what it was all about, overcoming the terrible power of evil in the world, a huge undertaking he'd started in the desert when

Thursday: the mission

facing his own demons, and which he knew in his soul was a task he'd have to complete in Jerusalem. That's why he was going there.

Suddenly Jesus realized there was a danger attached to this joyful reunion. His friends could run off with the idea that they were the all-conquering heroes to whom the evil spirits submitted, and that wasn't the point at all. 'Rather rejoice,' he said firmly, 'that your names are written in the Book of Life.' And that took Jesus into a reverie of prayer. They watched his face transfigured with a joy that struck them dumb. Whatever was going on was between him and his heavenly Father, but those closest to him heard his delight that God had given these wonderful, young, innocent friends of his such revelation and such amazing experiences.

He was exhausted; they all were. But he was good at celebrating. It would be a great evening.

*I wonder how you might have felt if you'd been among
those seventy brave followers sent out by Jesus?*

*I wonder if you've ever done anything for God that really
tested your trust in him?*

*I wonder if there's anything lurking in your mind that God
might be nudging you toward trying—something that
requires more trust than you think you've got?*

*I wonder what this story might have to say to our churches
at this particular time?*

Friday



Doing and being: Luke 10.25–42

It was strange being around Jesus. I could never work out how he came up with such brilliant stories. He did it again as we headed south. We were having a rest near a synagogue, sitting around the well, and up popped a lawyer who had obviously heard some of what Jesus had been saying to us. To this day I don't know if he was asking a genuine question or trying to trick Jesus, but he asked about eternal life and what he needed to do to get that. Jesus threw the question back neatly and asked the lawyer what he thought the answer was, to which this solid citizen of the law gave the classic response we all learned at school, about loving God and loving our neighbor.

But then the lawyer went a step further, and it's that that makes me wonder if he wasn't trying to trap Jesus. He smiled and asked innocently 'And who is my neighbor?' He probably knew that Jesus was pretty generous on this one—he didn't think in terms of some people being neighbors and others not, like the lawyer would. He always told us God's grace was much, much wider than we thought.

And then Jesus told this great story about a Samaritan (can you imagine?) doing an amazing rescue of a Jew who got beaten up on the very road we were heading for, the one from Jericho up to Jerusalem—only he was heading the other way. Understandably, both a priest and a Levite left the Jew alone, partly because it could have been a trap on this dangerous road and partly because a dead body was too unclean for these Temple officials to touch. Fair enough, but along came one of those obnoxious Samaritans, and he did everything he could

and more—bandaged him up, put him on his donkey, took him to an inn, stayed overnight to look after him, made an open-ended promise to the innkeeper when he left to pay for the man’s lodging and other expenses. Way over the top.

Then came the killer question from Jesus: ‘So who turned out to be a neighbor to the injured Jew?’ Not ‘Who should we choose to care for as good Jews?’, but ‘Who proved to be the caring person in an emergency?’ Answer: one of the hated Samaritans! It was too much for our lawyer. It shattered his categories of who is and who isn’t included among God’s chosen people. He walked off quietly. James and I wanted to cheer, but Jesus gave us a look.

I can’t quite remember when it was, but there was another time when Jesus seemed to be saying something opposite to this ‘go and get on with it’ message that he gave to the lawyer. This was when he seemed to be saying ‘stay and listen to me’ to his good friends Martha and Mary. They were friends to all of us, actually, but Jesus would sometimes go and spend a few days relaxing with them and their brother, Lazarus. They had something special together.

You’ll have heard the story I imagine, Martha complaining that Mary was just sitting listening to Jesus when she, Martha, had all of us to prepare a meal for, and us strapping young men lolling around the courtyard and being generally useless. When Jesus said Mary had chosen the better thing to do, you can see why Martha might have been a bit put out.

But, you know, I think most of us misunderstood what was going on that afternoon. After all, Mary had done something rather shocking. She’d invaded the men’s space in the house, the public room where only men met and talked, leaving the kitchen and other private rooms to women. So Mary was behaving as if she were a man—she’d crossed a big, invisible boundary in the house and in the way our society runs. More than that, she was sitting at Jesus’ feet as disciples do when they’re learning how to be rabbis. She was taking her place as

Friday: doing and being

a would-be teacher and therefore stepping over yet another really important line.

It was all rather scandalous, but Jesus accepted her right to be there. Afterward, Peter and I tried to make sense of it and thought it was probably a bit like Jesus saying the love of God can't be channeled in straight lines; it's like a river that breaks its banks and floods the whole countryside. I think that interpretation was lost on Martha, however. There was a frosty silence from the kitchen, along with a lot of banging of pots and bottles.

It seems to me there's a time to get up and do (like the Samaritan and Martha) and there's a time to sit and listen (like Mary). The secret is in working out which applies when. And if we were to ask Jesus 'Which one is better?' he would probably just say, 'Yes'.

I wonder which of all the characters in the parable of the Good Samaritan you feel you're most like?

I wonder if society is getting more or less like the Good Samaritan in its response to need?

I wonder what Jesus might have said to Mary and Martha the next day, when tempers had cooled a little?

I wonder how much we 'get up and go' and how much we 'sit and listen'? Are we good at discerning which to do when?

Saturday poem



‘The coming’ by R. S. Thomas

And God held in his hand
A small globe. Look, he said.
The son looked. Far off,
As through water, he saw
A scorched land of fierce
Color. The light burned
There; crusted buildings
Cast their shadows; a bright
Serpent, a river
Uncoiled itself, radiant
With slime.

On a bare
Hill a bare tree saddened
The sky. Many people
Held out their thin arms
To it, as though waiting
For a vanished April
To return to its crossed
Boughs. The son watched
Them. Let me go there, he said.

Saturday poem: 'the coming'

I wonder which lines or images are the most evocative for you?

I wonder why the poet chose the phrases 'scorched land', 'crusted buildings', 'serpent', 'thin arms'?

I wonder if the son knew the bare tree was for him?