

ROAD RULES –

It's the season for vacations and road trips.

Eugene Peterson wrote a book with a powerful title that speaks to the road we're on spiritually: Long Obedience in the Same Direction.

In it, he said: *"Everything in the gospel is livable and that my task was to get it lived."* He said this was *"going to take some time, so I settled in for the long haul."*

We're called to a long haul, a journey. There may be no change in geography but there's a journey of the heart. A journey of transformation as we look to *"get it lived."*

God provides us with the path... and his Word provides us with principles for the path...

Isaiah 48:17

This is what the LORD says--your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel: "I am the LORD your God, who teaches you what is good for you and leads you along the paths you should follow."

Jeremiah 6:16 - *Stand at the crossroads and look; ask for the ancient paths, ask where the good way is, and walk in it, and you will find rest for your souls*

This idea of paths and roadways is important imagery to hold onto.

It's not just about position (justification), but a process (sanctification).

And when you talk about following Christ, it's not just about the destination, but the journey.

And as my dad worked a blue collar jobs as a carpenter, vacations weren't flights or cruises to exotic locations- they were good old fashioned road trips in our blue dodge caravan to visit extended family. Most frequent? The 16 hour drive to my grandparents outside of Chicago.

I did that drive about a decade ago as a young adult on my way to my grandmothers funeral. And there were times in Ohio I'd been driving an hour surrounded by nothing but blank flat horizons. No hills. No buildings. Just space and nothingness. I remember thinking- *we are in the middle of nowhere. I can't wait to get to Chicago!*

So we got there. My grandmother attended a Lutheran church not unlike the one here, Faith.

And that pastor said she'd often point to the sky and reference Nahum 1 where it says,

"The clouds are the dust of his feet."

On that drive home, passing through the same proverbial "middle of nowhere"- I'd look up at the clouds and think – God's here.

ROAD RULE #3 - Value the Middle of Nowhere

People can typically be divided into two groups.

Those that are in it to reach the goal and arrive at the destination, and those that would rather enjoy the journey.

We see it in personalities as some people are really into their goals and plans, while others live from day to day, content to enjoy the ride, come what may.

To make life about one or the other – a focus on the destination vs. finding joy in the journey- would be a false choice, a dumb dichotomy. Both attitudes are good. In fact, once you confidently determine your destination, you can find a new purpose and joy in the journey – even when you’re seemingly in the middle of nowhere.

Look at Jesus. Jesus knew his purpose, and it defined everything he did. He knew that his destination on this earth was Jerusalem, and ultimately- death on a cross.

In **Luke 9:51** says that as that time drew near, Jesus “*resolutely set out for [his destination] Jerusalem*”

Yet it takes a long time and many chapters for him to get there, chapters that include interactions like this one in **Luke 17:11**:

*“Now **on his way** to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They stood at a distance and called out in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”*”

Jesus again and again in the Gospels finds purpose between destinations. Between point A and point B. Over a dozen times in the Gospels we’re told Jesus was, quote, “**on his way**” to this place or that place when an interaction or healing significant enough to go down eternally in scripture took place.

Jesus values his destination. But it is because Jesus believed so strongly in his life’s destination and goal that he found purpose even in seeming interruptions to the journey.

We see that perspective in **Acts 8** as the apostles spread the gospel, specifically in the life of Phillip, in verses 26-39

One should preface this with what’s happening in the beginning of chapter 8 – REVIVAL! The gospel was reaching Samaria. Samaritans were being converted. The Holy Spirit was falling on people in droves. People were being healed. Acts 8 says that due to all this “there was great joy in that city.” This was a growing effective ministry that churches dream of.

Acts 8:26-39

As for Phillip, an angel of the Lord said to him, “Go south down the desert road that runs from Jerusalem to Gaza...”

An angel appears to Phillip. He tells him to go. And he goes. There’s no reason why that’s provided. And Phillip asks no questions.

Now?

He was in the middle of leading a revival of thousands!

You want me to up and hit some desert road randomly right now?

Where?

“Desert road” – picture it. We’re talking the middle of nowhere.

Other translations use words like desolate and deserted. Commentators and translators take this to mean that it may very well not have been in use anymore.

Phillip could have asked, *excuse me, where do you want me to go??*

Yet just as we see again and again in the accounts of Jesus' ministry, it's as Phillip was "*on his way,*" seemingly in the middle of nowhere, that God divinely and powerfully uses him to bring salvation to the Ethiopian eunuch.

Maybe you feel like this is a season of in between. Waiting on a shift. Working towards a goal. Between goals, between seasons, or between point A and point B.

We have to shift our perspective of "nowhere."
God is eternally present in the HERE and NOW.
Flip the order of "here" and "now."
Put a space in the middle of "nowhere" and what do you get?
NOW and HERE.

We need to leave a space in the middle of nowhere for God to move!
God isn't "out there somewhere." He's with us in the middle of nowhere. NOW and HERE.
In the middle of nowhere – God is present.
Meaning no matter where we are along the journey, even if it seems like the middle of nowhere, God is always up to something.
God can move NOW and HERE.

Thinking practically, God can be encountered at no other time and no other place than the present moment. Being present in the NOW and HERE is perhaps the premier skill of the spiritual life.

John Frankenheimer, the Hollywood director who directed over 50 successful movies from "The Manchurian Candidate" in the 60s up to movies like "Ronin" in the 90s, was once asked if he got nervous before directing these films with budgets that would drift toward 100 million...
"The most important thing for me as a human being and a movie director is to give undivided presence to the present."

In life there is restlessness to move on to the action.
Good art makes us confront and find meaning in the in-between, the NOW and HERE.

We ask God the Father "are we there yet?"
God asks us to see him in the NOW and HERE, and in doing so redeem the middle of nowhere.

Ok... how?

First...
REDEEM BOREDOM

Think about traveling 100 years ago- let alone thousands of years ago like Phillip and this eunuch- was defined by silence and reflection.

Today? I've got podcasts, music, and distraction so I can avoid silence. I don't have to embrace solitude, as if it's a bad thing.

I very rarely, as Jerry Frankenheimer would say- ***“Give undivided presence to the present.”***

“Boredom” – the word is brand new. The word didn’t exist in the English language until the 1850s, when the rich and aristocratic with the means and time for leisure and entertainment felt the need to be entertained constantly, to the point of feeling entitled to entertainment. Where entertaining distraction was absent, boredom came into existence.

One of the biggest enemies we face in this life isn’t out to kill us, it’s out to distract us. It’s not a frontal spiritual attack. It’s death by **distraction** from every direction. If we drown in distraction, it will drown out the voice of God.

“The Holy Spirit said to Phillip, ‘Go over there and walk beside the carriage.’”
How many of us want to hear the Holy Spirit with this much clarity? *Yes, please!!*
Yet how many of us are simultaneously swimming in distraction?

Henri Nouwen:

“While being so busy running my own life, I become oblivious to the gentle movements of the Spirit of God within me, pointing me in directions quite different than my own... God does not shout, scream, or push. The Spirit of God is soft and gentle like a small voice or a light breeze.”

Second...

RECLAIM OUR FOCUS

Phillip clearly imitated Jesus... it’s safe to assume he also imitated Jesus’ dedication to retreat. Jesus would retreat to silence. Lonely places. Quiet places.

“Busyness is the enemy of clarity.”

How quickly I throw on music, a podcast, and noise of any kind on a drive from point A to point B, as if to escape silence. When I’m “on my way” I rarely let myself focus on the present. My reasoning – “I’m multitasking.” We celebrate that.

The virtues of our age are multi-tasking and hyper-connectivity, not solitude and meditation. But as we embrace hyper-activity more and more, we forfeit clarity for cloudiness.

Jesus models the importance of the desert detour, the middle of nowhere.

Jesus went into the wilderness after his baptism and before starting his ministry.

I’ve always assumed he went there because it was the octagon where he would face off with the Devil. But he was there for 40 days before that interaction ever happened.

But what if the Devil would have come anyways, anywhere in time. But the Spirit led him into the wilderness because the fruit of solitude – a renewed focus- was the strength he would need?

What if what I see as far from the action was more importantly to Him far from distraction?

If he can’t derail us with distraction, he’ll sow seeds of dissatisfaction.

What did the enemy tempt him with? Glam and glitz. Notoriety and fame.

Dissatisfaction.

Every day is not a ten. Not every day comes with a highlight reel or a trophy photo. That's OK.

If something wasn't the greatest ever or seemed void of highlights that it was void of value. We undermine our ability to find joy in the ordinary.

We have to **RECAPTURE CONTENTMENT**. This ability to enjoy the ordinary.

Sometimes we are the eunuch in Acts 8. Feeling isolated. Looking for answers. Confused.

God sent this revival starter and pastor of many to sow into the one. Just as God redeems our idea of the middle of nowhere by meeting us there, he redeems our idea of nobodies. Which- as a result- means there's no such thing as nobodies.

God loves crowds and wants to see all saved. We see that by the revival in Samaria. But He also knows each person by name, knows the hairs on your head, and loves you. We see this with the Ethiopian eunuch.

I love that this one on one episode is given just as much space by the Holy Spirit in scripture as the record of the revival with thousands of people in Samaria.

If you live with that perspective, his love for you, you'll recover your contentment in every season.

You'll also **RECOVER YOUR COMPASSION**.

Phillip learned what we need to learn –

That sometimes what feels like God sending YOU onto a path of obscurity, is really a path of opportunity to REACH some one you wouldn't otherwise reach.

Desert detours don't just lead us to God, sometimes they lead us to others.

In our deluge of personal tasks and things to do we become less and less aware of those around us. Add to that daily routine the constant buzz of notifications and messages, and we are flooded.

In the car. In line. At a game. At the store.

During the seemingly ordinary. Mundane. Day to day. On our way.

We're often surrounded by small opportunities that God can use in big ways.

Sometimes God uses the mundane to prove that He can trust you with the meaningful.

If you feel like you're in the middle of nowhere right now... between seasons... point A and point B... know that you're in good company.

Because God is a God of desert communion.

It was when Jacob was "on his way" -fleeing through the desert, running from Essau, desperate to get to point B- that God met him and wrestled with him right where he was.

It was when Moses had fled Egypt and was spending decades as a shepherd off the deserts of Sinai that God came to him in the burning bush.

It was John the Baptist, who like Phillip, was led by the Spirit into the desert wilderness, and there- after decades- Jesus came to meet him.

As we feel the itch to ask God “are we there yet?”

May we remember that space in the middle of nowhere may be exactly where God wants to move- in the middle of NOW and HERE.

This redeems the mundane Monday.

It transforms our Tuesdays.

It rewires your Wednesday.

It changes your life!

Like Jesus, may we “resolutely set out for our destination,” yet recognizing that along the way, God is present in the NOW and HERE.

May we master the spiritual discipline of being present.

May we have a theology that embraces nowhere, the inbetween, aware of opportunities while we are “on our way.”

“Giving undivided presence to the present.”

Recognize that being present in the moment is where we meet God, where He uses us spiritually regardless of geography.

...even if it's the middle of nowhere.