

The Journey of Faith

Title: Part 1 – Something Happened

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Transition: Paul Prays & Seats People.

While everyone here in the house is saying “Hi,” as always, we say “Hi” to you on our app or social channels. Hope you had a great Easter and I’m excited you are joining us today. Let us know how we can pray for you or serve you. AND if this message blesses you, consider sharing it with a friend.

Today we are beginning a brand-new collection of messages called “The Journey of Faith” that I am so excited about, but before we go any further can we just thank God for what He did in this place on Easter! We began our church 18 years ago this weekend with the hope and prayer that we would be a safe place for people to experience God, where anyone could their next steps, and it was so powerful to see God move in people’s lives! Come on, let’s praise Him one more time!

How many of you have heard this before, “Every journey begins somewhere...” Raise your hands if you have heard that before? Like if you are planning a big fishing or camping trip maybe it begins at Bass Pro Shops. That’s always a good place to start! Maybe if you are trying to get in shape it begins at the gym you join. Every love story begins somewhere, right? The journey of your career began somewhere. Maybe your journey with cancer began at Moffit. You get the idea. The journey of this church began in my living room, BUT every journey begins somewhere.

AND sometimes we forget that:

Our faith journey began somewhere.

Your faith, whatever it is or whatever that looks like for you today, began somewhere!

For some of us, our journey began in childhood through a conversation with a parent, a priest, or a pastor. Your journey had something to do with something you heard in church, or at a camp, or some program. But somewhere back there in childhood, you were handed some building blocks, and your faith began.

For others, nobody handed it to you. Over time you kind of cobbled it together based on your own experience, things you have read, things you have heard. But somewhere back there, you don’t really know when, but your journey began and started putting together your faith. Maybe you haven’t done much with it sense, but there was place where your faith journey began.

For many of us, our journey included things like this:

God is good.

Somebody told you that as a kid. Maybe you even had a little prayer before a meal "God is great. God is Good. Let us thank him for our food." I was always confused, why are the other vegetables not thanking Him for the food too? Some of you will get that on the ride home, and you still won’t laugh.

Somewhere along the way, you were told:

God punishes evil and rewards good.

You better be a good little boy, be a good little girl, ‘cause God rewards the good people and God punishes you when you are bad. In fact, maybe the tradition you grew up in, they tried to use that to scare the hell out of you! But there was some kind of formula that God rewards good people.

And regardless of your background part of the faith framework that we were handed or cobbled together is:

God answers prayer.

Right? So, you said your little prayers.

BUT then something happens, we get older, life happens and the childlike faith that we were handed takes a hit. And for some of you, maybe for many of you, I think for all of us to some extent, our childhood faith does not do well under the pressures of adult life. Those stories that meant so much then begin to fall apart. And the foundation that we thought was so firm, just doesn't support the challenges of adulthood.

God is good, but there's a lot of bad things in the world that God doesn't seem to do anything about. "God, I was taught that You were good and I wanna believe that you're good, but it's hard to reconcile a bad world with a good God."

"In fact, God, there's a lot of good in my life that I thought You were gonna reward, but my marriage didn't turn out the way I thought it would. AND I thought You answered prayer, but you didn't answer my prayer. You didn't answer my mom's prayer about my brother. My mother is one of the best people I know, and she prayed, and prayed, and prayed but my brother still ruined his life with that addiction. So, I'm not sure what to do with that, God?"

One author put it like this:

Many of us have been left stranded with an incoherent concept of God. We learned about God at about the same time as we were told about Santa Claus. But while our understanding of the Santa Claus phenomenon evolved and matured, our theology remained somewhat infantile. Not surprisingly, when we attained intellectual maturity, many of us rejected the God we had inherited and denied that he existed.

— Karen Armstrong

In other words, there was a gap between what we experienced and what we were told to believe. And we didn't mean to leave faith behind, we never really made a decision not to believe anymore, we never really made a decision not to behave anymore. It just seemed less and less relevant.

So, because this has impacted all of us to some extent, what many of us need is a new, adult beginning for our faith journey. That's why our church began 18 years ago. To give people a restart button. So, what we're gonna do in this collection of messages that will take us all the way to summer is we're going to hit the restart button. We're gonna hit the restart button on faith and ask the question:

What if we didn't know anything, where would we begin?

What if we'd never heard any of those stories, what if we'd never read the Bible, where would we begin? Where would we begin our adult faith journey, all over?

AND to do this we are going to have to approach this a little bit differently than perhaps you approached it as a kid. Because faith as a child is very different than faith as an adult. Right? For example, if your faith journey began early in your childhood, like it was for me, then you were taught the Bible more than likely. Which is not a problem, it is important, but sometimes the way we teach the Bible can be a problem. What I

mean is I was taught the Bible is the Word of God. I was taught the Bible is inerrant, meaning no mistakes, that the whole thing from Genesis to the maps was inspired by God. Adam, Eve, Noah, Jesus coming back... yep, yep, yep, yep if it's in there then I believe it because the Bible told me so.

Now, I still believe all those things, I want to be clear on that. But the problem comes when we teach this to kids as a book. The Bible is not a book. It's not one holistic story written by one guy. But when we present it that way, and never teach what it really is or where it came from, the Bible becomes a house of cards. Right? All someone had to do was come along and pull away a couple of the pieces in college, and suddenly the whole thing comes tumbling down, *ALONG* with your faith! You went into an environment that didn't respect the Bible and suddenly, that beginning that seemed so relevant way back then, suddenly it all went away.

Beginning your faith journey as a child is very different than as an adult. Meaning, "The Bible Says," in quotes:

"The Bible Says" is not an adequate returning point for many adults.

Does that make sense? So, we are not going to begin or restart a faith journey with, "The Bible Says." "The Bible Says" is not an adequate place to begin faith. But here is the good news and here is the reassuring news and here's where we're gonna go for a few minutes today as we begin...

"The Bible Says" was never intended to be the beginning of Christian faith. (anyway)

See, for those of you who are hoping, that's who I'm really talking to, for those of you who are hoping to hear something, anything, that reignites faith, that allows you to believe again, even with all the things you have experienced so far in life. If that's you, then I think today and for the next few weeks you are going to be pleasantly surprised.

Because, the New Testament, where we get most of what we know about Christianity, Jesus, the apostle Paul, the church, all that, the New Testament wasn't put together for about 300 years after the events of Jesus' life. In other words, for the first 300 years of Christianity nobody could say, "Well, the New Testament says," because there was no New Testament as we know it today. There were a lot of activities and rituals. There were creeds and documents, there were letters that Paul wrote. There were the Gospels that were written and passed around all shortly after Jesus, but for the first 300 years of Christianity there was no New Testament as we know it today.

Yet, thousands and thousands of people became Jesus' followers during that time. Churches were started all over the place and none of them could say, "Now, open your Bible to..." But these early Christians had extraordinary faith! Faith that would just dwarf ours when we think about what they were willing to do and go through in order to follow Jesus. Many losing their lives for what they believed. And yet for those first 300 years, people's faith journey had nothing to do with the "Bible."

So, the question is, how did their faith journey begin then? How did they come to faith in a Jesus? How did they become Christians if there was no official "Bible."

Today, I want to answer that question because here's what I believe for some of you, their beginning point will need to be our beginning point. And it's not that your mom and dad were wrong. It's not that your pastor or priest was wrong. They presented something to you the way they would have to present it to a child. It's just that nobody came along after them to help you restart your faith journey as an adult.

SO, here's what we're gonna do. We're going to listen in on a conversation between the Apostle Paul and a group of people that knew nothing about Jesus. This was about 20 years after Jesus was crucified. And so that you don't argue that I'm using circular reasoning, we're gonna read a portion of Scripture from this little document that we call the Book of Acts. But we're not reading the Bible. We're actually reading a journal. There was a man named Luke, who was a doctor, who traveled with the Apostle Paul and took notes on everything that happened as Paul moved around the Mediterranean rim starting the first churches. This was before the New Testament.

AND this was a man, the Apostle Paul, who knew what he knew about Jesus not because of what he read, but because of who he knew. He knew Peter and he knew John and he knew James the brother of Jesus. What he knew about Jesus came from the people he knew before any of it was written down. In Fact, the writings of the Apostle Paul actually predate the writing of the Gospels. Nobody disputes that. Everybody believes there was a historical figure named Paul who wrote letters or epistles. My point, he did not learn what he learned about Jesus from the Bible.

So, one afternoon Paul finds himself in Athens, Greece and he's wandering around and he sees something very interesting. So, he begins a conversation, and that conversation is recorded for us in this travel journal that eventually became part of the New Testament hundreds of years later.

Listen to how someone who lived before the Bible presented the message of Christianity to a group of people who had never heard any of it before. Because in this conversation we get to what I believe is the adult beginning point or restarting place of faith. So, here we go, Acts 17:

¹⁶ While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was greatly distressed to see that the city was full of idols. [Now this is the same Athens, Greece that you can visit today. He looks around and there are idols everywhere] **¹⁷ So he reasoned in the synagogue with both Jews and God-fearing Greeks, as well as in the marketplace day by day with those who happened to be there.**

So, Paul is walking around, he's just engaging people in conversations about religion, Athens is full of philosophers, so this wasn't hard to do. He starts in the synagogue and then ventures out into the marketplace just to engage people in conversations about religion and eventually Jesus. Verse 18

¹⁸ A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to debate with him. Some of them asked, "What is this babbler trying to say?" Others remarked, "He seems to be advocating foreign gods." They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

So, he finds a group of people that were willing to engage with him about religion and about philosophy. Epicureans believed, "Hey, we can't figure it out. Who cares, just have a nice day and an extra glass of wine." But he met a group of them and began to debate with them. And as he starts talking about Jesus they think he is nuts, they think he is talking about foreign gods. They'd never heard any of this before. This was brand new.

Now again, everything Paul knew about Jesus came from people who knew Jesus. Everything Paul believed about the resurrection came from people who saw a risen Jesus. Nobody had read anything. There was nothing to read at this point in history anyway. So, verse 19 now:

¹⁹ Then they took him and brought him to a meeting of the {Arie-op-o-gus} Areopagus, where they said to him, "May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting?"

Now here's the interesting thing. You can actually visit this place. Here it is:

[The Areopagus]

Supposedly in Greek mythology, the Areopagus is where Ares was put on trial by the gods for murdering Poseidon's son. So, this is a really important place, AND it is a historical place. And the reason they took Paul there is because this revered place in the middle of Athens was considered a place of judgment. This is where they had civil trials, this is where they made decisions. They actually took the Apostle Paul to this very spot to decide whether or not they were gonna allow him to spread this brand-new idea that no one in Athens had heard about before. The story continues:

²⁰ You are bringing some strange ideas to our ears, and we would like to know what they mean.”

“So, please, for our benefit and for the benefit of the city council and the elders of the city, would you start from the beginning?” Now how cool is this? Here's someone, about 20 years after Jesus, explaining to people who knew nothing, the beginning of faith. Verse 22:

²² Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “People of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. ²³ For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD.

Now this is interesting. So, they've got altars all over the city to all these different gods, trying to keep them all straight, and just in case they missed one... they even had an altar to “The Unknown God.” This was the just in case altar, just in case they missed one, we don't know who they are, but if that God shows up we can say, “Oh, we were expecting you. We just didn't know what name to put on here.”

Today, we think that's silly, but this is why some people only go to church on Christmas and Easter, it's the same just in case mentality. Some of you have a piece of jewelry and if something bad happens, you feel like you have to touch it, just in case. People today still have the, “I don't know how it works, but just in case” mentality.

So, Paul says, “[Look, you're very religious, so would you like to know what's out there. You know there's something out there bigger than you. You just don't know what it is.” So, Paul says, and this is a strong English word, it didn't come across the way it does today, but he says, rest of verse 23:

So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

He didn't mean you're dumb “ignorant” because they're philosophers. These were smart people. What he's saying is, “You're guessing. You're guessing, aren't you?” “Yeah, we're guessing. If we were certain we wouldn't have that Unknown Altar sitting around.” Right? Paul continues:

²⁴ “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.

The one God, not the Pantheon of Greek Gods. The God who made the world and everything in it. He is bigger than all the rest of your Gods put together. In fact, you can't build a temple for Him. He is so big he couldn't fit. He is the Lord of Heaven and Earth. Meaning, you can discover a lot about God in His creation,

but you won't find God in creation. He's too big, He won't fit. And He certainly couldn't fit on your little itty-bitty altar. And... Verse 25:

²⁵ And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything. Rather, he himself gives everyone life and breath and everything else.

He's going, "You're always trying to bribe your gods as if your gods need something. You're always trying to get your gods to do something for you. You're always trying please & honor your gods so they aren't upset." He goes, "Let me tell you about the Unknown God. He doesn't need any of that. This isn't a God that needs anything from you. This is a God that sustains the universe. This is the God that sustains your very life." Then he says:

²⁶ From one man he made all the nations, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he marked out their appointed times in history and the boundaries of their lands.

He is the sovereign God that is tied into the actual history of every nation and every people group. He's not just the God of your real-estate. He's not just the God of a nation. He's not just an Egyptian God, or a Persian God, or a Judean God. He's the God of all creation. And God, look what he says:

²⁷ God did this so that they would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from any one of us.

Paul looks around the city of Athens and he says "Look at all these idols. You're God seekers. You wanna know, you wanna know with certainty. God knew that. He knew you would ask questions, and he knew you would seek."

And then Paul does something so cool. He quotes, not from the Bible, because there's not one. He quotes from their own philosophers. He digs into their own culture to say, "Hey, you haven't missed it completely. Even some of your poets kind of bumped into the truth about this big unknown, but yet personal-not-so-far-off God." He says:

²⁸ 'For in him we live and move and have our being.' As some of your own poets have said, 'We are his offspring.' [And they're like "Yeah, so we're not that far?" He says, there is just more...] ²⁹
"Therefore since we are God's offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone—an image made by human design and skill. ³⁰ In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent.

He's like "Come on. You can't make an image that reflects this big, grand, glorious God." In the past though, God understood that people knew there was something more, more than could be seen, and so they built images, and temples, and they burned incense, and made sacrifices. In the past God just kind of said, "OK, I get it, I understand." But now, meaning like since Jesus came, now He commands people everywhere to repent.

Now when we hear repent, we think of repent from sin, that's not what he's talking about. There's not been any mention in this sermon about sin, this isn't about sin, this means **change your mind**. Change your thinking. He says, "Now that God has revealed himself," he's getting to that in a minute, "now that God has done something unusual, God wants us to rethink, to change our minds, about God."

Because God has done something BIG! What has he done? V.31:

31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the MAN he has appointed. He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead."

"Now Paul we've got to stop right there. We're talking about religion, there's no proof in a religion. I mean look, unknown, we don't know. But you're saying that somehow this New Thing that you're telling us about, that there's proof?"

Paul says, "Yeah, actually that's why I'm here and not in my hometown. That's why I left the comforts of home because now: in this age, in this generation, God has done something, and there is proof!" Proof moves us from "hope so" that's religion, to "know so," that's certainty.

"Well Paul tell us what God has done so that we could have that kind of certainty? What is the proof?" He says, "He has given us proof of this, to everyone, by raising Him from the dead! AND I didn't read about this, no one has written about it yet. I wasn't told this by someone who knew somebody, who knew somebody, who knew so and so. I came from the place where it happened, and I've had conversations with the eye witnesses, and I'm here in Athens absolutely convinced that God has done something on the planet. He raised a man from the dead to give us proof that He is who he claimed to be. And He's not simply a Jew for the Jews. He's a man sent from God for the whole world!"

So, what did they do when Paul told them about all this?

32 When they heard about the resurrection of the dead, some of them sneered,

...they fell on their faces and repented, and they tore down all their idols. No, that's not what happened, this isn't a story, this is about a real conversation in a real place between real people. When they heard about the resurrection of the dead some of them did what? SNEERED! Of course they did, because when people die they generally stay what? Dead! BUT...

but others said, "We want to hear you again on this subject." 33 At that, Paul left the Council.

So, most of the people who heard went, "Gotta go. If that's the beginning of the faith journey then I ain't going on this ride! If that's what we have to embrace and believe to follow this new teaching, we'll just go back to unknown."

But a few people said, "OK, you're telling me, just a few years ago? Right over there? In that place that nobody from here wants to visit, we've heard it's a desert and hot. You're telling me you know people? You have talked to people who witnessed a resurrection?" Paul said, "Yes! And for the first few years I didn't believe it either. And for the first few years I did everything to stamp out this cult, this Jewish knockoff. And then one day I met the risen Jesus! And so, I'm here to tell you, yes, God has done something in our generation as proof that He knows us, and He loves us, and He can be known."

{CUE SOUND}

SO, here is what we learn from all this. The beginning of Christian faith is not the Bible. AND the beginning of Christian faith is not just belief. The beginning of Christian faith is not, "Were Adam and Eve really naked?" OR "Are we living in the end times?" OR "Did they really put all those animals in the ark? Is there enough water in the atmosphere to really flood the Earth? I've heard there's only enough water in the atmosphere to flood the Earth two inches." No, no, no... none of that!

The question, the foundation, ground zero, the thing you've got to wrestle to the ground that's needed to restart your faith as an adult is simply this:

Who is Jesus?

Not "Is the Bible true?" Not the other 20 things we can debate because their fun to debate but "Who is Jesus?" That is THE question, and that will always be the question.

And regardless of what happened to your Sunday school faith, regardless of what happened to you in your past, regardless of your unanswered prayers, regardless of the fact that He doesn't always seem to reward good... It's not that those things are not important and worth talking about and wrestling through. BUT the place to begin the faith journey again as an adult is "Who is Jesus?"

AND that's exactly what Paul did. Paul left the hill that day, leaving them with THE issue to wrestle with, "Who is Jesus?" And that's where we're gonna leave it today. But the good news is this collection of messages is called "The Journey of Faith" so the journey is just getting started.

And I hope you will do everything you can to be here in person for this over the next 7 weeks, see if a commitment doesn't rise up inside you that says, "This is too important to miss!" But no matter what, I want you to spend some time with two questions. Write these down:

1. How and when did your faith journey begin?

What was your childhood journey like, if you have one, today or last Sunday might be the beginning of your journey, that's awesome! But how and when did your faith journey begin? Number 2:

2. How well has your faith held up under the pressures of life?

In other words, has your childhood faith supported you through the difficult times of life? Or do you find yourself trying to support your faith and keep your faith intact under the pressures of life?

Spend some time answering those questions this week and it will set us up for next time. Again, I challenge you to see if a commitment doesn't rise up inside you to be here for as much of this as possible. I think you are worth it; I think your faith is worth it, and I'm excited to see where this journey leads us.

Let's pray.