

WHY JESUS

LEARNING TO FOLLOW THE UNCONVENTIONAL TRAVEL ITINERARY OF A

CROSSED

FIRST-CENTURY CARPENTER AND HIS RAFTAG GROUP OF FRIENDS AS THEY HOP FENCES, CROSS

ROAD THE

BORDERS, AND GENERALLY GO WHERE MOST PEOPLE DON'T

BRUCE MAIN



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Why Jesus Crossed the Road: Learning to Follow the Unconventional Travel Itinerary of a First-Century Carpenter and His Ragtag Group of Friends as They Hop Fences, Cross Borders, and Generally Go Where Most People Don't

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To the children of Camden
With open arms, you lovingly crossed the road to me.

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INTRODUCTION

OPEN THE EYES OF MY HEART

Loving God, we admit to attitudes that exclude rather than embrace. We prefer to associate with others who think and act as we do. . . . Awaken us to the limits of our understanding and the narrowness of our dealings.

PRESBYTERIAN PRAYER OF CONFESSION

Jim was tall, angular, and masculine—almost movie-star handsome—a warm, easily likable person who never backed down from a challenge; he was a doer in his church, planning the ski trip or the summer pool party for the young people. Jim was high octane, a roll-up-your-sleeves kind of guy who liked to get his hands dirty; when Hurricane Katrina devastated the southern coast, Jim recruited his buddies and got them to spend their vacation days stripping moldy Sheetrock from the devastated houses and repairing roofs in ninety-degree, suffocating heat; then he led service-oriented trips for youth to Mexico, Kentucky, and Maine—building homes, clearing trails.

Yet leading a mission group to Camden, New Jersey—that dread-of-a-broken-city just ten minutes (but light-years) from his home—well, that was a different matter.

Jim was telling his story to the teenagers from his church who crowded the room at UrbanPromise.¹ “When the chairman of our church’s mission committee—you know what they’re like—asked me to lead an exploratory trip to Camden, I was a little defensive. No, I was a lot more than *a little*.” Jim was pacing back

and forth, beginning to perspire as he passionately tried to let us all know his deepest feelings.

He paused. The room of teens was transfixed as Jim continued his confession. “After all, Camden is known by everybody as the *badlands*. All the local magazines and newspapers call Camden ‘America’s most dangerous city.’ Most of us intentionally avoid it. The main freeway that divides Camden from the surrounding communities might as well be the Berlin Wall. Few people would question my apprehension to go there; most would cheer me on and call me sensible and wise and heroic. I mean, I just dug in my heels,” he said, not disguising the emotion he felt. “No way! My heart was closed. I wasn’t about to go to Camden.”

The kids in Jim’s youth group were transfixed by his openness. Mr. Positive Leader had let down his guard.

“But then, at the urgent (verging on the passionate) request of our mission director,” he continued, “I reluctantly, *very* reluctantly, went down to Camden for a visit. All the time I was thinking, *This is a waste of time*, since I had already made up my mind.

“Then I met Diamond. (God uses sneaky ways to get our attention sometimes.) Diamond was a charming, beautiful little girl—around eight years old. She gently took my hand and began to lead me around her school, showing me all the classrooms, rambling on about . . . well, about everything. I was smitten.”

Jim looked at the crowd. “My heart melted. She was an unassuming, intuitive little girl who never let on that she sensed my contempt. Instead, she reached out to me with love.”

He brushed away a tear.

“A few minutes ago when we sang the words ‘Open the eyes of my heart, Lord,’ I was reminded of what happened in my life. The eyes of my heart had been shut tight toward Camden before I arrived. But then, my eyes were opened. I encourage each person here to make that your prayer—allow God the opportunity to open the eyes of your heart.”

often isolate certain communities from others. Highways don't simply get you from point A to point B. These six-lane rivers of concrete are the new "railroad tracks" that divide who is on the "right side" from who is on the "wrong side." Some borders are geographical, others are social, many are psychological. If we are completely honest, all of us have places, situations, and people that we do our best to avoid. Given a choice between taking a left turn toward that which makes us uncomfortable or a right turn toward the familiar, we take the right turn every time. Our fear may be precipitated by too much information from past negative experiences or ignorance from a lack of information. Needless to say, crossing roads and borders is tough work; it takes energy, intention, and a whole lot of courage.

As difficult as it is, it is critical to cross these roads for two reasons: First, Jesus, who models a road-crossing lifestyle, calls those who follow him to do the same. Throughout his ministry, at every turn it seemed Jesus crossed *barriers*, *borders*, and *boundaries*. Because of his commitment, Jesus' spiritual life was comprised of a faith that faced the realities of daily life head-on. In the travels of Jesus we find the clues to what it means to be a person committed to growing as a child of God, a person who reflects the heart and nature of God in the world. Second, in some mysterious way, God uses our road crossings to change both our lives and often the lives of those we meet along the way.

ROAD MARKER

Jesus crossed the road to model a new kind of spiritual journey.

This book is about discovering why it is critical for Christians to view road crossing as an essential spiritual discipline. But it's

not just to take in the view. By examining the life of Jesus and the lives of those who have chosen to reach across barriers and boundaries, the hope is that we can find the courage and inspiration to go and do likewise.

Bruce Main

PART ONE

WHY
JESUS
CROSSED
ROAD
THE

WHERE DID JESUS TRAVEL?

In this regard it is significant how Jesus routinely crossed borders that others imagined impenetrable.

RODNEY CLAPP¹

“Those potholes were the size of Volkswagen Bugs,” exclaimed Frank, his arms held wide as if describing the fish that got away. He was recounting his recent, on-purpose detour through the north side of our city’s most deteriorated neighborhood. He wanted to make it clear that he had not made a wrong turn but had intentionally driven through this community that would never be mentioned as a must-see attraction.

“My wife and I always take a different route whenever we’re going home from an event,” he continued with more than a hint of sadness in his voice as he remembered that evening. “I always try to get a different perspective wherever I go, but *your* town was a bewildering and grim eye-opener.” He paused for a moment, reflecting. “Do you *really* believe those neighborhoods can be improved?”

I admired Frank. He could have taken several expressways and been home in minutes; most people do. Instead, he chose to take out-of-the-way side streets. He drove where most people are afraid to drive, and because of it his perspective changed.

Now he was asking me questions, seeking answers. Trying to come to grips with the harsh realities of the inner city, he was genuinely concerned.

Frank explained that he made it a practice to break his routines and travel new roads, and his musings underscored his curiosity. Most of us, on the other hand, choose expedience over adventure, four-lane highways over potholed side streets, the familiar over the unknown. We forget that the places we visit—or choose not to visit—profoundly affect what we see, what we hear, and what we think. But Frank altered his travel plans so that the experiences would challenge him to see life in a different way. Unbeknownst to himself, Frank was modeling a critical biblical truth, the truth so vividly demonstrated by Jesus.

WHERE DID JESUS GO?

If we read the Gospel narratives as merely a travel itinerary, what would it reveal about Jesus and his disciples? Sit down and map out the journey of Jesus during his three years of public ministry. What do his stops say about his interests, concerns, faith, mission, commitments, and purposes?

I think it's relevant and interesting that Jesus initiated his public ministry in Capernaum—a poor fishing village, not a bustling metropolis. He spent time in graveyards, traveled through Samaria, went to ethnically mixed cities like Tyre and Sidon, and intentionally returned to a hostile Jerusalem. These places were not simply locations, without significant meaning or repercussions. Each of his destinations and interactions with various people groups represented something for Jesus; and where he went and what transpired there provide us with a deeper glimpse into his mission and purpose on earth. In the end, the fullness of Jesus' life cannot be interpreted only on the basis of what he taught. His actions also speak to us across the centuries . . . sometimes even louder than his words.

We all know that the places we visit provide insight into our interests and life purposes—for example, a trip to the Acropolis reveals an interest in ancient Greek culture; a week spent in Yosemite National Park shows a love of nature and the outdoors.

A weekend in Las Vegas, well, that at least suggests a curiosity about gambling and partying. (Of course, you could be an insomniac and need a good restaurant at three in the morning. Las Vegas never sleeps.)

The people and places we visit reveal more about our commitments and convictions than what we espouse with our lips. Our travel plans make a moral and spiritual statement; they reveal how we spend our most sacred gifts—time, energy, and resources. They also reveal an attitude of the heart.

ROAD MARKER

Jesus crossed the road to let his actions speak louder than his words.

The same is true of Jesus: he chose how he spent his time. I resist the temptation to believe that he was divinely programmed—having no choice where he would stop for lunch, take a nap, or bunk down at the end of each day. God did not insert a fresh computer chip in Jesus' brain that outlined the next day's activities and encounters. Jesus made choices.

But even if we argue that Jesus was divinely programmed, we would have to admit that his travel schedule displayed the consistent and varied interests of God. The places where Jesus spent his time provide important insights into the heart and will of God.

For example, if Jesus spent all his time with the upper crust of society, it would speak volumes about God's potential bias toward the rich and powerful. If, like some mystic, Jesus spent all his time in a far-off desert cave, it would provide deeper insight into the meaning of a holy life. But Jesus did neither exclusively. Yes, he spent time with wealthy people, even going to their parties, and he did spend time in isolation. But in most of his public life Jesus was engaged with people who lived

in small towns, capital cities, villages, wherever—each person representing the diversity of the human family in all aspects of his or her life.

A closer examination reveals that Jesus even traveled to places that one might not associate with a holy man or an itinerate preacher; instead he crossed roads and barriers that other people were afraid to cross. Metaphorically speaking, Jesus crossed the “roads” that divided people on the basis of race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, and economic standing. Jesus’ road-crossing actions demonstrated that he did not follow the religious and societal protocols of his day. In a world that was governed strictly by geographical, religious, and social barriers, Jesus was audacious enough to cross the roads that kept people in safe categories. And by crossing those roads Jesus demonstrated that a God-following life is a life of inclusion and expansion—not an exclusive and limited life that avoids certain kinds of people and certain places. The God-following life for Jesus was a life committed to entering the lives and stories of all kinds of people. It was a life that challenged barriers.

Rodney Clapp puts it powerfully when he writes,

He welcomed children and talked publicly to women. He ate with tax collectors. He stepped inside the borders of the stoning circle and stood on the side of the adulteress. He touched the sick and the leprous. And of course he famously suggested that purity was not a matter of what comes from the outside in, but of what comes from the inside out. He treated borders as . . . “places of encounter” as permeable and alive as the skin that covers our bodies.²

At the heart of Jesus’ public ministry was his willingness to convert barriers into bridges—bridges where differences could be united and embraced.

THE LOST DISCIPLINE

If I asked one hundred Christians how I could or should grow in my faith, I guarantee that I would hear the following: attend church regularly, get involved in a small group, read the Bible, pray daily, and avoid the temptation of sin. Some believers would mention the need for fasting; others might insist that meditation is primary. When most of us think of spiritual growth and personal transformation, we tend to think of more traditional disciplines. No one would claim road crossing as an essential spiritual discipline.

But here's the problem. I believe that we can faithfully read the Bible, pray, fast . . . and never really change. We can go to church all our lives and still hold bigoted views of others, live in fear, and never develop the capacity to see beyond our own kind of people. Church history is full of such examples. Christians sat in church Sunday after Sunday for years, well aware of the atrocities happening to their African American brothers and sisters, and still resisted granting them their basic civil rights. Some high-profile Christian leaders, who have spent a lifetime studying the Scriptures, still make comments that reveal a complete ignorance of other cultures and values. Despite centuries of faithful Christian service and enormous contributions, women can still be marginalized by pious, chauvinistic, Bible-believing men. Dedicated, lifelong church elders can make it uncomfortable for outsiders to feel welcome and can wield power in unbelievably childish ways. A life dedicated to the practice of traditional spiritual disciplines does not guarantee growth toward full Christian maturity.

The problem with the traditional spiritual disciplines is that they can all be done in isolation—both privately and within groups—and simply reinforce what we want to believe. The problem with a spiritual life being exercised in isolation is that it allows people to grow without the perspective of others.

Surrounding ourselves with people who think, act, look, and even smell like us usually leads toward a distorted growth pattern or no growth at all. We may ultimately experience a small fraction of what God wants for our lives, even with erroneous views going unchallenged. But ultimately our growth becomes biased, unbalanced, and stunted.

This is why the discipline of road crossing is so critical to add to our list of spiritual disciplines.

ROAD MARKER

Sometimes we have to cross the road to find
Jesus' footprints ahead of us on the path.

Some people might argue that crossing roads—going to those places we find uncomfortable and out of the way—should be the end result of our interior development. To put it another way, we engage in spiritual disciplines to prepare ourselves to reach out to other people. Crossing roads, you might argue, should be placed in the category of “Christian service” or “social action,” not spiritual discipline.

I would argue differently. Jesus did not have a “spiritual life” with a little service tacked on. Nor did he have an occasional service project with a few hours of spiritual disciplines scheduled in his downtime. Rather, there is an integration of these two realities expressed in the life of Jesus. Action and contemplation interact with one another in dynamic relationship. They feed each other. They shape each other. For Jesus, every aspect of life had the potential of deepening his relationship with God and expanding his notion of what it meant to live as God’s child.

From Jesus we learn that the act of road crossing—crossing barriers—places us in conflicted situations that challenge our narrow vision of spiritual growth. Conflict can be healthy and

lead to growth: it can call us to reevaluate our lives, our commitments, our perspectives, our prejudices, and our vision for God's work in the world.

Since the Scriptures claim that Jesus "grew in wisdom and stature" (Luke 2:52) we must look to his life as a model for our own growth. And since Jesus spent a good deal of his time crossing barriers erected by his society and its religious leaders, we must understand the nature of his crossings and follow his lead.