

YOU NEVER KNOW WHO YOU MAY RUN INTO: JESUS, IT'S TOO HARD

Text: Mark 10:17-27

This Lenten season we are going to meet some of the characters that Jesus encountered on his journey to Jerusalem, his last journey to Jerusalem. Maybe we will meet ourselves in some of them.

Thirty-five years have passed since I knelt at the feet of the ^Agood teacher.^A I was young then, full of dreams and plans, full of myself. My future was wide open, promising and fertile as the fields of Ephraim. Yet I was not content. Even though I had everything a young man could desire, I was searching. For what? **I didn't know then what I know now.** I suspected there must be something more to life than the pleasures and enjoyments my wealth provided. My friends assured me that there was nothing money couldn't buy. But, why did I feel dissatisfied with my life? My restlessness was ironic. All that I desired, I acquired. I was ridiculously rich. After my father died, I had inherited his agricultural business and multiplied it into a great fortune. Because of my savvy and hard work, I no longer had to worry about money. I could live in luxury with servants scurrying to fulfill my every desire.

Strangely, I found that as soon as one desire was fulfilled, another arose to take its place. I was living from desire to desire, but contentment eluded me. It was then that emptiness descended upon me like fog on the Kidron Valley at daybreak. Since I didn't have to do anything, there was no necessity to my life, no sense of purpose, no direction. Even running a successful business became unsatisfying. I was bored with life, not knowing which way to turn.

Even the religion of my father offered no relief. As a boy, I had memorized much of the Torah in synagogue school. I lived by the letter of Torah with passion. As a young man, I became as devout as a rabbi. Daily, I went to pray in the synagogue. I gave a double tithe and alms above that impressing everyone, especially rabbis and priests. I tried to achieve contentment through outward righteousness. Somehow, following the way of Torah didn't satisfy either. All I know is that I was seeking something, anything that would soothe the ache in my soul.

One day, at my lowest point, I heard that a new rabbi called Jesus was coming town. He had a reputation as an amazing teacher. Reportedly, the crowds who heard him were astonished by his miracles of healing, even raising the dead. I joined the large crowd who had gathered on the road to see him and be healed. I pushed my way to the front to see several children surrounding Jesus. He placed his hands on their heads and said, ^AI tell you the truth: Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.[@]

That was it! Jesus named what I was searching for: the kingdom of God, eternal life, that was it. He started walking up the Jerusalem road. On a wild impulse, I broke free from the crowd and bowed down at Jesus's feet. I blurted out, ^AGood teacher, what must I do to have eternal life?[@] "Interesting you called me 'Good; Only God is good... You know the commandments don't you?" he said and he ran down a few of them. "I've never broken any of those even as a boy," I said defensively. He looked into my eyes – it almost took my breath away. I felt that he cared deeply about me, a stranger asking a question. He seemed to know why I had asked. It was as if he was looking deep into my soul and saw the void there.

What he said to me next I will never forget: ^AYou lack one thing; go, sell all you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.[@] I was stunned. Jesus's words pierced me like a centurion's sword. Was he blind to the fine clothing and jeweled rings I wore? Why wasn't he impressed? Did he not know who he was talking to? It was impossible what he was

asking. My wealth was my armor, my protection against the hardships and sufferings. **My** wealth was **my** security. Without it, I would be naked and vulnerable. I couldn't bring myself to imagine giving away my hard-earned fortune to the undeserving poor! Everyone knew success was the proof of God's blessings for my righteousness?

It was ridiculous! I couldn't leave my great fortune behind and **follow Jesus into poverty**, wandering from town to town, dependent upon others for food and lodging. **Or, was he saying there was no hope for me?** How could treasures in heaven surpass earthly riches? **Yet, there was part of me that wanted to follow Jesus, anyway.** My emptiness cried out, but my fears drowned out the inner voice that begged me to do what he asked. It was terrifying taking this leap into the unknown. Who would be willing to live that way? I had too much to give up. **I wanted to follow Jesus and keep my wealth.** But, this option was not offered. I walked away in silent sorrow, never to see him again. After a while, my sorrow turned into anger, and anger into indignation. How dare he ask the impossible! I shouted aloud, He can't even imagine what he is asking of me. Who does he think he is? I was seething, outraged that he demanded such a soul-wrenching choice. My rage drove out the sorrow - **for a time.**

Three months after that encounter with Jesus, I learned that he had been crucified like a common criminal. Instead of feeling sadness at this news, I felt relieved! Jesus= crucifixion confirmed that I was indeed right. I could have ended up on a cross too, had I been so foolish to give away my wealth and go with him on the road to Jerusalem.

As I said, that happened thirty-some-odd years ago. In light of the events last year, I have started wondering how different my life might have been if I had followed Jesus. My business was wiped out when the Romans invaded Palestine and destroyed much of Jerusalem. There is nothing left, all my and my father's hard work gone. Did he know what was to become of it? How different my life would have been if I had done what he asked, given it all away and followed him. Would I have found what I was missing?

I thought it was too late for me to follow Jesus; **I had chosen my master, my wealth, not him.** But, a few days ago, a stranger calling himself a Christian told me that after he was crucified he was brought back to life by God. He also said something that rekindled my yearning for something more, **All who believe in him will be raised to new life in the kingdom of God,** he said. Wistfully, I told him the story of walking away from Jesus so many years ago. Amazingly, this stranger wasn't shocked at my rejection. He said he too had rejected Jesus when he was alive, as had many who now follow him. He assured me that it is never too late to follow Jesus and live. **This time, I WILL follow him.**
(portions by Robert Martin Walker, *Encounters on the Road to the Cross*, Abingdon, pp. 11-14)

Do you see any of yourself in this story? Do you know that man, Jesus? Would you have followed him to Jerusalem? **Do you sometimes wonder if this is all there is to life?** Maybe the things of this world no longer satisfy you as before. **It's not too late for you either.** Will you deny yourself, take up your cross and walk with Jesus? There is nothing in this world that can compare with the eternal treasures waiting for YOU, YES YOU in the kingdom of God, starting now. What holds you back from truly following Jesus now? Or, will you turn away today? **Which master will you serve?**