

Do You Know Where You're Going?

On his 80th birthday, Billy Graham was honored at a luncheon that was held for him by some local leaders in his home town of Charlotte, North Carolina.

After receiving several accolades, the famous evangelist stepped to the rostrum, thanked the crowd and then told the following story about Albert Einstein.

In his later years, Einstein was traveling from Princeton on a train when the conductor came down the aisle, punching the passenger's tickets.

When he came to Einstein, Einstein couldn't find his ticket in his vest pocket or his trouser pockets. Then he looked in his briefcase but it wasn't there.

Then he looked in the seat beside him and still couldn't find it.

The conductor said, "Dr. Einstein, we all know who you are and I'm sure you bought a ticket. Don't worry about it!"

Einstein nodded appreciatively and the conductor continued down the aisle punching tickets.

As he was ready to move to the next car, he turned around and saw Einstein down on his hands and knees looking under his seat.

The conductor rushed back and said, "Dr. Einstein, Dr. Einstein, don't worry, you don't need a ticket—I know who you are!"

Einstein said, "Young man, I know who I am too; what I don't know is where I'm going."

I don't know about you, but I can relate to that!

At every point in our lives we are on a journey of one kind or another.

What we don't know is where that journey is going to take us.

I'd like to tell you about four journeys I have made in my life: I chose the first three journeys and the Lord chose the fourth.

The first journey began when I was in grade school.

I was born and raised in the Ozarks—in Joplin, Missouri.

My parents weren't much for travelling—in fact they never went anywhere except from home to town and back.

We didn't even take family vacations.

The only sights I saw outside of Joplin were through my Viewmaster—do you remember those things?

I had two discs: one of the monuments in Washington D.C. and another one of Boulder Dam.

I spent many hours looking at those places.

I couldn't wait to grow up so that I could travel around the country.

In high school I read the autobiography of Woodie Guthrie, the famous folksinger and migrant worker who wrote "This Land is Your Land" and Pastures of Plenty."

I decided that some day I wanted to bum around the country like he did, hitchhiking on Rt. 66 and riding the rails.

That desire kept niggling at me.

After three semesters of college, during which I majored in cutting classes and organizing poker games, I was politely asked to leave.

For me it wasn't altogether bad news because it freed me up to pursue my dream.

I told my father what I was going to do and he got so angry he was on the verge of disinheriting me, so one morning very early I went out to Route 66, which went right through Joplin, and stuck out my thumb.

I set out on what you might call a "journey of experience."

I roamed around the country for four years, riding in empty boxcars, sleeping under bridges, and hitching rides.

I worked in a factory in Los Angeles, fought forest fires in Idaho and waited tables in New York City.

I met a lot of people—workers, hobos, migrants, jailbirds.

As you might imagine, they were a cynical, disillusioned bunch of people.

Some of them still clung to a few pipedreams which had a zero chance of working out.

Finally, after I nearly killed myself wiping out a motorcycle on the Pasadena Freeway, I decided that I had had enough “experience” and I decided to return to college.

There I started a second journey which you might call a “journey of the mind.”

I decided that I wanted to be a writer so as I was working on getting a college degree in English I started writing poems.

The problem was, nobody wanted to publish any of them so I gave up on poetry and decided that I would write the Great American Novel.

After I had written around a hundred pages I went back and read what I had written and decided it was garbage, so that ended my career as a novelist.

I finished college and grad school I got a job teaching at the University of Wisconsin.

I quickly discovered that all was not as happy as I expected it to be in the world of academia.

I found my fellow faculty members to be as cynical and disillusioned as the hobos and migrants and jailbirds I’d met under bridges and in boxcars.

I decided that I didn’t want to spend the rest of my life with unhappy people so I abandoned my journey of the mind.

So at the tender age of 35 and with no marketable skills I entered the business world and began a journey of “rags to riches.”

I wasn’t very good at business because down deep I didn’t care much about getting promoted or making a lot of money.

I can honestly say that I survived fifteen years in the business world without ever coming to understand a P & L statement or a balance sheet.

But by the grace of God I was fairly successful and ended up in what is usually called “upper management.”

Unfortunately, after I had “arrived,” as they say, I found the same cynical and unhappy people I had met under bridges and in academia.

Most of them had acquired everything a person could dream of acquiring, but they were driven by a burning desire to acquire MORE.

They were also haunted by the thought that the guy across the conference room table, or the guy who had an equivalent job in another company was being paid more than they were.

Finally God must have decided that since I hadn't proven very good at choosing journeys, He would choose one for me.

He put it in my heart to become a pastor and so at the untender age of 50 my family and I moved to St. Louis where I attended seminary.

After I graduated, I spent the next thirty years serving in churches in Solon, Mantua and here at Hope in Aurora.

In all three churches I have gotten to know people who instead of sinking into a quagmire of cynicism and disillusionment, are growing in faith and hope and love.

Now please understand: at any given point during my first three journeys, I figured I was headed somewhere.

Even if I was sleeping under a bridge I was looking forward to the next town, the next job, the next lucky break, the next something: I was going *somewhere*.

All three journeys were dead ends but as it turned out they part of a larger, longer journey God was crafting for me.

Although I didn't know it, I was going to end up where God wanted me to be.

He had a plan; he just wasn't divulging the details of it to me.

And that's how God does things.

We LONG to be in control of our situations—to be pilots of our ship and masters of our own fate.

And when things don't go according to OUR plans, we acan become disappointed and angry.

If the wind seems to be blowing where IT will blow rather than where WE want it to blow we can get frustrated.

The American poet A. E. Housman wrote: *"We of a certainty are not the first, have sat in taverns while the tempest hurled their hopeful plans to nothingness, and cursed whatever brute or blackguard made the world."*

Often God forcibly takes us in a different direction than the one we have chosen, and it frustrates us..

Opportunity knocks—and we complain of the noise.

We are like the Israelites described in today's Old Testament lesson who decided they didn't like the journey God was taking them on, even though He had promised it would end in the Promised Land..

Forgetting their lives as slaves in Egypt from which God had delivered them, they began to complain to Moses, saying, *"Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the desert? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"*

Things weren't going the way they wanted them to go, so they got mad at God.

God works in mysterious ways, but the point is that He is always at work in our lives.

And He not only works in our outward lives, He works within **us**.

He teaches us to love the things He loves, to hate the things He hates, and to do the things He wants us to do.

It isn't always easy.

In fact it can get pretty hard at times and we begin to wonder if God *does* have a plan for us.

If He does, it seems like He is certainly taking his time to reveal it.

But we can have confidence in the fact that all who lift up their eyes from their worldly woes and fix their gaze upon Jesus are safely within His plan and under His care.

As we sing in one of our Christmas carols: *"All you beneath your heavy load, by care and guilt bent low, Who toil along a dreary way with painful steps and slow: Look up! For golden is the hour, come swiftly on the wing; the Prince was born to bring you peace—of Him the angels sing."*

Or, as Paul tells us in *Romans*: *"...**in all things** God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those He knew, he also predestined; those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified."*

This has been called the "golden chain" of God's promise to cause ALL THINGS to work together for good in the lives of those who place their trust in His Son.

He who created a good work in us will see it through to the day of its completion.

We are all on a journey.

It may not be the one we signed up for, but it's one that God has chartered for us and He will see us safely through to our destination.

All the journeys I crafted for myself turned out to be side-trips, but God used them to get me where He wants me to be.

What I learned is that the place He had in mind for me to be is a far better place than any I could have chosen for myself.

After 4 years bumming around, 10 years in academia, 15 years in the business world here I am behind a pulpit!

I'm pretty sure God got it right this time because I don't think I have enough time left for a 5th career!

Imagine for a moment the difference between a homeless person wandering around on dark streets looking for someplace to sleep, and a man who is headed home.

The homeless man stumbles around looking for doorways and alleys to sleep in.

The home-bound man walks with confident steps toward the lights of his house up ahead.

There is a world of difference between those two men just as there is difference between people who wander about trying to work things out for themselves, and people who know that God is leading them home.

After Billy Graham had told his audience the story about Albert Einstein, he continued: *"See the suit I'm wearing? It's a brand new suit. My wife, my children and my grandchildren were telling me I had gotten a little slovenly in my old age. I used to be a bit more fastidious. So I went out and bought a new suit for this luncheon and for one more occasion. You know what that other occasion is? This is the suit in which I'll be buried. But when you hear I'm dead, I don't want you to remember the suit I'm wearing. I want you to remember this: I not only know who I am...I also know where I'm going."*

In Christ Jesus,

Amen.