

THE BACKPACKER

(Luke 12::,2-:,+)



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I set out on this journey carrying a backpack. It contained all my life's experiences - some good, some bad. The good ones were shiny stones, smooth to the touch. The bad ones, however, were big and jagged, likely to scratch and even cut your hand. They had to be handled carefully.

Now, I'm a meticulous packer. I love sorting and arranging, so that each stone (in this case) was placed correctly in relation to the others, to achieve balance. Much easier to bear the load that way. So the smooth stones were all on one side of the backpack, and the ragged stones all on the other. The load was heavy, but I had confidence that Jesus would ease me of that load.

My pilgrimage took me down a well worn path, bordered, I noticed, by smooth stones much the same as mine. Every now and then there would be a small cairn by the side of the road, made up of jagged stones, again similar to mine. There were other people on the road. Some struggled under their load, while others had empty back packs. Those who carried empty backpacks tended to journey together or form groups at the side of the road, and seemed to chat and laugh, easy in each other's company. I wondered why Jesus had emptied their backpacks and not mine, but I didn't stop to ask. I was intent on the journey to which I had committed. Occasionally someone would walk alongside me and offer to ease my load, but I was confident that Jesus would do

the journey, and knew that I had never been alone; my burdens had been borne by others too.

As I turned back to Jesus, others caught up and joined us, and the laughter and joy was even better than that which we had shared along the pilgrim way.

There is still a long way to go, but now that my backpack is empty, I have no need of it. If an experience is good, it becomes a marker of encouragement to others. If it is bad, it becomes a reason for passionate prayer for those suffering similar circumstances. I am free to give them away, and much lighter and happier for it.

And, best of all, I know that there are always others like Jesus who will share the journey with me.

what he said he would do, and so I would politely decline their offer.

Then one day I was particularly out of sorts. The backpack felt heavier than ever and harder to shoulder. I became tetchy and grumpy, and began to resent these happy people with their empty backpacks, sharing their easy conversation and laughter with each other. I even began to question Jesus' promises, and that made me even more grumpy. After a while I passed another group, keeping my head down because if I didn't, I might have said something rude. Even if my faith was wavering, I at least could retain my good manners.

But one of them caught up with me and said, "Would you like me to help you with that?"

"No." I said, a bit too abruptly. "I don't like anyone handling my stones. Besides, I've given them to Jesus, and he'll deal with them."

"Ah." she said. "Well, why don't you show me one or two of them."

I suppose it wouldn't hurt, I thought. Besides, I could do with the break.

I stopped and unshouldered my backpack. Out of it I chose a particularly lovely polished stone. "This is the love of my parents. It's beautiful, isn't it?"

"Yes," she said, "It really is beautiful. It would be good to share this memory with others, to encourage them. Why don't you put it alongside all the others that

mark the road? That way other pilgrims will be able to find their way more easily."

This proposition had its merits, so after a little hesitation, I did what she asked.

"Thank you." I said. "I'll just be on my way."

"Wait," she said, "Your load will be uneven without that stone. Why don't you show me a different one."

Wow! A packer after my own heart. How could I refuse?

Again I opened my backpack and chose a particularly wicked looking stone, jagged and hard, and gingerly extracted it from the rest. It was the memory of my mother's death when I was ten years old.

"Oh, I'm sorry." she said. "That is a very heavy burden to bear. Perhaps you could place it with the sad memories of others, over there." She pointed to a small cairn at the side of the road. "That way you'll know that there are others sharing your burden, and you theirs."

Again I did as she asked. I carefully carried the stone over to the cairn and put it with the others. As I did so, I realised that maybe, just maybe, I wasn't alone in my journey. It was a comforting thought, and as I picked up my backpack, it was indeed lighter. I thanked her and continued on my way.

This time as I travelled I was more aware of the bright, smooth stones that marked the road ahead, and

was grateful for them. Also, this time, as I came to a cairn, I would pause and think about the difficulties of other pilgrims along the way, and pray for them - and me. I also found myself seeking the company of those whose backpacks were empty. I listened to their own stories of their journeys, and I became easier about sharing my own, carefully adding my own memories to the roadside as encouraging markers or as part of a cairn.

Then came the moment in the journey when I rounded a corner, and there stood Jesus, smiling at me. I ran to him, but (to my shame) my first words were, "You promised to take my load away - where were you?"

"I was there all the time. Let me ask you a question - could you have run to me when you first started out?"

I thought about that one. The truth is, no - I was too weighed down.

"And where is your backpack now?"

I looked at where I had dropped it, and realised that it was, in fact, empty.

"You see, I can only relieve your burdens if you are willing to give them away. Then you in turn relieve the burdens of others by showing them the path and praying for them. Look at where you have come from."

I turned and looked back down the road. The smooth stones along the roadside glowed in the morning sun, and I realised that I, along with others, had helped define that path. I saw the cairns raised at intervals along