

A Journey to the Ends of the Earth & to the Heart of the Son

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Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit. You should not be surprised at my saying, 'You must be born again.' The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit."

"How can this be?" Nicodemus asked.

"You are Israel's teacher," said Jesus, "and do you not understand these things? I tell you the truth, we speak of what we know, and we testify to what we have seen, but still you people do not accept our testimony. I have spoken to you of earthly things and you do not believe; how then will you believe if I speak of heavenly things? No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven – the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.

– JOHN 3:5-15

How would you go about hiding a twenty-thousand ton battleship on the open sea? The first really successful attempt to camouflage a ship in the twentieth century came about through a method that was exactly the opposite of what one would imagine.

Those were the days before radar technology and it seemed that the easiest way to make a ship disappear into its surroundings would be to paint it the color of the sea or sky. But at that point in history, military strategists simply could not find paint that was good enough to hide a ship on the open sea. So in 1917, an artist named Norman Wilkinson invented what was then known as "dazzle" camouflage.

Wilkinson convinced the English military to paint ships in outlandish colors and cubist designs that were so unexpected for the eye, so out of place on the sea, that the eye simply did not know how to register what it was seeing. A person either overlooked the ship entirely – or, in seeing the ship, was so disoriented that he could not tell from where it was coming or to where it was going.

Hiding a battleship in plain sight on the open sea is a neat trick, but when Jesus says that His Spirit and Kingdom are equally hidden from natural sight we are more than intrigued; we are concerned. Yet, in John 3 Jesus tells Nicodemus that no one can see the Kingdom of God unless he is born again of the Spirit. Then Jesus says that the Spirit is like the wind, blowing where it pleases so that you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.

We are concerned when we read these words because we want loved ones and lost ones to see the Kingdom of God. At the same time our Lord is saying that people cannot control the Spirit, we know that without the Spirit no one can see Him. It does not seem right to tell a person that he or she must be born again and then to take the mechanism for spiritual birth right out of his hands. Isn't this like telling Barry Bonds to hit a home run and take his bat away, or urging James Galway to play the Pachelbel Canon without his flute? Nicodemus asks the right question in response. He says, "How can this be?"

The answer lies in understanding that everyone who is born again must experience a journey of the soul. We cannot make people see the Kingdom of God, but we can guide them to where they can see, should the Spirit open their eyes. That is my task and yours if you are a follower of Jesus. What does that journey look like? It is, in essence, a journey to the ends of the earth and to the heart of the Son.

The Journey to the Ends of the Earth

What does the journey to the ends of the earth involve? Jesus has already given strong indications of what this journey is like when He tells Nicodemus that in order to see the Kingdom of God a person must be born again – from above. The journey to the Kingdom of God involves the realization that nothing on earth (including our greatest achievements) will bring us the spiritual blessings of heaven. A person must come to the end of what the earth offers or what they can gain by worldly achievement in order to see the Kingdom.

Jesus says to Nicodemus, "You are a leader of Israel and you do not know these things?" The words are meant to remind Nicodemus, and all of us, of the spiritual limitation of all that is of this earth, no matter the level of its status.

Nicodemus was at the top of his career. He had risen to the peak of the religious establishment, he sat on the ruling body of the nation of Israel, and he was at the top of the intellectual ladder. Jesus' little statement takes in all that Nicodemus is and at the same moment indicates this is not enough.

Jesus clearly understood the place from which Nicodemus was coming. And we also must understand the place in life from which those around us come if we seek to care for them. By assessing the status and pursuits of others, we are able not only to know them, but also to serve as a guide in a spiritual journey. We help them on that journey when we accurately point to their place in life and say, "You are here." But of course that is not the end of the journey.

You Can't Get There From Here

Why doesn't Nicodemus' earthly place in life provide the spiritual path to heavenly things that he wants? Because very simply "you can't get there from here."

Essentially Jesus tells Nicodemus that the only one who can find heaven is the one who has been there, and Jesus is the One sent from heaven. By this statement Jesus attests to His own status as Messiah. But Jesus is also declaring the limitation for anyone who wants to experience the Kingdom of God apart from Him.

At some level Nicodemus already knows this limitation. After all, Nicodemus comes at night to find out why, as a Jewish leader, he cannot understand this itinerant rabbi's actions and teachings. In so coming Nicodemus automatically acknowledges that he does not know all that he wants to understand. His privileged place in the world has not led him to all that he wants. Jesus only confronts Nicodemus with the limitations the Jewish leader's actions already confirm but that his heart has not yet acknowledged.

Do you know people like this? People whose pursuits are themselves the confession that they have not found something that satisfies their souls and, yet, they have not yet confessed this limitation to their own hearts?

In our relationships with people engaged in such pursuits, our place is to say, “Here is where you are. You have pursued success and fulfillment, but you are still looking for something that satisfies your longings. You are trying to find the things of heaven through the means of the earth, but you can’t get there from here.”

To see Jesus, people must first come to see the ends of the earth – their own limitations and the limitations of the idols they worship in order to gain some kind of satisfaction. C.S. Lewis once noted in a sermon, “We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea.”¹

But Jesus also teaches in this exchange with Nicodemus that not only is Nicodemus limited, but Nicodemus cannot have what he wants without having Jesus Himself. Jesus says that it is the Son of Man who has experienced heaven and one cannot experience heaven without experiencing Him.

What the Journey Looks Like for One Man

We meet Nicodemus for the first time in John 3 as a cautious inquirer, but the Gospels are not done with him. The next time that we see him, he is an almost-courageous defender (Jn. 7:50). Fellow Pharisees accuse Jesus of breaking the law and Nicodemus meekly suggests, “Shouldn’t we have some proof before we try him?” Finally, we see Nicodemus as a humbled servant of Christ as “the leader of Israel” accompanies Joseph of Arimathea in petitioning Pilate for the body of the crucified Savior, provides the spices for His burial, and aids in the preparation of the corpse for burial (Jn. 19:38-40).

Consider what this really means. It is night again. The darkness covers Nicodemus as it did when he met Jesus for the first time. But now he does not hear about a new birth from Jesus but faces rather a fresh death. Nicodemus’ actions in the face of that death are perhaps the best mark of a new birth. Nicodemus goes in what must be degrading humiliation to petition the Roman governor for the body of a crucified, renegade preacher. Such actions will cause Nicodemus to be rejected by his colleagues and scorned by his people. He sacrifices his pride for the body of a dead man.

Nicodemus looks up to a cross as they take the body down, and perhaps takes on his own shoulders the weight of the body of that One. Does Nicodemus feel the weight of his own sin thinking, “I did not defend him?” Nicodemus is a Jewish holy man who is not supposed to touch the dead and in doing so risks everything his privileged status provides. Nicodemus, whose name means conqueror of people, has been conquered in spirit. He is at the end of his world. He is willing to risk it all for the sake of One who gave His all.

Nicodemus is at the end of his world but, of course, that is where the Kingdom of heaven begins – and is about to break wide open. The Spirit often works this way in the process of new birth from this earth: we are taken on a journey to the end of our world, a journey that is really to the end of our self.

In a recent interview, novelist Anne Lamott talked about her journey to the end of this earth. She said:

...I never felt like I had much choice with Jesus; He was relentless. I didn’t experience Him so much as the hound of heaven, as the old description has it, as the alley cat of heaven, who seemed to believe that if it just keeps showing up, mewling outside your door, you’d eventually open up and give him a bowl of milk. ...I resisted as long as I could, like Sam-I-Am in Green Eggs and Ham. I would not, could not in a boat! I could not, would not with a goat! I do not want to follow Jesus, I just want expensive cheeses. Or something. Anyway, He wore me out. He won.

I was tired and vulnerable and He won. I let Him in. This is what I said at the moment of my conversion: I said, “Okay! Come in. I quit...”

Then, when I was dozing, tiny kitten that I was, He picked me up like a mother cat, by the scruff of my neck, and deposited me in a little church... That's where I was when I came to. And then I came to believe.²

Almost always in our spiritual re-birth there is a journey that must be taken to the ends of the earth, to the ends of ourselves. Believers need to hear this too, right? We get into the orbit of this world and forget the things of God. We look for security and peace in all the wrong places. Over and over again, we have to relinquish those vanities. We need to be reminded of this for ourselves and we need to be reminded for others. We cannot be the witnesses we ought to be without realizing again and again that what heaven holds cannot be found in the things of the earth. The good news is that when our journey comes to the ends of the earth, the trip is not over. The ends of this earth is also the edge of heaven and the beginning of a better journey to the heart of the Son.

When you come to the end of yourself, Jesus still awaits and a new life – a better life, the one that truly satisfies – is ahead.

The Journey to the Heart of the Son

The journey to heaven, on which Jesus now leads Nicodemus, begins with a reference to the past – to the last miracle performed by Moses. Do you remember the story? The last of Moses' recorded miracles, told in Numbers, is the account of deliverance from a serpent attack. The story begins with the nation of Israel growing impatient with their journey to the Promised Land. They complain against Moses and God. Emblematic of the venom from their mouths, God sends poisonous snakes to plague them. They begin to die, but Moses petitions God for them. God subsequently instructs Moses to construct a serpent of bronze and lift it on a pole. Anyone who would look up at the serpent – trusting in God's provision – would live.

Now Jesus says to Nicodemus, even as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up. The implication is plain. Christ Himself must be exalted, lifted up, and those who look up to Him will live.

Look through Nicodemus' eyes to consider the journey he must take to the heart of the Son. Nicodemus knew that the raised-up serpent looked like what was afflicting the people, not like what was delivering them. The serpent was the symbol of their sin. For Jesus to indicate that He would be lifted up is to indicate that He will take the place of the serpent; He will stand in as the sin of the people. This is Christ's own acknowledgement that He who knew no sin would become sin for us (2 Cor. 5:21).

What do you see when you see Jesus? Goodness, faithfulness? You should see these things. But what Jesus is showing Nicodemus by reference to the Savior's future suffering is the awfulness of Nicodemus' own sin. In Christ's blood we see our sin on Jesus.

A Mere Look

Why was it hard for the Israelites to look at the serpent? It was hard because the serpent of bronze reminded them of the venom of their own complaint and lack of trust. We all have trouble looking on the horror of our own sin and recognizing our own need for forgiveness.

What about those whom we would lead to the heart of the Son? Why won't some of them look up to Him? It is because on the cross they have to look at the thorns on the brow, the nails in the hands, the blood pooled beneath his feet – and weep. Looking to the Son requires a realization that it is for my sin and rebellion this Savior died. But when I cannot bear the sight of my own sin, my God looks at my sin there upon the cross and, then, He passes over me. When I see that, then I have seen the Kingdom of God, and I have taken the journey to the heart of the Son.

Former seminary student and current military chaplain, John Griessel, tells of an experience of farm workers during harvest season. In the fury of the corn harvest an auger at the top of a grain elevator clogged and stuck. One of the workers crawled down into the hopper to undo the clog not realizing that the power to the auger, the great screw that funnels the grain into the bins below, was still engaged. As soon as the worker cleared the clog, the auger began to turn and suck the man along with the tons of grain down its throat. The man quickly sunk to his chest, as if in quicksand.

Fellow workers lowered a rope to him, but the man – panicked by his predicament – was simply looking down and trying to swim through the grain. His deliverance was within reach but he did not see it. Together with one voice to rise above the roar of the auger, the fellow workers yelled, “Look up!” He did, and was saved.

Our call is not so different for those that we love and Christ loves. We see them swimming through the sin and rebellion that will soon engulf them. Our goal is to lift their eyes from the things of this earth and look to the One who alone can save them. Our means is to lead them to the end of this earth and to the heart of the Son with the Gospel call, “Look up.” ■

¹ C.S. Lewis, *The Weight of Glory* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), 2.

² Susan Olasky, “Like a Puppy in a Christmas Stocking,” *World*, 20 September 2003, 25.

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