The Journeys of Jesus: From Light to Darkness

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In 1923 seven men met for a summit meeting at the posh Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago. Newspapers called them *The Magnificent Seven*. Together, they controlled more wealth than the U.S. treasury. The collective power of these wizards of Wall Street was greater than that of the Federal government.

*The Magnificent Seven* had come to Chicago to plot the financial future of the world. Their summit made headlines across America. They were held up as the epitome of glamour and success. But in 1950, a reporter followed up on these men who had mesmerized America. This is what he discovered 27 years after the summit:

**Charles Schwab**, the president of the world’s largest independent steel company, lived on borrowed money the last five years of his life. He died penniless.

**Arthur Cutten**, the biggest wheat speculator on earth, died in a foreign country, insolvent.

**Richard Whitney**, the president of the New York Stock Exchange, had just been released from the penitentiary at Sing Sing. He was flat broke.

**Albert Fall**, one of the ten richest men in America and a member of the President’s cabinet, had just been pardoned from prison so that he could die at home.

**Jessie Livermore**, nicknamed the *Bear of Wall Street*, and hailed as the greatest genius the Stock Market had ever produced, took his own life after the crash of 1929.

**Leon Fraser**, the president of the Bank of International Settlement, faced with scandal, committed suicide.

**Ivar Kruegar**, the head of the world’s largest monopoly, was found dead in his Paris apartment after his financial empire collapsed. The police said he had killed himself.

As his monopoly collapsed, Ivar Kruegar plunged into dark despair. Before he committed suicide, he told a friend, “It’s time to flip the switch and escape into darkness.” One thinks of what singer Wynonna Judd confessed about her own demons: “Most of us are imprisoned by something. We’re living in darkness until someone flips the switch.” She testified that her light was Jesus. Ivar Kruger flipped the switch of suicide and went from the darkness of greed into outer darkness devoid of God’s light.

Kruegar was an avowed atheist. As far as he was concerned, the idea of a God of light was preposterous. He would have agreed with science fiction writer Robert Heinlein: “Searching for God is like looking in a dark cellar at midnight for a black cat that isn’t there.” C.S. Lewis would heartily disagree. This literary giant wrote, “A man can no more diminish God’s glory by refusing to worship Him than a lunatic can put out the sun by scribbling the word, ‘darkness’ on the walls of his cell.”
Boris Pasternak was raised in Russia and schooled in Communistic atheism. But he was mesmerized by a single line in the Christmas story: “The true light which gives light to everyone was coming into the world.” (John 1:9) He began to pen stories that exposed the darkness of Stalinist Russia. When he wrote Dr. Zhivago, he was targeted for death by the KGB. It was a season of unbearable darkness. But, unlike Ivar Kruegar, Pasternak wrote, “Even one step from my grave, I still believe that the powers of darkness will in time be crushed by the spirit of the Light.”

Ivar Kruegar, like old Ebenezer Scrooge, would have said about Christmas, “Bah Humbug!” But Boris Pasternak found comfort in the message of our Advent Season: the Light of heaven has invaded the darkness of earth. When he couldn’t get to God, he became a man and came to us. This is the third message of our Christmas series Advent Journeys:

Christ’s birth is the condescension of divinity, and the exaltation of humanity.

St. John wrote this line 2,000 years ago: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” (John 1:14) God became a baby. At conception, infinity was condensed in two cells; omnipresent light hidden in the darkness of a womb; omnipotent power reduced to a helpless baby. Indeed, Christ’s birth was the condescension of divinity. Yet, it was the exaltation of humanity. When God took on human flesh, he forever elevated human worth. This is Christmas: God made himself small to make us so much bigger.

Immediately a challenge is laid before us: if Jesus was willing to go all the way from a throne in heaven to a cross outside Jerusalem, how far are we willing to go to bring the gospel to others? If God the Son was willing to reduce himself to a two-celled zygote in Mary’s virgin womb, how small are we willing to make ourselves to reach people lost in the darkness? We have been talking about the intentional journey of discipleship. We’ve seen the pathway to becoming fully devoted followers of Christ: worship, grow, serve, and go. To live out the life of Christ, we must go into the darkness with the light, just as he did.

The world desperately needs the Son of God. During the dark winter of 1864, Robert E. Lee’s ragtag army faced the union divisions of Ulysses S. Grant at Petersburg, Virginia. The war was winding down to a bloody end. The glorious cavalry charges of earlier years had given way to the muck and mud of trench warfare. One evening, Confederate General George Pickett received word that his wife had given birth to a baby boy. Up and down the line, the Southerners built huge bonfires to celebrate the birth.

When Grant saw the fires, he sent out a reconnaissance patrol to figure out what was going on. The scouts returned with the message that the Confederates were celebrating the birth of General Pickett’s son. Grant remembered Pickett as a classmate at West Point. So he ordered
his Union troops to join the celebration by building their own bonfires. It was the most amazing night of the Civil War. For miles, on both sides of the battle lines, festive fires burned brightly. No shots were fired. No yelling back and forth. No war. Only light celebrating the birth of a child. For a moment, there was peace on earth—at least at Petersburg, Virginia in the winter of 1864.

But the light only lasted for a few hours. Soon the fires burned down and once again darkness prevailed—the darkness of the night and the darkness of war. Darkness still covers the earth. But a baby boy was born in Bethlehem—the Son of God. Shouldn’t those in God’s army celebrate by lighting up the darkness with millions of bonfires? Tragically, what happened in Petersburg, Virginia in the winter of 1864 is happening across America today. As the fires of fervent evangelism burn down to the dying embers of apathy, the darkness takes over again. Jesus would say to us: “Not only am I the Light, but you too are the lights of the world. So go out into the world and shine!” This is what we need to see in Jesus’ journey:

1. THE SENDER OF LIGHT.

Come with us to one of the greatest passages in Scripture. St. John writes these magnificent words in his gospel of Jesus:

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.”

—John 3:16&17

One thing is crystal clear: God loves us. It is his very nature to love. Later the writer of this gospel will say in I John 4:8, “God is love.” He doesn’t just love; he is love. Jesus is not only God in the flesh; he is also love in the flesh. Everything you ever wanted to know about love is summed up in John 3:16. Love has no limits. It plays no favorites. Love turns its back on no one. It overcomes racial barriers, social distinctions, ethnic differences, gender biases, the worst sins, and most painful wounds. It forgives again and again. Love embraces the whole world. Love will not stop until every lost person on planet earth is found and has a chance to hear the way of salvation. Love is the fuel of world missions. It drives missionaries to the ends of the earth, and causes those who send them to empty their pockets to fund the gospel enterprise.

Love gives everything it has to save those who are dying. “Whoever believes in him shall not perish...” So God gave his one and only Son. He had no other Son. There was no one else that he loved more than his one and only Son. When he gave Jesus, he gave his very best. His Son was God too—the same in substance, equal in power and glory. When he gave his Son he gave himself. To give yourself away, until nothing is left, is the ultimate sacrifice for the ultimate expression of love. No price is too great to reach lost people. No distance is too far to go—whether it
is across the street or around the world! Love is willing to journey from heaven across distant galaxies to a speck of a planet filled with God’s bitterest enemies. It is even willing to be nailed to a cross! All that, and so much more, is tucked away in verse 16.

I recently saw this cartoon: an astronaut from earth is talking to a space alien on a distant planet. The alien says to the astronaut, “Do you mean that Jesus only came once to your planet? He visits us every year. The first time he came, we gave him chocolates and a parade. What did you do to him when he visited you?” God’s love gives even when it ends in rejection and crucifixion.

What is the opposite of love? Most folks would answer, “Hate.” St. Augustine would disagree. He wrote, “Apathy is the opposite of love.” Apathy is a combination of two Latin words: a which means no, and pathos which means compassion. Apathy is to be without compassion or feeling. If the husband and wife hate each other there is still hope. At least hate is an emotion. But when they no longer feel anything, it’s usually over. But Mark 6:34 says, “When Jesus saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, for they were like sheep without a shepherd. So he began to teach them…” Do you see people that way? Does it fill you with compassion? Does that compassion drive you to go to them? If not, pray that God would give you his John 3:16 heart of love for the world.

2. THE REASON FOR THE LIGHT.

Look at verse seventeen. Love doesn’t condemn. Our problem is that we look at the lost world and condemn it for its sins. We are quick to point out their faults. We moan, groan, and complain, “What’s the world coming to?” But what will we do about it? Karl Marx wrote, “The problem with too many theologians is that they interpret the problems of the world. The point, however, is to change it.” Rather than condemn, God came to bring change. Grab hold of those words in verse seventeen: “For God did not send his son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.” God sent, and Jesus went. Are you going?

A thief broke into a darkened house. He was rifling the place, looking for valuables to steal, when he heard a voice: “Jesus is going to get you.” A moment later the voice in the dark spoke again. “Jesus is going to get you.” He turned his flashlight toward a birdcage and saw the parrot. The bird screeched it louder, “Jesus is going to get you.” “What’s your name?” snarled the thief. The parrot replied, “Moses.” The robber shot back, “What kind of a dummy would name a bird Moses?” The parrot replied, “The same kind of dummy that would name a Rottweiler Jesus!”

Some of us think that Jesus is like a Rottweiler stalking us in the dark to take a bite out of us for our sins. Instead, God finds thieves and other sinners in the act of stealing the silverware under cover of dark, and wraps his arms around them. Surprised by his grace, they ask, “Just how much do you love me, God?” God in the flesh stretches out his
nail-scarred hands about as wide as they would be spread out on the crossbeam of a crucifix: “I love you this much!”

There’s only one way you can be condemned. Verse 18 says, “Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already, because they have not believed in the name of God’s one and only Son.” By disobeying God, Adam and Eve condemned the world to perpetual sin and all its awful consequences—including death. Sin is no trifling matter to a holy God. In Genesis 2:16 he said to our first parents, “In the day you eat of it (the forbidden fruit), you will surely die.” St. Paul wrote in Romans 6:23, “For the wages of sin is death.” Jesus says it in John 3:16—the whole world is perishing. Unless God sent a Savior, there is an eternal separation from life and light that could not be avoided.

And yet, Jesus makes an amazing statement in verse 18. To sin against a holy God is bad enough. But to reject his love is the ultimate condemnation. For God to give his one and only precious Son, for us to see him crucified, knowing that pure holiness is covered with the grossest of sins, understanding that the wrath of a holy God is poured out on him in punishment for those sins, grasping the fact that he has even descended into hell, hearing him cry out, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”—and then to walk away without accepting such a costly gift, is the worst offense possible against God. To state it with all the force possible: such an act is a monstrousity of ingratitude. Any thinking person could readily understand why such callousness deserves the ultimate condemnation. You have heard the gospel. Have you believed and put your trust in Christ’s death as the only act that can save your life? God loves the sinner. It is the rejection of his Son that earns condemnation. And yet, there is….

3. THE REJECTION OF LIGHT.

Our Lord is speaking to the religious leader, Nicodemus. He has come to Jesus under cover of night’s darkness. He won’t risk his career by going to this Galilean Rabbi in the full light of day. Jesus has been branded a heretic by the religious establishment. Nicodemus can’t afford to be identified as a potential Jesus follower. This is the backdrop to what Jesus says next in verses 19&20:

“This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed.”

Nicodemus is a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin. This council of 70 religious leaders is the final arbiters of all matters of faith and doctrine in the ancient Jewish world, and the Supreme Court of Israel. Nicodemus is a Chief Justice, coming to weigh the evidence of our Lord’s claims. He doesn’t have a clue that the itinerate rabbi standing before him is really God in the flesh. This Supreme Court Justice must be absolutely stunned when Jesus turns the table on him with his words,
“This is the verdict…” In a lightening-quick reversal, Jesus is now the judge and Nicodemus stands in the dock as the defendant. The whole world stands in the same dock with him.

In my imagination, I see the courtroom of heaven lean forward to hear the Judge of the Universe give his verdict: “Light has come into the world, but the people loved darkness instead…” No wonder the world is perishing. Let darkness stay long enough and all life will cease. For a while, molds and fungi will grow in the dark. Crime flourishes in the dark. Rats and roaches scurry about in the dark, bringing disease and plague. Before God said “Let there be light!” the creation story reports, “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep…” (Genesis 1:2) Before life can exist, light must be there.

Even religious churchgoing men like Nicodemus love the darkness. He uses the dark as a cover for his cowardice. But, in a blinding moment of insight, the Light shines right into the compromising heart of a religious man who wants to stick one foot onto the way of the Cross while keeping the other in the safe place of his well-ordered religious life. In the dark, he can consider Jesus without endangering his position. Nicodemus is the patron saint of the safe Christian—the believer who walks the middle ground of grey mediocrity. Jesus is really saying, “Nicodemus, though you are a moralist church guy, you love the dark as much as the thief across town, who uses the dark as cover for his felonies, or the adulteress up the street who uses the same dark to hide her immoralities.’

Jesus spares no one in verses 19&20. Sinners hate the light because it exposes their sin. Religious folk hate the light because it exposes their hypocrisies. Even Christians hate the light because it shows that they aren’t really fully devoted followers of Christ. Perfectionists find out that they aren’t perfect. Those who can’t forgive find out that they are the ones who need forgiveness most. Worrywarts are forced to admit that they don’t trust God. The self-righteous discover that they are spiritually bankrupt. The humble are shown to be proud.

Jesus spoke of clean cups that were dirty on the inside, and whitewashed tombs full of dead men’s bones. We keep the curtains drawn and the lights dim in the hidden parts of our soul. We don’t even want to know ourselves what’s hidden in our unconsciousness. Then Jesus shines the light. To our horror, rats and roaches are scurrying everywhere across filth and garbage we didn’t even know was there. If we love the darkness enough, we will go as far as to crush and extinguish the light bulb against the hard wood of a cross.

4. THE TRANSFORMATION OF LIGHT.

Jesus looks right into the eyes of Nicodemus when he ends in verse 21, “But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly what they have done in the sight of God.” Jesus offers an invitation to this Supreme Court Justice: “Will you come out of the dark and into the light?” I stand in his place some 2,000 years later, giving you the same invitation. Yes, it’s a fearful thing to let the light come...
into your life. He will show you all the dark places. It won’t be pretty. This light will continue to expose that which is hidden for the rest of your life. As soon as he cleans up one corner of your life, he will be on to expose stuff in another. But Jesus says that, if you love the truth, you will come into the light.

He also says in verse 21, “...so that it will be seen plainly what they have done in the sight of God.” You might fool some of the people some of the time. Sadly, you will fool yourself most of the time. But you can’t fool God any of the time. Everything that you hide from yourself and others is in plain sight of God. Not even your most secret thoughts, or things down deep in your own unconsciousness, are hidden from him. Jesus is telling Nicodemus, and all the rest of us, to stop playing games with the truth. The truth is: we will perish without Jesus. So let’s face up to the facts, and come into his light so that we can live his life.

Now a word for those of you who are already in the Light and are serious about being fully devoted followers of Christ: we will welcome the Light—as embarrassing and painful as the revelations might be. We will say to the Light, “Come now. Come often. Go deep. Leave nothing unexposed. I want to become just like you. Then, filled with your light, I want to go to places of darkness and shine your grace into those places where lost people are groping in the blackness of an empty and dying world.” We will go knowing that the light of Jesus won’t be welcome, and we will be rejected along with our gospel. But we will go, because we are on an intentional journey with our Savior.

The light went out for Ivar Kruegar and the rest of The Magnificent Seven. They never understood the Christmas story. They built their lives on sand, trying to be men of success and glamour. They all ended up in disgrace, exposed by the truth. If only they had known that God’s condescension in becoming a human is the only thing that exalts humanity. But we know. So let’s set the bonfires ablaze. A Son has been born. Let it light up the darkness—not just for a night, but for eternity. Not just in Petersburg, Virginia in the winter of 1864, but in the whole world.