

GOING NOWHERE

Not too long ago I went down to Jackson, Alabama. I was the pastor in Jackson for about four- and one-half years. Now, the best way to go from here to Jackson is to go down I-65 to Birmingham, take I-20 West towards Tuscaloosa, then take Hwy 5 south to Thomasville, then Hwy 43 the last 30 miles to Jackson. If you take that journey, you will find yourself winding through the country a good bit and you will find yourself in a small town, barely staying afloat.

As I read this passage, I thought back to a time when I was traveling that very road. I don't remember exactly when it was; I know I was still the pastor in Jackson. I don't remember where I had been, but somehow, while traveling that road, I took a wrong turn. I'm still not sure how- that's a pretty straight road, but somehow, I took a wrong turn, and I wound up in Selma. Now, once I figured out where I was, I was able to fix the problem without too much trouble. It took me an extra hour to get home, but I got there without too much problem. I saw way more of rural Alabama than I intended, but that's okay.

Then I thought of another time. That time I was headed from Jackson to Memphis. Again, I took a wrong turn, and found myself on the road towards Biloxi. By the time I figured it out and got turned in the right direction, I had no choice but to chart a course through rural Mississippi all the way to Memphis. That time I saw way more of rural Mississippi than I intended to see.

Have you ever been on a road to nowhere? I have. The two previous incidents are just two examples of times when I found myself on the road to nowhere. More often, I've symbolically found myself on a road to nowhere. I know every bend and curve of that road.

Now, the concept of being on a road to nowhere is central to understanding this passage. If you were to look at a map of Ancient Palestine and try to find Emmaus, you would see it was a tiny village in Judea. That is, if you could even find it. It was tiny. All I know for sure about it is that it is close to Jerusalem. By our standards it's not very far; it's an easy car drive but in the Ancient World it was a road to nowhere. By the standards of the day, it was out in the middle of nowhere. The two men on the road are going nowhere.

As the two men are walking down this road, going nowhere, they are discussing the events of the last few days. Then a stranger suddenly appears and asks them, "What are these words you are exchanging?"

One of the men, whom the scripture identifies as Cleopas, turned to the stranger and said, "Are you the only one visiting Jerusalem and unaware of the things which have happened here in these days?"

The stranger answered, "What things?"

Cleopas replied, “The things about Jesus who was a prophet mighty in word and deed. How the chief priests and rulers delivered him up to be killed to a sentence of death. We were hoping he was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, it is the third day since these things happened. Also, some women among us amazed us. They went to his tomb but they didn’t find the body there. They saw a vision of angels. Others found the tomb empty too; they did not see him.”

The stranger said, “Oh foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken.” Then beginning with Moses, he explained to them the things concerning himself in all the scriptures.

So, let’s sum up. These two men are walking along the road going nowhere (to Emmaus) when the living God appears to them. They are on the road to nowhere in at least two senses. They are heard towards Emmaus, which is quite literally in the middle of nowhere. More importantly they were on the road to nowhere metaphorically. They were looking for hope, and they thought they had found it in Christ Jesus. They thought he would be the one to restore the nation of Israel, but with his death they believed that hope was gone.

However, right at that moment when they believed that all hope was gone, they encountered the fulfillment of all hope. They encountered the risen Jesus. When it happened it was so different from what they expected that they didn’t even recognize it. They didn’t even see it for what it was.

Let me ask you, has that ever happened to you? Have you ever been on the road to nowhere? I don’t mean going to someplace like Emmaus. I’m sure that’s happened to you. I’m sure you’ve been lost. I’m sure you’ve been out to someplace tiny sometime in your life. What I really mean is have you been looking for hope? Have you been looking for a reason to keep going? Have you been looking for a reason to hope? Have you been on that road when God suddenly intervened? When it happened, were you ready for it? Did you recognize it for what it was?

Here’s what I have noticed in my years as a pastor. Some people are on that road, going nowhere, and they don’t even realize it. They don’t even realize they’re on the wrong road. In fact, I have met a few people who don’t believe in hope offered by God. I was serving as a supply pastor at a small church in South Carolina in my senior year in seminary. I had been asked to go up and preach for one Sunday. It was a tiny church in this tiny town in South Carolina. One of the elders was telling me about one of the other elders in the church. He said, “I’m not sure he believes in Jesus Christ.” He said, “I asked this guy why he goes to church, and his reply was, ‘It’s a noble institution.’” Okay. There’s a lot of noble institutions out there. You could have volunteered to serve with the Red Cross; that’s a noble institution. You could have volunteered at the public library; that’s a noble institution.

I’m not even talking about people who are self-identified atheists, though. These are people who deny spirituality of any sort.

The most extreme example of this point of view that I can think of is the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche believed that nothing abstract exists. He didn't believe in spirituality. He didn't believe in morality. He didn't believe in good or evil. The only thing that mattered, in his opinion, was the superior will. Whoever had the strongest will was going to be in the right. That's the way it should be, according to him. Friedrich Nietzsche was German. It's no mistake that Hitler was a big fan of Nietzsche. My favorite story about this man is that his sister became a follower of his philosophy. Towards the end of his life, he descended into madness. Even though he was not able to communicate by this time, she permitted people to come to see him and watch him rave. The rumor I have heard was that she sold tickets for the viewing. I don't know if that's true, but it wouldn't surprise me.

Some people take a different tack. They live entirely in the spiritual realm. They believe the hope is real, but we will only see its fulfillment after death. I think, truly, many of them don't dare to hope, because they fear disappointment, so they live as if the hope will only be fulfilled later. It's not here for us to grasp right now.

Still others believe that the hope doesn't really exist. They believe the events described are real, but the hope is just imaginary. There's no point in clinging to that hope. The world doesn't really work like that. So, they go along as if the hope has no bearing on their daily lives. Frankly, I think that's the direction these men were headed before Jesus showed up. They wished that the world could be like they believed it should be, but it just isn't.

To me this is the saddest of all. They don't really believe it's possible to live according to the scripture. It's not really possible to love your neighbor. So, they wind up ignoring the story of the gospel and focusing on other things.

So, again, when you find yourself on that road- and all of us do- how will you react? When God intervenes in your life, when you're on that road to nowhere, what will your response be?

Fortunately, for these guys, they make the right choice in the end. After he explained these things to them, he made as if to depart, but they begged him to stay and eat with them. He agreed. The scripture says that when he broke bread their eyes were opened and they recognized him. At that point, as soon as they recognized him, he disappeared.

As they talked about it later, they recognized it for what it was. They said, "Were not our hearts burning within us?" So often our encounters with God are like that. When God comes to us we don't recognize it initially. We focus on the road to nowhere and we think God won't help. Sometimes we even think God doesn't care. Then when God appears and opens our eyes, we realize God was walking beside us all along.

That's an important point, but I believe there's an even more important point to be made. The real point of the Gospel is that we never have to be going nowhere. We don't have

to wait for God to find us on the road. All we have to do is open our eyes and look. That's all it takes.

Maybe today I'm talking directly to you. Maybe you're one of those people who feel as if you're on a road going nowhere. I can't answer that for you, but what I can tell you is that you don't have to be. You don't have to be going nowhere. God is ready to meet you. God has been beside you all along. All you have to do is listen. All you have to do open your eyes and look. You'll find God there.

God has already intervened in the most dramatic way possible. He gave his life for you on the cross. If that doesn't open your eyes, then I don't know what will.