

IT'S A START

When Penny and I were exploring London a little less than a month ago, we got fairly proficient at using the public transportation system called “The Tube.” “The Tube” is London’s underground subway system, and if you don’t mind doing a little—or in some cases a lot—of walking, you can get pretty much anywhere in the city. The key to successfully utilizing the Tube is to know where you want to go. You need to know your destination before you can get on the correct line and get off at the correct stop.

Shepherd’s Bush was the closest Tube station to us, about a ten minute walk from our hotel, the Hilton Kensington. From there we could get on the Orange colored main line, switch lines at the Holborn stop, get on the Blue line called Piccadilly and travel south to go to Piccadilly Circus. Or, if we remained on the main line and traveled east for two more stops, we could get off at the Bank terminal and walk southeast for twenty minutes or so to see the London Bridge (which was a little disappointing looking, to be honest), and the Tower of London. Or we could take the main line, get off at the Bond terminal, get on the Gray Jubilee line and ride southeast to the Westminster terminal, where we could find Westminster Abbey and, with a little more walking, Big Ben.

A little side note: I really, really wanted to see Big Ben while I was in London, but for some reason Penny and I were having trouble finding it. We wandered all over that area of the city, looking for this historic, very tall, majestic clock I’d seen so many pictures of, and as we searched I couldn’t help but wonder, if it’s called Big Ben, why we couldn’t find it.

Finally we saw a sign pointing the way to it, and when we got there we did see Big Ben—wrapped in so much scaffolding that the only thing visible on it was the face. Big Ben was being renovated, and the work on it was expected to be completed in 2021.

My point, of course, is that if we want to get somewhere, the first thing we have to do is decide where we want to go. We need to ask ourselves, what is our destination? Where do we want to be at our journey’s end? If we don’t know what our ultimate destination is, we’re never going to arrive. If we don’t know where we want to go, we’re never going to get anywhere. That’s true

whether we're traveling around London or Scarborough. And it's also true in our life's journey.

Jesus had a particular destination in mind for his disciples. And, to be honest, it's not a very popular, well-traveled destination. It's not a target or purpose that a lot of people ask directions for or set their GPS's at to make sure they don't miss it. Even if that GPS is Jesus himself. Because the destination, the end journey Jesus has in mind for his disciples—at least those disciples who want to be faithful to him—the destination Jesus is directing us toward is . . . the cross.

“Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

There's no Tube line or terminal stop that will get us to the cross. There's no plane, train or automobile that will bring us to an end point called “Take Up Our Cross Way.” No, we travel to the destination Jesus is pointing us toward step-by-step, in the ordinary, commonplace actions, choices and decisions we make every day of our lives. Each action, choice and decision we make on a daily basis moves us in one direction or another: either toward the way of the cross, or away from.

Which is why it's so vitally important to have an ultimate destination in mind: because the end goal we decide is most important to us as followers of Christ, the goalpost we choose to set for our life as Christians—either going toward or away from the cross—has an enormous, incalculable influence on the actions, choices and decisions we make every day. The way we conduct ourselves—the attitudes, actions and priorities we base our life on—centers on where we truly want to be when our mortal life has ended.

Some time ago I heard what I consider to be a very enlightening thought. “If you want to get the most out of your life, begin with your eulogy and work backwards.”

Think about it. If you were to take a pen and a pad of paper right now, while you're alive and well, and write the eulogy you would like to have printed in the newspaper—summarizing the important moments, accomplishments and experiences of your life—what would you want it to say? What would you like people to say about you after you're dead and gone? What's the legacy you would like to leave behind? I'm guessing that the things you would really want to have written about you for the people who read your obituary to see would have very little to do with things like how much money you earned, the beautiful house, nice car and vacation home you acquired, or how much time and energy you put into your career.

I mean, does anyone ever get to the end of their mortal life and they lie

on their deathbed and think, “Rats, I wish I could have worked more,” or “Gee, I really wanted to accumulate more stuff”? I don’t think so. And clearly Jesus didn’t think so, either, if we take his dire warning seriously: “What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?” What good is it for us to gain the whole world . . . in possessions, in prestige, in promotions, in power, in popularity . . . what good are those things if we obtain them at the expense of losing our souls?

To avoid the pitfall of getting our life’s priorities mixed up and mistaking such worldly things for the most important things, now is the time to set goals that are more suitable for followers of Christ. Because the sooner we set the appropriate destination for our lives as Christians, the sooner we can ask the Holy Spirit’s help in guiding us toward that destination. The sooner we choose the goal of taking up our cross by living a life of sacrificial love as Jesus taught, the sooner we can shape our actions and attitudes and set priorities that will begin to move our lives in that direction.

I don’t know if you caught it, but I purposely used a phrase in that last sentence that, for me, is vitally important. And that is, “. . . begin to move our lives in that direction.” You see, when we make the decision to take up our cross and follow Christ, faithfulness usually doesn’t happen all at once.

I think of walking in the way of Christ as being a long journey—a journey of a thousand miles. And like a well-known Chinese proverb says, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” And when we take that first step of Christian discipleship, pick up our cross and begin to follow Jesus, even if it’s a small step or we stumble when we take that step, we can encourage ourselves by saying, “It’s a start. Or, “It’s a new start.”

In their book *Leaving the Light On*, Gary Smalley and John Trent shared this story.

We know a wealthy couple in Dallas who really struggled with teaching their children servanthood. For one thing, the kids have had almost everything they’ve ever wanted for years. They became so accustomed to others meeting their needs and wants that the idea of “serving” sounded like something from the Middle Ages . . . or Mars.

The father in that family realized he was getting a late start to try and change that, but hey, it was better than no start at all! So, a week or two before the holidays he said to his family, “We’re going to do something different for Thanksgiving.” His teenagers sat up and listened. Usually when Dad said something like that it meant something exotic. Like parasailing in the Bahamas. But not this time.

“We’re going to go down to the mission,” he told them, “and we’re

going to help serve Thanksgiving dinner to some poor and homeless people.”

“Come on, Dad. You’re kidding . . . aren’t you? Tell us you’re kidding!”

He wasn’t. They went along with the idea because of their father’s firm insistence, but no one was happy about it. For some reason their Dad had “gotten weird,” and apparently it was something he just had to get out of his system. Serving Thanksgiving dinner at the mission? What would their friends think?

No one could have predicted what happened that day. Because no one in the family could remember when they had such a good time together. They hustled around the kitchen, dished out turkey and dressing, sliced pumpkin pie and refilled countless coffee cups. They clowned around with the little kids and listened to old folks tell stories of Thanksgivings long ago and far away. The Dad in the family was thoroughly pleased (well, maybe it would be more accurate to say he was stunned) by the way his kids responded; but nothing could have prepared him for their request a few weeks later.

“Dad . . . we want to go back to the mission and serve Christmas dinner!” And they did. As the kids hoped, they met some of the same people they had become acquainted with at Thanksgiving. One needy family in particular had been on their minds, and they all lit up with joy when they saw them back in the chow line again. Since that time, the families have had several contacts. The pampered teenagers have rolled up their sleeves more than once to serve the family from one of Dallas’s poorer neighborhoods.

There was a marked but subtle change in that home. The kids didn’t seem to be taking things for granted anymore. Their parents found them more serious . . . more responsible . . . more willing to deny their own desires to meet other people’s needs.

Yes, it was a late start. But it was a start.

My friends, as we each take up our individual crosses daily and strive to loyally follow our Lord, let’s remember that we’re on a journey that’s going to take our whole life to finish. But before we begin, we need to set our destination to make sure it’s the right one; the destination Christ is leading us toward.

Today we’ve already taken a first step in our travels with Jesus, because we’re, worshipping God together and seeking inspiration to take up our crosses and faithfully walk the path Jesus is leading us down. With a long road of Christian living ahead of us, I pray that the Lord will guide and encourage us so that, even if we haven’t gotten very far ahead on our journey of faith, we’ll be encouraged knowing that we’re moving ever closer toward the goal. And it’s a start. Amen.