

England: Stripped of security blankets

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Our first week in Leeds, my co-worker Paul and I would walk every morning from our host home to the Emmanuel Centre, the university chaplaincy headquarters. On one such walk, I became terribly aware none of my clothes fit. At least, that was how they felt—oversized, almost oppressive, tailored for a man far more substantial than I.

In many ways, that was my ever-present struggle on this trip. The clothes never seemed to fit. I am, by nature, a shy, reserved, look-before-I-leap creature of habit with an utter lack of confidence in social interactions. Leeds called me to be a gregarious, warm, adaptable risk-taker. Furthermore, although the United Kingdom and the U.S.A. are similar, I felt entirely culturally inept. I didn't know the city layout. I didn't have mobile Internet. I had a very small number of friends. And I hardly knew my schedule for the next three hours, let alone the next day. My security blankets all were left behind in America. What had I done to so dreadfully mislead whoever was in charge that I should be here? Who is this "Seth" fool? He doesn't fit the bill. He's not big enough to fit into these pants.

All of that is true. I don't fit the bill, I can't fill the pants, and I had done nothing to merit this. But Jesus does, he can, he did, and he will again. The full weight of that truth hadn't quite sunk into my head yet.

No source of comfort but Christ

Christ had to take away all my sources of comfort to make me realize that I don't trust him. Not really. I can trust him at home where it's safe, sure—when I have a plethora of other sources of security (environment, family, friends, studies) to fall back on if something doesn't work out. But

the problem is, I'm trusting those idols instead of him.

When those things were stripped away, I became paralyzed. Operationally, I was fine, I could do the things asked of me, but if I had to think about it, the self-doubts would creep in and cripple my heart. Comparison was a heavy one—I don't fit in with this team. They're so good, so in tune with the Lord, so blessed by his gifts. What value can I add?

Related to that was something I think most of our group struggled with—whether our work here meant anything, since we so rarely got to see the fruit. Worried, wrestling, I could not love the students as Christ called us to, even if I could go through the motions.

At the time, I didn't know what I needed. God did, though, and he used his Word and his people to show me. I was blessed by my brothers and sisters from both Houston and Leeds, over and over again. God reached down to me, a little fool in ill-fitting clothes, and offered himself as a security blanket.

University chaplaincy outreach

The chaplaincy held a worship service on Ascension Day, May 25, in front of the student union. It was beautiful. Afterward, a few of us were passing out sodas and asking students to pin their home countries on our world map. Two came over, attracted by the map. Gio considered himself Canadian, Italian, and Greek; Laura was purely Italian. Both were studying English literature at Leeds University. I ended up talking with them for over half an hour about literature, England, the other events we would be participating in, their religious backgrounds—Orthodox and Catholic, respectively, though neither now practice—and whether this Jesus fellow was really who he said he was. Abruptly, upon the arrival of their friends, they left to get ice cream and invited me to join. I had to stay at my post, I told them, but thanks anyway.

I assumed that would be the last I saw of Gio and Laura. Scattering seeds, I reminded myself, scattering seeds. Connect them with the chaplaincy, which can water, but the Lord gives the growth. Still, it was all too easy for us to become discouraged by the lack of miraculous “come to Jesus” moments.

But then, 30 minutes later, they came back—and they brought me ice cream, freely, a gift of grace. As they were on their way to the library, we didn’t get to talk much more. However, it brought me such joy to see a glimmer of hope that something was working in their hearts.

The chaplains, during a final debrief, told us how they had seen the Lord moving in the city since we arrived. On top of connecting with more students, we also had the privilege of ministering to the chaplains themselves, who can feel like every day is another round of the waiting game. We may not have seen much change, only coming in for two weeks, but they could recognize the difference.

Our last night in Leeds, the team was leading a worship service at the Baptist church we partnered with. I had invited Gio and Laura, but they were not sold on the idea. Again, I didn’t expect to see them, and again, they showed up, just to say goodbye before we left the next morning. I was blown away. God is so faithful! Here he gave me another glimpse of future growth, a reassurance that, even if I never see it until heaven, our time here did have an eternal impact. And the Lord, who is not bound by my range of vision, the city limits of Houston, or the borders of America, will continue to work in Leeds through the long-term ministers he has appointed there. I am so, so thankful for the opportunity we had to learn from them and to participate in God’s plan for the United Kingdom. Whatever I lack, He fills up to overflowing.

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