

## **Shamed by the Faith of a Buddhist Farmer**

**By Jesse M. Boyd**

There once was a poor Buddhist farmer who lost his yak somewhere in the high mountain valleys of Ladakh in the disputed Jammu-Kashmir province of northwestern India. Meanwhile, my wife, two-year-old daughter, and I had been living in Leh Town, the high-altitude hub of Ladakh, for some weeks, laboring together for the Gospel with the Nomad, an old seminary friend of mine. The broad desert valley of the Indus River, the serrated cliffs of the mountain roots, the crisp autumn air, the scattered Buddhist monasteries, the Kashmiri traders: it seemed to be an uttermost corner of the earth. Living in Leh, the closest thing to a hot shower involved a bucket of boiling water, and a shadowed corner in our small kitchen served as a “refrigerator.” Going to the local market meant more than a mile of slogging uphill at an elevation of over 11,000 ft. No matter what errand might take us into town, however, we could not escape the gaze of a hoary-headed pile of rock to the south, taller than anything around and with a downward gaze that never left the broad river valley below. Stok Kangri, perhaps one of the world’s most easily accessible 6,000 meter peaks, beckoned day in and day out. After laying low for a couple of weeks with a stomach virus; missing out on a visit to some Tibetan nomads on the Changtang Plateau; and days of localized preaching to Muslim traders, Buddhist monks, and European tourists, the cabin fever was simply too much to endure. Stok Kangri had to be conquered, and the Gospel of Jesus Christ would be placed somewhere atop her snowy pinnacle.

So, the Nomad and I set out with Ladakhi James, a local believer who had experienced real persecution at the hands of the community Buddhist association during his Christian walk (Buddhism, a religion of peace and tranquility? Ask Ladakhi James; his answer will astound you). A mountaineering adventure, we hoped, would provide a unique opportunity to disciple this brother. Our expedition team also included a young guide/cook and a local farmer with his mule train. The approach began at Stok, a little hamlet at the roots of the mountains, and our path provided not a few opportunities to proclaim the Gospel in a spiritually dark and forlorn land.

I recall an encounter we had early on with a couple from Belgium. The Nomad and I steered the conversation to the things of the Lord, and the young man firmly claimed that he did not believe in anything, maintaining that he was a “scientist” and evolution was a “fact.” I asked him about the scientific laws of thermodynamics (which, by the way, show evolution to be a farce), but he had no answer. The young Belgian and his girlfriend had just wrapped up a multiple-day trek in the mountains, so we asked them how they could spend so much time amongst the wonders of creation and still deny the existence of a Creator. The young man responded that all we were seeing was the result of tectonic plate upheaval. I was immediately reminded of Psalm 14:1: Only a FOOL can say in his heart that there is no God. These were FOOLS (I did not say it; the Lord did). Nonetheless, the Gospel was proclaimed, trusting that it would not return void in these stony hearts.

Then, there was Sonam, the young Ladakhi serving as our guide and cook. A Buddhist whose faith in the Dalai Lama had been solidified by the hypocrisies and false teachings received at the hands of nuns in a Catholic school, Sonam bragged about his Danish girlfriend and the things she had taught him about Americans. “Americans have no culture,” he boasted. This set the Nomad off: “No culture you say. Have you ever been to a tailgate party in the South just prior to an Alabama-Auburn football game? You betray your ignorance.” Then, Sonam talked overweeningly about getting the Danish girl pregnant and her subsequent abortion of the baby. “You are a murderer,” I replied in my righteous anger. The conversation then turned toward “His Holiness, the Dalai Lama.” Sonam spoke eloquently of this mere man as if he were some sort of “Savior” for the Tibetan and Ladhaki people. Out of nowhere, Ladakhi James injected: “Don’t you understand that behind the genteel eyes of the Dalai Lama is a devil who has deceived many. If this man were some sort of god, why doesn’t he just deliver the Tibetan people from the oppression of the Communist Chinese? Instead, he lives in posh luxury, traveling all over the world and relishing in the hypnotic devotion of the white man.” Such were our ramblings over rice, a few vegetables, and hot tea at 14,000 ft.

Needless to say, I was impressed with Ladakhi James’ boldness before the face of his friend and partner, unafraid to risk a friendship by exposing the reality of Tibetan Buddhism and the lies of its “Savior,” the Dalai Lama. Maybe it was the Nomad and me who needed to be disciplined by him. Anyway, Sonam was confronted with the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and our preaching spread over several days yielded visible signs of conviction. He was close to salvation, even lending his language abilities to help us communicate the Gospel to our mule driver and other local farmers that crossed our path. The Nomad and I felt good, solid in our faith. Gospel preaching, discipleship amongst Christian brothers, and a steady climb toward the summit of Stok Kangri. We were bold men of God preaching without fear in a far-off land, pioneers of great faith, or so we thought . . .

Over the next couple of days, the mountain was conquered and the Gospel of Jesus Christ was placed at 20,187 feet atop a pile of Buddhist prayer flags. We even left a strand of our own prayer flags, proclaiming “Jesus is Lord.” Reminiscence of that slogfest is crowded with memories of Orion to the east just before dawn, the inner-grinding of my guts and diarrhea high on the mountain, an incredible sunrise over the Karakorum in Pakistan, subzero temperatures, countless dry desert valleys below, mammoth Himalayan giants on the horizon, and a dead camera battery on the summit. Success further fed our satisfaction: We were bold men of God, taking the Gospel to the far-off high places of the earth, pioneers of great faith, or so we thought . . .

As our team began its descent from Base Camp after a victorious summit push, we noticed a stray yak. It was obviously owned by some villager and had wandered alone up into the high pastures. Ladakhi James suggested that we take it with us back to Stok, the hamlet where our journey began, and seek out the rightful owner. The Nomad and I assented, relishing the exoticism of traveling with a yak. Strangely, word got back to Stok that a lost yak had been found. How, I will never know. I recall no one crossing

our paths, but news had at other times shown itself to travel fast and bizarre in these parts, perhaps on the wind or with a bird of the air. Good and wise is the warning of Ecclesiastes 10:20.

Early the next morning, a poor farmer approached our tents as they lay sprawled in a grassy meadow on the canyon floor at 13,000 ft. His shoes were ragged, his gear scant, and his clothes showed evidence of a failed river crossing. We beckoned him to enter our cooking tent and warm up by the fire. Our visitor removed his socks to reveal feet that were blue and scarred. Over tea, we discovered that he had lost his yak. We had found one, or so he had heard, and he came thinking ours to be his. Unfortunately, our yak was not his yak. In the dismay of the moment, we proclaimed the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Sonam translating biblical truth; and we gave him a brand-new pair of heavyweight wool socks. The Nomad and I then laid hands on this elderly farmer and prayed that the Lord would return his yak.

As we began to pack up our tents, I kept worrying: What if he doesn't find his yak? Will he then reject the Gospel preached to him? What if God doesn't answer our prayers? We will seem to be fools, and this man will have occasion to blaspheme the Lord.

Meanwhile, in an incredible demonstration of faith that reminded me of the Roman centurion in Matthew 8:5-13, the Buddhist farmer ended his search, waited for us to finish packing, and then followed us down the mountain. The Nomad was compelled to inquire about this, and we learned to our amazement that he felt no further need to continue his quest. With unwavering faith, he explained: "You prayed for me, and I know that you both are men of God. Your prayers were heard, so why should I keep searching for what assuredly will be returned to me by your God?"

Such faith, the faith of a poor Buddhist farmer, shamed me; it convicted me. Yes, I was laboring for Jesus, proclaiming His Gospel with boldness in a harsh and spiritually barren land, thinking myself to be a man of great faith. A Buddhist farmer and his lost yak showed me otherwise, and the Lord taught me something formidable. So many in America claim to believe the Gospel and trust Jesus Christ with their eternal salvation, yet these cannot trust Him with the simple trials and hardships of everyday life. If we cannot trust the Lord with what we can see in our present, how can we truly be trusting Him for what we don't see in our future?

I never saw that man again, but thinking back, I cannot help but believe as it was to the Roman centurion in Jesus' day, so to the poor farmer with the blue and scarred feet: "Go thy way; and as thou hast believed, so be it done unto thee" (Matthew 8:13). Nothing happens by accident under the Sovereign hand of the Creator, and "Salvation is of the LORD (Jonah 2:9). Therefore, I like to think that in the Kingdom of God, I will again run across the Buddhist farmer whose faith in the Lord, in some ways, shamed my own.