

Real Faith for Real People:
“When We Get Where We’re Going, Where Will We Be?”
II Timothy 4:6-8

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It was the middle of the summer. We loaded our family in an old station wagon, the one with wood paneling down the side, and headed to Florida for a vacation. About ten miles into the trip, we heard the chant that all parents hear when they take children on vacation. “Are we there yet?” “How much longer?” “If you keep asking we will never get there.” You know, normal family conversation. Then about 50 miles into the trip, our 10 year-old son, Wes, posed a question I can never forget. “Dad, when we get to where we’re going, where will we be?” Do you ever ask that question?

Our founder, John Wesley said, “I want to know one thing, the way to heaven- how to land on that happy shore. God himself has condescended to teach the way.”

WHEN I GET TO WHERE I AM GOING, I WILL BE RESURRECTED TO LIFE

“I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11:25).

People say the only two sure things in life are death and taxes. I don’t believe that. If you are creative and generous, you can redirect a lot of tax money to charitable causes. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ took the sting out of death. As far as I am concerned the last word is not death, but life.

Jesus said, *“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.”* Do you believe this?

Dr. Ronald Sleeth, professor of preaching at Iliff School of Theology, lived 21 days after being diagnosed with cancer. His wife, Natalie, trying to deal with her own grief while comforting her husband, wrote one of Methodism’s best loved hymns. This is what she says:

In our end is our beginning; in our time, infinity;
In our doubt there is believing; in our life, eternity.
In our death, a resurrection; at the last, a victory,
Unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see.

We Christians do not explain the resurrection, we are explained by it. We start with it, and live by it, and hope for it. We believe in life everlasting.

Now let me be totally honest and completely blunt. The promise of eternal life is not good news for everyone. If you despise life here, eternal life will be hell, not heaven. If life is a miserable tale told by an idiot signifying nothing, who wants an eternity of it? If you hate people here, spending eternity with them will be awful. What seems like a promise can become a prison.

I have a colleague who says to me Sunday after Sunday, “Howard, preach the hell out of them today.” That’s what I try to do. Wesley’s only requirement for admission in the Methodist societies was a “desire to flee from the wrath to come.” It is the will of God that all might come to know the riches of his grace. Don’t let the devil have you. Not now! Not ever! If you are going through hell, hang in there until God reveals to you a glimpse of heaven.

WHEN I GET TO WHERE I’M GOING, I PLAN TO BE A CITIZEN OF GOD’S KINGDOM

“Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.”

Is that not what we pray for every week?

I am proud to be an American, to live in a land that’s free, where I can stand in a pulpit and be completely me, but the USA will not last forever. Like all other kingdoms that have gone before it, this great country will someday come to an end.

I am proud to be a Methodist. As the old camp meeting song suggests, “I’m a Methodist, Methodist, Methodist, Methodist, Methodist till I die. I’m a Methodist, Methodist, Methodist, Methodist, eatin’ Methodist pie,” but there will be no Methodists in heaven, figuratively speaking, of course. As Miss Stora Barlow used to say, when I was a boy preacher, “Brother Olds, there won’t be any stalls in heaven.” So, you who like to wave denominational banners better get your fill of it down here.

It is not going to help me at the pearly gates that I hail from the great Commonwealth of Kentucky, that I bleed blue, that I talk country, for the former things will have passed away.

Jesus said, *“Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you”* (Matthew 6:33). Smart people know how to put first things first, to spend their time on the important, to invest in the eternal.

What seems small now, no bigger than a mustard seed, will one day be the law of the universe. *“For God shall reign forever and ever.”* What seems like a daydream now shall one day become the way of life for all people. *“They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up*

sword against nation, nor will they study war any more.” What seems impractical now will become a possibility over there. *“And now these three remain, faith, hope, and love, and the greatest of these is love.”*

Sometimes I get anxious for God’s kingdom to come. Patience has never been one of my virtues. There are times when I find myself singing in the night:

This world is not my home; I’m just a passing through,
My treasures are laid up, somewhere beyond the blue,
The angels beckon me from heaven’s open doors,
And I can’t feel at home in this world anymore.

WHEN I GET TO WHERE I’M GOING, I WILL BE FINALLY HOME

Henri Nouwen often wrote about flying into airports after long trips and watching people being reunited with those they love. In airport terminals lovers are kissing, children are hugging; friends hold big signs that say “Welcome Home.” Henri, who traveled alone and often wrestled with his own loneliness, says that he often left the airport depressed and sad that he came home to not one personal greeting. “Then,” says Henri, “I find comfort in a greater thought. When I reach my final destination, when I make my final descent, when I am finally home, there will be a great company of saints to welcome me, a host of friends to say hello, and best of all, the Lord himself saying, “Welcome home, my beloved child; come on in.”

Somebody asked me the other day why I didn’t preach more on the rapture, on being left behind, on one being taken and another abandoned. My reply was quick and concise. I don’t preach about the rapture, because there’s not much about it in the Bible. A couple of verses in Matthew, that’s all.

What about Armageddon, that great war that is to end all war? It gets mentioned in one verse in Revelation; it doesn’t even make the index in my Bible. What sells as religious fiction and catches the imagination of many Americans is nothing more than a passing footnote in the Scriptures.

Let me tell you something that is on every page, since Adam and Eve were expelled from the garden. It’s the yearning for a home-coming. It’s about getting back to where we belong. It’s about a New Creation. John Wesley was interested in the universal restoration that superseded any universal destruction.

So, the children of Israel wandered 40 years in the wilderness without giving up until they found their way home. The Jews, in bondage, never lost hope that the destroyed temple would be restored and they would once more march to Zion. The prodigal, in the far country, never quite forgot the home from which he fled, and

when he came to his senses he headed back. The disciples were comforted by the very fact that their Lord and Savior was going to prepare a place for them.

Sometimes when I feel troubled by this war, weary with this disease, and pained by teenagers gone crazy with guns, I am reminded that my restlessness is a kind of homesickness. God never intended for us to get comfortable with things like this. So I live in the glad and glorious assurance that when I reach my final destination, disease will be conquered, pain will be eliminated, and people will live at peace forevermore.

For when I get where I'm going,
There'll be only happy tears.
I will shed the sins and struggles,
I have carried all these years.
And I'll leave my heart wide open,
I will love and have no fear.
For when I get where I'm going,
Don't cry for me down here!