

## DID WE EXPECT TO LIVE THIS LONG?

“Are we there yet, Daddy?” “No, you have to be patient. We will be there soon, but it won’t seem like it to you, so settle down and play with some of the things your mother brought along for you to do.”

That was a familiar scenario for me and my sister when I was very young. And I realized recently that it’s familiar still with a conversation I often have with God. I play it back and think *oh my goodness*. “Are we there yet God?”

How much longer before we get to go to the next realm? Are most of us really happier about spending 2018 here in this world than we would be to spend it in God’s Kingdom in a higher realm? I suspect that only people who do not really believe in the reality of God’s Kingdom feel this way about it. *Maranatha! Come Lord Jesus. Christ is coming soon*. That was the sincere hope and prayer of the early church. They knew that this was a vale of tears. They knew they lived in a reality ringed with cruelty, evil, poverty, disease, temptations, and pain. I know it too, don’t you?

To be sure, some things go very well – for a while. Some of our friends and relatives are in good health and in good circumstances – for a while. But the misery all around us is overwhelming – if we let it in; if we are willing to notice and hear the cries. Symphonies can be beautiful. Landscapes can be breathtaking. The stars are still beautiful at night, at least in Port Townsend and Alaska. Love is all around us. Opportunities and chances to do good abound. But a high percentage of us put on blinders and earmuffs most of the time in order to keep out the darker side of life – in order to keep our emotions from feeling the full weight of sorrow or despair, or worse.

The first generation of Christians literally warped the Message and the teachings of Jesus because they were so eager to get out of this world. They started promising each other that God’s Kingdom would come on earth within their own generation. We have ample proof that Jesus had no such expectations and that Jesus was trying to prepare His followers for a much “longer haul” than that: the *ecclesia* – the church; the mission to spread the Message of the Gospel to others; the great invitation to enter the Kingdom even in the here and now, and immediately. *Not* what we call the “Second Coming” – the last judgment and the close of the Age. But the made-up version of God’s

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plan had already embedded itself deep within the Jewish culture for at least two hundred years before Jesus arrived. So for a while, what Jesus tried to tell us could not “get through” to most people. For many, it has not gotten through even yet.

That’s not altogether surprising. We do not like what Jesus is telling us nearly as much as we like what we can make up. We like some of our daydreams better than we like the Gospel. Apocalyptic scenarios, however fraught with turmoil and warnings about what will happen to us if we do not repent and get on the right side, are full of grand celebrations and congratulations for those who have “made it.” “For the Lord God omnipotent reigneth. Hallelujah!”

Yes, well, we still live in hope. But such declarations are not true in this realm, not yet anyway. It is true and can always be true for us personally, if we truly choose to worship and love and serve our God. But it can get tough, even lethal, in this broken world whenever the authorities of this temporal world decide to resent anyone who will not acknowledge and pledge allegiance to their purposes, desires, and authority.

Most of Christianity as we know it is designed on the assumption that we will be here much longer than we want to be. Yes, and longer than makes any sense to us. Jesus came, died, and was resurrected. What’s the delay? What is God waiting for? Some of the people in Newport Beach do not mind waiting a little longer. Many of them have some good plans and possibilities that they would like to see evolve and developed. I have sometimes hoped for it too, with good friends like Jack Caldwell and Jim Musselman and many of you. I still have some good moments. I just do not like to kid myself about how good this world really is or how it is getting better and better. That may have made sense to some people in the nineteenth century, but it made no sense in the first century A.D. and it makes no sense today.

Even so, God has built us not to quit on life easily. I wonder why that trait is going to be so important in the next realm. It is obvious to me that God would not have made it so important here if we were not going to need it there. But speculation about the details of what awaits us only distracts us from our responsibilities here.

In any case, what we translate as “patient endurance” is a major theme in many of Jesus’ parables as well as in many of Paul’s writings. Next to humility, patient endurance is the most important virtue of the

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Christian Life. Why would that be? We are supposed to be all loving and kind to each other; we are part of faith communities; we have the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit; we have our work to do; we are full of hope and peace. Why would we need all this patient endurance?

“Within the next few days,” Jesus tells His first-string disciples and apostles, “you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit. Do not go on any of the missions I am sending you on until you are clothed with power from on high.” Why are they to be patient – to wait in Jerusalem – until they receive the Spirit? What sense does that make if they are all about to be whisked up into Heaven? Somebody already knows that the part about “He is coming soon” is nonsense. Oh, to be sure, He is coming soon as the presence and power of the Holy Spirit. But that does not get anybody out of the fray in *our* realm. That only makes it possible for us to survive here for whatever years are still to come: for the trials, temptations, and travails that are still to be endured; for the thorns we carry in the flesh; for the betrayals and the heart-aches and the failures and the losses we are about to suffer as we try to be faithful to our Lord in a broken world where nothing lasts and where nothing is as it was designed to be.

I don’t know about you, but the truth is that I did not expect to last this long. After some serious rounds with trying too hard and big mistakes and serious failures – and yes, picking up some experience and understanding along the way too – at about age forty-eight I thought it was “over.” I was already pretty surprised I had made it for *that* long. But instead of things ending, it all started over (so to speak) in a new and different light. Slowly I was drawn back into the game. And that was okay, but I still assumed it would only go on for a few more years. But now, thirty-six years later, it seems clearer and clearer to me that Jesus was designing His plan and purpose to prepare us for life in this partial place – this shadow realm – for a lot longer than the early disciples were counting on. As we all know, it is easier to be faithful, courageous, and true for a month or two than it is for thirty or forty or fifty or sixty years. So how do we get ready for the long haul?

The Path, the WAY – the Christian Life – is wonderful for the long haul, not just for a few weeks. But only if we really mean it – only if we truly walk the Path and trust our Lord. More and more it looks like many people in our society have given up on Jesus and the Christian Life. They do not even try to live “His WAY” or to please Him anymore. As some have commented, “Christianity is the greatest spectator sport

in America.” That leaves plenty of time for kibitzing; for good advice from the sidelines; for judgments and criticism about how others are doing. It is one of Satan’s best ploys, and churches are getting cut down and taken out by it everywhere we look. I am not sure it’s possible for a spectator to stop being critical. It just comes with the territory. The only solution is to get in the game.

Anyway, the disciples are waiting in Jerusalem. They are not off doing their own thing. They get impatient and try to do some important things while they are waiting, but it comes to nothing. They *are* waiting. They have nothing better to do. They have no idea what’s coming, what they are waiting for, what shape and form their lives will take now.

Some of us are not very good at waiting. Sitting around is against every instinct – against all our training. Therefore many of us will march into 2018 without waiting for the Holy Spirit to give us any instructions – without even waiting to see if the Holy Spirit will confirm the purposes and directions we are already pursuing. That may make sense to the world around us, but that is not the Christian Life. We are no longer in control. Our lives belong to Another. That’s what conversion means. We are open and waiting for our Lord – the head of the church – to tell us what He wants us to do next. Otherwise Christianity is all a farce – a pretend thing. If we do not believe in Jesus or His church – and clearly most people in our society do not – then it does not matter. It’s back to doing things our own way, to the best of our own abilities, and all of religion is just a metaphor – comforting perhaps, from time to time, but not the light and power behind all of our living.

In any case, we are reminded in the first chapter of Acts that living the Christian Life is not something we can design; it is not something we can figure out or control. We wait for the presence and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Until we are clothed with the Holy Spirit, we are not in the game. We all know that, at least in our minds, but Christianity is far more than intellect. It is not supposed to be *less* than intellect, but it is so much more than mere outer knowledge.

Chapter one of Acts has the disciples waiting in Jerusalem. But this is not our only tradition about how the disciples deal with this in-between time. I save myself a lot of angst by not trying to “homogenize” all New Testament passages. Different writers tell things with a different perspective – a different emphasis. That troubles some people, but it seems very understandable to me. It might surprise you, but sermons do not always go where I want them to go or where I intend them to go.

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In most Bibles, if you are studying the first chapter of Acts, then the last chapter of the Gospel of John (chapter twenty-one) is staring at you from across the open page. There the disciples are *not* waiting in Jerusalem. They have gone back up to Galilee. They have seen Jesus – they know He is resurrected – but they do not know that this has anything to do with *them*. Hooray for Jesus! He has been the incredible Messiah, and God has vindicated Him and made Him victorious. But these disciples all deserted Him at the crucial hour. They have failed. They think they are out of the story. Sitting around is not Peter's strongpoint, so he decides to go back to his old life – back to fishing. The others decide to go with him. This is not a happy moment. It is as bleak as anything we can imagine. If you have missed the only train that matters, life is not a joyful affair any longer. But what else can they do?

There is still a great hint for us here. If you think you have missed everything that matters, go back to where you were when Jesus came for you the first time. See if He comes again. And that is precisely what happens in this story. They have fished all night and caught nothing. Then they see this stranger on the shore, who tells them to cast their nets on the wrong side of the boat. And the nets are filled to overflowing, just like the first time.

Who is it, there on shore? Who else *can* it be? So we skip over the antics and the humor and the meal they share. It's all there in the twenty-first chapter of John, if you care. But after breakfast it gets deadly serious, and we move way beyond intellect. Jesus asks Peter, "*Do you love me?*" That is not an intellectual question.

If I ask, "Do you love Him?" – that is just impertinent curiosity, or perhaps a desire on my part to manipulate things. But if *Jesus* asks you, "*Do you love me?*" – that is entirely different. A lot of the power and reality of our religion is contained in that question when Jesus asks it. And it cannot be answered by reciting the Apostles' Creed, or by any of the other endless rituals that we have invented to put around our worship services to lend them dignity or to try to claim more than human authority.

"*Simon Peter, do you love me?*" Do you ever hear Jesus asking *you* that question? Take off the earmuffs and you will. Of course, I understand; I am as adept as any of you at dodging and ducking the Holy Spirit: It's only a question that Jesus directs to Peter, right? It's only a question that Jesus asked once, long ago. We are not

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involved. It's not about us. It's not a question we expect our Risen Lord to ever ask *us*. That's how we keep our earmuffs on. By the way, Jesus is already resurrected when He asks Peter this question.

Our answer to that question changes everything. And what Jesus means when He asks us to feed His sheep also changes everything. Do you really want a Happy New Year? Do you want it happy, or do you want it new? Nothing wrong with both, I guess. It is true joy to love Jesus, and it is joy to feed His sheep. And no, they are not *my* sheep! They are *His* sheep. What a huge burden that takes away, when I remember it.

Some of you are way ahead of me already, but I have been a Pastor long enough to know that many people – maybe even the majority of us – when we start to get into passages like this, our first inclination is to go negative. Despite all that Jesus has done, taught, gone through, and tried to explain to us, our first reaction much of the time is guilt. Christians have heard of forgiveness and grace, but they *believe* in guilt. If I feel guilty enough for long enough, eventually the shame will make me be good. Is that not the real creed of the Christian church?

But Jesus does not ask Peter – or you – “*Do you love me?*” just to make Peter feel guilty. He asks it to bring Peter back to full awareness of the real truth. Jesus *loves* Peter. And Peter loves Jesus. That is the truth, and that is the bond of power between them.

If we go guilty or negative in the face of life's real and most important questions, then all hope goes out the window. Guilt and shame do not bring us into love and life. The love of the Savior and the love of God behind Him bring us to love and life. Guilt and shame can sometimes get our attention and help us to realize where we got off track. But the instant we recognize them, then we need to be calling on forgiveness and grace to restore us to what we really love.

So excuse my digression, but I want you to realize that I am not sidestepping anything. Here is the crucial moment: “The Last Breakfast,” we often call it.

Jesus does not ask Peter if he feels guilty about having deserted Him on Maundy Thursday. He does not ask Peter how he feels about having heard the cock crow, or about how he sometimes wanted to be the greatest among the disciples. Jesus does not remind Peter about any of his mistakes and blunders. He does not remind him about the

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time Jesus even said to him, “*Get thee behind me Satan.*” Jesus does not chide Peter about all the times he was off base or all the times he misunderstood things, even when he was sure he was right. Jesus does not even scold him for having gone back to fishing – back to his old life. If guilt and shame were the purpose, these would have been the right and proper questions.

But Jesus asks Peter only one thing: “*Do you love me?*” That is not about guilt. That is not about shame. That is the most powerful affirmation known to humankind. “*Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.*”

Do you know what is going to happen to us if we go into the new year with that affirmation ringing in our ears?