

“Now and Then” (Revelation 7:9-17) All Saints’ Sunday, November 1, 2009

“Are we there yet? Are we there yet?” If you’re a parent, these words probably sound familiar! Especially when you’re heading off on vacation! Kids can start asking this before you’re even out of town. But isn’t that the way it is with kids? Never mind what might be worth seeing along the way. Never mind relaxing and enjoying the ride. To them, all that matters is reaching the destination. Hence the annoying question, *“Are we there yet?”*

How different this is from the way grown-ups think! We focus much more on the journey. And for good reason! When we head off on vacation, we know our time is limited, so we want to savor each moment. After all, vacation will be over before we know it! And then what? So we tend to focus on the journey!

At any rate, these are two very different attitudes, aren’t they? So which one is better? Some might prefer to focus on our destination, others on the journey, but regardless of which approach is better, I think we can all agree which one is best – and that is focusing on both! Enjoying the journey and looking forward to our destination. Not one or the other. Both.

And if I understand Scripture, that’s also the best approach to life. Yes, there was a time when Christians focused mainly on their destination – or at least thought they were supposed to. This life was just a vale of tears – something they had to get through before they finally arrived in heaven. These days, though, the attitude seems just the opposite. People focus almost exclusively on the here and now. Make the most of this life! Grab all the gusto you can get! And as for heaven... Well, how many times have we heard someone say, “It’s the journey that counts, not the destination”?

But that’s not true, is it? Actually, neither attitude is true. God did not give us this life just to “get through” it, but by the same token, He never meant this life to be our primary focus, either. A truly meaningful life focuses on this life *and* the life to come. Not one or the other but both. People who just live for the moment fritter away their lives. Their tombstone might as well read, *“They just took up space.”* The same is true for those who just mark time looking forward to eternity. Their tombstone might read, *“Too heavenly minded to be any earthly good!”* But when people focus on both – that’s a whole different ball game! They ask themselves, “What did God put me on this earth to do? What things will matter in eternity? What choices will please God, so that when I meet Him face to face He’ll say, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant! Enter into the joy of your Lord!’?” People who ask such questions and act accordingly are the ones who make the most of their lives. They’re the ones who make a difference with their lives. People who focus on this life and the next. People who focus on now and then.

Just to illustrate this need to focus on both, think about your average college student. What happens if he just focuses on the journey, not the destination; just

lives for the moment? Chances are he'll have a lot of fun in school – way too much fun for the parents' comfort level! But chances are he'll also fritter away the time – not only wasting money but valuable opportunities. That's what usually happens when you just live for the moment. On the other hand, though, think what happens when a student just focuses on the goal. You know: work, work, work, work, work so you can graduate and get on with life! To be honest, I was one of those, so I can tell you what happens. You kind of turn into a drudge! You also miss a lot of opportunities. One of my biggest regrets is that I didn't take time to smell the roses, didn't take time to enjoy the experience, didn't take time to learn things I didn't have to learn. In its own way, that approach also fritters away time. In my own case, the best course would have been to focus both on the journey and the destination. Not one or the other. Both. That's true for any college student. And that's true for life.

An even better illustration would be seminary. When I started preparing for the ministry, we used to joke, "What if Christ comes again before we get the chance to warn people that Christ is coming again?!" – the assumption being that ministry only begins after you graduate. Well, that first year, I learned better when a young pastor named Jim Baker suddenly died. He had only been ordained maybe a month, so there were many who said what a shame it was that he went through all that preparation and never got the chance to minister. But the preacher at his funeral set us straight. The truth was: Jim had not put off ministry until after graduation. Throughout his young life, he had served God in various ways; he had touched people's lives and made a difference in various ways. That would not have happened if he just lived for the moment. It would not have happened if he had just marked time until graduation. Fortunately, he made the most of the journey by focusing on what would matter when he reached his destination. Each step of the way, He followed Jesus, served Jesus, shared the love of Jesus. So even though his life was short – way too short – his life was still rich and meaningful. That's how it should be. And that's how it will be – however much time we spend here on earth – when we focus both on our journey and our destination. Focus on both now and then.

You see, focusing on now and then has a way of shaping our perspective and deepening it as nothing else can. That's especially true when we're looking at the hard side of life. These days, many people have a skewed perspective –like there should be no hard side of life. Many seem to think that life should be easy and religion should make it easier until you get to the easiest part of all – going to heaven! I don't know where they get this perspective, but it isn't very realistic, is it? And it sure doesn't fit the Bible's perspective!

Take the one in our text, for instance. As John shares his vision of heaven, he describes **“a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.”** These people are **“robed in white”** – symbolic of Christ's righteousness. They carry **“palm branches in their hands”** – symbolic of spiritual victory. So **“who are these, robed in white,**

and where have they come from?” “These are they who have come out of the great ordeal.” Now, in studying this text, some interpret “**the great ordeal**” as a specific persecution – maybe one the early Christians faced or the Great Tribulation before Christ comes again. Certainly, it could include either or both, but John is talking about an awful lot of people here – “**a great multitude that no one could count**” – and they’re not just from one particular time or place but “**from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.**” So my guess is that this multitude includes all Christians, including you and me. In fact, this vision shows us the biblical perspective on the Christian life.

So notice: it assumes we will have spiritual and moral struggles. That’s why we need a Savior. That’s why we need forgiveness. That’s why we need Christ and His sacrifice on the cross. That’s why we need to be saved by grace alone – or to use John’s imagery, why we need to have our robes made “**white in the blood of the Lamb.**” This vision also assumes that we’ll face trials and hardships. Why else would we need comforting? Why else would we need tears wiped away? And why else would we get palm branches? Palm branches are for people who conquer, not for people for people who just coast! So struggles big and small are assumed, likewise trials and hardships, which is not to say the old puritans were right – that this world is *just* a vale of tears we need to get through – but ups and downs are in the contract! There is no exemption just because we’re Christians! Jesus never promised us life would be “*easy, easier, easiest.*” He called us to deny ourselves, take up our cross, and follow Him, then promised, “**Be faithful unto death and I will give you the crown of life.**” That’s the biblical perspective. And it’s actually a very helpful perspective if we can keep ourselves properly focused on both now and then.

I mean, if we just focus on life now, as if this world is all there is, then any struggles, any tears, any trials, any losses will seem like the ultimate tragedy, from which nothing positive could ever come. And strangely enough, it will be no better if we just focus on the life to come. Then any struggles, any tears, any trials, any losses will just be something to get through, nothing more.

But...think what our perspective will be if we focus on both now and then. For one thing, nothing that happens now will be the ultimate tragedy, because we know what awaits us ahead – a life of glory, peace, fulfillment; a reunion with departed loved ones. “**God will wipe away every tear.**”

What’s more, in God’s hands, whatever happens now can actually be used to our spiritual advantage – used to shape us into better people; used to make us stronger, spiritually mature; used to change us more and more into the kind of people we’re meant to be. Remember how Paul said in Romans 5: “**We even rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts...**” James says much the same thing in the first chapter of his book:

“Consider it nothing but joy whenever you face trials of any kind, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.” Now notice: this insight comes from Paul *and* James! When those two agree, you know we’re onto something special! And John, Jude, Peter, and Hebrews back them up. Just shows what a great God we have! Not only can our God bring light out of darkness, good out of evil, life out of death, He can use even the toughest experiences to bring growth and strength and deeper meaning to our lives. He can even bring blessings out of misery; unexpected blessings. He can – if we’re open to it. But to receive all this, we need the right perspective, a biblical perspective – one that doesn’t focus just on this life, doesn’t focus just on the life to come, but lives each day with an eye on both – choosing to live life here in light of what will ultimately matter in eternity.

Many of the saints we’re remembering today knew this truth and made the most of it. What stories I could tell about the difference it made in their lives! But if you don’t mind, I’d like to share a story that’s fresh this week – about my goddaughter, Marylee. A month ago, she learned that she had an ovarian cyst. It was large and painful, and there was no way of knowing whether it was cancerous. Now, for any 19-year old, that would be traumatic enough, but for Marylee even more so, because she grew up in the shadow of her uncle Chris’s death...from cancer...at about the same age. In fact her surgery was scheduled the day before the anniversary of his death. I talked to Marylee beforehand, of course, then I went up to Spokane the night before surgery to spend time with her. And I have to tell you how proud I was of her attitude. I didn’t see any self-pity. Or any bitterness. Or any doubt or resentment toward God. And what *did* I see? Courage and confidence and inner peace. That’s what I saw Thursday morning at the hospital, too. Like anyone, she prayed for a good outcome, that God would bring her safely through the surgery no worse for wear. That’s what we all prayed for! But with amazing serenity, Marylee placed herself in God’s hands, trusting implicitly that **“nothing in all creation could separate” her “from the love of God.”** What a wonderful perspective! And that’s what I saw in Marylee. So let me share one last thing. Here’s what I expect to see now that the surgery is over. I expect to see even greater confidence in her Lord. I expect to see deeper awareness of what things really matter in life. I expect to see her draw upon this experience to help others facing traumatic situations. Just for starters. This wouldn’t be possible had she just focused on this life or on the life to come. But focusing on both – that made quite a difference!

It always does. So that’s the encouragement we take home with us today: making sure we keep focused on both now and then – and not just now and then but always! There is no better perspective we could choose, no wiser approach to life, and no smarter way to use whatever life dishes out to our spiritual advantage. Make the most of the journey by focusing on what will matter when we reach our destination! Focus on both now and then! Amen.