

# A Time for Farewells, A Time for Mission

August 30, 2020

## Opening

To read, to hear, to find the Word of the Lord just when you need it, this is one of the best mysteries in the Kingdom of God. The longer one lives, the more one finds that the Word of God is an endless and beautiful mystery. You can read a book, a parable, a verse twenty or two hundred times and it reads no differently. But then all the sudden life changes and you read familiar passages through new eyes, reading well-known words as if for the first time. Jesus' words, "Come to Me all who are weary and heavy-laden and I will give you rest," sounds entirely different to the soul suffering exhaustion. The beatitude "Blessed are those who mourn" stands out when you experience loss. Even Ecclesiastes' ancient words that "there's a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from embracing" reads entirely new during a pandemic.

So it's both surprising and unsurprising that Scripture shows a persistent pattern of farewells. Surprising because we've likely never studied Scripture regarding farewells. Unsurprising because we know that the Word of God is living, active, endlessly wise and comforting.

Jacob bids farewell to his sons who bring forth the 12 tribes of Israel. Moses bids farewell and speaks the Lord's blessing over Joshua and Israel. Elijah blesses Elisha in his dramatic departure. Our Lord's addresses his disciples in the Upper Room, known as the Farewell Discourse, with the deepest words from his heart.

Departures and farewells persist throughout Scripture, but there's a noticeable change in that pattern *after* the Gospels. Partings and farewells become more frequent in the Book of Acts and the New Testament Epistles. There is no coincidence here. We discover that *moments of farewell increase as Gospel mission expands*. Paul recalls his parting from Timothy at Ephesus in his second letter, remembering Timothy's tears. Apostles remain at

churches for seasons and years, then the Lord calls them onward in mission, just as Paul bid farewell to Titus at Crete. Then there's that moment when Paul is traveling along, finds lodging at Troas, goes to sleep, and a Macedonian man appears in a dream saying, "Come over to Macedonia and help us."

*If you join God's mission, it's inevitable that you will experience farewells. It is a sign that God the Holy Spirit moves in the hearts of his people to advance his Kingdom.*

This morning we bid farewell to our dear brother in the Lord, David Clifton. Let's just afford one another permission to receive the tears God gives today. I'll need that permission myself. Remember Paul and Timothy: tears will flow for apostles at the time of parting and farewell.

Yet partings and farewells are occasions that *form* us, too. These moments shape us in the love and obedience of Christ. Before parting occurs, there's always an opportunity to be formed more deeply *for* God's mission. I don't want to miss that moment, difficult though partings be.

Our Lord Jesus reveals three purposes for his saints in times of parting:

- these times form us more deeply in obedience
- they renew vision of our Lord's Kingdom
- they strengthen and encourage saints to remain faithful to the end.

Let's meditate on deepening obedience to begin.

## **Learning Obedience Through Tears**

Farewells between friends is always a time of mixed emotions, the greater part of those emotions involving tears. There is sadness in the parting, but there is unquestionable devotion from both to the Lord Jesus and his calling. Friends who belong to one another in Jesus Christ spur one another to obey the Lord's calling, whatever that may be.

Notice how Luke describes Paul's response to the dream of this Macedonian calling. After they awoke in Troas, *immediately we sought to go on to Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the Gospel to them.*<sup>1</sup>

The mission of our Lord Jesus Christ requires our obedience. / He does not reveal all that awaits or will transpire at the next station. He requires trust. He calls for obedience. God's mission to redeem humanity through his Son's Incarnation began with the Virgin Mary's *obedience*. "Behold I am the servant of the Lord; let it be unto me according to your word," the Virgin Mother said.<sup>2</sup> That's the creed of the surrendered servant of the Lord: 'let it be unto me according to your word.'

Mary's obedience was immediate; Paul's obedience was immediate. Sometimes the call comes at the end of extended discernment, but when the call comes, saints have one response: obey the calling of the Lord.

I think of a moment in Thessalonica when a contentious mob said of the saints, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also."<sup>3</sup> As the Holy Spirit was turning the world upside down, underneath the spiritual revolution saints made numerous decisions of common *and* extraordinary *obedience*. When saints obey the Lord's calling—whatever or *wherever* it may be—there is only one sufficient response: Yes, Lord.

Obedience is difficult because it can mean partings and farewells; uncertainty of the road ahead. But it's all worth it because our Lord Jesus said, "Behold, I am with you always even to the end of the age." Obedience may bring tears at times of departure, but **peace abides** because you enter the future confidently trusting our Lord Jesus.

God gives the gift of peace when you answer his call. Here's the most distressing place to be in the spiritual life: resisting the will of God when you know what he's called you to do. It's not even an efficient use of your energy. You have to work hard at resisting his will and you're worse off for fleeing his call. Obedience may require sacrifice, obedience may bring

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 16.10

<sup>2</sup> Luke 1.38

<sup>3</sup> Acts 17.6

farewells and tears, but one thing you never have to sacrifice when you live abandoned to the Lord Jesus: peace that passes all understanding.

## New Devotion

Just as times of parting form us in obedience, times of parting also reveal **the essence of the Gospel**. When Jesus stood on the Mount of Olives before his departure and ascension, he distilled his Kingdom mission to its very essence with these words of commission:

*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age.*

Three years of apprenticeship in the Kingdom of God distilled into these three sentences. Departures help us see essentials in ways we cannot perceive in ordinary days. We see the Kingdom of God with greater clarity in times of transition.

Preparing for change prompts reflection. It's almost an involuntary response. You reflect on years past as you prepare for the years ahead. And when you look back, you see with greater clarity what matters most in this life and the Kingdom of God. /

As many of you know, Emily and I are packing up our house to move to north Knoxville. We're expecting to close on our house in 10 days. When you pack up your belongings, inevitably you come upon photos and mementoes that revive memories in a home. When you're going about your daily life, you don't realize all the important events and memories that have happened in one place. You don't realize that an ordinary place is becoming a sacred place in your heart. Times of change have a way of helping you see the faithfulness of God in ways you couldn't perceive day to day.

When we bought our home five years ago, we asked the Lord to make our home a blessing for his purposes. We desired our home to be a gathering place for friends, especially for

Apostles friends. And that it was, especially for our Table Group, which gathered there many times. As we prepare to move house, I find myself reflecting how the Lord answered our prayer ‘greater than we could have asked or imagined.’ He fulfilled his purposes for that place, even as we sense his calling to a new home in Knoxville.

As we look back on these past eleven years with David Clifton, we look back to the beginning of Matthew’s Gospel, where our Lord Jesus proclaimed his words of blessing—the Beatitudes. This is what the Kingdom of God is all about. We see with greater clarity the purposes of his Kingdom. Bless the poor in spirit, bless the meek, bless those who mourn, bless those who hunger and thirst for righteousness. That’s the beautiful simplicity of this Kingdom. That’s why you answer his call with obedience—to extend the blessing of his Kingdom wherever he sends you.

## The Purpose of His Sending

This much remains clear—God sent you here, my brother, to write new songs for his church. We read the Gospel, we hear the Gospel, we preach the Gospel; you have led us to *sing* the Gospel. That has been true throughout the seasons of this past decade; it was especially true in the Advent and Christmas seasons. You gave us new ways of singing familiar Christmas songs and carols with reimagined versions of “O Come O Come Emmanuel,” “Infant Holy, Infant Lowly,” “O Little Town of Bethlehem.” You led our children to lead us all in worship with a new song for us, “Love Shown Down.” We can’t imagine Christmas without that song. We sing with childlike faith; we sing with one voice across the generations in that song of praise.

New songs came forth from your heart over the past decade when we celebrated the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus, too: the *Carmina Gaedelica*, *The New Born King* in Christmas 2014 remembering the Christmas Truce of 1914, and in recent years the *Magnificat*.

In ordinary days, we got some of our Appalachian melodies deeper in your bloodstream and you led us to Lean on the Everlasting Arms; to arise and go to Jesus; with a new renderings of our folk melodies. A whole new verse and chorus came through your soul when the Lord gave you *The Beatitudes*. I would not have heard the fullness of Jesus’ words,

“great is your reward in heaven” without the song he gave you. Or without Preston on bass and Jason on drums.

I will always be grateful to you for the way you hear and play *O Love That Will Not Me Go*. I want to preach one day like you play that hymn. Those words and melodies move past all our defenses and reach us with the love of God where we need it most—the heart. Bless you, my brother, for playing music that takes hold of the secret heart with the Gospel of our Lord’s endless love.

Our good, beloved, and departed brother in Christ, Alec Woodhull, used to quote this lovely proverb:

For the common things of everyday God gave man speech in a common way.

For the deeper things men think and feel God gave the poet words to reveal.

But for the heights and depths that know no reach God gave man music, the soul’s own speech.

You have given our souls speech for this pilgrimage of faith.

I told David Clifton that I often sing *The Song of Simeon* that he wrote to my son at nighttime. It’s a composition that works as a choral piece, with a worship band, and even as a lullaby. We sing these songs as prayers.

(I know you’re uncomfortable with attention focused on these works right now, but know that we’re thanking God more than we’re praising David Clifton. These were his gifts to you. These gifts became our offerings to worship our Lord Jesus with our voices, our souls, our hearts.) We are grateful to you, my brother, and it’s remarkable the work God has done through you. You only see glimpses of the work he desires to do through you when you say yes to his calling. You can only see so much of the work he had for you when you arrived in 2009. But we all have a greater fullness of the Lord’s goodness in the songs you’ve led, conducted, written, and sung. *You have fulfilled the work the Lord called you to do at Apostles*. We are full of so many good hymns and songs that sing the Gospel to our souls.

They remain with us as we *answer God's calling for us with obedience in Knoxville*, just as you're obeying the Lord's calling in Oxford.

The Apostle Paul, who became so experienced in departures with his missionary calling, said this: "Glory to God whose power working in us can do infinitely more than we can ask or imagine." So we give thanks to you, but we glorify the Lord alone who never ceases to amaze us with his goodness.

## **Godspeed, Our Brother (Strength for Mission)**

And so we say Godspeed to you, our brother. There is no denying how difficult change and times of departure will be when saints have loved one another and served the Lord together. This is what life brings when you're sojourning to the Lord's New Jerusalem. And that is why in times of parting we see one final pattern. Always we find this when saints part from one another: strength and encouragement.

When you trust in the Lord and obey his calling; when your faith is renewed with the essence of the Gospel; he calls us into his mission. But he sends us with *strength and encouragement*. It was Paul's signature offering to his churches. Be encouraged, be strengthened in the Lord Jesus. Be strong of heart when you answer the Lord's calling. Walk with boldness and confidence that is the Holy Spirit of God leading you, working in you that which is well pleasing in his sight. That is our farewell blessing to you, but this is a missional moment for us, too. If God has been calling you to a work from which you been running, answer his call with obedience. Instead, be strengthened and encouraged in the Lord and do the work he's calling you to do. Apostles Anglican, we have Kingdom work to do in Knoxville, TN. We are the bearers of God's blessing upon the poor, the tired, the meek, the exhausted, the weary, the hungry, the thirsty. Listen for his personal calling. Obey the voice of the Lord and take heart that he is with you always even to the end of the age.

And remember what comes at the end of the age! The New Jerusalem coming down out of heaven. Yes, we'll sing that a little later. And we'll sing a lot more songs in this sojourn of our faith; many songs we didn't have in 2009 that have become precious to our souls. They

are traveling songs. For partings in the kingdom of God are only temporary. ***The New Jerusalem is permanent.*** We are rehearsing for the New Jerusalem every time we sing. For all our farewells will come to an end when the Holy Spirit completes the mission our Lord Jesus began. And there we will sing forever in his New Jerusalem: Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit. As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be; world without end. Amen.