

A Solid Goal in Mind

In the name of him who has sent us his Holy Spirit as a pledge guaranteeing the things to come, dear friends in Christ: Quite a few years back, as I was just finishing up the US Army Engineer officer basic course at Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and getting ready to head out for that first real assignment, they had all us brand new second lieutenants sit down with an Army career counselor. He said, "Okay, the first thing I want you to do is to write down all the jobs and assignments you'd like to have in the next twenty years before you're eligible for retirement. If you could plan your career in the service, what would it look like?" So we went to work. And we sat there listing items thinking, "Well let's see, first I'll have to serve as a platoon leader; that's a given. Then I'll want to be a company executive officer, and after that a company commander – actually, I'd like to do that twice – then, I'll want to be on a battalion staff for a while ..." and so it went; we just kept listing all the things we dreamed of doing. When we had finished that, he said, "Now you have to add a few things. First, if you stay in for twenty years, you'll probably spend at least three of them in various schools and training programs, so add that to your list. Then, you have to recognize that sometimes you'll have assignments that probably aren't on your list. Everybody has to pull their time in what we call the three R's, which is Recruiting, ROTC, or serving full time with the Reserves; so add that to your list as well." There may have been a few other things he had us add too, I don't remember; but anyway, then he said, "Okay, now that you've figured out what you want to do, I want you to add up exactly how long it's going to take for you to do it."

When we added up the numbers, the results varied from a low of about thirty-five years to over sixty for a few especially ambitious young officers. The average was somewhere in the high forties – all those assignments we hoped somehow to cram into the next twenty years. Having thus made his point, the counselor said, "You can't plan your career by trying to do everything you want. You simply don't have enough time. Instead, you have to pick a solid, attainable goal and work toward that. So the question is not, 'What do I want to be doing for the next twenty years?' rather it's 'In twenty years' time, where do I want to be?' Then, allowing time for schooling and certain obligatory assignments, when you have a chance to choose, you pick those assignments that will advance you toward your goal. Or to say it another way, you make your career decisions in the present not based on personal preferences or the whimsy of the moment; but with an eye toward attaining your goal. Let your future be what drives your thinking in the present."

Now, I have to say that very good advice for a bunch of green second lieutenants way back when (not that I took it, because you can see where I ended up, and believe me, this wasn't part of the plan back then; but, even though that's true,) I think it's fair to say that the same general principle applies to most other career fields, and really, to life in general. A journey needs a destination. Rather than flitting about aimlessly pursuing the latest fads, scratching your itches, and doing whatever feels good at the moment, and, as a result ending up nowhere near where you want to be, it's far better to have in mind a concrete goal for the future and live in the present with that goal helping you to define your priorities, inform your decisions, and guide your steps.

And if that's a good way to approach the worldly and temporal side life, then let me suggest that it's even better on the far more important spiritual and eternal side. And what I mean is this: if I were to ask, "Where do you anticipate seeing yourself in, say, one hundred years' time?" I'm guessing that we'd all have the same answer. We will be where we will spend all of eternity: in heaven with the Lord. (Am I wrong? Is there anyone hoping to be someplace else? I didn't think so.) Obviously, most of us won't have to wait a hundred years to realize that future – any one or all of us could be there tomorrow; but my point is this: if that's where we all want to be, and indeed plan on being, then shouldn't that goal be what's driving our thinking, planning, prioritizing, and decision making in the present?

Now, there is a difference here, to be sure. When it comes to career planning or setting goals for this life, there's a good chance that if you're not consciously working toward your goal you'll never attain it. That isn't the case with our heavenly goal. None of us will inherit the kingdom of heaven because of our own achievements, nor will we lose it because we didn't fulfill our obligations. We're not *working* toward the goal. It's a gift we receive through faith in the Lord Jesus who suffered and died for our sins, and who rose

from the dead to make his righteous life our own. It's his work for us on the cross that we rely on to get us to the goal—which is why the goal is so surely and certainly ours. If it depended on the things that we do or don't do, none of us would make it. But since it depends on Christ and his perfect atonement on our behalf, then our making it to the goal is as certain as his resurrection from dead. Because Christ lives and reigns for all eternity, so certainly will we who through faith are in him. The only way we can lose it is to get ourselves outside of him. Through willful persistence in sin, by extinguishing the voice of the Spirit who calls us to repentance, or by starving our faith through neglect of God's Word and Sacraments, sure, in such ways we can indeed "jump ship", so to speak, off the Ark of Salvation and throw ourselves into the sea of damnation. But there are rails in place to help keep that from happening. And if we do fall or jump overboard, the Lord sends lifeguards who try to get us back aboard. You've literally got to be hell-bent determined to drown yourself – albeit sometimes people do. But if we are keeping our minds on the goal, then we won't be doing the sorts of things that will put us at risk.

And that's part of what I mean when I say it's best to keep our mind on the solid goal; but there's more to it than that. Because this wonderful heavenly goal is so surely ours in Christ, it should be a big part of how we think about things now. That's what St. Paul is saying in today's Epistle lesson. He writes, "We know that if this earthy tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands." And here when he speaks of a tent, he's talking about this mortal body of flesh and blood in which our spirits dwell. He's saying that it's just a temporary shelter; a flimsy, portable hovel of skin that serves as our living quarters during our journey here below. It's not going to last, nor should we want it to. He's saying that one day we're going to happily set these junky tents aside to move into our permanent homes: our glorious, immortal, resurrected bodies. That's a good thing: something that we should be looking forward to with eager anticipation; so much so that if the enemy attacks us and threatens us with persecution and death, rather than fear and tremble, our response should be, "What are you going to do, kill me? Go ahead. Make my day." And likewise, when we see the telltale signs of degeneration, the wrinkles and gray hairs, when we feel the aches and pains of age, don't sweat it. It only means that this tent is wearing out; and when it does, you get a house that lasts forever. It's not a loss; it's a huge step up. It's something to desire.

And we can take this a step farther. The truth is that there are few things as important to us as our own bodies. We prove this by devoting countless hours and vast amounts of resources to feeding, clothing, cleansing, exercising, resting, and trying to satisfy it. We buy vitamins and medicines to keep it healthy; haircuts, cosmetics, and jewelry to keep it looking good; and deodorants, colognes, and perfumes to keep it smelling nice. And after investing all this time, effort, and expense, when all is said and done, we're only going to throw it away. Now, believe me, I'm not saying you should neglect yourself or your appearance. Lord knows I don't want you to stop washing and using deodorant (that could get nasty). What I'm saying is that we need to keep it all in perspective. If what's most important to us is only going to the dump, so to speak, then how much less should we be attached and devoted to the lesser things we value so much in this life? Yes, we live in the present, and in the present we have to contend with the realities of our situations. We have obligations to fulfill. But, *but when we have choices to make*, we should make them from a heavenly perspective. We can ask, "Is this going to matter to me when I make it to the goal?" Think about all the things you fret about and get so worked up over. Think about the goals you have in this life. Ask yourself, "Will I think that this was important, that it was worth the time and effort I put into it, when I'm in heaven with the Lord?" If the answer is "no", then maybe it's time to reconsider your priorities. Maybe it's time to ask, "What *can* I be doing now that *will* matter to me when I'm in heaven?"

We've all heard the expression, "He's so heavenly minded that he's no earthly good." And it's possible to be that way. That's the way certain people at the church at Thessalonica were. They learned from St. Paul that Jesus was coming back soon to judge the earth and take the faithful to heaven, so they said to themselves, "Great! Since it won't be long now, let's just sit back, take it easy, and wait for it to happen." They stopped working. They stopped cleaning their houses. They stopped looking after themselves and thinking about the future because, they thought, it would all be over soon. Paul had to set them straight. He told them to get back to work and to keep on with the business of living their lives. They had a wrong approach to being heavenly minded. But in another sense, being heavenly minded is the right way to be. The fact is that we don't know how much time any one of us has left; but we do know that each one has been given a limited amount of time and resources. Let me suggest that only a person who views things from a heavenly perspective can see

the present accurately. Only such a person can see how he or she might best utilize whatever they've got for things that will matter in eternity.

This is what Paul means when he says, "We live by faith, not by sight." Because *we do know* what the future holds, we are able to see the present for what it really is: just a temporary weigh station, a passage to something permanent beyond. And so, from this point of view, Paul says, "We make it our goal now to please the Lord"; that is, to use the limited time and resources we have to do the sorts of things that will matter forever. We know that none of the stuff that people strive so hard to accumulate in their lives will go with them to the other side. We know that there are only two things from this life that will endure: people who trust in Christ as their Savior and Lord, and the fruits of faith and righteousness that Jesus worked in them through his Word and Spirit. That's it. And that's where, when we have choices to make, our priorities should lie.

When we arrive at the goal, none of us will ever regret the time we spent strengthening our faith by hearing and learning God's Word. No one will say, "Nuts, I went to communion too many times." We won't regret the time we spent sharing God's Word with others. We won't think that the time and effort we spent helping people in need were wasted. We won't regret the occasions on which we were able to display Christian love and compassion. Instead, these will be the only things from this side of life that we will continue to value. And understanding as we do that such actions are the fruit that Christ works in us by his Word and Spirit should encourage us all the more to enrich ourselves with the means that God has given us to grow in his grace. That's the emphasis of today's Gospel lesson: the Word of God is Seed that grows in us and produces a harvest. It follows that the more we plant in ourselves, the greater will be that harvest that we produce.

One final thought here: Paul's talk of our present bodies being tents in which we are living during our temporary journey here on earth suggests the biblical image of the Children of Israel wandering in the desert on their way to the Promised Land. Just think for a moment what it would have been like to be one of the Israelites who were very young at the time of the Exodus from Egypt, or who were born some time in the forty years of wilderness wandering. Put yourself in a pair of their sandals. You've lived in the hot, dry, and dusty desert all your life. You've been constantly moving from place to place to find forage for the livestock. Your home, such as it is, is a tent made of animal hides and camel hair. It's heavy to carry; and when it's set up, the desert winds make it flap and shake like it's coming apart. It's constantly in need of repair. Then there's the food situation. You've got manna. That's pretty much it. Once in a while some quail come in and you have meat. Maybe a little milk and cheese from the goat herd; but nothing else, ever. Then there's the constant water shortage. Yes, there are springs and oases here and there, and when you're really in a pinch the Lord gives you water from rocks; but most of the time you to carry your water in goatskin bags from place to place. Life is hard, hot, monotonous – you and everything you own is constantly covered in sweaty, sandy grit. It's a real pain in the backside.

But the old folks, the ones who remember living in Egypt, they talk about how things are going to be when we get to Canaan. They say, when we arrive there we'll have homes: solid buildings made of stone and wood. They will be permanent and sturdy. We won't have to keep taking them down, lugging them around, and setting them up all the time. And inside there'll be furniture: tables and chairs and real beds to sleep on. And around the houses we'll have gardens with sweet smelling flowers and fresh vegetables. And there'll be groves of fruit trees: olives, figs, pomegranates, plums, and apricots. And there will be vineyards: fresh clusters of juicy grapes – and wine to drink. And we'll be able to sit in the shade of big trees, and feel the cooling breeze coming in off the sea. And there'll be wells with water in them all the time, or maybe a stream running by, and you'll be able to have cold, fresh, clean water—as much as you want, whenever you want. They talk about these things; but you are unable to even imagine most of it. What's a solid home to someone who's never lived in one? What's a bed to someone who's only slept on the hard ground? For goodness sake, what's an apricot to someone who's never seen a piece of fruit much less tasted one?

In the same way we too, who are in our pilgrimage here below cannot now imagine what it will be like when we are received into the kingdom that Christ our Lord has prepared for us; but we know it will be an infinite step upward. That's our goal: a heavenly inheritance given to us through faith in our Savior. We are going home. We are certain of it. And because we are certain of this solid goal it needs to be what drives our thinking and our actions in the present. So, for the times that we have allowed ourselves to lose this heavenly

perspective and have become distracted by things that ultimately do not matter, and for the times we have succumbed to doubt and despair because of the weakness and signs of decay we see in our bodies, we ask the Lord's forgiveness. And hearing his sure word of absolution, and receiving to ourselves again his body and blood given as witness of his earnest, let us ask him to fill us with his Spirit that we may truly live by faith, doing the things that will please him now in time, and, when in his wisdom he takes us home, forever in eternity. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!