



Every parent who's ever breathed has no doubt heard the cry that every child in transit has uttered: "Are we *there* yet?" Sometimes the words are repeated in chattering expectation; sometimes they are sighed in resigned weariness. But regardless of their tone or frequency, their prompting is the same: the longing to be somewhere we are not. For those of us who are no longer children, the stakes of our grown-up journey are much higher than we may admit. Our hoped-for destination is not Disneyland or grandmother's house or a favorite campsite. We are not traveling in a loaded station wagon with a Styrofoam ice chest in the back. This journey is just as real—but our destination is a true kingdom, not a magic one. And our goal is not simply transport or amusement. *It is abundant, vibrant, God-glorifying, soul-satisfying life.*

The mystery of our anticipated kingdom lies in the fact that it is both present and future, now and not yet. It overlaps the edges and sometimes intersects the very heart of this ragged world—but it comes from another place altogether. In those overlapping, intersecting moments, our desire is most keenly felt. *We know* we're made for more than this. We're just not sure whether to bury our longings or embrace them—whether to deny the disappointments of everyday life or dive deeper and plumb their depths. Like it or not, we live each day struggling to reconcile "how it is" with "how we hoped it would be."

And the ache persists. Money can't make it go away, and love can't quench it entirely. It won't be wrestled into submission by activity or power or subterfuge. C. S. Lewis once said that if we

find in ourselves a desire which no earthly thing can satisfy, the logical conclusion must be that we are made for another world. And so we are.



Blow-dried meteorologists invoked their grim mantra over and over as I sat before the television, trying to absorb the reality of what a category five storm might mean to my sprawling Gulf Coast city. "Run from water," the weather gurus repeated, "hide from wind." Friends called to confer: "Are you leaving? Where are you going? When will you go?" We discussed things that had never before come up in the course of conversation, like whether or not we lived in the one-hundred-year floodplain (half of Houston does) and what records or belongings we ought to take with us, should we decide to evacuate.

I called my sister and brother-in-law. They were staying close to care for his elderly parents. I called my parents. Staying, in a split vote. I had a ready refuge two hundred miles north, and my family encouraged me to go. A good friend had offered her home so that I could at least work and not risk being without power for several days. I could even bring my dog, she said, knowing full well I wouldn't have left without him. I wavered for a full day as the storm grew, gaining speed and intensity, but after hearing a host of elected officials urge everyone who could travel to do so, I decided to head north. Run from water, hide from wind, they said. I set my alarm for 4:30 and went to bed. I was going to run before sunrise.

My ringing cell phone awakened me at 5:45. The alarm had failed to go off, but the car was loaded—and after hearing my dad's last-minute instructions (take plenty of water; be sure you have a full tank of gas; be very careful; call often to let me know where you are), I put my dog Chester in the seat beside me and our northward exodus began. I thought the four-and-a-half-hour

trip might take me as much as twelve hours, and I had prepared myself for that. But nothing could have prepared me for the eighteen-hour purgatory that would soon unfold.

Less than a half mile from my home, the freeway shut down to a crawl. An accident was blocking the three right lanes, the radio informed me. I dutifully merged left and waited. Forty-five minutes later, I was sailing north, but my burst of speed didn't last long. I had traveled only another handful of miles before coming to a literal halt on the interstate. Ahead of me as far as I could see was a line of brake lights. I turned the radio up and heard the bad news: gridlock for a hundred miles, with over a million people (and me) traveling out of the city toward safety. It was, quite literally, an exodus of biblical proportions.

I took a quick inventory. I had a quart or more of water. Dry cereal and some juice packets. A full tank of gas. A cell phone and charger. But it wasn't yet 7:00 a.m., and already I could feel the heat rising from the asphalt beneath me. The radio announcer said to expect temperatures nearing 100 degrees throughout the day, and I knew that sitting in a running car with the air conditioner blowing would use up precious fuel. Being hot was far better than being stranded, I reasoned. I would use the air conditioner sparingly, only when I needed to cool us down. I rolled down the windows and turned off the engine. The uncertain wait was on.

Cars were parked for miles on the freeway. People got out and walked from one car to the next, talking to strangers as if they were neighbors. The couple in front of me was from Maryland, trying to catch a flight out of the airport some twenty miles away. They offered me pistachios and chatted good-naturedly as we waited to inch forward another few yards. I prayed they would make their flight and get home. I prayed I would make my destination too, but the signs were not encouraging. Not at all. Four and a half hours later, I was approaching the airport.

On a normal day, the same trip would have taken me twenty-five minutes or less. The heat was becoming unbearable. Chester was panting, but he refused to drink. I began wetting the top of his head with water, fearful that my decision to leave would cause this to be the last trip we would take together.

My radio DJ wingman offered no encouragement at all. He reported that every artery out of town was essentially shut down and not moving. Department of transportation engineers were devising ways to make all incoming lanes outgoing—a massive contra-flow plan that included every freeway but the one I was on. Then he not-so-judiciously announced that a family of four had just called in to say that their family pet had expired in the car. I cried for the first time.

If I could have turned around then, I would have. Movement, even in the wrong direction, was preferable to being trapped in the heat and having my dog die in my lap. But there was simply no way to reverse the path that I had chosen. I was on a course that could not be changed—at least not anytime soon. Every hour or so, when I could get a cell tower signal, I spoke with my dad. He offered alternate routes if and when I could exit the interstate. My sister did likewise. Ultimately I would use one of those routes, but not for several more hours. The familiar voices of my family became my lifeline. I needed to believe that someone knew my whereabouts. I needed them to tell me I would be okay. I tried to keep my voice from sounding frightened as we spoke, but I could not begin to mask its weariness. I was bone tired, sweating, and stroking the head of the limp and panting dog draped across my lap. Every time I wet his head, the words “I baptize thee” came strangely and soundlessly to mind. I prayed the water would soothe him, even if he would not drink. I sipped from a juice pack, but not often, since bathroom breaks were a complete impossibility. And we waited in mind-numbing limbo for something ahead of us to move.



Like me, the Israelites were barely “out of town” before their massive and miraculous exodus screeched to a halt. Backed into a corner at the edge of the Red Sea, they faced the sure menace of Pharaoh’s oncoming army. The only choice left to them seemed to be not *whether* to die but *how*: by an Egyptian soldier’s sword, or by slow drowning in salty waves? The same God who—by plagues and miracles—had weakened Pharaoh’s resolve to keep Israel in slavery now changed the Egyptian ruler’s heart again: “For Pharaoh will say of the sons of Israel, ‘They are wandering aimlessly in the land; the wilderness has shut them in.’ Thus I will harden Pharaoh’s heart, and he will chase after them; and I will be honored through Pharaoh and all his army, and the Egyptians will know that I am the LORD” (Exod. 14:3–4).

It made no sense. Why would God lead his people out and then threaten their very lives? Why would he arrange the all-too-soon showdown at the Red Sea? For his own glory, the Bible records. For his renown. For his great fame and name. It seems that more was at stake than the Israelites’ straight, comfortable, and expeditious journey to the promised richness of Canaan. Their going out was as much about the trip itself as it was the destination. They may have been focused simply on getting from point A to point B. God was focused on much, much more than that. Through time and tears and hardship, he would build their faith and cause them to boast in his provision. He would make believers out of opposing armies and prove his faithfulness again and again. His chosen ones were weak and dependent. He was mighty and strong. This was the truth they would be called to relearn at every bend in the road.

Were they pleased with the painful and unpredictable nature of their God-led journey? No, they were not. They grumbled. They railed at Moses. They reinvented for themselves a happy

history in Egypt, where in fact they had been miserable slaves. They even questioned whether it had been necessary to embark at all if death was to be their certain end: "Then they said to Moses, 'Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you dealt with us in this way, bringing us out of Egypt?'" (Exod. 14:11).

But the Red Sea did not prove to be the scene of their demise. Anyone who's seen Cecil B. DeMille's *The Ten Commandments* knows how the showdown ended: God instructed Moses to send the Israelites into the water and to lift his staff over the sea and divide it. (I try to imagine how implausible these instructions must have sounded to Moses; I simply cannot.) God ordered—and Moses obeyed. The Egyptians gave chase, but the wall of water that protected God's people did not stand for their enemies. The Egyptians drove their chariots and armies into the sea in chase, and chaos ensued. Then Moses lifted his staff again and the waiting waters gave way, drowning the chariots, the horsemen, and Pharaoh's entire army.

Could unarmed Israel have defeated Egypt in their own strength if they had turned and fought at the edge of the sea? Not likely. Had a single Israelite ever witnessed a body of water—*any* body of water—cleave itself in two? Negative again. But these end-result-oriented people were only just getting to know their process-happy God. In the months and years that ensued, they would find themselves helpless and held fast by circumstance many times, and he would surprise them at every turn.

He led them to twelve springs of water in Elim when they thought they would die of thirst. But he didn't quench their thirst that same way again. The next time he brought water from a rock instead. He fed them with strange stuff from heaven called manna, but just enough for each day. Its properties were oddly fleeting, and it could not be stored up in advance. They were forced to gather it anew each morning, and each morning he

provided more. He gave them bread at sunrise and meat at sunset. He led them with a cloud by day and a column of fire by night. He routed armies before them and confounded their enemies. They grew in faith, and he got glory. Lots of it. But they would never have chosen such a rigorous drill had the choice been left to them. They were learning to be God's people in God's presence by God's power. They were tasting his kingdom, still miles and years from Canaan.



As traffic crept along the interstate at a snail's pace, I eyed the gas gauge. It had dropped below half a tank, and I was still hours from my destination. My friend called and suggested an alternate plan if I could not get to her home by nightfall. Her former college roommate lived an hour or two closer and would be glad to take me in. If I could not get to her, she and her husband would come for me, wherever I was en route. "Get as far as you possibly can," she said. "Don't stop. Help is coming."

I exited the interstate onto a farm road that would carry me north and west, then crawled along on it for twenty miles. (Others, it seemed, had had the same idea.) At least this road was shaded by tall pine trees, and the heat was less intense. I rolled down the windows and felt a slight breeze. Chester turned his face into the wind. I was grateful for such a small but welcomed grace, and I whispered heartfelt thanks. Haltingly, start and stop, start and stop, I made my way to another interstate—this one turned into a six-lane contra-flow, heading north. Moving on it at more than ten miles per hour felt like driving the autobahn. I spoke with my dad again. "As soon as you can, start looking for gas," he urged. I *had* been looking, but every station I'd passed had either shuttered up entirely or placed white plastic bags over the pump handles to show they had already sold what little gas they had.

Finally, with less than a third of a tank left, I spotted an open station with a long line of cars. I pulled in behind the last one and prepared to wait another hour or more for fuel, praying the supply would not run out before my turn came. I thought of the God who provided oil for the Maccabees and bread for the multitudes and prayed that he would provide fossil fuel for me. I put Chester on his leash, gave him water and a few bites of kibble, and let him explore. I carried him inside with me for a break and then returned to my car to inch toward the pumps.

In front of me, a man in a Michael Jordan T-shirt smiled. I smiled back. When his turn came to pump, I stepped out of the car again. "Where are you coming from?" he asked.

"Houston," I said.

"Where are you headed?"

"Tyler tonight, I hope," I said. "How about you?"

"Got family in Crockett," he replied. "I think we'll stop there." Then he eyed my car and my now energized four-legged traveling companion. "Is that your posse?" he asked.

"That would be it," I nodded.

"Come on now," he teased. "Where's that man of yours?"

"Don't know. I guess he hasn't found me yet," I said.

He smiled again. "How about a thirteen-year-old ball player? I coach a boys' basketball team back home."

The line got a chuckle. I think that was his intent. We wished one another a safe journey, and then he and his family were off.

I had enough gas now to reach my final destination, but traffic and time would not cooperate. I continued to inch forward until darkness fell. It felt much, much lonelier in the dark, but at least it was cool. I spoke with my friend's former roommate, who assured me I had a place for the night. Then she called twice more to check my progress and encourage me. I hadn't eaten all day, and my eyelids were getting heavy. Chester had finally

fallen asleep. My dad called every hour or so to ask where I was, far past the time he would have normally been in bed. When I finally reached the turnoff to Crockett, a familiar-looking SUV pulled up beside me, and in the red glow I saw its driver smile and wave. It was my gas line friend. He had followed me for the last fifty miles, but I hadn't known.

With less than another fifty miles to go, I was able to drive the speed limit for the first time since morning. I turned on the radio, searching for a station that would come in clearly, and stopped when I heard a familiar pastor's soothing voice. I was smack in the middle of the Bible Belt, where gospel preachers compete with rock stars and country crooners for AM airtime. I listened as this one began to recite the beautiful words of Psalm 23. I whispered them out loud with him. God was providing for me on my run from the storm, just as he had for his people on the run from Pharaoh. Run from water, hide from wind. Run from water, hide from wind. And run *into* the arms of the shepherd whose name is Jesus. The weathermen hadn't said that hours ago, but they should have.



I don't know how many times in my childhood I asked, "Are we there yet?" Too many to count, I am sure. I do remember the urgent desire, even when comfortably settled in the back of my parents' car with a book or a pad of paper or a doll, to be somewhere *other* than where I was. I longed for those places I knew and had visited before—familiar, much-loved destinations where hugs and smiles and adventure surely waited. In a short time I wanted the trips to be over and done so the destination could be seen and enjoyed. It was always either/or back then. Never both/and.

But it's different today. Today I am painfully aware that I belong to another world—one I haven't seen and can only imagine.

I live en route, in between. And as much as I dream of heaven, I love this life on earth. I love the sights and sounds and smells of it, the faces of family and friends, and the comforts of music and art and laughter and delicious meals. I love worship and travel and a warm cup of coffee between my hands, and seasons and solitude and sleeping dogs. Still, I yearn for what I haven't gained but have only glimpsed. I long for more than the simple goodnesses I have known.

Because I believe that more exists, this life is my exodus, not my end. Because the way itself is rich, I want to travel it with purpose, passion, and as much joy as I can muster. I know the ache of long miles slowly paced, and of heat and fear and loneliness. I know that on the journey hearts break and storms come and plans change (oh, how they change!). But thankfully, on the way to the Good, the True, and the Beautiful, we encounter the good, the true, and the beautiful—even as we travel with the unpleasant companions of disappointment, pain, and despair. The secret of savoring the journey into the fullness of the kingdom is to refuse to either kill our present desire *or* deny our dissatisfaction. The challenge is to live in the “now,” fully engaged by its conflicts—and to long just as expectantly for that not-yet day when we will finally, breathlessly, completely arrive.



I didn't realize how good I had it years ago, traveling in the back of the family station wagon with my Barbies, books, and games. I was never asked to drive, the map was someone else's responsibility, the snacks were plentiful, and all roads led to adventure, then home. Journeying requires more of me these days—sometimes more than I feel I have to give. And I believe God means for it to.

Are you road-weary? Disillusioned? Have you settled in a place you never meant to linger for more than even an hour? Do you believe joy, comfort, and satisfaction are always “out there,” just beyond the

horizon? What if hints of your desired destination were very near and it really was possible to experience them, now, today?



“Who is like You among the gods, O LORD? Who is like You, majestic in holiness, awesome in praises, working wonders? . . . In Your lovingkindness You have led the people whom You have redeemed; in Your strength You have guided them to Your holy habitation. . . . You will bring them and plant them in the mountain of Your inheritance, the place, O LORD, which You have made for Your dwelling, the sanctuary, O LORD, which Your hands have established. The LORD shall reign forever and ever” (Exod. 15:11, 13, 17–18).

“You will make known to me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever” (Ps. 16:11).

“One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the LORD and to meditate in His temple. For in the day of trouble He will conceal me in His tabernacle; in the secret place of His tent He will hide me; He will lift me up on a rock” (Ps. 27:4–5).

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