

LANDING GEAR

In July, 1996 I was taking advantage of a small window of opportunity to fly to Oakland, California to visit my son Paul and his family. Three weeks earlier I had had surgery for breast cancer and soon I would begin radiation treatments. Not knowing how my body would react to the treatments, I decided to make the trip before they began.

The flight was going along smoothly until somewhere over the Sierra Nevadas. Suddenly the plane began to shake and there were some loud noises. "Don't be alarmed," the Captain said over the speaker system, "that was just the landing gear beginning to come into place." He explained that we still had forty-five minutes of flying time before we arrived at our destination and that there would be other times when the plane would shake, but there was nothing to worry about; everything was proceeding normally.

The pilot's reassuring message started an interesting chain of thought in my mind. When I got onto the plane in New York, I didn't expect that we would fly around forever. I wanted to land in Oakland where my son and his family lived. Therefore I would have to accept – and even welcome – whatever it took to get the plane out of the sky and back onto the ground. I had no way of knowing whether our plane would land safely or not, but since no amount of worrying would change the outcome of our journey, I thought I may as well relax and enjoy the rest of the trip.

But my mind would not quit! Indeed the best was yet to come. "Why, the landing gear of my life has started to fall into place!" I thought, referring to my cancer surgery. I was 63 years old, coming to the end of my middle years and heading into old age. I was having a wonderful time. In February I had taken my first trip overseas, visiting Israel and Egypt. In the fall I was invited to return to Egypt to conduct a two week evangelistic campaign. Meanwhile I was serving as pastor of a church in my hometown and helping to conduct religious services at a boarding school for troubled children. And then, as unexpectedly as the shaking on the plane, came the breast cancer. How interesting to see it afresh as the beginning of the end of my life on earth!

My thoughts also began to compare my earthly destination (and I certainly had one; I would not have embarked on a trip to an unknown place) with my heavenly one. To me Heaven is just as real as Oakland. I would not have enjoyed my trip if I had a nagging doubt as to whether Oakland existed! Yet many travel through this life wondering if Heaven is real. I would be sick with worry if I did not know! I love the picture of Abraham given in Hebrews 11:8-10. There we find that Abraham didn't mind living in tents and moving around on earth *"for he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God."* "Foundations," "architect," "builder": sounds real to me! Notice how Abraham's certainty of the future erased the grip of materialism on earth. May the same be true of us.

I also like John 14:1-4 where Jesus talks about his Father's "house" with many "rooms": also concrete words. Then Jesus says he himself will prepare (decorate?) a place for us and – as if that were not enough – come himself to personally take us to that Prepared Place so that we may be with him! This passage, besides telling me of a real place, also speaks of the people who will be there. Jesus was talking to a whole group of followers at the time. Certainly all of us in Heaven will not only be with Jesus but also with each other. Which brought my thoughts back to Oakland. The main attraction there for me was not the architecture of the city, but my family and friends. I looked forward to warm hugs and kisses. What will our reunion be like in Heaven?!

My reverie was interrupted as we dropped lower in the sky on our descent. I like to watch for the first signs of familiar landmarks on earth. First I see what looks like lines drawn on the ground. Then tiny ants seem to be running along the lines. Sight becomes clearer as we approach the airport. The ants become matchbox cars, then larger toy cars and then ... full size cars! We're in Oakland! The trip is over and the visiting about to begin.

Analogies between natural and spiritual things all break down at some point. Airplanes may crash or be hijacked before arriving at the destination. Pilots sometimes fail. None of this is possible spiritually. We have God's word that all of us with faith in him, through our Lord Jesus Christ, will arrive safely at our eternal home. There's no reason to worry. Enjoy the trip – even the descent.

Oakland and Heaven are both desirable destinations at the right time. I will relax and enjoy the rest of my trip on earth. Jesus is my Pilot and Jesus is the Vehicle in which I am traveling. I trust my Pilot to know how, why and when he wants to prepare me for landing and by his grace, I will accept – and welcome – the shakings. Since 1996 my body has undergone several more surgeries, many falls and now PLS, my motor-neuron disease. I've had to let go of a lot of things: household goods in our move from house to apartment, my piano, the ability to walk without assistive devices, the ability to talk clearly, to sing, have a hearty laugh or a good cry, to drive, and all foods except soft ones. Much remains, but I can't know for how long. Everything on earth is temporary. Yet my spiritual sight is becoming more and more clear as I come nearer to my Destination, and oh!, the sight is glorious! My heart flutters in anticipation just as it did on my many trips to wonderful places in the past.

"For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate [me] from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus [my] Lord" (Romans 8:38,39).

Hallelujah!

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