Heavenly minded (Philippians 3:17–4:1)

Our prevailing practical wisdom to focus on the here and now cuts sharply against the grain of Paul’s advice.

March 14, 2025

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“Shall I go to heaven or a-fishing?” I’m pretty sure Thoreau didn’t intend this as a serious question. For mature, well-grounded, enlightened folks in his day and ours, fishing is the clear favorite. Better to make your home in this world than to risk the irrelevance (at best) or fanaticism (at worst) of the heavenly minded.

Such folksy wisdom has become so ubiquitous that it is easy to forget that it wasn’t always this way. Not that long ago, a mature, well-grounded person could have contemplated the mysteries of heaven even on a sunny spring afternoon.

In *Why We Are Restless*, Benjamin Storey and Jenna Silber Storey credit Michel de Montaigne (1533–1592) with the remarkable achievement of convincing practically everyone that the path to contentment is paved with a healthy variety of humble, homely pleasures. Secular and religious, liberal and conservative alike now adhere to the prevailing common sense that it is unwise to think too much about heaven. Ever since Montaigne, we are all traveling down the same road, which the Storeys describe as the “quest for immanent contentment.”

It is striking that our prevailing practical wisdom cuts so sharply against the grain of Paul’s advice to the church of Philippi. After bemoaning those in their midst whose “minds are set on earthly things,” he praises “our citizenship is in heaven”

(Philippians 3:19-20). He encourages them to lean into their future identity in Christ and to think of themselves as pilgrims bound for a home that is higher than their horizon. Our pursuits, Paul seems to suggest, have meaning beyond the sum of our days. And ultimately our happiness lies in a transcendent gift rather than in immanent pursuits.

In his sermon “The Quest for the Eternal,” Howard Thurman shared a story about a young girl who was giving her mother “a great deal of trouble.” At wits’ end, her mother finally retorted, “If you don’t stop, you won’t go to heaven when you die.”

Her daughter, however, was uncowed. “Oh yes I will!” she shot back. “Oh yes, I’ll go. I’ll go right up there where God is and I’ll go in and out of the room; in and out of the room. And, finally, God will say, ‘Either come in or go out.’ And I will come in.”

This story could easily be dismissed as yet another example of kids saying “the darnedest things,” as something to elicit a sanctuary full of sentimental smiles. But Thurman takes this homely anecdote seriously.

“Do you believe this?” he asks. “Do you believe it?” he insists. What is he demanding his congregation—so cozy in their pews—think hard about? It is this: “that whatever you are doing, however ordinary or commonplace … it all takes place within the sweep of the divine context. … There comes a time, when you have to say yes or no to God. … Soon or late every human being … comes to a place when he has to turn and face what for him is the ultimate demand of existence.”

The Storeys open their book with a young woman not much older than the little girl of Thurman’s illustration. She is soon to graduate, with her Phi Beta Kappa key in hand. Yet triumph is overwhelmed by anxiety as she contemplates what immanent pursuit should occupy her next. “The tightness of her face, the finger picking at the plastic tabletop, the skittish darting of her eyes,” recall the Storeys, mimic the demeanor of “a terminally ill patient choosing from a grim variety of palliatives.”

Maybe it’s time to reconsider some of what Montaigne (and Thoreau) have to teach us in light of older advice from Paul. Perhaps our immanent quests only take us so far, and our best hope lies in that which transcends us. I’m all for homely pursuits and simple pleasures, and I’ll continue to be cautious against flights of fancy. But I will also keep in mind that sometimes fishing is, as they say, just drowning worms.