

June 26/27, 2004

On the Wings of an Eagle

Isaiah 40:31

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I think I'm just about to prove that I do not come from America, with how I speak. Would you turn to "Is-I-ah" – not "Isaiah." And remember, we had the language first. I'm actually in the middle of almost a month of moving around different parts of the USA, speaking mainly at United Bible conferences and conventions in different cities and towns. It's interesting to me that I'm going to be finishing up with some multiple services at a mega church in Philadelphia, helping them to celebrate the 4th of July. Can you imagine that? Me, an Englishman! But it's good to see how well the colonies have done! I'm rather pleased that at least you've got the English language—well, *kind of* got the English language, you know. I'm told that it was by one vote you decided on the English language against the German. That really would have made life difficult for me now. And maybe our sense of humor wouldn't be the same, as well.

I was speaking at an international gathering and there were a number of different people there to interpret. They were all in their glass boxes, and I was told, "Don't worry about them, Derek. You just carry on. They've all got these earpieces; the congregation, the audience, will pick up what you're saying." So I said something on the Saturday evening which I guess would be mildly humorous for an English ear. And the first people to laugh were the block over here that were the Germans. Then there was a ripple of laughter from the center part, where the English speakers were, and then the Scandinavians—last laugh, you know. And then on the Sunday morning, the same thing happened. Come the Sunday evening, I realized what my German interpreter was doing. He was whispering into their earpiece, "This is an English joke. I don't understand it, but laugh *now*." So they did! Which, I'm told from my German friends, is typically German.

It really is nice to be with you over this time. I've tried to think of a different way of saying, "It's nice to be with you," and I've come up with this one: "It is nice to be with you." I can't think of anything better to say, but I *do* mean it. Thank you for the welcome that you've given to me while I've been here these past days recording for Back to the Bible USA. Make sure you listen when I'm on, won't you...please...and let them know that you've done that. I'm also thankful for the spiritual enrichment time with the staff there and the chance to be with you over this weekend.

Three couples were meeting in the home of a man called Vernon. The evening was getting late in the social visit, and the conversation got round to certain words and their meanings and a friendly disagreement. Vernon said, "I will demonstrate to you the meaning of some of these words." So he went to his telephone and he took the phone off the hook and he punched out a number at random. The phone was taken off the hook at the other end of the line, and Vernon said, "Hello, is Charlie there?" The voice at the other end of the line said, "No, you've got the wrong number. There's no Charlie here." So he put his phone down, turned to his friends and he said, "Now, that is an illustration of *irritation*."

He then dialed the identical number. The phone was taken off the hook at the other end of the line. And Vernon said, "Hello, is Charlie there?" The voice at the other end of the line said, "No, and you've dialed this number once already. It's late. You've got a wrong number." Vernon put his receiver down, turned to his friends and said, "Now, that doesn't illustrate irritation. That's *aggravation*."

He said, “I will now give you an example of *frustration*. So he punched out the same number. The phone was taken off the hook, and Vernon said, “Hello, this is Charlie. Have there been any phone calls for me?” I do hope I’m not giving anybody any ideas.

Frustration comes in the English from the Latin “to disappoint.” One of the things that I have discovered, as I move from place to place around the world and I meet with a lot of churchgoers, is this: There are a lot of very sincere believers who are not about to give up their belief, but somehow or the other it is frustrating. And it’s disappointing. And it’s not all that they would want it to be.

For example, you read in the Bible that Jesus said, “I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly.” I love it when I’m speaking in Sweden because I know that my interpreter there is saying, “That you might have life and more than you need.” That is the Christian life—that we will live in the *overflow*. Real Christianity is understood in its superlative. It’s not love; it’s love that surpasses knowledge. It’s not joy, but joy unspeakable and full of glory. It’s not peace that we are to experience, but a peace that transcends understanding. And it’s not grace, but the *much more* of God’s grace. It’s all in the overflow.

And yet, many times we end up with a Christian experience which is a bit like getting a headache. You know, when you get a headache, you don’t want to lose your head. It just hurts you to keep it. We don’t want to lose our Christianity; we have no intention of giving up on it. And yet, it is so frustrating and disappointing for us.

Now, if this is a disappointment to us, let me say it is also a disappointment to our Lord. God has not made it easy for us to fail at living the Christian life. Peter spelled that out when he wrote, “His divine power has given us everything we need—for life and godliness.” What do we need? It has been given to us. I like to think of it as the A to Z of blessing, and to spell out in the English alphabet spiritual blessings that we have in Christ. I am **accepted, beloved, chosen, delivered, enlightened and forgiven** by God. I have the **grace, hope, inheritance, justification, knowledge, love and mercy** of God. I have His **nearness, ownership, peace** and the **quickening** of His Spirit. I am **redeemed, sealed, treasured, understood and validated**. He gives me His **wisdom, His extra-ordinary grace**. He is the **yes** to all the promises, and the **zenith** of it all is... I’m going to live forever!

I’m not particularly into litany, but I do like the youth creed that has the refrain, “I *am* God’s child.” If I were in England I would say this creed and then invite my congregation to join me in the “I *am* God’s child.” I’m not in England; I’m going to see whether it works over here.

I may be young, I may be old, I may be hot, I may be cold, but...I *am* God’s child.
I may be educated, I may be unlettered, I may be free, I may be fettered, but...I *am* God’s child.
I may be black, I may be brown, I may wear a brace, I may even be a clown, but...I *am* God’s child.
I may be rich, I may be poor, I may be white, I maybe even snore, but...I *am* God’s child.
I may be short, I may be tall, I may have hair, I may be bald, but...I *am* God’s child.
I may live in a house, I may live in a trailer, I may be successful, I may be a failure, but...
I *am* God’s child.
I am a sinner, but I’m also a saint. And “nobody” I certainly ain’t, because... I *am* God’s child.

But what kind of action takes that from my head, slips it about eight inches a little bit towards the left, and affects my heart?

That's where Isaiah chapter 40, verse 31 truly helps:

Those who hope in the LORD [in other words, wait or anticipate in Him] will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint. (NIV)

God's people had been told they were going to be out of their own land for 70 years in exile. They were weary and tired. Did you know only 20 percent of you got enough sleep last week? No wonder you're looking tired. The exiles felt isolated and alone—off the radar screen with God. What to do about that situation? Hoping in the Lord was the answer. They would quite literally exchange their weakness for His strength; their lack for His giving.

But what does it mean to put our hope in the Lord? How do we do that? The picture of the eagle can help as we check it out from Scripture itself. Indeed the Bible is full of pictures to let light into the building to be windows into our mind. For example, the last book of our Bible pictures Jesus as being like a lion. But when John turned to see the lion, He was as a lamb. And those pictures communicate something. Towards sin He is as a lion; towards the sinner He is as a lamb.

Just as the lion is the king of the jungle, so the eagle is the king of the birds. Eagles can fly in hurricane-force winds and dive at 200 miles per hour. They partner for life. They free fall several thousand feet, mating while they do so. Interesting. The female eagle is bigger and stronger than the male. Both parents sit on the eggs, guard the nest, and feed and train the young. They can attack upside down. They can break the bones of your forearm without even knowing that they have done it. Surgical needles were modeled after eagles' tongues because they pierce, not tear, the skin.

And the eagle picture is used many times throughout Scripture. God describes Himself as being like an eagle. Egyptians used pictures for an alphabet. The "A" or the equivalent in their alphabet has the symbol of an eagle. Three months after Israel left Egypt, God said, "You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to Myself."

That picture would not be lost on them. Ezekiel never forgot his 30th birthday, when God gave him a vision which included angels with *four* faces. The face of a man, the highest of God's created beings. The face of a lion, the highest of the wild animals. The face of an ox, the highest of the domestic animals. And the face of an eagle, the highest among the birds.

Revelation 8:13 says there will be an eagle flying in mid-air with an eternal gospel to proclaim. In hours right to the end, God will see that people have an opportunity to hear the message of the gospel. And if humans will not do it, God will intervene by other means of messenger.

But what does it mean when *we* are compared to an eagle? I want us to take the picture of an eagle. I want us to look at Scripture. I want us to understand what it means when we really are putting our hope in Him, so that we will rise up above the ordinary, the average—to the noble Christian life, growing in grace and in the knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

So we're going to ask this picture a series of questions and supply the practical answers for our good. The first question is this: How do eagles mature? In Deuteronomy 32, verse 11 it says an eagle stirs up its nest and hovers over its young. Of the twelve species of eagles that live in Israel, none do what that verse says *now*, so this must be an eagle which is now extinct.

But, you get the picture? Here is a little baby eagle high up on a rock in its chair—a rocking chair—way up on the edge of a cliff. And all that it has to do is open its mouth. The mom comes along and

drops a nice morsel into its mouth. It's wonderful being a little baby eaglet... until one day, when I'm opening my mouth wide because Mom has come, and she hasn't got anything for me. And I'm without and I'm feeling very hungry and uncomfortable.

Do you understand what I'm saying through that? When we say we want our hope in the Lord—that we want a Christianity which is authentic—God will move in our lives in certain ways to make us lean harder upon Him and grow up.

You know, sometimes I want to be a child again. Decisions were so much easier. We decided by “eeny, meeny, miney, mo.” Race issues were who was fastest around the block. Scrapes were kissed better by my mom. But to the Corinthians Paul said, “Spiritually, the trouble with you is you're acting as babies.” He didn't say they *were* babies. The whole world loves a baby. But when you are 21 years old and you're still acting like a baby, that's sad. God doesn't mind me going through the baby stage as long as I don't stay there.

We have to grow physically, don't we? We pass through the tender teens, teachable twenties, tireless thirties, fiery forties, forceful fifties, serious sixties, sacred seventies, aching eighties, and the naughty nineties. And it passes so quickly! Don't worry about middle age—you'll grow out of it. It's whether we grow *through* it that's the important thing.

So now the baby eagle is being made very uncomfortable. And this has been deliberately done by the one that loves them most. You may say, “Derek, the devil is really getting at my life and making me miserable.” Are you sure? Because my New Testament tells me it is through the trying of my faith that God moves me on to be a much more mature and complete believer. God uses problems and conflicts to get us moving. And when life falls apart in some area, He is giving us a chance to *grow*. Every event which befalls us has a meaning beyond itself. And our task is to ask the Lord, “What are You trying to say?”

But the mother isn't finished with the baby yet. Now, having stirred up that nest, a ruined and demolished home, making me very uncomfortable, she comes, perches there, and puts her wings out as if explaining this potential in wings. She will, as Deuteronomy says, *hover* over her young. That's a word used in the Creation, where the Spirit hovered over the chaos out of which would come the potential of Creation.

Then, if this doesn't entice Junior to use his wings, do you know what she'll do next? She will nudge the baby off the edge of the cliff. And there I am—hurtling down to become a horrible, mangled mess of jelly on the rocks beneath. “Mom, why have you done this? I thought you loved me! This is not good for my self-esteem...or anything else, come to think about it.” And then suddenly there's a swish of wind, and she comes right underneath me and plop, I land on her back. And I'm hanging on for dear life now! She's soaring up and it's exhilarating and she plops me up. We're home at one speed. “Oh, I do hope she doesn't have an accident like that again. She's getting clumsy.” And then she goes and does it again! I'm hurtling down... “Mom! Mom!” And she comes right underneath me, and the same procedure happens. You know, after a while, I begin to get an idea, *Mom is trying to tell me something!*

Did you realize that our God, when we say we want to hope in Him, we want our Christianity to be real—He will push us off the cliff edges so that we'll start to rely upon the potential we have in Christ, and look to Him and Him alone. It's very unfair for a preacher to do the rounds and say, “You give your life to Jesus and He will put you on a pillow throughout your days.” You see, He is more concerned about our character than our comfort. Ask a sculptor, “Is it easy to sculpt a head out

of that marble?” He may say, “Of course it is. All you have to do is to chip away everything in the marble that doesn’t make it a head.”

I believe in evolution, but don’t misunderstand me. The kind of evolution I believe in is being changed from one form of glory to another. And the Lord has a procedure where He will chip away at my character to conform me to the image of His Son. Sometimes we don’t trust Him until we have to. And He will drive us to maturity; He will push us to the edge of our comfortable nest. God wants you flying away...into something higher. Your salvation from sin, wonderful as that is, isn’t enough. You need salvation to holiness. So you need to work *out* your salvation—not work for it. It’s a gift that God gives. If I were to say you’re going to have to work out your own problem, it assumes you’ve got one, right? So to work out your salvation assumes you’ve got it—it’s given by grace through faith in Christ. But we need to take what’s on the inside and work it out.

What leap of faith do you need to make? If you were sure that you would succeed, what would you dare to try? Life is to teach us to fly—to exercise our half-fledged wings. The immediate opportunities prepare us for the greater ones. You can’t take long flights if you’re afraid to try out your wings in the shorter flights. Are you settled in the nest? Don’t become content with too little.

Which leads us to another question that we can ask: Where do eagles live? Jeremiah 49 verse 16 supplies an answer. They occupy the heights of the hills. And Obadiah 4 says eagles make their nests among the stars. When somebody says to me, “Christianity is not providing me with what I hoped it would,” I must ask, “Have you forgotten that yours is a high and holy calling?” We don’t belong to the sordid. God wants to move us from the gutter most to the uttermost. We mustn’t be too much a Christian to find that sin will make us miserable, but too much a sinner to find that Christianity makes us miserable.

Eagles have a built-in sense to detect danger, but they can choose to ignore it. The eagle is a clean bird when free, but dirty when bound. Don’t expect to soar if you deliberately chain yourself to the things of this world. As Paul wrote, “Do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature.” And then he outlines the acts: greed, jealousy, resentment, pride, and the like. The space between “I” and “me” is too small a space for an eagle believer to live. We must decide to rise above such things. It’s amazing what people will trust in and believe in, and it seems to help.

One man, not a Christian, was very much into golf, but he wasn’t very good at it. Then one day as he teed off he took a tranquilizer and he played a reasonable round and he thought, *That’s the problem: I’m too nervous.* He took a tranquilizer the next time; it worked then. So the next time in a club competition, he was about to tee off and he suddenly realized he hadn’t taken his tranquilizer. So he quickly reached into his pocket, gulped it down, played a reasonable round of golf, came off the final green, casually put his hand in his pocket and discovered his tranquilizer. He suddenly realized what he had done. Earlier that morning a shirt button had fallen off. It’s amazing how helpful for a round of golf a shirt button can be...if you believe in it.

Now, I don’t go bonkers on the power of positive confession. I know the ditty, “Every day in every way we’re getting better and better.” But I also know the ditty, “He tackled the things that couldn’t be done, with a will he went right to it. He tackled the things that couldn’t be done and discovered he still couldn’t do it.”

But what you say is often the deciding factor of how you live. For example, in Psalm 42 and 43 where the man is getting very low, the psalmist says something to himself and it helps. Because self-talk counts. “Why am I cast down, O my soul, hope in God.” I used to think that I learned at school

my multiplication table by *heart*. But then I've come to think about it, I learned it by *lip*. We would recite as a class: "2 x 2 is 4; 3 x 3 is 9..." And by what we would say, it got into our nature.

Revelation 12 verse 11 says, "They overcame the evil one through the blood of the Lamb and their word of testimony." You see, sin only leaves your body through your mouth. As you confess with your lips what you believe of Jesus as your Lord, that's where salvation begins. And don't say, "I can't"—when He promises you can. Let's live with the dignity we're called to be: a noble people.

That raises another question: How *do* eagles fly? Proverbs 30 verse 18 says:

There are three things that are too amazing for me, four that I do not understand. (NIV)

The first mentioned is the way of an eagle in the sky. Eagles don't flap up; they soar. Cylindrical bones, plus a built-in understanding of the air currents. It looks so effortless.

And Christians can fly without looking as though they're trying when they know the secret of the wind. You see, the Christian life isn't easy. It isn't difficult. It's impossible. God never expected me to live the Christian life. *He* wants to live the Christian life *through* me. He indwells me—the presence of Christ by the Holy Spirit. It's as I depend upon Him—the secret of the wind. Do you know what I'm getting at now? The wind of God's Holy Spirit. The secret of witness is found right there. You are never so bound as when you think, *I've got to put a word in for Jesus. Got to manipulate a conversation around to be a testimony for Him.* You are never so free as when you respond to God's initiative and you recognize what the Holy Spirit is setting up, and you go with the flow and current of the Spirit.

That happened to a missionary I know, coming home on furlough. He got on the long haul flight and sat down in his seat. He said the usual thing as he got in his seat, "Lord, help me to sit in the right place and say the right things to the people around about me that are the right people for me to connect with." And a little girl, maybe 7 or 8 years old with Downs Syndrome, was sitting in front. She turned around, looked at him and said, "Hello." And he said, "Hello." And then she said, "Mister, did you brush your teeth this morning?" And he smiled and said, "Yes, I brushed my teeth this morning." And she said, "That's good, because if you don't brush your teeth they'll rot." And then she said, "Mister, do you smoke?" He said, "No, I don't smoke." She said, "That's good, because if you smoke you'll get cancer and die." And then she said, "Mister, do you love Jesus?" And he looked at her, smiled, and said, "Yes, I love Jesus." She said, "That's good, because then you'll go to heaven when you die."

A businessman came hustling in, sat next to him, got his laptop out, wanting to get busy. And this little girl looked at the missionary and said, "Ask him." He thought, *I know where this is heading.* He said, "You don't ask personal questions like that. *Ask him.*" So he turned and he said, "Excuse me, but I've just been introduced to this lady in front here and she wants me to ask you one or two questions... is that okay?" He smiled condescendingly and said, "That's okay." "Did you brush your teeth today?" And he smiled and said, "Yes, I brushed my teeth today." She said, "That's good, because then they won't rot." "Ask him." So he said, "She also wants to know: do you smoke?" And he said, "Well, I used to smoke, but I don't smoke now." And she said, "That's good, because you won't get lung cancer and die." Then she said, "Ask him." So he said, "Look, there's just one more question she's interested to get the answer on; it's over after that. Do you love Jesus?" The man looked down, looked up, sighed, and said, "You know, life hasn't been what it should have been of late. And I've been wondering about the spiritual side of my life." That missionary had the joy of leading him nearer to Christ during that flight. You're never so free as when you're responding to the Spirit setting things up.

The secret of bearing burdens is exactly the same. Has anyone ever said to you, “God will not give you more than you can bear”? That’s not true. That’s in the New Testament context of no temptation being too great for you towards sin. Of course He won’t do that. But God will give you more than you can bear...but not more than *He* can bear. So when you cast your burdens upon the Lord, He will sustain you. He will carry you as you carry that burden. And He will do it through the comfort of the Holy Spirit.

And victory over stubborn habits comes exactly the same way. There’s a problem with habits, isn’t there? There was a fire at a convent and some elderly nuns who were on the fourth floor made out of their clothes a crude rope and shimmied down the rope to safety. A local newspaper reporter interviewing them said, “Did you fear that that cloth rope would break and tear and you would fall?” And one nun in her mid-eighties smiled and said, “Oh, no. Because old habits are hard to break.” How very true. You can see it even in the word “habit”—no matter what you do to the word. If you take off the “h” then “a bit” is left. So you take off the “a” and “bit” is left. You take off the “b” and “it” is left. And you take off the “t” and that’s the problem—“I” am still there.

The secret is living by the Spirit and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature. Eagle Christians understand about the saving death of Christ, that we might be forgiven, but also about the saving life of Christ. The One who died for us comes and lives in our humanity. We reckon upon Him, so we don’t struggle, *Got to be patient today, even if it kills me. And I want patience today, Lord...right now.* It’s not like that. We recognize He is patient. *Lord, be patient through me.* If a soaring eagle pulls in its wings, the law of gravity takes over and it goes down. But if we exercise our wings of trust and obedience and thankfulness to Him, we soar.

And the eagle is not content to fly high. It wants to fly higher than any other bird. And on his way up he passes the crow sitting on the telephone lines passing on the latest bit of gossip—which is the art of saying nothing and leaving nothing unsaid. That’s not for the eagle believer. Criticism is often the death gargle of the non-achiever. That isn’t for the eagle believer. The only people Jesus criticized were the critical. And the level of my love for God will be seen by the level of my love for the people around about me.

And do you know an eagle has two sets of eyelids—one for the earthly realm and the other for the heavenly. Eagles can see 3-inch high letters on a billboard one mile away. They could see a small fish jumping out of the water five miles away. David defeated Goliath because he had divine viewpoint—not just human viewpoint. That’s why he took five stones against that mighty moving mountain of muscular manhood—that huge, hulking hippopotamus of humanity. All chest and no vest. Why? Because there were another four giants. Now, he didn’t get them; some of his mighty men did. But that was his perspective.

How do we become divine-viewpoint people? It has all to do with our mindset. We need to stay sharp in our thinking. You are the same person today that you will be five years from now...except for the people you meet...and the thoughts you think. And God will transform the way we live by changing the way we think. (Now in just a moment you could all fly away.) But every once in awhile, an eagle will get very doubtful—do you know that expression? Feeling particularly sorry for itself, losing a lot of its feathers. Do you ever have times like that—where you think about your life and you feel quite depressed? The eagle knows what to do. It perches on a rock in a high place, looks towards the sun, and allows the rays of the sun to renew it. Do you experience low times? Learn to expose your inmost being to the Son of God. Then as Psalm 103 verse 5 says, “My youth is renewed like the eagles.”

Old age has its drawbacks. A pastor was talking to an elderly lady and said, “Do you ever think about the hereafter?” She said, “All the time. I stand in the middle of my bedroom and think, *What am I here after?*” Age is mostly mind over matter. If you don’t mind, it doesn’t matter. Aging is not a matter of arteries, but attitude. Rose was 87 years old when she went to the university. The first tutorial was a “get-to-know-you” time, and a young student sitting next to her said, “But why have you come to the university at your age?” Quick as anything, she said, “To find a rich husband, get married, have a couple of kids, retire, and travel.” He said, “Seriously.” She said, “Well, seriously, I just don’t want to vegetate.” She became the most popular student in the university. She became the banquet speaker for their football team. When she went up to the podium she dropped her notes. She couldn’t get down there to pick them up again, so she held onto the podium and she beamed at everybody and said, “You know, life has taught me four secrets. One: find humor everyday in something. Two: You’ve got to have a dream; you die if you don’t have a dream. Three: There’s a difference between growing old and growing up. And four: Have no regrets.” She said, “The elderly people I know, we don’t regret what we did. We regret what we did not do.” Two weeks after graduation she died, and 2,000 students came to her funeral.

Your goal is not to live long, but to live *now*. An office sign read: “In ten years time, what you have wished you had done today...do it now.” It’s not the way we deal with our situation that determines our hope. It’s the way we deal with our hope that determines our situation. Everything God allows is preparation for something else. And just as an eagle loses its feathers in order to produce new ones, keep your eyes upon Christ—reckon upon Him—and new strength comes through.

And when the time comes for the eagle to die, somehow or the other, it seems to know its moment. He finds a place high up on a rock and sets his eyes towards the sun as it goes down, and he closes his own eyes in death. He dies well.

I hope this doesn’t sound morbid; I don’t mean it to be that way. But I want to die well. Once a year, normally at the turn of the old to the new year, my prayer is, “Lord, I don’t know what’s going to happen this year. But whatever it is, if I’m going to die, I want to die well.” I really do. I got that idea when I was invited to the United Nations in Geneva to speak, and after that I was shown the John Calvin museum. There I saw an artist’s impression of John Calvin dying publicly and pleading with people to go out and to make disciples of Christ. Dying well. As Paul has said, “For me to live is Christ. To die is gain.” God wants us to rise above the pessimism and despair of our day. And the way we end our life is more important than the way we began it.

Will you rise higher? Will you depend upon the wind of God’s Spirit? We were programmed to fly... and it’s never too late to begin.

Father, we thank You for the many pictures that there are in Your Word. And we thank You for the picture of the eagle. Help us to learn what it means to put our hope in You and to soar. Amen.