



THE THREE DIMENSIONS OF A COMPLETE LIFE

by

Martin Luther King Jr



"The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life,"
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In this sermon, versions of which King had preached as early as 1954, King laments that "too many of our white brothers are concerned merely about the length of life rather than the breadth of life."¹ He suggests that with reordered priorities "the jangling discords of the South would be transformed into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood." King's theme and content reflect the influence of abolitionist minister Phillips Brooks's sermon "The Symmetry of Life."² After this morning sermon, King traveled to Boston to deliver "The Future of Integration" at the Ford Hall Forum. The following transcript was drawn from an audio recording.

Reverend Daskam and members and friends of this great church, ladies and gentlemen.³ I need not pause to say how very delighted I am to be here today and to be with you and this community and to have the opportunity of sharing this great ecumenical pulpit. It is always a real pleasure to come back to Philadelphia and this area. I never feel like a stranger when I return because I lived in this community some three years, and I was a student in theological seminary.⁴ At that time I met many, many people in this area, and I feel that I have some real genuine friends in Philadelphia. So it is always a rewarding experience to come back to this area. And it is a great pleasure to be in this pulpit, and I want to express my personal appreciation to Reverend Daskam for extending the invitation.

And this morning I would like to have you think with me on the subject, "The Three Dimensions of a Complete Life." The three dimensions of a complete life. Many, many centuries ago a man by the name of John was in prison out on a lonely obscure island called Patmos. While in this situation, John imagined that he saw the new Jerusalem descending out of heaven from God. One of the greatest glories of this new city of God that John saw was its completeness. It was not partial and one-sided, but it was complete in all three of its dimensions. So in describing the city in the sixteenth chapter of the book of Revelation, John says this: "The

1. King, "The Dimensions of a Complete Life," Sermon at Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, 24 January 1954. King also preached a version of this sermon on his first Sunday as co-pastor at Ebenezer on 7 February 1960 (Paul Delaney, "'Follow Way of Love,' Dr. King Asks People," *Atlanta Daily World*, 9 February 1960). A published version appeared in King's book *The Measure of a Man* (Philadelphia: Christian Education Press, 1959).

2. Brooks, "The Symmetry of Life," *Selected Sermons*, ed. William Scarlett (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1949), pp. 195-206. In a later interview King acknowledged that Brooks's sermon was the inspiration for "Three Dimensions" (Mervyn A. Warren, "A Rhetorical Study of the Preaching of Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., Pastor and Pulpit Orator" [PhD diss., Michigan State University, 1966], p. 105).

3. In a 24 May letter to Max Daskam, who had been pastor of the church since 1929, Maude Balou relayed King's consent to preach. Daskam first invited King on 24 March 1959.

4. King attended nearby Crozer Theological Seminary in Chester from 1948 until 1951.

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length and the height and the breadth of it are equal."⁵ In other words, of this new city of God, this city of ideal humanity is not an unbalanced entity, but it is complete on all sides. And John is saying something quite significant here. So many of us the book of Revelation is a difficult book, puzzling to decode. We see it as something of an enigma wrapped in mystery. And I guess the book of Revelation is a difficult book, shrouded with impenetrable mysteries, if we accept everything in the book as a record of actual historical occurrences. But if we will look beneath the peculiar jargon of the author, what theologians call the prevailing apocalyptic symbolism, we will find there many eternal truths which forever confront us, and one such truth is the truth of this text. For what John is really saying is this: that life at its best and life as it should be is three-dimensional; it's complete on all sides. So there are three dimensions of any complete life, for which we can certainly give the words of this text: length, breadth, and height.⁶

The length of life, as we shall use it here, is not its longevity, its duration, not how long it lasts, but it is a push, the push of a life forward to achieve its personal ends and ambitions. It is the inward concern for one's own welfare. The breadth of life is the outward concern for the welfare of others. The height of life is the upward reach for God. So these are the three dimensions. On one hand, we find the individual person; on the other hand, we find other persons; at the top we find the supreme infinite person. These three must work together; they must be concatenated in an individual life if that life is to be complete, for the complete life is the three-dimensional life.

Now, let us think, first, of the length of life, and this is that dimension of life, as I've said, in which the individual is concerned with developing his inner powers. In a sense this is the selfish dimension of life. There is such a thing as rational, healthy, and moral self-interest. If an individual is not concerned about himself, he cannot really be concerned about other selves. Some years ago a brilliant Jewish rabbi, the late Joshua Liebman, wrote a book entitled *Peace of Mind*. And he has a chapter in that book entitled "Love Thyself Properly."⁷ What he says in that chapter in substance is this: that before we can love other selves adequately we must love our own selves properly. And many people have been plunged in to the abyss of emotional fatalism because they didn't love themselves properly. So we have a legitimate obligation: be concerned about ourselves. We have a legitimate obligation to set out in life to see what we are made for, to find that center of creativity, for there is within all of us a center of creativity seeking to break forth, and we have the responsibility of discovering this, discovering that life's work.

Then once we discover what we are made for, what we are called to do in life,

5. Cf. Revelation 21:16.

6. Brooks, *Selected Sermons*, p. 195: "St. John in his great vision sees the mystic city, 'the holy Jerusalem,' descending out of heaven from God. It is the picture of glorified humanity, of humanity as it shall be when it is brought to its completeness by being thoroughly filled with God. And one of the glories of the city which he saw was its symmetry. Our cities, our developments and presentations of human life, are partial and one-sided. This city out of heaven was symmetrical. In all its three dimensions it was complete. Neither was sacrificed to the other. 'The length and the breadth and the height of it are equal.'"

572 7. Joshua Loth Liebman, *Peace of Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1946), pp. 38-58.

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we must set out to do it with all of the strength and all of the power that we can muster up. Individuals should seek to do his life's work so well that the living, the dead, or the unborn couldn't do it better. He must see it as something with cosmic significance; no matter how small it happens to be, or no matter how insignificant we tend to feel it is, we must come to see that it has great significance, that it is for the upbuilding of humanity. So to carry it to one extreme, if it falls one's lot to be a street sweeper, he should at that moment seek to sweep streets like Michelangelo carved marble, like Rafael painted pictures. He should seek to sweep streets like Beethoven composed the music or like Shakespeare wrote poetry. He should seek to sweep streets so well that all the hosts of heaven and earth will have to pause and say, "Here lived a great street sweeper, and he swept his job well."⁸ And I think this is what Douglas Malloch meant when he said, "If you can't be a pine on the top of the hill, be a shrub in the valley-but be the best little shrub on the side of the rill; be a bush if you can't be a tree. If you can't be a highway just be a trail, if you can't be the sun be a star, for it isn't by size that you win or you fail-be the best of whatever you are."⁹ This power to discover what you are made for, this onward push to the end of personal achievement, the length of a man's life.

We must not stop here. It's dangerous to stop with the length of life. Some people never get beyond this first dimension of life, they're often brilliant people. They develop their inner powers. They do extraordinarily well in their fields of endeavor. They live life as if nobody else lived in the world but themselves. Other people become mere means by which they climb to their personal ends or their personal ambitions. Their love is only a utilitarian love. There is nothing more tragic in life to find an individual bogged down in the length of life, devoid of the breadth.

The breadth of life is that outward concern for the welfare of others. I should submit to you this morning that unless an individual can rise above the narrow confines of his individualistic concerns to the broader concerns of all humanity he hasn't even started living.¹⁰ You remember a man went to Jesus one day to raise some serious questions; he was interested about life and all of its eternal meaning. Finally he got around to the question, "Who is my neighbor?"¹¹ Now it could've very easily ended up in a sort of philosophical debate, in an abstract discussion. Jesus immediately pulled that question out of mid-air and placed it on a dangerous curve between Jerusalem and Jericho. He talked about a certain man that fell

8. In an earlier speech King attributed this quotation to Morehouse College president Benjamin Mays (see King, "Facing the Challenge of a New Age," Address Delivered at NAACP Emancipation Day Rally, 1 January 1957, in *Papers* 4:79).

9. King paraphrases the poem "Be the Best of Whatever You Are" (1926) by Douglas Malloch.

10. Brooks, *Selected Sermons*, p. 196: "The Breadth of a life, on the other hand, is its outreach laterally, if we may say so. It is the constantly diffusive tendency which is always drawing a man outward into sympathy with other men. And the Height of a life is its reach upward towards God; its sense of childhood; its consciousness of the Divine Life over it with which it tries to live in love, communion, and obedience. These are the three dimensions of a life, -its length and breadth and height, -without the due development of all of which no life becomes complete."

11. This question was asked of Jesus, who replied with the parable of the Good Samaritan (see Luke 10:29).

11 Dec among thieves. Three men passed, you remember. One was a Levite; one was a
1960 priest. And they passed by on the other side; they didn't stop to help the man. And finally a man of another race came by. The Samaritan, you remember. He stopped; he administered first aid; he helped the man in need. Jesus implied that this Samaritan was good, that he was great, because he had the capacity to project the I into the Thou.

Now, when we read this parable we tend to use our imagination a great deal. I know I do when I read it. We begin to wonder why the priest didn't stop and why the Levite didn't stop. Now, there are many reasons when we begin to use our imagination about it. It's possible that they were busy and they were in a big hurry because they had some ecclesiastical meeting to attend. That's a possibility. And so they just didn't have time; they had to be there on time; they didn't want to be late; they considered the duties of ecclesiastical concerns more important. Now, there is also a possibility that they were going down to Jericho to organize the Jericho Road Improvement Association. That's another, a real possibility.

Well, you know there is another possibility that I often think about when I think about this parable. It's really possible that those men were afraid. You know, the Jericho road is a dangerous road. A few months ago Mrs. King and I were in Jerusalem, and we rented a car and drove down the Jericho road from Jerusalem to Jericho.¹² And I said to her as we went around this road-it's a meandering, curvy road-and I said I can easily see why Jesus used this as a setting for the parable because there is something dangerous about this road, and it's conducive for robbery. Here is Jerusalem, some twenty-six-hundred feet above sea level, and here is Jericho, some one thousand feet below sea level, and you go that distance within about fifteen or sixteen miles. Mountainous, dangerous, meandering road, and so it is possible that the priest and the Levite had a little fear. The robbers could have still been around, and they could have raised this question. Maybe they are still around; or maybe the man on the ground is faking, and he's just trying to get us over there to end up robbing us in the long run. So may it not be that the first question that the priest raised or the first question that the Levite raised was this: "If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?" Then the Good Samaritan came by, and in the very nature of his concern reversed the question: "If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?"¹³ And so he was a great man because he had the mental equipment for a dangerous altruism. He was a great man because he not only ascended to the heights of economic security but because he could condescend to the depths of human need. He was a great man because he discovered in his own life that he who would be greatest among you must be your servant.¹⁴

Now this text has a great deal of bearing, this whole question of the breadth of life has a great deal of bearing on the crisis which we face in race relations in our own nation. I am absolutely convinced that the problems which we face today in

12. In a 29 March 1959 Easter Sunday sermon at Dexter, King recalled his recent visit to Jericho (see King, *A Walk Through the Holy Land*, pp. 164-175 in this volume).

13. Cf. Luke 10:30-37.

14. Cf. Matthew 23:u.

the Southland grow out of the fact that too many of our white brothers are concerned merely about the length of life rather than the breadth of life, concerned about their so-called way of life, concerned about perpetuating a preferred economic position, concerned about preserving a sort of political status and power, concerned about preserving a so-called social status. As we look to these problems we find ourselves saying, if they would only add breadth to length, the other-regarding dimension to the self-regarding dimension, the jangling discords of the South would be transformed into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood.

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We look at New Orleans today-what do we see there? We find hundreds, hundreds and thousands of people infiltrated with hatred. We find a legislative body using all of the fears and all of the emotions to keep the people confused.¹⁵ In many instances these political leaders are concerned merely about perpetuating their political power. So we see many irresponsible leaders of states in the South using this issue merely to keep the people confused and arousing their fears just to get elected, concerned merely about the length of life, not the breadth. For you see in a real sense the system of segregation itself is wrong because it is based on the question of length and not breadth, it is exclusive and not inclusive. Segregation is wrong because it substitutes an I-it relationship for the I-Thou relationship.¹⁶ Segregation is wrong because it relegates persons to the status of things. Segregation is wrong because it assumes that God made a mistake and stamped a badge of inferiority on certain people because of the color of their skin.¹⁷ Therefore, all men of goodwill have a moral obligation to work assiduously to remove this cancerous disease from the body of our nation. It must be done not merely to meet the Communist challenge, although it will be diplomatically expedient to do it. It must be done not merely to appeal to Asian and African people, although it would be expedient to do it. In the final analysis segregation and discrimination must be removed from our nation because they are morally wrong. They stand in conflict with all of the noble principles of our Judeo-Christian heritage. They must be removed because they are wrong at the very core.

I don't want to give the impression that those individuals who are working to remove the system and those individuals who have been on the oppressed end of the old order must not themselves be concerned about breadth. But I realize that so often in history when oppressed people rise up against their oppression they are too concerned about length too often. It is my firm conviction those of us who have been on the oppressed end of the old order have as much responsibility to be concerned about breadth as anybody else. This is why I believe so firmly in non-violence. Our aim must not be merely to achieve rights for Negroes or rights for

15. Judge]. Skelly Wright had ordered the New Orleans public schools to desegregate on 14 November 1960, prompting whites to mob city hall and withdraw children in large numbers from the local schools (Claude Sitton, "Pupils Integrate in New Orleans as Crowd Jeers," *New York Times*, 15 November 1960).

16. Cf. Martin Buber, *I and Thou* (1937).

17. King's discussion of the effects of segregation is similar to Benjamin E. Mays's treatment in a 1955 speech, "The Moral Aspects of Segregation" (see note 11 to "Address at Public Meeting of the Southern Christian Ministers Conference of Mississippi," 23 September 1959, p. 288 in this volume).

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colored people. We are concerned about this only, we will seek to rise from a position of disadvantage to one of advantage, thus subverting justice. The aim must never be to do that but to achieve democracy for everybody. And this is why I disagree so firmly with any philosophy of black supremacy, for I am absolutely convinced that God is not interested merely in the freedom of black men and brown men and yellow men. But God is interested in the freedom of the whole human race, the creation of a society where all men will live together as brothers and every man will respect the dignity and worth of all human personality. And a doctrine of white supremacy is concerned merely about the length of life, not the breadth of life. So the aim of the Negro never be to defeat or humiliate the white man but to win his friendship and understanding.

As I said, the tension which we face in America today, not so much a tension between black men and white men, but it's a tension between justice and injustice, a struggle between the forces of light and the forces of darkness. And, if there is a victory, it will be a victory not merely for seventeen or eighteen million Negroes. It will be a victory for democracy, a victory for justice, a victory for freedom. And this is why I admire so much these hundreds and thousands of students all across our Southland not merely because they are working for constructive ends but because they have decided to use means that have the element of breadth. For all of these months they have taken the deep groans and the passionate yearnings of the Negro people and filtered them in their own souls, fashioned them into a creative protest, which is an epic known all over our nation. Yes, they have moved in a uniquely meaningful orbit, *[imparting?]* light and heat to distant satellite. And I am convinced that when the history books are written the historians will have to record this movement as one of the most significant epics of our heritage, not merely because it seeks to bring about humanitarian ends, because it also has humanitarian means.

And not only does this text have bearing on our struggle in America in the area of race relations, but it has a great deal of bearing on the crisis in the world in international relations. This text says to us, in substance, that every nation must be concerned about every other nation. No nation can live in isolation today. We live in a world that is geographically one now. We have the job of making it spiritually one. A few months ago Mrs. King and I journeyed to that great country in the Far East known as India. I never will forget the experience; it was a most rewarding experience, one that I will remember as long as the chords of memory shall lengthen, experience of talking with the great leaders of government, meeting hundreds and thousands of people all over India, most rewarding experience. And I say to you this morning that there were those depressing moments. How can one avoid being depressed when he sees with his own eyes millions of people going to bed hungry at night? How can one avoid being moved and concerned when he sees with his own eyes millions of people sleeping on the sidewalks at night? In Calcutta alone more than a million people sleep on the sidewalk every night. In Bombay more than five hundred thousand people sleep on the sidewalk every night, no houses to go in, no beds to sleep in. How can one avoid being depressed, he discovers that out of India's population of four hundred million people, more than three hundred and fifty million of these people make an annual income of less than sixty dollars a year? Most of these people have never seen a doctor or a dentist. Many of these conditions exist because these people for many, many years

were dominated politically, exploited economically, segregated and humiliated by foreign power.

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As I watched these conditions, I found conditions, I found myself asking, can we in America stand idly by and not be concerned? I thought of the fact that we spend millions of dollars a day to store surplus food, and I started thinking to myself, I know where we can store this food free of charge—in the wrinkled stomachs of the hundreds and thousands and millions of people all over the world who are hungry. Maybe in America we spend too much of our money establishing military bases around the world rather than establishing bases of genuine concern and understanding. And all I'm saying is simply this, that all life is interrelated. Somehow we are tied in a single garment of destiny, caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, where what affects one directly affects all indirectly. As long as there is poverty in this world, you can never be totally rich, even if you have a billion dollars. As long as diseases are rampant and millions of people cannot expect to live more than thirty or thirty-two years, you can never be totally healthy, even if you just got a clean bill of health from Mayo Clinic or John Hopkins Hospital. Strangely enough I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the way the world is made; I didn't make it that way, but it's like that. And John Donne recorded it years ago and placed it in graphic terms: "No man is an island, entire of itself; every man is a piece of the continent, a part of the main." And then he goes on toward the end to say: "Any man's death diminishes me because I am involved in mankind. Therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee."¹⁸ Only by discovering this are we able to master the breadth of life.

Finally, there is another dimension. We must not stop with length and breadth. There is another dimension. Now some people never get beyond the first two. They are brilliant people, and in many instances they love humanity. They have active social concerns. They stop right there, so they seek to live life without a sky. They live only on the horizontal plane with no real concern for the vertical. Now I know that there are many reasons why people neglect this third dimension, this point of reaching up for the eternal God.¹⁹ Some people, I'm sure, have honest reasons for, for not pursuing the ends of the third dimension. Some people have looked out into the world, and they have noticed evil in all of its glaring and colossal dimensions. That's something that the poet Keats called "the giant agony of the world."²⁰ They found themselves asking how is it that a good God who is at the same time an all-powerful God, how is it that such a God will allow all of this evil to exist in the world? And so they find themselves caught up in the problem of evil. Because of that they end up neglecting the third dimension.

And others who've gotten disgusted with organized religion and as a result of

18. King quotes lines from John Donne's "Meditation XVII" (1624).

19. Brooks, *Selected Sermons*, p. 202: "So much I say about the length and breadth of life. One other dimension still remains. The length and breadth and height of it are equal. The Height of life is its reach upward toward something distinctly greater than humanity. . . . The reaching of mankind towards God!"

20. King quotes from John Keats's "The Fall of Hyperion: A Dream" (1819).

11 Dec 1960 their disgust with organized religion, and those people who claim that they believe in God living contrary to all of the demands of religion, they have decided that the third dimension is a waste of time. And we must admit that so often the church has been the arch conserver of the status quo. The church has too often been that institution that serves to crystallize the patterns of society through often evil patterns. How often in the church have we had a high blood pressure of creeds and an anemia of deeds? People looking out at that, seeing that the church has often gone out in society with no social consciousness, they've decided to neglect the third dimension. And then there are others who find it difficult to square their intellectual world view to the sometimes unscientific dogmas of religion.

But I imagine that most people fit in another category all together. They are not theoretical atheists; they are practical atheists. They are not the people who deny the existence of God with their minds and their lips, but they are the people who deny God's existence with their lives. For some of these other people who have the theoretical doubts and honest doubts reveal a deeper commitment in so many instances because while they deny God's existence with their minds they affirm God's existence in the bottom of their hearts and with their lives. But there is another type of atheism that is much more damaging. And so there are so many people that have neglected this third dimension just because they've become so involved in things [gap in tape] Greek civilization, unconsciously believing that only those things which we can see and touch, apply the five senses to, their existence.

But in spite of our theoretical denial, we still feel in life another order impinging upon us. In spite of our doubts, we go on in life having spiritual experiences that cannot be explained in materialistic terms. In spite of our inordinate worship of things, something keeps reminding us that the eternal things of the universe are never seen. We go out at night and look up at the beautiful stars as they bedeck the heavens like swinging lanterns of eternity; for the moment we think we see all. Then something comes to tell us, "Oh no." We can never see the law of gravitation that holds them there. We look at this beautiful church building, and we see the beautiful architecture, and we think for the moment we see all. Oh no. We can never see the mind of the architect who drew the blueprint; we can never see the love and the faith and the hope of the individuals who made it so. You look here this morning, and I know you're saying, "we see Martin Luther King." I hate to disappoint you. You merely see my body. You can never see my mind; you can never see my personality; you can never see the me that makes *me* me. So in a real sense everything that we see in life is something of a shadow cast by that which we do not see. Plato was right: "The visible is a shadow cast by the invisible."²¹

And so in spite of our denials we are still reminded of this, and may it not be that God is still around? And all of our new knowledge will not diminish his being one iota. All of our new developments can banish God neither from the microcosmic compass of the atom nor from the vast unfathomable ranges of interstellar space, living in a universe in which we are forced to measure stellar distance by light years, confronted with the illimitable expanse of the universe in which

21. King refers to Plato's allegory of the cave, from *The Republic*: "The truth would be literally nothing but the shadows of the images" (514a-c, 521a-e).

stars are five hundred million billion miles from the Earth, which heavenly bodies travel at incredible speed and in which the ages of planets are reckoned in terms of billions of years. Modern man is forced to cry out with the solace of old: "When

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I behold the heavens, the work of thy hands, the moon, the stars, and all that thou hast created, what is man that thou art mindful of him and the son of man that thou rememberest him?"²² And so it may well be that God is still around. So let us go out with a cultivation of the third dimension, for it can give life new meaning. It can give life new zest, and I can speak of this out of personal experience.

Over the last few years, circumstances have made it necessary for me to stand so often amid the surging [*moment?*] of life's restless sea.²³ Moments of frustration, the chilly winds of adversity all around, but there was always something deep down within that could keep me going, a strange feeling that you are not alone in this struggle, that the struggle for the good life is a struggle in which the individual has cosmic companionship. For so many times I have been able with my people to walk and never get weary because I am convinced that there is a great camp meeting in the promised land of God's universe.²⁴ Maybe St. Augustine was right: we were made for God; we will be restless until we find rest in him.²⁵

Love yourself if that means rational, healthy, and moral self-interest. You are commanded to do that; that is the length of life. Love your neighbor as you love yourself. You are commanded to do that; that is the breadth of life. But never forget there is a first and even greater commandment. Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with all thy mind.²⁶ That is the height of life.

When an individual does this, he lives a complete life. Thank God for John, who centuries ago caught vision of the New Jerusalem; and grant to those of us who are left to walk the streets and the highways of life will also catch vision of the New Jerusalem, decide to move toward that city of complete life in our individual lives, in our national lives, in which the length and the breadth and the height are equal.

Let us pray. Eternal God, our Father, we thank thee for the insights of old, the insights of prophets and those who have lived near to thee. Grant that as we continue to live we will seek to develop all of those dimensions that will bring completeness to us. Grant somehow that we will learn to be concerned about ourselves, but at the same time give us that great concern for other selves. At the same time, help us to be concerned about thee and to worship thee in spirit and truth.²⁷ Grant that somehow we will come to the great conclusion that unless we have all three of these we somehow live lives that are incomplete. Amen.

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22. Cf. Psalm 8:3-4.

23. King may have borrowed the phrase "restless sea" from Cecil F. Alexander's 1852 hymn "Jesus Calls Us": "Jesus calls us o'er the tumult of our life's wild, restless sea; day by day his sweet voice soundeth, saying, 'Christian, follow me!'"

24. King adapts the lyrics of the spiritual "There's a Great Camp Meeting": "Walk together children, Don't you get weary, Don't you get weary, There's a great camp meeting in the Promised Land."

25. *The Confessions of St. Augustine*, 1.1: "Thou madest us for Thyself, and our heart is restless, until it repose in Thee."

26. Cf. Matthew 22:37.

27. Cf. John 4:24.