

Then I heard a voice from Heaven say, "Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on."

"Yes," says the Spirit, "They will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them."

Revelation 14:13

The Final Sermon of Frazier Hilliard

The Rev. Frazier Hilliard passed away on Sept. 19, 2009 at 11:15 p.m. at the age of 83, not long after he and his wife celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary. Elder Hilliard is a former pastor, and was on the ministerial staff of the church Carolyn and I attend. There were a number of factors contributing to his passing – kidney failure requiring dialysis, poor circulation leading to the amputation of both of his legs below the knee – mostly connected to the effects of having lived a long life of service to the Lord.

We had gotten to know Elder Hilliard and his wife fairly well in the final year of his earthly life. We had spoken on many occasions, and I always found him to be interested in new teaching of the Lord. My wife would visit them from time to time while I was at work and read to him from one of the books we have received some of our teachings from; he was always ready to soak it up like the proverbial dry sponge and ask questions. His body may have been failing, but his mind was still sharp and his heart still loved his Lord.

Elder Hilliard is a member of a generation that is rapidly passing from the scene, and I believe we are the worse for it. He met and shook hands with Bishop Charles Harrison Mason, the founder of the Church of God in Christ and (to me, at least) one of the unsung heroes of the Pentecostal movement. The "new teachings" he found to be actually much older, closer in spirit to the Word given through the Lord Jesus and the Holy Spirit and a call for a wholehearted return to the Lord. He was of a time when reverence for the things of God was far greater than it is today, and a quality we as believers need to re-cultivate. Our culture does not appreciate older people today, much to its detriment, for the elderly in many cases are living examples of such qualities as reverence, patriotism and endurance.

But it was the things I learned *from* Elder Hilliard in that year that made such an impression. Because of his physical limitations, he could no longer preach as he once did; indeed, sometimes it was a victory for him just to be able to attend church. He required assistance (provided by his wife) to get onto the toilet and (once or twice provided by myself) to get into bed. Thrice-weekly dialysis sessions sapped him of strength, and he needed a day or two to recover from them; toward the end, he did not seem to fully recover at all.

For a man in that position, the thought must go through his mind, *Is this it? Am I coming down to the end? Am I about to die?* It happens even under far more favorable circumstances – when I had surgery to fuse three cervical vertebrae a few years ago, a similar thought occurred to me as I was wheeled into the operating room as a complete newcomer to this experience: *What if something happens? What if you don't wake up?* (Nice bit of irony for someone whose first career choice was medicine, eh?)

Now granted, I was not with the Hilliards 24/7, so I have no idea what was going on in his private moments or in his thoughts. Likewise, however, I don't know anyone

who came to visit him in his last months who even once heard Elder Hilliard complain about his situation, indulge in self-pity or engage in the slightest bit of selfishness. Surely he would have been entitled to vent, even just a little, about his predicament – but that sort of thing never came out of his mouth. The closest he came to a gripe was when he noted that he could no longer go to church. When he did come, riding in a motorized power chair, sometimes the adapted buses for the disabled operated by our local transit authority did not come right away. Carolyn and I would sometimes keep Elder Hilliard and his wife company waiting for the bus, wishing we could put him in our vehicle and drive him home ourselves. But never did one word of complaint pass his lips – then, or the last time we were able to hold any kind of conversation with him.

The approach of one's own death is where the "rubber meets the road," as it were, in terms of one's faith – especially when it comes slowly, and you have time to *think* about it. This is where all pretenses are stripped away, and people see who you *really* are. It is where you take a look at your Bible, and you face the question, *Is this the Word of Almighty God or isn't it? Can I make my final stand upon this Word?* Because we all have to face it at some point. "Man is destined to die once," wrote the Apostle Paul in Hebrews 9:27; author Stephen King rephrased it a bit more directly; "We all owe a death." Yet seeing that death coming a long way off, even with half of both legs gone, enduring the physical depletion of dialysis and suffering the thousand-and-one indignities of his physical condition, Frazier Hilliard maintained his core humanity and his dignity because of his faith in God. He remembered who he was – the creation of Almighty God, of inestimable worth in God's sight simply because God made him. When you are called to this kind of work for the Lord, there will be a lot of words written and spoken, few of which will ever actually be remembered. But people do remember how we live our lives in His service, because we're all headed to the same place; standing before God at the end of our lives, wanting to hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"

I'm sorry I didn't get to hear Elder Hilliard preach when he was in his prime; I'm sure it must have been something to hear. But the final days of his life were, essentially, his final sermon, one that carried with it far more *gravitas* because it showed the man at his core, a core molded by God Himself. Physically speaking, I hope first to reach my 80s (at least) and, second, to be in good physical condition (although in truth our bodies ultimately count for nothing). But, spiritually speaking, I want to take the final sermon of Frazier Hilliard as much to heart as possible and say, *may my end be like his*.