

Not Many Years

Philip Doddridge (1702–1751)

Not many years their rounds shall roll,
Each moment brings it nigh,
Ere all its glories stand revealed,
To our admiring eye.
Ye wheels of nature speed your course,
Ye mortal pow'rs, decay;
Fast as ye bring the night of death,
Ye bring eternal day.

Ye weary, heavy laden souls,
Who are oppressed sore,
Ye trav'lers through the wilderness
To Cannan's peaceful shore.
Through chilling winds and beating rains,
the waters deep and cold,
And enemies surrounding you,
Take courage and be bold.

Though storms and hurricanes arise,
The desert all around.
And fiery serpents oft appear
Through the enchanted ground.
Dark nights and clouds and gloomy fear—
And dragons often roar—
But while the gospel trump we hear,
We'll press for Canaan's shore.



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ΤΩ ΧΡΟΝΟΥ ΚΑΙΡΩ

In the Nick of Time

Favorite Interests—Airliners

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God has created humans to exercise dominion over the created order. Exercising dominion includes the ability to invent devices that allow us to bend the natural world to our use, sometimes in wonderful ways. Such machines and their products reflect the image of God in us. We often build them not merely to be useful, but also to be beautiful. Not surprisingly, people become intrigued with both the devices themselves as well as their products.

This fascination moves some people to collect intricately manufactured objects like coins or stamps. It is why some people work on cars or observe trains. Some people collect pens while others accumulate firearms. One man I know collects monkey wrenches. Rightly placed in our lives, such interests are wholesome, and they embody an aspect of what God made us to be and do.

Most of us can be drawn to more than one of these interests. We have to discipline our use of time and money so that our interests do not become obsessions. Given limited resources, we look for interests that require minimal investment. For me, one of those interests is the marvel of machines that enable people to fly.

This interest comes from my childhood, when my father worked for Capital Airlines and then for United Airlines after the two companies merged in 1961. The combined airline was the largest in the world. A perk of my father's job was that our family could fly on passes. And we used them. I grew up flying more miles on more airplanes than most people fly during their entire lives.

Security was almost nonexistent in those days. Your friends could walk you unchallenged to your gate. And flying was a luxury. People dressed up to get on an airplane. Prices were regulated and air travel was expensive, so the airlines competed by providing services. The food was good. The first eggs Benedict I ever enjoyed was on a United Airlines 727. The meals were even good enough that sometimes the airline employees would use their passes to take their wives out to dinner—on the planes.

I was flying before I was conscious of it. The first flight that I remember took off when I was about four years old. It was on a Douglas DC-3, and it was just a short hop from Tri Cities Airport in Freeland, Michigan, to Bishop Field in Flint. I remember the roar as the twin radial engines coughed into life. I remember the airplane taxiing, and I remember being disappointed because it felt just like riding in a car. Then the craft thundered down the runway, and before I understood what was happening, all the buildings beneath me were growing smaller and smaller. It was an incredible sensation. I kept my face plastered to the window for the whole flight.

My first jet ride came a few years later. My parents roused us early in the morning as if we were going to school. But instead, we drove to the airport. We caught a quick flight to Chicago, and there we boarded a Douglas DC-8 for San Francisco. As ever, we flew first class—I didn't even know about coach. I gazed out of the window for the entire trip. I specifically remember looking down on Yosemite National Park and on the Golden Gate Bridge. From SFO we caught a Convair 240 up to Sacramento. We were met by an uncle who drove us to Redding, where he was an engineer at the Shasta Dam.

I loved to distinguish airliner types the way that some guys loved to name cars. I used to be able to identify any commercial airliner at a glance. The propliners were always my favorites, though they were much noisier than the jets. Besides the planes I've mentioned, I flew at one time or another on the Lockheed Constellation and the Douglas DC-4, DC-6, and DC-7. During the mid-1960s, United installed lounges in the back of some of its DC-6 aircraft. I have good memories of sitting at a round table on a circular sofa.

The most comfortable propliner was the Vickers Viscount, a British plane powered by Rolls Royce turbo-props. Those engines whined rather than thundered, and the interior of the craft was much quieter than a piston airplane. The Viscount had roomy, comfortable seats and very large, oval windows. They were excellent for gazing at the ground. Several years ago, I bought a set of Viscount seats in an auction and gave them to my father. I still enjoy their comfort when I'm in his home.

The jets began to take over in the late 1950s. United flew Boeing 720s and Douglas DC-8s. United also flew the French-built Caravelle, which I saw but never flew on. Then Boeing came out with its 727. This incredible craft had a T-tail and three engines on the rear of the fuselage. I got my first chance to fly in one in about 1966, and it became my all-time favorite jet.

A key turning point came to the industry when Boeing introduced its 737. This stubby aircraft was made to service smaller airports, and it quickly became the workhorse of many short-to-medium length routes. Compared to the sleek 720 or DC-8, it looked ungainly. It was dubbed the "pregnant

guppy" by some and the "mini-pig" by others. But the type has continued to evolve. Its designers have lengthened it, increased its wingspan, and given it larger engines. In its various permutations, it has become the most successful aircraft ever built.

The 737 and Douglas's DC-9 pushed out the propliners. By the early 1970s they were no longer needed. Then the long-haul routes were taken over by the jumbo jets: the 747, the DC-10, and Lockheed's Tristar. For the briefest of moments, the old luxury of air travel merged with the jet age. When I was in high school, our family flew to Honolulu on a 747. The airline's luxury was on full display during that flight: gourmet meals, generous service, and genuine comfort.

What happened? The short answer is that Ronald Reagan deregulated the airline industry. Competition increased, prices came down, more people wanted to fly, and the airlines wanted to cram more passengers into the same space. Service plunged. Airliners became flying cattle cars. Then came 9-11, which resulted in long lines for security checks as well as a host of restrictions on what could be worn, carried, or checked.

The bad news for air travel is that the luxury and mystique are gone. The good news is that almost everybody can now afford to fly. The other good news is that flying is as safe as it has ever been, which is very safe indeed.

I still love to fly, and I still look out the airplane window like I did when I was a kid. I don't miss the luxury all that much. But I hate the crowds, the standing in line, the security checks, the TSA pat-downs, and the cramped seating—all of these are good reasons to drive whenever I can. But I miss propliners the most. And they won't ever be back.



This essay is by Kevin T. Bauder, Research Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology at Central Baptist Theological Seminary. Not every one of the professors, students, or alumni of Central Seminary necessarily agrees with every opinion that it expresses.
