

Don Alexander: Soaring Like an Eagle

BY DAVID POSEY

We've lost another saint to the ravages of cancer, a bitter enemy that has taken too many, too soon. Our brother Don Alexander was a talented man — that's well known. Most of us know that he was a marriage and family counselor for many years, and helped countless families avoid marital disaster. And his songwriting talent was amazing. His hymns, "Saints Lift Your Voices" (#7 in our hymnbook) and "Mended and Whole" (#369), are destined to become classic hymns, sung for ages to come. Many of his other songs should reach the same status. His lyrics are profound, decidedly scriptural, and the melodies majestic and beautiful.

His songs reflect the man. Don was a pure soul, passionate, steadfast and dedicated. He was an excellent Bible student and preacher and writer. I asked him, on several occasions, to write for us when I was editing *Focus Magazine*. He was always so humble, wondered why anyone would want to read what he had to say but what he had to say was always instructive and insightful.

I've known Don for over 40 years. But after we moved to Folsom, I had the privilege of spending some quality time with him on occasion. We would meet for breakfast at Brookfield's Restaurant off of Sunrise in Rancho Cordova. We would discuss sermons and talk about church issues and problems and, at the end, joke that we were glad we were able to solve all the problems in the churches in such a short time. I regret that we were unable, for various reasons, to meet together as much in the last few years.

I was totally, and permanently, impressed with the man. There was nothing pretentious about him. Whether writing a song or preaching a sermon or teaching a class, he had one goal in mind — to telegraph the truth, unvarnished and pure — to all who would listen. I loved that about him.

As a preacher, it's so easy to get your head turned by members, or other preachers, who have an agenda, the fulfillment of which requires a jettisoning of at least some of the truth. Don would have none of that.

I remember distinctly Don's frustration with the lack of preaching about repentance. He called it "the forgotten command" and I had to admit he was right. It was good for me to hear his concern. Preachers want to talk about faith and grace and baptism and attendance and giving... but repentance rarely comes up. Yet it is a dominant theme in scripture and without it, there is no forgiveness from God (see Acts 2:38 and note what comes before baptism). He also was a clear-eyed observer of changes in churches — changes that worried him, as they did me, because they were dangerous. He sent me a sermon outline back in 2014. After expounding on some passages in Ephesians and Acts, he summed up his thoughts with this:

The "church" didn't begin with a building, a group of people who liked to potluck, and whose kids went to the same school, and who just wanted to be "religious" so they decided to become a "church." It DIDN'T BEGIN WITH THEM AT ALL! It began with the grace of Almighty God, a "sower," the gospel --

"seed" of the kingdom, courageous men and women whose faith and conviction in Jesus moved them to work with God to call others out of sinful living and into the grace of God. And those who obeyed Jesus—not the preacher—became Christians, and devout followers of Jesus Christ, and thus "the church"; may we dare to say "the church of Christ"(Rom. 16:16)! If we preach what they preached, believe what they believed, and obey what they obeyed, and live as they lived for Jesus, we will be what they were: "Just Christians", no-brand, undenominational Christians, nothing more, nothing less than that. When you make "Christians" you make "the church."

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I love men and women who speak the truth without regard to the consequences. Paul himself said, in Romans 3:4,

Let God be true though everyone were a liar...

Don was a courageous teller of the truth and his zeal for truth never flagged.

But he wasn't one of those grouchy, complaining, always-looking-at-the-dark-side preachers. His joy always shined through. We could talk about the most serious topics, yet share a good laugh as well. It was the joy he expresses in his songs, especially in "Saints Lift Your Voices":

Lift up your eyes and see His great might!
Soar like an eagle, on wings of flight!
Saints lift your voices, though dark your days!
Lift up your spirits, sing out His praise!
Upward the calling, brighter the light!
Soaring like eagles, on wings of flight!

If that chorus doesn't lift your spirits, I doubt anything can. The song, of course, puts to music the words of Isaiah 40:31,

...they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.

In 1997, I was asked to speak at the FC Lectures. My topic was "Introduction to Ephesians, Colossians and Philemon." I wrote my assigned article for the book, including all the salient facts and details that are called for in an "Introduction." But I dreaded trying to preach a 35 minute sermon on it. I prefer to keep people awake while I'm preaching, if I have any say in it.

So I took a different approach. With Don's song, and Isaiah 40:31 in my head, I spoke of how Paul soars in his letters to the Ephesians and Colossians. Here's an excerpt from that sermon*:

Let's soar with Paul for a few moments. Turn to Ephesians 1. "To the praise of his glory" (v. 6, 12, 14). What does that say to the magicians, the soothsayers, the astrologers and idolaters? Can magic redeem your soul, can faith in the stars forgive your sins, can bowing to idol bring peace to your soul? All of those things rest on the earth, but the gospel promises to "raise us up to sit in the heavenlylies with Christ Jesus"! (2:6). As my good friend Don Alexander has written in one of my favorite songs, "lift up your eyes and see his great might, soar like an eagle, on wings of flight..." Diana –neither the goddess nor the princess – ever had the power to inspire that kind of lofty praise. Doctrine comes before duty; practice must be governed and controlled by God's principles. But I've discerned a *failure to soar* before touch-down, especially in our Bible classes. In our rush to be *relevant*, our classes can become little more than pooled ignorance — sentiment without substance, or little academic mini-

lectures that never rise above the ceiling. These epistles announce, over and over again, “*Our God, He is Alive!*” How can any thinking Christian read the first chapter of Ephesians without getting goose bumps? They call us up to think deeply about the grand design of God (1:3-6); to contemplate our exalted position in Christ (2:4-6); to dwell on the profound significance of the church (1:22-23; 3:10-11). And then there are Paul’s prayers; ponder those, and *soar like an eagle*: 1:18-19; 3:14-19.

In that year, my mother passed, a few months before I was to deliver this speech. Don’s picturesque scene, of saints soaring like eagles, comforted me. Now, with Don’s passing, we can be comforted by knowing that he is, in a very real sense, “soaring like an eagle on wings of flight.”

Rest in peace, dear brother.