

**DISAPPEARING RAILROAD BLUES**  
**A Devotional Meditation from**  
**Isaiah 65: 17-19; Matthew 13:52; Luke 5:36-39; Revelation 21:1-4**  
**Albert J. McCarn**  
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Railroads have carried people and goods across vast distances for nearly 200 years. The history of many nations and empires is intertwined with the development of the railroad. For example, the American Transcontinental Railroad and the Russian Trans-



*The Illinois Central's City of New Orleans at Kankakee, Illinois, August 1964. Photo by Lawrence and David Barera, via Flickr.com*

Siberian Railway rank among the highest national achievements of both countries, connecting their wide expanses through reliable transportation.

But railroads are more than just efficient means of transport and sources of national pride. Trains hold a special place in our global cultural consciousness. That's because there is something romantic about trains – especially the great passenger trains of bygone days. We hear that in the wistful ballad, *The City of New Orleans*, written by Illinois native Steve Goodman in 1970. Goodman drew inspiration from a journey he and his wife made on the passenger train of that name, and then shared that inspiration with his friend Arlo Guthrie, who made the song a hit.

*The City of New Orleans* speaks to something vital, yet intangible, in the American spirit. This nation contributed much to develop railroads, but by the 1970s, transport of people and goods had largely switched from trains to automobiles, trucks, and airplanes. Train travel, at least the way Americans knew it, was on the way out, supplanted by new and more efficient modes of transport. The new and better would phase out the old and outmoded, and in the interest of progress, America would lose something precious. That's what Goodman meant by the line in his song, "This train's got the disappearing railroad blues."<sup>\*</sup>

That is one way to look at it, but Goodman's song, and our history, actually say something different. *The City of New Orleans* is a nostalgic look at train travel, giving honor to something that Americans had made and that had shaped America. Some parts of that American innovation did pass away, but not the railroad itself. Rail transport adapted, and to this day remains an essential part of life, both in America and around the

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<sup>\*</sup> "City of New Orleans by Arlo Guthrie," *Songfacts*, accessed April 23, 2021 (<https://www.songfacts.com/facts/arlo-guthrie/city-of-new-orleans>); "City of New Orleans Lyrics," *Genius Lyrics*, accessed April 23, 2021 (<https://genius.com/Arlo-guthrie-city-of-new-orleans-lyrics>).

world. The new does not supplant the old, but transforms it in ways that the original innovators likely could not imagine.

This is the true way of the earth. Cars, trucks, and airplanes have not replaced trains any more than trains replaced horses and mules. That is why even now, in this era of space travel, widely different forms of transportation coexist around the planet. Dog sleds still run across Alaska's tundra; alpacas and llamas still carry burdens over the Andes; camels still traverse the Sahara; and elephants are still indispensable in India. It's not that the old is no longer useful, nor that the new can do everything better, but that each has its place. The real question is which is the best answer in each situation.

This is biblical. Messiah Yeshua spoke to this principle in parables like this one:

"No one tears a patch from a new garment to use it on an old garment. Otherwise he will rip the new, and the patch from the new will not match the old. And no one puts new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins, it will be spilled out, and the skins will be destroyed. But new wine must be put into fresh wineskins. No man who drinks old wine wants new, because he says, 'The old is fine.'" (Luke 5:36-39 TLV)

Notice that Yeshua never calls for throwing away the old garments or wineskins, but rather using each in the right ways. The human tendency, however, is to go with what we know. If we are used to the old way, then we say, "The old is fine," and reject the new, but if we know only the new way, then the old way seems obsolete and inferior. Unless we find a way to transcend this human tendency, the clash of old and new will forever separate us into generational groups, sects, clans, and all manner of divisions, each clamoring that its own way is best and that all others are flawed.

If ever there was a clash between old and new, it was in the life and work of Yeshua of Nazareth. The established segments of Judaism had trouble comprehending how He fulfilled the Messianic prophecies to save the world, and ever since then the established segments of Christianity have had trouble understanding how everything God presented through Moses and the prophets remains relevant. And yet, Jews and Christians are still here, each contributing important elements to God's Kingdom purposes. Why did one not supplant the other? Perhaps because God has a reason to keep both around. If that is so, then maybe it's important for us to discern that reason.

But how do we discern it? How do we transcend this human tendency to reject whatever challenges our familiar patterns? Our Messiah once again explained, this time in the context of His parables about the Kingdom of Heaven:

Then He said to them, "Therefore every *Torah* scholar disciplined for the kingdom of heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure both new things and old." (Matthew 13:52 TLV)

English translations use the words scribe, teacher, and lawyer in place of Torah scholar. Today we might say rabbi. What Yeshua means is that those who know the scriptures and who receive the revelation of the Kingdom given through Him are the ones who gain the treasure of both. He opened the way for every man and woman to become such a Kingdom-disciplined Torah scholar, instructed from the Word by His Holy Spirit. All we need do is make the effort over a lifetime to appropriate that gift.

It does take a lifetime, of course, and much effort. Paul tells us that:

Make every effort to present yourself before God as tried and true, as an unashamed worker cutting a straight path with the word of truth. (2 Timothy 2:15 TLV)

“Cutting a straight path” is another way to say, “rightly dividing the word of truth.” The apostle, like our Messiah, never tells us to throw out any part of the word, but find the right path through it and with it.

This is more than simply an intellectual exercise. Any scholar can study the Bible, but only a true disciple can navigate the path it marks to the heart of our Heavenly Father. The closer we get to His heart, the more we discern how the many diverse parts of His Kingdom fit together. This, in turn, gives us ever more reason to praise Him and glorify His Name – which is precisely why He created and redeemed us.

To be sure, the Bible does speak of a new heaven and new earth. John tells us of this in Revelation, drawing on promises given first through Isaiah:

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. I also saw the holy city—the New Jerusalem—coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. I also heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, “Behold, the dwelling of God is among men, and He shall tabernacle among them. They shall be His people, and God Himself shall be among them and be their God. He shall wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more. Nor shall there be mourning or crying or pain any longer, for the former things have passed away.” (Revelation 21:1-4 TLV)

Yes, the new does eventually replace the old, but only when God Himself restores creation in the way He has intended from the beginning. Until then, old and new remain with us everywhere we look – even in our own homes, where grandparents joyfully greet and help raise their grandchildren. The new cannot mature without the old, and the purpose of the old remains incomplete without the new. This is why we must always look both backward and forward while remaining in our present. Emphasis on one or the other may cause us to suffer a spiritual version of the disappearing railroad blues.