

## Bob Dylan's "Mississippi" – an analysis by Kees de Graaf.

Dylan composed this masterpiece during the 1997 recording sessions for the album *"Time out of Mind"*. Dylan decided not to include this brilliant song on *"Time out of mind"* and obviously he had his reasons for this decision. However, little must he have realized at the time that it was destiny that caused this song to end up on the 2001 album *"Love and Theft"*. "Destiny" is a word often used by Dylan in his book *"Chronicles"*- Volume 1. When asked in his famous 2004 60 minutes CBS television interview why his still out there on stage after so many years he replies: *"It goes back to that destiny thing. I mean, I made a bargain with it, you know, long time ago. And I'm holding up my end"*. When asked whom he made that bargain with he replies: *"With the Chief Commander, in this earth and in a world we can't see"*. The fact is that the album *"Love and Theft"* was released on September the 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, the day when those two planes crashed into two twin towers and the world stood still in shock and agony. *"Mississippi"* exactly puts into words what happened on that dreadful day to all those unfortunate who were trapped in these towers: *"We're all boxed in, nowhere to escape, trapped in the heart of it, trying to get away, and "Sky full of fire, pain pouring down"*. It was as if destiny- the powers from above- had instructed Dylan to hold this prophetic song in his portfolio for more than 4 years and not release it until September the 11<sup>th</sup> 2001. So when I listened for the first time to this song on September the 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, the lyrics hit me like a thunderbolt and I was deeply touched and every word of it rang true. But not only that: musically the song has an ascending bass line which very much adds to the tension and drama of the song. All of this was reason enough to make this song one of my favourite Dylan tunes. There are many layers in the song and this makes it not an easy task to analyse the song. There is an outtake of the song which at some points has different lyrics but we will focus on the lyrics of the official release. As said it was not only 'destiny' that caused this song to be released on nine-eleven 2001 but apart from that there is also – as will outline below- a lot of 'destiny' in the lyrics of the song itself.

The song comprises 12 verses arranged in three sets of four verses and each of those three sets ends with a conclusion, the chorus of the song: *"Only one thing I did wrong, stayed in Mississippi a day too long"*. The chorus has no doubt the key to come to some sort of understanding of the meaning of the song and we will discuss the chorus in depth after the fourth verse but let's here suffice it to say that in his 2001 Rolling Stone interview Dylan said that *"Mississippi"* has *"knifelike lyrics trying to convey majesty and heroism"*. Indeed there is majesty and heroism in the lyrics of this song but we will see that this majesty and heroism shows itself not so much in- what we would usually expect- in glamour and courage but in all vulnerability and ostensible weakness and fragility which the poet expresses in this song, just like the apostle Paul once said: *"for when I am weak, then I am strong"* (2 Cor 12:10). We are going to find out in the analysis of this song that it is drenched in the imagery of the Biblical wisdom literature such as the Book of Job, the Psalms and the book of Ecclesiastes but also on the Pentateuch. So let's see how we can piece all these things together and in a verse by verse analysis.

### Verse 1

*Every step of the way we walk the line*

*Your days are numbered, so are mine*

*Time is piling up, we struggle and we scrape*

*We're all boxed in, nowhere to escape*

First of all, when it says: *"Every step of the way we walk the line"* this line bears the marks of the main theme of the album *"Time out of Mind"* for which this song was originally composed. The main theme of *"Time out of Mind"* is "movement". Movement in whatever direction so it is no surprise to begin the

song with **"Every step of the way"**. This verse – and also other verses in this song for that matter - expresses 'destiny' but destiny not seen from a divine stance but destiny seen in a way as we- mortal beings- often experience destiny. We invariably experience destiny in a negative way, as some sort of fatality from which there is no escape. But we must not forget that this is not how God sees destiny. From a divine stance it is better to use the word 'providence'. The word 'providence' has a positive meaning, it means that God protects, guides, and takes care of every step in our life in order to take us safely home, reassuring us so that we conclude: **"Every step of the way we walk the line"**. This notion resembles what Paul says in Rom. 8:28: *"We know that in everything God works for good"*. But this seems by no means the feeling the poet intends to express in this verse. In this verse **"Every step of the way we walk the line"** seems much more a statement of desperate resignation, everything has been predetermined and things go as they go. There is certainly a strong feeling of destiny here but at the same time there is this idea that there is nothing one can do against the destructing powers of destiny, there simply seems no escape from it. According to the English dictionary -the Wiktionary- one of the meanings of *"To walk the line"* is *"To behave in an authorized or socially accepted manner, especially as prescribed by law or morality"*. Some on the internet have argued that **"Mississippi"** is a socio- political song, depicting the status of American politics and social order. If this were right *"To walk the line"* would mean for citizens to act and behave exactly in accordance with whatever the ruling order prescribes you to do. Maybe these commentators were inclined to think into this direction because of what Dylan said in his 2001 Rolling Stone interview about **"Mississippi"**. Dylan, criticizing the attitude of Daniel Lanois towards the song, then said *"that the song has more to do with the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution and the Bill of Rights than witch doctors, and just couldn't be thought of as some kind of ideological voodoo thing"*. We all know that -especially in interviews- Dylan is fond of expressing himself cryptically, making it not easy to understand what exactly he may have had in mind, but our take on it is that Dylan intended to say that just like the foundation of the American nation is solidly and legally laid down in the official laws and documents, **"Mississippi"** likewise has a strong foundation, based on the hard facts laid down in the Scriptures rather than on some vague ethereal voodoo ideology full of superstition. We conclude that when it says **"Every step of the way we walk the line"** the poet may intend to say that every step we make in life is predetermined by the powers from above, by God. In this process it looks as if human responsibility is wiped out and that the human existence is nothing more than wind, like *"The wind that blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course"* (Ecclesiastes 1:6 NIV). This sense of vanity is certainly how the human existence sometimes feels but it does not necessarily mean that in reality this is the case.

When the poet goes on to say that **"Your days are numbered"** this does not exactly express the same idea as in Dylan's song *"Every Grain of Sand"* where it says: *"then onward in my journey I come to understand that every hair is numbered"*. This line echoes Mat. 10:30. But the statement from Jesus in Mat. 10:30 that *"all the hairs of your head are numbered"* is meant reassuringly, to take away fear. But here the words **"Your days are numbered"** have a much more ominous character. Here, when it says: **"Your days are numbered"** it reminds us of *"the moving finger that is moving on"* (Narrow Way) and also of *"The writing's on the wall, come read it, come see what it say"* (*"Thunder on the Mountains"*). Here it is what the moving finger wrote on the plaster of the wall of king Belshazzar's palace (Daniel 5:5): *"This is what these words mean: [Mene] means 'numbered'--God has numbered the days of your (Belshazzar's) reign and has brought it to an end"* (Daniel 5:26). Belshazzar had *"lifted up himself against the Lord of heaven"* (Daniel 5:23) and therefore God made an end to his rule. The days of all evil doers are

numbered and will come to a predetermined end, but not only for them but the days of all mortal human beings are numbered, that is why the poet includes himself and says **“so are mine”**. This is the first moment in the song where the lyrics as Dylan puts it *“convey majesty and heroism”*. When you are a celebrity the threat of *“the disease of conceit”* the thought that you are “too good to die” looms large in the background and it takes heroism for the poet to acknowledge that. It may have been the reason why he added: **“so are mine”**.

**“Time is piling up”** sees time go by not in a linear, everlasting, sequence of events but time seen in a sort of vertical way, as an edifice which is gradually erected. **“Time is piling up”** shows much more a feeling that time is limited, the end of time is near and there a sense of urgency. In Dylan’s sugar and candy’s *“Handy Dandy”* we see the opposite phenomenon. Handy Dandy is a typical end time personification, a person who *“got all the time in the world”*. Here “time” builds up ominously and it all seems so useless, **“we struggle and we scrape”**, that is all we can do. Life is hard, time is nearly up and we have to fight to get to the end of it all. There is just no let-up: **“We’re all boxed in, nowhere to escape”**. This notion comes close to what is says in the Book of Ecclesiastes Chapter 9:12(NLT): *“People can never predict when hard times might come. Like fish in a net or birds in a trap, people are caught by sudden tragedy”*.

#### **Verse 2:**

***City’s just a jungle; more games to play***

***Trapped in the heart of it, trying to get away***

***I was raised in the country, I been working’ in the town***

***I been in trouble ever since I set my suitcase down***

It is said that the first cities were formed after the so-called Neolithic Revolution (10000 BC) which brought agriculture and made denser human populations possible. We have found that the events the narrator pictures in this and the following verse (including the chorus)very much resemble the history of Lot -Abraham’s nephew – written down in the book of Genesis. Let us follow this lead and see if there is a match and decide for yourself if this idea makes sense.

When it says: **“City’s just a jungle”** the poet may have had the city of Sodom in mind where Lot once dwelled (Gen 19:1-3).Now Genesis13:13 and 18:20 says that Sodom was a very wicked town indeed. The **“City’s just a jungle”** means that the law of the jungle ruled in the city of Sodom. The fittest literally played dirty tricks on you in that city and the narrator may allude to this when he says: **“more games to play”**. This appears specifically when two angels visit Sodom (Gen. 19:1). These two visiting angels where sexually harassed by a violent mob (Gen 19:4-14) and had Lot, his family and the two angels, trapped in their house, and although Lot tried to escape from this jam by offering his two daughters (Gen. 19:8)to protect his two visitors, there was no escape, that is why the narrator says: **“Trapped in the heart of it, trying to get away”** and if the two angels had not intervened by blinding the mob so that they could not find the door of the house (Gen.18:11), Lot and his family and the two visitors surely would have been sexually assaulted and abused and subsequently killed by the hostile and furious mob.

And now it is as if Lot retrospectively says: **“I was raised in the country, I been working in the town, I been in trouble ever since I set my suitcase down**. Lot -Abraham’s nephew Gen. 11:27- was indeed **“raised in the country”** when his grandfather Terah left Ur and took Abram and Lot with him and went into the land of Canaan to settle in the neighbourhood of Haran (Gen. 11:31). Later on Abram and Lot left the Haran region to roam about the countryside of Canaan (Gen 12:5) However, the two shepherds Abram and Lot separated and Lot thought he outsmarted Abram by choosing the fertile Jordan valley as his habitat (Gen.13:10) and finally ended up living in the town of Sodom (Gen 19:3) in which he got

nearly killed. So when it says: ***“I been working in the town”*** Lot refers to the town of Sodom where he settled down and arranged his business. But as appears from Gen. 19:9 Lot was not a welcome guest at all in Sodom and regarded as a nuisance and the Sodomites said to Lot: *“this fellow came to sojourn, and he would play the judge! Now we will deal worse with you than with them”*. It is the reason why it is as if Lot in retrospect says: ***“I been in trouble ever since I set my suitcase down”***. “to set one’s suitcase down” is a metaphor for “ever since I settled down” in this case for Lot in Sodom. From the moment Lot arrived in Sodom, Lot knew he was in trouble. The reason for this is that Lot’s lifestyle did not match the lifestyle of the Sodomites at all, to say the least of it. Although Lot made a poor decision to go and live in such a wicked town as Sodom, 2 Peter 2:7,8 nevertheless says that *“God also rescued Lot out of Sodom because he was a righteous man who was sick of the shameful immorality of the wicked people around him, Yes, Lot was a righteous man who was tormented in his soul by the wickedness he saw and heard day after day”*. Therefore, for the poet to have Lot say in retrospect: ***“I been in trouble ever since I set my suitcase down”*** is an accurate metaphor to describe what happened to Lot the moment he settled down in Sodom.

### **Verse 3 and first bridge**

***Got nothing for you, I had nothing before***

***Don’t even have anything for myself anymore***

***Sky full of fire, pain pouring down***

***Nothing you can sell me, I’ll see you around***

Usually the bridge in a song is used to pause and to reflect on earlier parts of the song and to lead the listener to the climax – usually the chorus – of the song. However, in this bridge – and the following two bridges - there is also this ascending bass line which very much increases the tension and the drama in the song and serves at the same time as an indication that the following words are of the utmost importance and should not be ignored. If we follow our line of thinking in this verse, it may be again Lot who reflects here on what happened to him and what he learned from the apocalyptic destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. However, ***“Got nothing’ for you, I had nothing before, don’t even have anything for myself anymore”*** may also – and maybe at the same time – a generic statement about the human condition. But let’s first find out how it may apply to Lot and see for yourself if it makes sense.

To escape the ***“sky full of fire”*** and ***“pain pouring down”*** – pain in the form of brimstone pouring down on Sodom (Gen. 19:24)-, Lot, in order to to save his life, had to leave Sodom in a hurry and fled to the town of Zoar (Gen 19:22). But Lot was afraid to live in Zoar, therefore Lot left Zoar and with his two daughters dwelt in a cave in the hills surrounding the Sodom valley (Gen 19:30). The fire and brimstone pouring down from the sky not only destroyed the towns of Sodom and Gomorrah but also the whole valley surrounding these towns (Gen.19:25) Like Abraham Lot had great possessions – flocks and herds and tents (Gen 13:6)- but lost all his possessions when fire and brimstone came from the sky and destroyed everything he owned. Therefore, ***“got nothing for you”*** literally became the naked truth when only Lot’s soul and the soul of his two daughters were saved but the rest of his family and all of his material belongings were destroyed. This was not the first time that Lot lost all of his possessions. ***“I had nothing before”*** may refer to Genesis 14. In Gen. 14 we read that Lot and his family were captured and kidnapped by king Ched-or-laomer and his companions and they stole all the goods of Sodom and Gomorrah and all their provisions and also everything Lot owned. (Gen.14: 11,12). That is why Lot exclaims: ***“I had nothing before”*** .

Abraham however, came to Lot’s rescue and liberated Lot and returned his family and all of his possessions (Gen 14:16). But the worst of it all was when it was as if Lot exclaimed: ***“don’t even have***

**anything for myself anymore**". Bereft of everything Lot once owned and left behind with only his two daughters, they had to take refuge in a cave in the desolate hills surrounding the Sodom valley (Gen.19:30). While living in solitude in this cave, the worst thing that happened to Lot was that he had no prospect of having any posterity which in that culture was the worst thing that could happen to a man, that is why it is as if Lot cries out in despair: my life is finished and I **"don't even have anything for myself anymore"**.

But as said this verse may also be a general statement about the human condition. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah may only be a minor prelude to the great apocalypse that is to come on the Latter Day. The apocalypse has always been a main theme in Dylan's work. Dylan was to the point when in his song "God Knows" he warned: "God knows there's gonna be no more water, but fire next time". Water destroyed the world in the days of Noah (Genesis 7). Next time it would be fire. Fire and pain pouring down on Sodom and Gomorrah as a prelude to the fire coming down on the Latter Day as prophesied by 2 Peter 3:10. When the apocalyptic fire comes down from the sky, there is no help you can offer to other people and other people cannot help you. On the Latter Day it will be like Dylan said in his apocalyptic song: "Crash On The Levee (Down In The Flood)": "You're gonna have to find yourself another best friend, somehow". But is clear: another friend will not be available at that Day. On that Day you will be thrown on your own resources. Therefore, on that dreadful Day, when the: **"Sky is full of fire, and pain is pouring down"** you cannot help anybody – not even your next of kin- to escape doomsday: In desperation you exclaim to your next of kin: **"Got nothing for you"** to save you.

Since man fell into sin, the condition of man is such that one can also say: **"I had nothing before"** and **"Don't even have anything for myself anymore"**. On that Day man is entirely delivered to the mercy of the Lord. No human offering, concept or thesis will save you on that dreadful Day and the poet is fully aware of this when he says that there is: **"Nothing you can sell me, I'll see you around"**. In verse 5 the poet is going to say: **"Say anything you wanna, I have heard it all"**. Basically that line expresses the same thing as **"there is nothing you can sell me"**. It is as if the poet says "I will not buy what you say because it brings no solution to the crisis we are in, in fact no human being is capable to come up with any solution to avoid apocalyptic destruction, it is going to happen anyway and soon you gonna find out, **"I'll see you around"** means that I will see you again soon and then you will acknowledge that I was right".

#### **Verse 4 and chorus.**

**All my powers of expression and thoughts so sublime**

**Could never do you justice in reason or rhyme**

**Only one thing I did wrong**

**Stayed in Mississippi a day too long**

When it says **"All my powers of expression and thoughts so sublime"** these words may be autobiographically interpreted and quite rightly so. Dylan wrote about **"his powers of expression and thoughts so sublime"** in his song "In the Summertime": **"I'm still carrying the gift you gave, it's a part of me now, it's been cherished and saved, It'll be with me unto the grave, and then unto eternity"**. His huge poetical **"powers of expression and thoughts so sublime"** must be seen as a special gift from God to be used within the framework of "destiny", the "destiny thing" he elaborated on in his 2004 CBS 60 minutes interview. In this interview Dylan also said that the early songs he wrote (like "It's all right Ma") were almost magically written, admitting at the same time that nowadays (2004) he cannot write songs like that anymore but added: **"I can do other things now"**. One of the **"other things"** he certainly can do is write a brilliant song like **"Mississippi"** in which all his **"powers of expression"** and **"thoughts so sublime"**

shine brilliantly. But no matter how graceful this special gift the poet has received may be, the poet wants to make it very clear that this gift pales into insignificance beside the One who gave this gift to him. The poet's sublime words and thoughts come, as Dylan also said in his 2004 CBS interview, "*right out of that wellspring of creativity*". If this creative process, these words and thoughts, -his "**powers of expression and thoughts so sublime**"- are already so beautiful, how beautiful and beyond words must not be the Creator of all of this, the One who made this creative process possible, which cannot be anybody else but God? In other words, no matter how great his "**powers of expression and thoughts so sublime**" are, these powers and thoughts will never be able to describe God's greatness and sublimity adequately. Words and thoughts, no matter how powerful and sublime, will always fall short and "**could never do you justice in reason or rhyme**". Within the context it seems obvious that this "**you**" is God. Human thought, reason and human rhyme can never do justice to God, and is unable to penetrate the depths of God's wisdom, power and compassion. A few examples from the Scriptures to back up this thought:

Job 37:23,24 (KJV): "*Touching the Almighty, we cannot find him out: he is excellent in power, and in judgment, and in plenty of justice: he will not afflict. Men do therefore fear him: he respecteth not any that are wise of heart.*"

Ecclesiastes 8:17 (NLT): "*I realized that no one can discover everything God is doing under the sun. Not even the wisest people discover everything, no matter what they claim*".

Romans 11:33-36 (KJV): "*O the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! how unsearchable are his judgments, and his ways past finding out! For who hath known the mind of the Lord? or who hath been his counsellor? Or who hath first given to him, and it shall be recompensed unto him again? For of him, and through him, and to him, are all things: to whom be glory for ever. Amen*".

It is said that the chorus "**Only one thing I did wrong, stayed in Mississippi a day too long**" echoes an old blues song which Alan Lomax recorded in the Mississippi Parchman Farm prison in 1947- 1948. The prisoners used to sing '*Only thing I did wrong was stayed in Mississippi a day too long*'. No doubt that in the chorus of the song we may find an important clue to grasp the comprehensive meaning of the song. Some have argued on the internet that the song – and especially the chorus- is about the death of Dylan's friend Jeff Buckley. On May 29<sup>th</sup> 1997 Jeff Buckley went swimming in Wolf River Harbour, which is a slack water channel of the Mississippi river, and was drowned. The interpretation is that Buckley made a fatal mistake and if he had not been in Mississippi on that particular date, he would have stayed alive but Buckley "**stayed in Mississippi a day too long**" and lost his life.

Others argue that the song may have something to do with the story of the great Mississippi Flood of 1927 which caused death and widespread destruction throughout the lower Mississippi Valley. If at the time in 1927, one was not evacuated in time from the Mississippi Valley, and became trapped in the rising waters, one could say of oneself that the "**Only one thing I did wrong, stayed in Mississippi a day too long**".

However, as far as Dylan is concerned, things are never what they seem. Therefore, we feel that we should not focus too much on what the use of the word "**Mississippi**" may mean in this chorus.

"**Mississippi**" should not be taken too literal but may be just a metaphor to lead you to deeper waters. This seems a common phenomenon in Dylan's work, e.g. "*Roll on John*" looks like as if it is about John Lennon, but closer examination will learn you that the focus point is actually somebody else, another "John" namely John the Apostle of light. (For more details on this, see my analysis of this song elsewhere on this website).

We feel that the main thought expressed here is: if you **stay** somewhere **too long**, the consequences will

be devastating. When you stand at the cross-roads, when fire and pain is about to pour down from the sky, you have to make a choice: either flee while you still can or otherwise you will have to brace yourself for elimination. When it says **“Only one thing I did wrong”** it seems obvious that the **“thing”** done **“wrong”** is a life changing event. When this thing was done wrong life will never be the same again. The classic example of this idea is, when the devil in the shape of a serpent approached Eve in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3), Eve did not flee from him as she should have, but stayed on, making it possible for the serpent to seduce her. She stayed on for too long a time and man fell into sin. And indeed, if there is one event in history which changed everything and of which one truly may say that this is **“the only thing (man) did wrong”** it is this catastrophic decision in the garden of Eden. However, if you resist the devil, the opposite will happen and the devil will flee from you (James 4:7). Joseph in Gen. 39 did the right thing and fled. When Joseph was seduced by Potiphar’s wife (Gen.39:7-23) Joseph did not stay on but fled, leaving his garment in her hand and got out of the house (Gen. 39:12). When the **“Sky was full of fire and pain pouring down”** on Sodom (Gen. 19:24), Lot reluctantly fled from Sodom and was saved but Lot’s wife spiritually stayed on in Sodom, looked back and turned into a salt pillar (Gen. 19:26). In a way one could say that in her mind Lot’s wife **“stayed in Mississippi(Sodom) a day too long”**. Jesus prophesizing the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70: **“let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let no one on the housetop go down to take anything out of the house. Let no one in the field go back to get their cloak (Mat. 24:16-18 NIV)**. In other words: don’t stay a day too long, otherwise you will be eliminated. These are indeed knifelike lyrics, just as Dylan said.

#### **Verse 5.**

***Well, the devil’s in the alley, mule’s in the stall***

***Say anything you wanna, I have heard it all***

***I was thinking about the things that Rosie said***

***I was dreaming I was sleeping’ in Rosie’s bed***

This verse very much breathes the atmosphere of imprisonment. Imprisonment and hard labour because of some irreversible act of felony committed in the past. It is the same atmosphere which we already found in the chorus **“Only one thing I did wrong, stayed in Mississippi a day too long”**. This chorus seems to echo an old blues song from Alan Lomax recorded in the Parchman Farm Prison in 1947-1948. There seems to be a CD from these sessions called 'Prison Blues Of The South.' In the liner notes of the accompanying booklet, you read the words *‘Only thing I did wrong was stayed in Mississippi a day too long’*. Apparently, this is what the prisoners in the Mississippi Parchman Farm prison used to sing during hard labour. On that occasion Lomax also recorded a prison song called “Rosie” which is featured in this verse. Alan Lomax said that: *“These songs belong to the musical tradition which Africans brought to the New World, but they are also as American as the Mississippi River ... They tell us the story of the slave gang, the sharecropper system, the lawless work camp, the chain gang, the pen.”* On the one hand, when you consider the harsh circumstances the prisoners were in and the lawlessness in the Mississippi Parchman Farm Prison camp, one is easily inclined to say that in this prison camp: **“the devil’s in the alley”**. The devil is always nearby in these prison labour camps; it looks as if the devil has it all his way, having no other purpose in the end but to chain these prisoners for ever and bereave them of all hope. On the other hand,- as so often in Dylan’s oeuvre - the words **“the devil’s in the alley”** may also have an apocalyptic sub-meaning. If so, it reminds us of a Dylan line which would later show up in his song *“Thunder on the Mountains”*. It says: *“There is a ruckus in the alley and the sun (or Son) will be here soon”*. This ruckus – in the alley - is at its most intense when the Latter Day is about to break through and the sudden arrival of the Son of Man on the clouds will make an end to this ruckus (Rev. 1:7).

When it says: ***“mule’s in the stall”***, one should not forget that not only stubbornness is usually associated with mules, but also hardworking. ***“Mule’s – kicking – in the stall”*** not only has a rural connotation but also a connotation of those hard labouring prisoners in this Mississippi Parchman Farm prison, who during hard labour, just to distract their minds, chant those prison songs which Alan Lomax recorded. When the poet goes on to say: ***“Say anything you wanna, I have heard it all”*** these words may again have a double meaning. First, it may apply to those inmates in the Parchman Farm Prison. When you have been an inmate in this prison – or any other prison for that matter - for a long time and you see the same inmates over and over again, during a long period of time, there are few new things you can tell one another; you have heard all the personal stories and you may conclude: ***“Say anything you wanna, I have heard it all”***. Secondly, when you stick by an apocalyptic interpretation the words ***“Say anything you wanna, I have heard it all”*** have some sort of destiny and acquiescence in them. Destiny and resignation in the sense that there is no clever human thesis available in this world which could change the course of things and prevent doomsday from coming. The words also show weariness, just like it is said in the book of Ecclesiastes, there is nothing new under the sun and things go as they have been predetermined.

Some have argued that “Rosie” the words ***“I was thinking about the things that Rosie said, I was dreaming I was sleeping’ in Rosie’s bed”*** refers to the ideal woman in the same as e.g. in France Marianne is a symbol for the Republic. If that were correct “Rosie” would be a symbol of love and not an actual woman. However, we feel it is more likely that “Rosie” is a reflection on the prison song “Rosie” which -as said above- Lomax recorded in the Mississippi Parchman Farm Prison in 1947-1948. The lyrics of “Rosie” go like : *“Be my woman gal, I’ll be your man. Every day’s Sunday dollar in your hand, In your hand lordy, in your hand. Everyday ’s Sunday dollar in your hand. Stick to the promise girl that You made me. Won’t got married til’ uh I go free I go free lordy, I go free, won’t got married til’ uh I go free”*. These words fit like a glove within the atmosphere of this verse which speaks of imprisonment. Even under the harsh circumstance of hard labour the longing and hope for a better future keeps these inmates going. Dreams about a promise a girl once made to them remain: ***“I was thinking about the things that Rosie said”*** and also hope for a happy matrimony in the future: ***“I was dreaming I was sleeping’ in Rosie’s bed”***, no matter how hopeless and idle these dreams usually prove to be.

#### **Verse 6.**

***Walking through the leaves, falling from the trees***

***Feeling like a stranger nobody sees***

***So many things that we never will undo***

***I know you’re sorry, I’m sorry too***

This verse expatiates on the previous verse and also deals with the mental state of a prisoner. The thought seems not far away that, because we all sinned, we are all in a way prisoners. To live a life of sin and crime creates isolation -literally and figuratively - and is a lifestyle one should try to avoid, just like Dylan wrote in his song *“Working Man Blues #2”*: *“I don’t want to be forced Into a life of continual crime”*. ***“Walking through the leaves, falling from the trees, feeling like a stranger nobody sees”*** expresses isolation and loneliness. Locked up in a prison camp, often bereft of all your next of kin, you feel quite alone. Walking amidst the dead leaves, falling from the trees, intensifies the feeling that your situation is hopeless and that you might as well be dead just like those leaves. Nobody cares for you and nobody looks after you, you have nobody left on this planet who is interested in you and cares what will happen to you, nobody knows you and nobody will miss you, you are ***“feeling like a stranger nobody sees”***. In a prison camp there is plenty of time to think about the past. ***“So many things that we never***

**will undo**” means that you can’t turn back the clock, you can’t unring the bell, the sins you have done and the crimes you have committed are irreversible and they keep on haunting you. Often at this point of contemplation regret and remorse come stepping in: **“I know you’re sorry, I’m sorry too”**. **“Love is all there is”** Dylan once wrote in his song **“I threw it all away”** and love is all that really matters but at the same time love and passion are so delicate and vulnerable, that once there is a falling out, there is guilt and regret on both sides: **“I know you’re sorry, I’m sorry too”**. A falling out may easily lead to a “crime ‘passionel’ and you may end up in prison and – just like the Prodigal son once did in Luke 15:17- you may “come to yourself” and say **“I know you’re sorry, I’m sorry too”**.

#### **Verse 7 and second bridge.**

***Some people will offer you their hand and some won’t***

***Last night I knew you, tonight I don’t***

***I need something strong to distract my mind***

***I’m gonna look at you ‘til my eyes go blind***

Just like in the first bridge, there is this ascending bass line in this verse which – as said above - very much increases the tension and the drama in the song and takes the song to a higher and more spiritual level. These words in this verse go beyond the words spoken by a prisoner in a prison camp in Mississippi. It is as if the camera zooms out from the prisoner in the Mississippi prison camp and now focusses on what goes on at a higher, ethereal, level. This higher level has to do with something we would like to call eternal separation. It seems that Dylan is grasped by this idea of eternal separation and it is a phenomenon we quite often see in Dylan’s works. By eternal separation, we mean eternal and absolute separation between good and evil; separation and distance between those who chose to be redeemed and those who chose to reject redemption. A separation which has its beginning on this earth and will be carried on eternally into a future world, a world – as Dylan puts it – “you can’t see”. This idea is worked out in two parables from Jesus which shimmer through in this verse. **“Some people will offer you their hand and some won’t”** reminds us of the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30-37). The first parable tells us that a man on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho was attacked by robbers who stripped him and beat him and departed, leaving him half dead. What you expected the least happened: an outlawed and despicable Samaritan and an unknown innkeeper took care of the man and they offered him their hand by dressing up the man’s wounds and paying for his lodgings in the inn. However, those people who were expected to come to the rescue of the man, the priest and the Levite, passed by and left the man to die. **“Some people who will offer you’re their hand”** are the Good Samaritan and the innkeeper, **“some who won’t”** are the priest and the Levite. This attitude, an unwillingness to offer your hand, may have some nasty consequences, we see this alluded to when it says: **“Last night I knew you, tonight I don’t”**. We see that in the second parable, called the parable of “the five wise and the five foolish maidens” which we find in Mat. 25:1-13. The five foolish maidens negligently took not enough oil with them to keep their lamps burning and to welcome the arrival of the bridegroom. When these maidens subsequently went out to buy some additional oil, the bridegroom had arrived in the meantime, but then the five foolish maidens were too late for the wedding and the door to the wedding feast was shut. When these maidens said to the Lord- the bridegroom-: **“Lord, Lord, open to us”** (Mat. 25:11), the Lord refused the five foolish maidens entry to the wedding feast and said: **“Truly I say to you, I do not know you”**(Mat. 25:12). We find the same picture of a closed door and a householder who refuses entry for those knocking at the door, saying that he does not know them in Luke 13:25-27. It is as if the Lord Jesus now says to the maidens: **“Of course, it is not that I do not know who you are because even last night we ate and we drank in the street (Luke 13:26), therefore “Last night I knew you” but**

tonight, now that the wedding feast has begun and the door is closed, I do not know where you come from, (Luke 13:27) I only know people in a special way, I only know those people who have rejoiced in my arrival and have taken precautions, these people I welcome to my wedding but you, you disrespected me, you were negligent, therefore I do not know you any more, therefore to you I say: ***“Last night I knew you, tonight I don’t”***. This whole concept of eternal separation which is expressed here has such an overwhelming impact on the mind of the poet and fills him with so much awe and fear for this long and narrow way (Luke 13:24) that he feels he needs help from above and cries out: ***“I need something strong to distract my mind”***. “To distract” may mean here that he wants draw attention away from what he is doing and focus on what is of the utmost importance to hang on. To do that he ***“needs something strong”***. One is easily inclined to assume that ***“something strong”*** means some drug or substance but that is not self-evident. We rather feel that by ***“something strong”*** help from above is meant, a strong and helping hand, as Dylan wrote elsewhere: *“Nothing can heal me now, but your touch”*. Spiritually he does not want to belong to the five foolish maidens of Mat. 25 to whom is said: ***“Last night I knew you, tonight I don’t”***. Remember that this song was originally composed for the album *“Time out of Mind”*, on which the theme of eternal separation is also very much present, especially in a song like *“Trying to get to Heaven”*. The chorus of this song is equally based on the parable of the five wise and foolish maidens when it says: *“I’m trying to get to heaven before they close the door”*. The “closed door” is the same door which the five foolish maidens found closed (Mat 25:10). The poet does not want to be refused entry into heaven and wants to stay focussed, and therefore he not only ***“needs something strong to distract his mind”*** but he also needs to keep his eyes fixed upon the promised land: ***“I’m gonna look at you ’til my eyes go blind”***. Of course it is possible to interpret ***“I’m gonna look at you ’til my eyes go blind”*** -as many have done on the internet -as simply directed to some woman he frantically loves or fancies but we have to bear in mind that there are always these deeper spiritual layers in Dylan’s work. In fact, the difference between a romantic “down to earth” interpretation of ***“I’m gonna look at you ’til my eyes go blind”*** and a more spiritual interpretation of these words, is based upon the fact whether you feel that Dylan was serious or not, when, in his 2003 CBS interview, he said that it all *“goes back to the destiny thing”*. ***“I’m gonna look at you ’til my eyes go blind”*** has to do with concentration. The poet does not want to be like Desolation Row’s Ophelia, who, although she had *“her eyes fixt upon Noah’s great rainbow”* it was of no avail to her. Here we see the same tenacity and perseverance as in Acts 3:4, when Peter and John directed their gaze at the lame man and said “Look at us” which led to the healing of the lame man. Only those survived the lethal bite of the serpent who had their eyes fixed upon the bronze serpent which Moses set on a pole (Numbers 21:9). Only if the poet sticks to his destiny and keeps his eyes fixed upon the promised land, only a concentration even ***“till his eyes go blind”***, will enable him to pass the Narrow Way that ultimately leads to the promised land.

#### **Verse 8.**

***Well I got here following the southern star***

***I crossed that river just to be where you are***

***Only one thing I did wrong***

***Stayed in Mississippi a day too long***

When it says ***“Well, I got here following the southern star”*** it seems obvious that this Southern star is not followed with the same evil intentions king Herod once had in Mat. 2, when he tried to follow another star *“the same one them three men followed from the East”* ( see Dylan’s “Man of Peace”). Herod followed the star in order to track down the whereabouts of the new born child Jesus with the

only purpose of killing the child (Mat.2:16).

The words "**Well, I got here following the southern star**" seem much more reassuring. The poet is still on his way in southern direction, just as he wrote in "*Trying to get to Heaven*": "*I'm going down the river, down to New Orleans*". He follows the southern star which he can see in the sky going down the Mississippi river, till he finally reaches New Orleans in Louisiana. "**Following the southern star**" also indicates that he has a mission to fulfil. This mission is to cross that river and "**to be where you are**". The words "**to be where you are**" represent the equivalent of what Dylan once said in his 2004 CBS interview. Dylan said he made a bargain with "destiny" and when asked: "*What was your bargain?*", he said "*to get where I am*". "**To be where you are**" is the equivalent of "*to get where I am*". Again it is possible to simply interpret "**to be where you are**" as addressed to some woman but – as so often in Dylan's work- there may be a deeper layer. Therefore, when it says "**to be where you are**", we cannot help thinking of the people of Israel miraculously crossing the river Jordan (Joshua 3) and entering the Promised Land, the land of God, the land where God wants them to be and the land where God is near (Joshua 3:7). Although the words "**to be where you are**" fulfil a passionate longing to be near God in that Promised Land, there is at the same time also something preliminary in these words; he has not reached his final destination yet, the poet is still on his way, he is "*trying to get to heaven*". As long as he is on his way, there still is this tragic and dark shadow of sin expressed in the chorus: "**Only one thing I did wrong, stayed in Mississippi a day too long**".

#### Verse 9.

**Well my ship's been split to splinters and it's sinking fast  
I'm drowning in the poison, got no future, got no past  
But my heart is not weary, it's light and it's free  
I've got nothing but affection for all those who've sailed with me.**

The beautiful 's' alliteration in the first line is noteworthy. This 's' alliteration in the first line combined with the use of 's' in 'poison', the 's' like sound in 'future' and the 's' in 'past' turns these first lines into a compact statement which very much expresses an atmosphere of mental alienation. It is the same feeling of alienation which is so emphatically present on the album "*Time out of Mind*" for which this song was originally composed in 1997. When you hear the words "**Well my ship's been split to splinters and it's sinking fast, and I'm drowning in the poison**" you can imagine some lonesome pilgrim "*going down the (Mississippi) river, down to New Orleans*" (*Trying to get to Heaven*). Well, his ship has been split to splinters and it has sunk and now he is "*wading through the high muddy water with the heat rising in his eyes*". The words from '*Standing in the Doorway*' echo: I "*got no place left to turn, I got nothing left to burn*".

The poet adds: "**got no future, got no past**". When the future looks harsh, grim and unpromising, one may say that a person has no future to look forward to. But it is much harder imagining a person with "**no past**", no matter how dreadful this past may have been. Every living soul- more or less- has a past. When a person says that he has "**no past**" he intends to say that does not have past on which he can be proud. However, "**got no future, got no past**" is usually said of God and if this is intended, it may add a spiritual connotation to this stanza. Only God is said to have no future or past. To have a future or a past is to be temporally contingent. God is said to live in an eternal present. Here one may bring in a Christ like reference. Because, what can be said of God, can be said of Jesus too. He is God too (Phil. 2:6) and like of God the Father, Jesus, the Son of God, has no future or past. If we follow this track this whole stanza may tell us something of what Jesus once experienced. Jesus who – as Dylan hints at in '*Not Dark Yet*' - had "*not even room enough to be anywhere*" (Luke 9:58) and was outlawed and bereft of

everything. Therefore from a human point of view one may say that Jesus' **"ship has been split to splinters and it's sinking fast"** and, Jesus, constantly harassed by the Pharisees and falsely accused by the Sanhedrin, was **"drowning in the poison"** all around him.

The words **"But my heart is not weary, it's light and it's free, I've got nothing but affection for all those who've sailed with me"** are the first words in the song that -amidst all darkness- strike a positive note. The words may again hint at this lonesome pilgrim, who going down the Mississippi, down to New Orleans, who, amidst all hardships, has a free conscience and feels sympathetic towards all his fellow travellers who endure the same problems on this journey. If you continue following the spiritual train of thought, the words: **"But my heart is not weary, it's light and it's free, I've got nothing but affection for all those who've sailed with me"** can also make good spiritual sense. In the revised lyrics of 'Pay in Blood' Dylan now says: **"My conscience is free, what about you?"**. The poet's free heart, his free conscience, has everything to do with the theme of the song 'Pay in Blood'. Jesus voluntarily paid with his blood on the poet's behalf which enabled Jesus to set the poet free and give him a free conscience. Jesus' lightness and freedom became the poet's lightness and freedom. Jesus took over his weariness and now the poet's heart is no longer weary. Moreover, as a result of all this, there is now room in the poet's heart for others, there is room for affection towards all of his fellow travellers: **"I've got nothing but affection for all those who've sailed with me"**. Redemption leads to love for all those who are on the same road that leads to a bright future. Redemption leads to a strong brotherhood, to mutual love and affection, just like Dylan wrote in his song "Ain't Talking": **"All my loyal and much-loved companions, they approve of me and share my code"**.

#### **Verse 10.**

***Everybody moving, if they ain't already there***

***Everybody got to move somewhere***

***Stick with me baby, stick with me anyhow***

***Things should start to get interesting right about now***

In the introductory lines above, we wrote that there is quite a lot of 'destiny' in this song. The words **"Everybody moving, if they ain't already there, everybody got to move somewhere"** are exemplary for this destiny. This is a phenomenon we often see in Dylan's work. The camera zooms out and we get a sort of helicopter view. You start to see things from a distance, a sort of heavenly time lapse in which you see all people of all ages move to their ultimate destiny. Likewise the poet says in "Cant Wait" that **"there are people all around, some on their way up, some on their way down"**. The words **"Everybody moving, if they ain't already there, everybody got to move somewhere"** express this idea of eternal separation we spoke about earlier. We give a few more examples to demonstrate this concept of eternal separation. In his song "Most Likely You Go Your Way (and I'll Go Mine)" it says: **"Then time will tell just who fell, and who's been left behind, when you go your way and I go mine"**. Or more recently from the song "Tempest": **"All the lords and ladies, heading for their eternal home"**. Dylan sees this process of eternal separation occur as a result of the absolute distance there is between right and wrong. Ultimately the poet sees the Apocalyptic view of **"the few who will judge the many"** (1 Cor. 6:2) (**"Ring them Bells"**). **"Everybody moving"**, that is, some of the living are on their way to this judgement, **"if they ain't already there"** that is, some have already died and are awaiting this judgement on the Latter Day. **"Everybody got to move somewhere"** may mean that ultimately all will be judged and go to their eternal home. Does this whole process wipe out human moral responsibility?. No it doesn't. But in the human mind there is always tension between divine predestination and human responsibility. The interaction between predestination and human responsibility is not transparent for the human mind, the human

mind simply misses a dimension to see through all this, only God can see through all this. This makes this whole process of pre-destination and human responsibility not less interesting, on the contrary. It may be the reason why the poet goes on to say: ***“Stick with me baby, stick with me anyhow, things should start to get interesting right about now”***. It is true, in his song *“High Water(for Charley Patton)”*, Dylan-dealing with Charles Darwin- has George Lewis say *“don’t open up your mind boys to every conceivable point of view”*. But here it is as if the poet encourages and begs his fellow companion to open up her mind: ***“Stick with me baby, stick with me anyhow”*** which means “stick with me”, don’t give up on me, now that things get not only complicated but also very interesting. The stakes are high here. ***“Things should start to get interesting right about now”***, interesting things happen at the very moment when human decision and God’s predestination coincide, when you are on the cross roads of life and big decisions are made which way to go. Once you have made this decision, there is no turning back and the poet begs his companion not to leave him and go in an opposite direction even now when the poet is in a jam. The next verse speaks of the jam the poet is in.

#### **Verse 11 and third bridge.**

***My clothes are wet, tight on my skin***

***Not as tight as the corner that I painted myself in***

***I know that fortune is waiting to be kind***

***So give me your hand and say you’ll be mine.***

When it says here: ***“My clothes are wet, tight on my skin”*** the metaphor applied in verse 9 of a sinking ship that has been split to splinters, is continued in this verse. The poet metaphorically survived the shipwreck and had to swim for his life. He made it to the shore but now he is wet to the skin. Basically the same idea as expressed in the first bridge of the song is expressed here: ***“Got nothing for you, I had nothing before, don’t even have anything for myself anymore”***, albeit, his soaked clothes are apparently the only thing he has left. ***“My clothes are wet, tight on my skin”*** may have something passive in it. In a way destiny brought the ship down and there is nothing he could do to stop it from sinking and the result is that ***“My clothes are wet, tight on my skin”***. But the next line: ***“Not as tight as the corner that I painted myself in”*** is more active than passive. Personal responsibility for painting himself in a corner cannot be wiped out. ***“To paint oneself in a corner”*** is usually understood of a person who has got oneself into a difficulty from which one cannot extricate oneself, or according to Wiktionary it derives *“From the idea that a person painting the floor of a room may inadvertently apply the paint everywhere except the corner that the person is standing in, so that to leave the room the person has no choice but to step on the freshly painted floor and damage it”*. ***“Not as tight as the corner that I painted myself in”*** may say something about the human condition. Man’s disobedience led to his downfall and now man is unable to extricate himself from the precarious situation he is in. Man has painted himself in a corner, man is in a jam, and now the only thing that can save him is redemption. Elsewhere (*Ain’t Talking*) the poet hints at this redemption when he says: *“Who says I can’t get heavenly aid”*. In other words: heavenly aid is available, no matter what people think. Redemption may enable him to escape from the tight corner the poet has painted himself in. This is good news of which the next two lines testify: ***“I know that fortune is waiting to be kind, so give me your hand and say you’ll be mine”***. Hope shimmers through in these words and the poet feels certain that whatever is in store for him will be materialized. ***“Fortune”*** here does not primarily mean “chance” or “good luck” and the way it effects one’s life. It seems to us that here ***“Fortune”*** much more stands for *“Peace and harmony and the blessings of tranquillity”* of Dylan’s song *“Moonlight”*. ***“Fortune is waiting to be kind”*** may mean that this peace, harmony and tranquillity has been in store for him all along and is now waiting to be unpacked.

much in the same way as a bride anxiously waits for the arrival of the groom on the day of her wedding.

***“I know that fortune is waiting to be kind”*** may lift your weary heart to contemplate how it will be in heaven, in the same way as Dylan says in *“Ain’t Talking”*: *“It’s bright in the heavens and the wheels are flying ,fame and honour (fortune) never seem to fade, the fire’s gone out but the light is never dying”*.

The main characteristic of a really exquisite thing is, that it always invites others to join in. So when the poet adds ***“give me your hand and say you’ll be mine”***, the poet knows that the best is still to come and he invites his lover or companion to join in and to surrender to him. ***“Give me your hand and say you’ll be mine”***, echoes Shakespeare’s *“Measure for Measure”*. In Act 5, Scene 1 Duke Vincentio says:

*“If he be like your brother, for his sake  
Is he pardon’d; and, for your lovely sake,  
Give me your hand and say you will be mine”*.

A Christ like interpretation of ***“give me your hand and say you’ll be mine”*** is also possible. This is a phenomenon not at all unusual in the poetry of Dylan. Dylan’s *“Make you feel My Love”* is a classic example of this. One may say that in *“Make you feel My Love”* references to Christ are more explicit. For more details see my analysis of this song [elsewhere](#) on this website. Here in this song you have to read references to Christ between the lines and if you do, it can make good sense. Jesus compares his upcoming Kingdom of Heaven often with a treasure, a fortune, (Mat. 13,44-46), an imperishable, undefiled and unfading heritage which is kept in heaven (1 Peter 1:4) and is waiting to be unpacked ***“for all those who sailed with me”***. It is as if Jesus says: ***“I know that fortune is waiting to be kind, surrender to me, we go together through life to our destination, give me your hand ,I will protect and guide you, you are my property and I’m waiting for you to say that you’ll be mine”***.

#### **Verse 12.**

***Well, the emptiness is endless, cold as the clay***

***You can always come back, but you can’t come back all the way***

***Only one thing I did wrong***

***Stayed in Mississippi a day too long***

Dylan here follows the style of the Biblical prophets who intersperse promises of future glory and fortune with threats for those who rebel. (compare e.g. Isaiah 66: 18-23 with Isaiah 66:24). Therefore, it is not unusual that promising words like ***“I know that fortune is waiting to be kind”*** are immediately followed by gloomy words like ***“Well, the emptiness is endless, cold as the clay”***. The double alliteration in this line is striking and- again like in verse 9- renders this line into a compact statement. ***“The emptiness is endless”*** makes you think of an endless, lonesome, desolate and also hostile universe where no living creature can survive. This emptiness is said to be ***“cold as the clay”***. The words ***“Cold as the clay”*** may be inspired by a book from Alvin Schwartz called *‘Scary stories to tell in the dark’*. In story eight called *‘Cold as Clay’*, a farmer’s daughter put her hand on her lover’s forehead -named Jim - and says: *“Why are you cold as clay”*. *“I hope you are not ill”* and she wrapped her handkerchief around his head. Later on, her lover Jim died and was buried. For some reason they opened Jim’s grave and found her handkerchief around his head.

However, it seems more likely that the words ***“Cold as the clay”*** refer to a traditional Western cowboy ballad called *‘The Streets of Laredo’* also known as the *“Cowboy’s Lament”*. This song was also recorded by Johnny Cash. In this ballad a dying cowboy tells his story to a living one. The lyrics start with: *“As I walked out on the streets of Laredo - As I walked out on Laredo one day, I spied a poor cowboy wrapped in white linen, wrapped in white linen as cold as the clay”* And onwards we read: *“The streets of Laredo grew cold as the clay”*. Both Alvin Schwartz’s book and the ballad *‘The streets of Laredo’* have this in

common that they both deal with death. For that reason, it is possible to interpret the words ***“the emptiness is endless, cold as the clay”*** as belonging to a permanent status after death for which there is no turning back. Some people say that hell is a metaphor for a place where God is not present and has withdrawn, resulting in an extremist emptiness and loneliness. One may also say that the words ***“the emptiness is endless, cold as the clay”*** represent the polar opposite of words like *‘a place where it’s always safe and warm’* from Dylan’s *‘Shelter from the Storm’*. So, the words ***“the emptiness is endless, cold as the clay”*** may speak of an eternal and dreadful status quo after death, however, the promising and reassuring words that follow: ***“You can always come back, but you can’t come back all the way”*** are addressed *not* to those who are dead but to those who are still among the living. It is possible to interpret the words ***“You can always come back, but you can’t come back all the way”*** in a secular way as words directed to a lover with whom he apparently had a fallen out. Now he is ready to make it up with her and says ***“you can always come back”***. However, whenever you have had a serious break-up, you suffer damage and the scars caused by this break-up remain and still cause pain, even when you have become reconciled. It is the reason why the poet adds: ***“but you can’t come back all the way”***. Here you may find the same mood as in Dylan’s song *‘Never gonna be the Same Again’* where it says: *“Now, I can’t go back to what was, baby, I can’t unring the bell”*. ***“You can always come back, but you can’t come back all the way”*** can also be understood spiritually, in a Christ like way. If so, it is as if Christ says: “You need not end up in this endless emptiness, because as long as you are alive you can always come back to me; I’m always there and ready to forgive you, I paid in blood for you. However, in this life- although I have forgiven you - I cannot wipe out all the consequences of sin done the past and in this sense ***“you can’t come back all the way”***. The words ***“you can’t come back all the way”*** come close to what it says in *‘Not Dark Yet’*: *“I’ve still got the scars that the sun (or Son) didn’t heal”*. Some have argued that the ‘sun’ cannot heal scars, in fact exposure of scars to the sun makes the scars worse, therefore when Dylan writes ‘sun’ here, he must have meant ‘Son’ in the sense of the Son of God, Jesus. When we apply this meaning here it is as if Jesus says: ***“You can always come back”***, I’m ready to take you back and accept you because I have forgiven you, but I cannot take away the scars which sin has caused yet so ***“you can’t come back all the way”***.

Then for the third and last time in the song the refrain follows: ***“Only one thing I did wrong, stayed in Mississippi a day too long”***. We already explored the possible meaning of this refrain above under the first and second refrain, here we wrap things up by outlining the restriction which the refrain offers on the line immediately leading up to each of the three refrains.

The first refrain follows the words: ***“All my powers of expression and thoughts so sublime, could never do you justice in reason or rhyme”***. One could conclude that because the poet stayed in Mississippi a day too long, he has become unable to do justice in reason or rhyme to his creator. Sin- staying on too long – bereft the poet of this capacity to do justice to his Creator.

The second refrain follows the words: ***“Well I got here following the southern star, I crossed that river just to be where you are”***. One may conclude that because the poet stayed in Mississippi a day too long, redemption was necessary to bring relief. And relief came. It happened when the river was ***“crossed”***. Some say that “crossed” may be a covered reference to the cross at Cavalry. We think this is farfetched. On the other hand, one may say that the ultimate goal of redemption is that God will dwell with men, just like Dylan’s favourite Bible book The Revelation of St. John says in Chapter 21:3 ***“Behold the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people”***. God wants to be ***“just where you are”***.

The third refrain follows the words: ***“You can always come back, but you can’t come back all the way”***.

One may conclude that because the poet stayed in Mississippi a day too long, he constantly needs to come back and is in need of redemption as long as he is here on this earth. However, because he stayed in Mississippi a day too long, he ***“can’t come back all the way”*** the consequences of sin cannot be wiped out and as long as you live and the scars remain.