

THE STORY OF MAN'S DESTINY #14

TO LIVE IS CHRIST --- TO DIE IS GAIN.

PH. 1:1-30

1. INTRODUCTION.

In our study of the “soul and spirit”, there has been an abundance of evidence showing that the traditional theology regarding them has some serious flaws. For one thing, there are no scriptures that assign inherent immortality to them, not even one. This alone is enough to rule out the modern concept of soul or spirit. Without the possession of inherent immortality, all of the related statements describing some “living departure” from the body at death to ascend to a “better and brighter world above” have no possibility. In addition, “death the gate to glory”, “never dying soul”, “going to a mansion in the sky”, and other such statements, all are totally impossible without the immortality of the soul or spirit. Once you realize that you cannot support the popular concept of soul immortality, then you can find the real scriptural use of the terms soul and spirit along with a broad dimension of other scriptural truths about life and eternity.

We are (entirely) created beings, and as a result of sin, our total being is forfeited to the condemnation of death. The only hope of eternal life in any form for any one is by way of a resurrection through our Lord Jesus Christ at his second coming. That is what we mean by the statement: “Life Only Through Christ”. LOTC. This gives due honor and glory to God who, through the atoning work of the death, burial and resurrection of Christ, has made provisions to banish sin and death and bring life and immortality to light, through the gospel.

However, there are certain passages of scripture that have had an erroneous interpretation for centuries that deserve our consideration. If we will always remember that: (1) the word of God is not always laying on the surface where the carnal mind roams, but is often purposely hidden from the abilities of the mind of man; (2) and that the eternal fabric of truth woven by God's word is not subject or open to carnal interpretation, but requires the revelation of the Holy Spirit. Thank God that it is and that God can and will reveal it to those who seek his will and purposes. The first of these passages of scripture we will look into is found in our scripture lesson in: Ph. 1:1-30. After reading this scripture, we begin with the following question.

2. WOULD YOU BE BETTER OFF DEAD?

This question arises from orthodox theology that is taken from a scripture: Ph. 1:21: *“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain”*. Rather than just reading this one verse only, let us now take the time to read the entire chapter where this verse is found. We will find this interesting and important to our question: “would you be better off dead?”

When you take this verse 21, for face value without any comparison to the rest of the chapter and subject matter, it is not hard to see why the carnal mind would state that a person (Christian) would be better off dead. That's how it is interpreted and applied by the majority of orthodox theology. At someone's death, people, and especially preachers, will begin making such statements as: “they are better off now”; “the Lord took them to a better place”; “they went home to be with the Lord”; “they are already in their new mansion looking down on us”, and a host of such statements. Very likely, in the process, someone will quote Ph. 1:21: “to die is gain”. Thus, orthodox theology concludes that death is better than life. But is it really? Is it actually true that death for even a Christian makes you happier and better off than you are under any kind of living conditions? If so, why don't we hasten the end of life in order to experience this “gain” or is there a different message contained in this scripture than we usually hear at funeral time? With death being the judgment for sin, passed on us in the Garden of Eden, and being the arch enemy of all life, and as Paul states, is the last enemy that shall be destroyed, it is utterly unthinkable to describe death as the “gate to glory”. Our eternal gain

is not through the process of dying. Instead, it is through the process of the coming of the Lord and the resurrection of the saints. So let us analyze Ph. 1, to find out just what kind of gain Paul is talking about in it.

3. THE FURTHERANCE OF THE GOSPEL.

At the time Paul wrote this letter to the Phillipian church, he was a prisoner in Rome because of his faith in Christ and a resurrection through him. Nearing the end of his journey and ministry, he has followed a long path, filled with daily suffering. From his escape at Damascus, to many times in jail, beatings, ship wrecks, stoning, hunted like a criminal, forsaken and despairing of life; his entire Christian experience was one of peril upon peril. (see II Cor. 11:24-28). Having been boated from Ceserea to Rome, along the way in a horrible storm and ship wrecked on a strange island, he is now a prisoner waiting for Nero to pass sentence on him. Even at the city of Phillipi itself, he was shamefully treated, beaten and thrown in jail. Why? Because he preached through Jesus the resurrection of the dead.

Now he writes back to this church that had received his message and was continuing in the faith. They knew of his many sufferings. In V7, he declares to them that in his "bonds" and in his defense of the gospel, they were partakers with him. He prays that they may abound in knowledge, V9; that they might be sincere and without offense till the day of Christ, V10-; and that they might be filled with the fruits of righteousness, V11. Then (in V12) he wants them to understand that the things which happened unto him (all the trials, sufferings, imprisonments, etc.) have fallen out rather unto the furtherance of the gospel. They meant it for evil, but God turned it for good. More specifically, all of these sufferings and hardships have opened doors for me to preach the gospel, and thereby it has advanced. V13, So that my "bonds in Christ" are manifest in all the palace and all other places. If we were subjected to these same sufferings, we would complain over our horrible treatment. Not Paul! He looks at it totally different and sees through his bonds and afflictions the opportunity for the gospel to be advanced. Literally, through his patient endurance of cruel, unwarranted sufferings, the message of the gospel "gained" a great opportunity to be heard. In addition to this, V14, many of the brethren in the Lord grew confident (by Paul's bonds) and became more bold to speak out for Christ. Look at the multiplying affect of Paul's sufferings. First, he is not at all deterred by these bonds, but uses them as an opportunity to speak up for Christ. Then, the Christian brethren, who otherwise were intimidated and fearful, have now waxed very bold and confident to also preach Christ.

Then, verses 15, 16, and 17 are classics. Here Paul describes some who preach Christ out of envy and strife. (Paul's boldness and forwardness to preach Christ even as a criminal prisoner) has stirred some to advertise Christ, albeit unwittingly. These insincere ones, speaking against Christ, thinking they are adding more affliction and condemnation to his bonds, actually were creating a larger forum for Paul's message of Jesus to be preached. (They could do nothing against the truth) for it all turned out to the "gain" (there's that word again) or advancement or furtherance of the gospel. In V18, Paul rejoices that in all of these unpleasant conditions, the gospel is preached. What a focus he has. Facing almost certain execution, he rejoices in every infirmity that serves to the advancement of the gospel. He is not advocating that it is okay to "preach Christ" with envy, strife, insincerity, with contention and a desire to increase his affliction. He is virtually taunting his persecutors and in effect saying to them: "go ahead, treat me however bad you wish; it will only turn out to the advancement, furtherance, "gain" of the blessed gospel for which I suffer in these bonds as an evil doer. So confident and trusting in God is Paul, that he declares, V19, that all of this will turn to the good of me and my salvation. This is my expectation and my hope, Paul declares in V20. What is his expectation and hope? That in nothing will I be ashamed, but instead, with all boldness, as I always have during all of my past journey of suffering affliction and hardship, so now also in this instance (O ye Phillipians) Christ shall be magnified ---- how? in my body. In these sufferings, afflictions and even death if necessary, Jesus Christ (and his gospel) shall be glorified in me; whether it is by living or dying (for his cause). It is so foreign to our modern religious culture and way of thinking that we could be so disposed toward any suffering for the sake of the gospel that we could look on it as the means by which Christ is glorified and the gospel message is increased. But that was exactly Paul's

attitude toward his bonds and afflictions. This is the man that has said: I will spend and be spent for the gospel; I am not only willing to suffer but also to die for him. And again, “the Holy Ghost witnesseth that in every city, bonds and afflictions await him”. When he was converted God foretold how great things he would suffer for his name sake. This is the man that said I will glory in mine infirmities and when I am weak then I am strong.

4. TO LIVE IS CHRIST; TO DIE IS GAIN!

With all of the life- long reality and testimony of Paul’s sufferings for the gospel fresh in our minds, and more particularly, fresh in the life and experience of Paul, from the bowels of this reservoir of confidence that, in it all, the gospel has been furthered and in these sufferings his salvation will accrue to his good, Paul declares: (V21) **“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain”**. Throughout this chapter we have seen a constant emphasis on the concept that through sufferings, bonds, afflictions, even through people speaking of Christ with envy and strife, that it has all turned to the furtherance of the gospel. Rather than his suffering putting a damper on preaching Christ, Paul unflinchingly persevered in the opportunity it afforded him to preach, even in all the palace, who this Jesus was. And by his boldness, many brethren also waxed confident and preached Christ. Instead of defeating the ministry of Christ, everything they did against it only advertised it greater. And there was a great advancement, if you will, a “gain” to the preaching of the gospel.

In the overflowing of this unusual manner by which the gospel was advanced in Rome, there is a very appropriate question: “What is the context of the statement in V21, “to me to live is Christ and to die is gain”? The succeeding verses will abundantly answer this question, but to state the obvious, the context is that of the sufferings and the resulting benefit and spread of the gospel in Rome. It is not at all from a man who is defeated, quitting and has found the obstacles too great for him to carry on in the very important work of preaching in Rome. It is from a man who is, rather, rejoicing that his sufferings are the means of a great gain for the gospel in this capital city of the world. And this is exactly the message he writes back to the Phillipians. I don’t want you (Phillipians) concerned about me and these bonds. They are promoting the gospel all over the place, and therein I rejoice. He isn’t talking about the anguish and loss from dying; he is talking about the gain to the gospel, if, for its sake, he should be called on to die for it.

In V20, Paul speaks of Christ (and by extension the gospel of Christ) being magnified in his body, “whether by life or death”. The subject matter, the aim of his focus and the thing he holds high before the Phillipians, is not whether he lives or dies, but whether or not the gospel is furthered at Rome. For this to be accomplished he is completely resigned to either prospect; not for some personal gain to himself but that the gospel (which he loves more than life) can be elevated, advanced and delivered to every corner of Rome. I need to repeat again that it is extremely difficult for us in our modern culture to have this focus and high priority because we don’t put value on suffering for Christ; we put value on our expectation for Christ to deliver us from our suffering.

I would suggest that it is necessary to get into the mind of Paul, so as to be able to see this message he is writing from his perspective or point of view. In so doing you will be able to see that the thing that is important is not his own life (be it living or dying) but the preaching of Christ. Furthermore, and this is very important, with over 30 years of constant suffering and extreme hardships, even to the point of the continual threat to his life, it is not hard to sympathize with him, if he is to the point of saying: “if I die it will be a rest from my labors”. Job, in the midst of his suffering said, “the clods of the valley would be sweet”. Moses and Elijah reached the point of despair where death would be a welcome relief. It is in this sense that Paul is so resigned to either prospect: living or dying, which ever will be for the best in the cause of the advancement of the gospel. But nothing in Paul’s statement should be construed to mean that he was focused on personal gain. That would demean his total commitment to the gospel at any cost.

Moving on with his letter, V22, he says that if I live in the flesh this is the fruit of my labor. That is, if he continues to live, the results will be that he continues his labors in the gospel. (Which is, in fact what he did for about 2 more years). By connecting V24 with V22, the meaning is clear. It is better

for you (Phillipians) if I continue to live (because I will continue to minister the gospel, even through bonds).

Now back to V22-23. “What I shall choose, I wot not”. I don’t know which the Lord would have in store for my life, whether life or death. I am in a strait betwixt two. I am looking at the two possibilities: (1) Continue living, suffering and preaching; (2) dying for the sake of the gospel and thereby exalting it’s message. I don’t know which of these I should choose. That is, I don’t know which will benefit the gospel and glorify Christ the most. (Surely if he was advocating that the gain was for himself by dying and going to a better world above he would not have been in a quandary as to which to choose). But being in a strait betwixt two makes him neutral as to which occurs because his only motivation is not living or dying, but the advance of the gospel.

Then (V23), Paul introduces something entirely different (than living or dying). He says: “having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better”. What is it that Paul sees as far better? What kind of “departure” is he speaking of? I don’t think that he was saying, I’d rather be dead than alive; I’d rather fly away to a home in the sky; if I could just go ahead and die it would not only liberate me from this unfair suffering, it would also usher me into my mansion on glory avenue, where the streets are pure gold. Having listened to Paul speak repeatedly, describing his perspective on the advance of the gospel through bonds and afflictions, I cannot conceive of him saying that he prefers to die and get out of it all. Most especially is this true since he has said that he did not know what to choose (between life and death).

So we come to this third prospect (as Paul sees it) other than living or dying. The Emphatic Diaglott rendering of verse 23, as translated directly from the original Greek, is as follows: “I am indeed, hard pressed by the two things: I have an earnest desire for the returning and being with Christ, since it is very much to be preferred”. The word “depart”, in this verse, comes from the word “analsia”. Though it is in this instance translated “depart”, yet in no other instance of the use of analsia is it translated depart. The word means, “the loosing; the returning. The third item Paul sets forth then, beyond that of living or dying, is the returning of Christ, which he says is much to be preferred. It is not (according to the original language) a departing from the earth to a “mansion in the sky”. Instead it is the returning of Christ that Paul prefers. Again, from V24, he recognizes the practical truth, that it would be better for the church, etc., that he continue living and laboring to extend the gospel of Christ wherever his trail of suffering might lead him. Even though it is not hard to see that with a life of bitter suffering behind him, from a very physical point of view, he was bound to see even death as a “rest from his labors”.

And he bolsters this thought in V25, expressing a confidence that he will be able to continue for their furtherance and joy of faith. He even expresses in V26, his desire to be able to go to Phillipi again. (Paul writes this letter about 62 A.D., and apparently was martyred about 65 A.D., and no doubt never was able to visit Phillipi again). Then, he exhorts them, V27, to a steadfastness and unity in the gospel whether or not “I come and see you, or else be absent”.

V29, is a fitting summary of his message to the Phillipians, regarding suffering and the gospel, both of which he was so well acquainted with. “For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake. Where, I ask, in all of the culture of today’s “name it and claim it message”; or in the “just believe” theology; or in the “prosperity gospel advocates”; or in the notion that “if you just believe and send in your seed of faith money”, where, I ask again, can the message of believing and suffering for Christ’s sake be found? Paul certainly did not experience or teach, in any of his writings, the concepts of a warm and fuzzy religion; or a feel good church; or situation ethics; or personal prospering through faith in Christ. They were totally foreign to his experience of salvation, faith, ministry and sufferings. And that was not just occasionally, but day after day; everywhere he went; for all the years of his ministry. When you compare the experience of Paul with that of today, “something is missing today”.

5. SUMMARY.

In summary of this lesson, we are going to look back at some of the major events in Paul's life, to help us re-focus our concept concerning the proclaiming of the gospel of Jesus Christ. In so doing, it will help us properly frame and interpret the lesson topic of: "To Live Is Christ And To Die Is Gain". It will also enable, perhaps even inspire us, to see that "suffering for Christ and the gospel" is not only a consequence of the message of eternal life only through Jesus Christ, but more importantly, it is the opportunity by which this message can best be advanced in a world of sin. While it is not a concept that endears itself to today's brand of Christianity, it is, nonetheless, the concept that Paul taught and experienced.

Beginning in Acts 9:15-16, while Paul waited, blind, at the house of Judas, on the street called Straight, God told Ananias: "For he is a chosen vessel unto me to bear my name before the Gentiles, and kings and the children of Israel. For I will shew him how great things he must suffer for my name's sake. Within days (Acts 9:23) the Jews took counsel to kill him, and it never let up.

- He was stoned and left for dead at Lystra on his first missionary journey.
- At Phillippi, he was beaten with many stripes, put in jail and shamefully treated.
- At Thessalonica, the Jews stirred up the low life against him.
- They did the same thing at Berea.
- At Athens, the philosophical elitists, made mockery of his preaching.
- Insurrection against him at Corinth.
- At Ephesus a great uproar because of their devotion to "Diana of Ephesus".
- In Acts 20:22-23, headed to Jerusalem, he stops off at Miletus and told the elders of Ephesus: "the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city that bonds and afflictions abide me.
- At Cesarea it was prophesied that he would be bound and delivered to the Gentiles. To which he responded: "I am ready not to be bound only, but also to die at Jerusalem for the name of the Lord Jesus.
- At Jerusalem, a frenzied mob, sought to capture and kill him.
- He is carried by Roman escort by night to Cesarea, to avoid a mob, and he spends about 2 years there in detention.
- As a Roman citizen, he appealed to Cesar.
- God appeared to him and said: "be of good cheer, and that he would testify at Rome.
- On a ship with criminals, he encountered a storm that threatened all of their lives, except for the intervention of God.
- Finally, after more than 2 years preaching in Rome, history tells us that Nero had Paul beheaded.

While under house arrest at Rome, he writes back to the Phillipian church. They know of his sufferings and that even in Rome he is in bonds and afflictions. So Paul writes with reassuring words to this great Christian church. What does he tell them? Don't be worried concerning the things which happened unto me because they only served as an opportunity to further the gospel in Rome and elsewhere. Not only that, but through my afflictions and unrelenting perseverance, others have become emboldened to preach Christ. I want you to know that I greatly rejoice that through these "light afflictions", the gospel has been carried forward. For my part, it does not matter if I live and preach, suffer affliction, or even die for Christ's sake. However the Lord can best be magnified is what I want. I don't know which to choose, because I don't know by which (living or dying) Christ can be best glorified and the gospel get the most gain. I am resigned to either event. If I had my preference in it all, it would be for the returning of Christ, that I might be with him.

We know that from his last days, with his execution apparently set, he writes to Timothy, not as a melancholy, defeated warrior, but a victorious servant of the most high God. "I am ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing".

We ask this question: Paul, which did you believe: that you would gain your eternal reward by dying; or would you get it "at that day (with) all them also who love his appearing? We have

answered this question by demonstrating that any “gain” of Ph. 1:21, is for the furtherance of the gospel and not some personal transport of Paul to a mansion in the sky.

The record is clear. Christ was glorified by the life Paul lived by faith, service and continual suffering for him. He was also magnified by dying for Christ, unrelenting and uncompromising in his message and commitment to Christ. And he, being dead, yet speaketh.