

## V. Lesson 5 Reason for Joy/Inclinations & Responsibilities – Phil. 1:18b-26

November 1/2, 2006

**Aim:** To recognize the mutual dependence of Christians in the present age, and the glorious prospect which awaits them in the future.

### A. Reason for Joy (Phil. 1:18b-21)

Even though he was confined to prison and waiting to hear what the authorities were going to do with him, the apostle rejoiced (v. 18). Paul knew that one way or the other, he was going to be saved. He was sure that if the Romans decided to take him out of the prison and execute him, then he would go straight to be with Christ, which would be far better for him than to continue living on this earth. On the other hand, Paul knew that if the verdict of the judges was that he was to be set free, then everything would also go well with him, and his release would be of great benefit to the churches.

#### 1. Deliverance (1:19)

Paul anticipates ‘deliverance.’ He uses the New Testament’s normal term for salvation (*soterian*). But does he mean release from prison, or final salvation? The words ‘turn out for my deliverance’ are taken directly from the Greek Septuagint translation of Job 13:16. He is clearly thinking of himself being vindicated before the judgment of God rather than before a human tribunal. He is confident that whether he is acquitted or not his stand for Christ will be vindicated (*cp.* Job 13:18). However, it is possible that Paul actually had both judgments in mind: the judgment of Rome and the judgment of Christ.

Paul looks for two different kinds of aid. The first is human (prayer), and the second is divine (the Holy Spirit). Paul was constantly conscious of his own weakness and need. He candidly asks for the prayers of others to assist him in his ministry (e.g., Rom. 15:30-32; Eph. 6:19). Here he is sure that the Philippians who love him so deeply will have been praying for him constantly. In 1:4 Paul had said, ‘In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy.’ Now he says that he knows they are praying for him.

But for what did the Philippians pray? And for what are we to pray for Christians in times of trial? Paul gives us a clue. He anticipates that he will receive the help of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit endued Jesus with all that was necessary for His work on earth (see Is. 11:1-2; 61:1-3; Mt. 3:16; John 3:34; Heb. 9:14), and Paul says that this same Spirit of Jesus would deliver him. The word ‘help’ or ‘supply’ (*epichoregia*) means assistance which undergirds and strengthens the object. It was employed outside the Bible in various picturesque ways—for example in medicine for a supporting ligament, or in the theatre for the provision the leader of the chorus made for its members. Surely his friends were praying, ‘Father, send your Spirit to give Paul help. Support him in his weakness; provide him with everything he needs to be faithful to your Son.’

- *Paul anticipates his deliverance as a result of: (1) prayer; and (2) the help of the Holy Spirit. Why both? What other indications are there in Paul’s letters that he relies on his fellow-Christians?*
- *How do you think the Philippians prayed for Paul to be helped?*

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### 2. Christ Exalted (1:20)

While Paul is optimistic about being released from prison (see v. 25), he realizes that he has not been given a special revelation from God concerning this matter. It is possible that he will not be released but will rather be executed. Paul's 'earnest expectation' (*apokaradokia*) denotes a state of keen anticipation of the future. It refers to the craning of the neck to catch a glimpse of what lies ahead.

But in any case freedom is not the most important issue for him. Rather, he gives priority to this: that 'now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or death.' So confidently does the apostle await the verdict of his trial, preoccupied not with his fate but rather with the desire that whatever happens may result in the glory of his Master. The alternatives, whether life or death, are seen by the apostle as leading to the same end: the glory of the Lord.

How is Christ 'honored' in our lives? 'Honored' or 'magnified' (*megaluno*) literally means 'made large.' Whenever it becomes clear that we count Christ greater than ourselves, He is honored (*cp.* John 3:30).

- *Why do you think Paul is concerned here lest he should be ashamed?*

### 3. Ambition (1:21)

Paul's situation was serious, potentially life-threatening. He faced life and death issues. What is the secret of remaining faithful under such pressures? Paul knew there was something more important than life. He expresses it in the simplest yet profoundest of statements: 'For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.' The gain of course, lies in the fact that Paul's death will usher him into the presence of Christ (see v. 23). His death would also be a gain for the gospel; Christ is magnified by the apostle's death as by his life (v. 20) because in both he is dedicated to the service of the Lord. But that future experience gives him joy only because in the present Christ means everything to him: 'to live is Christ.'

Later in Philippians the apostle will spell out in greater detail what this involves (see 3:7-11). Even here, however, it clearly implies that Christ is the One in whose presence he lives and whose glory is the motive for everything he does. If we cannot share Paul's desire, it is because we have not seen as clearly as he has the wonder of what Christ has done.

While Christians should never look forward to death (which speaks of pain, sorrow, and separation), they should look forward to heaven. This is why Paul did not fear the executioner's sword. He knew that the pain would be short and bitter, but he also knew that eternity would last forever and would be joyful and blessed. By saying that death would be gain for him, Paul meant that he would leave behind all of the cares, pain, and sorrow of this world. These things would be taken from him. He would know that his work on earth had been completed. He would have the assurance that God had others who would take over from him, and carry on his work.

We are all familiar with situations that are so dreadful that death is a relief. But Paul is not saying that death is better than the worst of life. He is saying that death is better than the best of life. In other words, he was not longing for death as the way out of unbearable circumstances. He was longing for it as the way into unspeakably glorious circumstances.

- *How could Paul regard death as better than life in this world? Read 1 Corinthians 15:20-28; 2 Corinthians 5:1-8; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18.*

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### B. Inclinations and Responsibilities (Phil. 1:22-26)

Paul's whole life was centered on Jesus Christ; his will was submitted to the will of his Master. But serving Jesus Christ does not mean that we become automatons with no wills, preferences, or choices of our own. Growing in holiness means that, like Paul, we bring all our preferences to this touchstone: How will Christ be most clearly exalted in my life?

Paul was not sure what his personal choice was (v. 22). In these verses he considers the question of personal preferences, and in the process gives us some guidelines to follow in our own lives. In particular he compares his natural inclinations with his apostolic responsibilities. Here, then, is a practical principle to follow when we are seeking conscientiously to discern the will of God. Place side-by-side, in columns, the answers to two questions: 1) What are my natural desires, preferences, and instincts in this situation? 2) What responsibilities do I have in terms of my home and family, role in my church, stewardship of my gifts, experience in the past?

#### 1. Natural Inclination (1:23)

Paul wanted 'to depart' (*anulusai*). Characteristically he employs a graphic word which could be used of a ship weighing anchor, or soldiers striking camp, or even of someone solving a problem. But Paul does not merely want to escape from bodily existence, as though it were the prison Greek philosophers believed it was. He is not choosing death, as though he were rejecting life; he is choosing Christ, who he loves and whom he believes he will get to know better than ever.

Dying is gain (v. 21) because it means to 'be with Christ' (v. 23). This future being with Christ is 'better by far' or literally 'much rather better,' a triple comparative meaning 'by far the best.' What is better about dying is that for the believer death is the gateway into the presence of his Lord. What a glorious prospect this is for the Christian: our knowledge and love of Christ in the present life are only preliminary to what awaits us after death. It is this assurance which transforms the Christian's attitude to death. Of course there is much about it that is painful and sad, sometimes deeply distressing. But this cheers our spirits: we are traveling home; we are going to see Jesus Christ!

#### 2. Responsibility (1:22, 24-26)

Until the time of his departure, Paul wanted to live for Christ (v. 21). He was not selfish. His critics only wanted glory for themselves (vv. 15, 17), but Paul only wanted Christ to be exalted in his body (vv. 20, 22).

Paul was 'hard pressed' between: 1) the joy that lay before him in the presence of Christ; and 2) the alternative of continuing his life and ministry. What would the second alternative be? 'Fruitful labor' (v. 22), he replies. Christ is Lord of our lives; they come to an end only in His sovereign will, when His purposes in us and for us have been completed. But if it is His will for us to continue to live, one reason is this: He means to continue to bless us and use us as His servants.

'Fruitful labor' (*ergon*) is a frequent term for Paul's missionary activity (see Rom. 15:18; 2 Cor. 10:11; Phil. 2:30). It meant he would be free to travel once more to meet the believers in the various churches. He would be able to encourage them and teach them more about the Lord. He would also be free to visit places where the gospel had not yet been preached and have the opportunity to establish yet more companies of the Lord's people.

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We usually associate being torn between options with being unhappy. ‘I am hard-pressed (or torn) between the two’ (*synechomai*) carries the idea of external control. Paul is a torn man, but he is also a vibrantly happy man. He is torn because, on one hand, he wants to continue his ministry, and, on the other hand, he wants to be with Christ. But he is a joyful man because he knows he will not be the loser in either case. If he dies, it will be for the cause of Christ and bring honor to His name. If he is released, it will be so he can continue to promote the cause of Christ.

But this personal desire ‘to be with Christ’ in glory must be subordinated to his pastoral responsibility to the Philippians. The need of the churches he had founded seemed to lead Paul to the conviction that it was surely the Lord’s will for his life to be spared and for his ministry to continue so that others might make progress in grace and increase in joy (v. 25). This word ‘progress’ (*prokope*) is the same one which is translated ‘advance’ in 1:12, but here it applies to the progress of the believer’s spiritual life. The desire that was uppermost in Paul’s mind was not that the congregation should increase in size, but that the believers should make progress in the Christian faith. He also wanted to see their ‘joy in the faith’ (v. 25). He knew that Christians do not have to be miserable all the time. The most joyful people ought to be those who know and love the Lord.

Paul’s attitude provides a striking insight. If the Lord continues to keep us in this life, He means our lives to encourage others to grow as Christians and to bring joy to them. That is part of the answer to the question, What is my life really for? This is a good question to ask ourselves: Does my life encourage others to grow and to rejoice? Here is the secret of maintaining a sweet spirit in adversity: I have a glorious prospect before me when I am with Christ. But for the present, that same Christ means to help others through my presence with them. There are few richer blessings than being in the presence of someone who obviously lives for Christ. That is Christian service!

### C. Application & Discussion Questions

- *‘He reserves the best of his gifts for the time of our greatest need.’ How was that true for Paul? Has it been true in any special way for you?*
- *What was ‘more important than life’ to Paul and how can it be a mark of our lives also?*
- *Paul indicates that he struggled to reach the conclusion he describes in verses 23-26. How do we learn to tell the difference between our natural inclinations and the will of God?*
- *What teaching does the New Testament give on what happens to the believer at death?*
- *You have learned that a dear friend or family member has been diagnosed with a terminal illness. How does Paul’s teaching here help you to give practical advice to that person? How does it help you, personally, to prepare for death?*
- *Discuss the application of these verses to ‘Christians who have few gifts, or are weakened by illness, or who have grown frail in old age’ (p. 32). How can we strengthen our anticipation of being with Christ?*

For next time: Read Philippians 1:27-2:4 and Ferguson chapters 9-10.