

Joy in Spite of the Flesh

Scripture: Philippians 1:22–26

Code: 50-10

INTRODUCTION

The book To the Golden Shore tells the story of Adoniram Judson, one of the first American missionary sent overseas (Courtney Anderson [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956]). He was a brave ambassador of Jesus Christ who served his Lord in what was then known as Burma. After fourteen years of enduring wretched imprisonments and life-threatening diseases, all he had to show for his pains were the graves of his wife and all his children. He was all alone, yet was faithful to remain there. He wrote that if he had not felt certain that every trial was ordered by God's infinite love and mercy, he could not have survived his accumulated sufferings.

Judson understood his trials were a part of the sovereign plan of God. Although he must have longed to be with Christ and enjoy the fellowship of his beloved family, he also longed to meet the needs of the pagan Burmese people. Therefore he prayed God would allow him to live until he had translated the entire Bible into Burmese and had presided over a native church of at least 100 Christians.

Judson had the spirit of the apostle Paul, who longed to be with Christ but also desired to be useful to the church: "If I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. And convinced of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again" (Phil. 1:22-26).

REVIEW

I. JOY IN SPITE OF TROUBLE (vv. 12-14)

II. JOY IN SPITE OF DETRACTORS (vv. 15-18)

III. JOY IN SPITE OF DEATH (vv. 19-21)

LESSON

IV. JOY IN SPITE OF THE FLESH (vv. 22-26)

As Paul wrote to the Philippian church he was waiting for the Lord to show him whether he would live or die. In verse 21 he mentioned that to die and be with Christ is gain, but he was willing to remain in the flesh if it would benefit the church. Those two equal desires ought to characterize every believer.

A. The Meaning of "Flesh" (v. 22a)

"If I am to live in the flesh."

This clearly refers to remaining in this world. Romans 8:5 contrasts those who live "according to the flesh" with "those according to the Spirit." That's a contrast between unrighteousness and righteousness, but "flesh" can also refer to one's existence in the physical world.

1. 2 Corinthians 10:3--"Though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh." Here Paul was not speaking of walking in sin (cf. Gal. 5:16-17, 25) but of living in the physical world. Although we exist in the physical realm, we do not fight spiritual battles with physical weapons.

2. Galatians 2:20--Paul said, "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but

Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God." Paul didn't mean he was living in sin, but that he was living the remainder of his life by faith.

3. 1 Peter 4:2--"Live the rest of the time in the flesh no longer for the lusts of men, but for the will of God."

B. The Promise of Fruitful Labor (v. 22b)

"This will mean fruitful labor for me."

1. It is hard spiritual work

If Paul lived on in the physical world, he fully expected that would result in "fruitful labor." He considered being alive in our world to be synonymous with fruitful labor for Christ. That's the idea behind Philippians 1:21: "To me, to live is Christ."

Paul often used the Greek word translated "labor" (ergon) to describe his own ministry, and used it to describe Epaphroditus's work in Philippians 2:30: "He came close to death for the work of Christ" (emphasis added). Used that way ergon refers to spiritual work--work for the Lord.

a) Romans 1:13--Paul said to the Romans "I have planned to come to you ... that I might obtain some fruit among you." That's a reference to converts.b) 1 Corinthians 16:15--"The household of Stephanus ... were the first fruits of Achaia."c) Philippians 1:11--As Christians we're to be "filled with the fruit of righteousness."d) Galatians 5:22-23--"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control."e) Hebrews 13:15--We are to offer a sacrifice of praise to God, "that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name."

Spiritual fruit may be people, deeds, words--whatever is of eternal value. That kind of fruit comes from good, hard work, which is the natural activity of the godly on earth.

2. It requires a strong desire

Paul had a strong desire to stay and bear fruit. He wanted the Philippians to be confident in Christ and strengthened for evangelism (Phil. 1:26-27). He's reminiscent of the psalmist who said, "O God, Thou hast taught me from my youth; and I still declare Thy wondrous deeds. And even when I am old and gray, O God, do not forsake me, until I declare Thy strength to this generation, Thy power to all who are to come" (Ps. 71:17-18). That elderly man wanted to live long enough to declare God's strength and power to the next generation.

King Hezekiah was about to die an early death, but God was gracious to him and healed him. The king declared, "Sheol cannot thank Thee, death cannot praise Thee; those who go down to the pit cannot hope for Thy faithfulness. It is the living who give thanks to Thee, as I do today; a father tells his sons about Thy faithfulness" (Isa. 38:18-19). Like Paul, Hezekiah desired to communicate the greatness of God to others.

C. The Hard Choice (vv. 22c-23a)

"I do not know which to choose.... I am hard-pressed from both directions."

Death would have ushered Paul into the presence of his lord, yet life provided the opportunity to advance the kingdom. The phrase "I do not know" contains a Greek word Paul often used (gnorizo). Of the twenty-six times it occurs in the New Testament, eighteen of those occurrences are in Paul's writings. It means "to reveal" or "make known." Paul couldn't say what he would choose. He knew it was an issue that was in the Lord's hands, and, given the choice, couldn't choose either heaven or earth for himself .

Choosing Between Heaven and Earth

You may find yourself in the same dilemma Paul faced. Every Christian ought to feel the strain of desiring to be with Christ, yet also longing to build His church. If the Lord said to me, "You have five minutes to choose between being in heaven or on earth," I would have a difficult time making that decision. And I would want to be sure I was choosing for the right reasons.

The only legitimate reason making that choice difficult is whether you could glorify Christ more in heaven or on earth. Paul found it an impossible choice. Nevertheless, most people would choose to

stay on earth. When asked why they would say, "We're getting a new house," "We're going on a trip," or "I don't want to leave my kids." For Paul, nothing really mattered except to glorifying Christ. When faced with the most basic of life's issues--whether it would be better to live or die--his response was, "I would be thrilled to glorify Christ in heaven or on earth. Given the choice, I can't choose." Because glorifying Christ was Paul's motivation, where he glorified Christ was not the issue. That ought to be true for every believer.

Because Paul couldn't choose he wrote, "I am hard-pressed from both directions" (v. 23). "Hard-pressed" (Gk., sunecho) speaks of being hemmed in on both sides. It pictures a traveler on a narrow path, a wall of rock on either side. He is unable to turn aside and able only to go straight ahead (William Barclay, The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians, rev. ed. [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975], p. 27). Paul felt pressured from both possibilities, and didn't know which way God would lead.

Paul had "the desire to depart and be with Christ" (v. 23) yet also "to remain on in the flesh" (v. 24). His two desires were equally strong and equally good--not a choice between one alternative and something better. His was not the dilemma of David, who was presented with choices from the Lord, each of which would cause him great distress. Yet in that situation, David discerned that one of the choices was better than the others. David said, "I am in great distress [at the choices presented to me]. Let us ... fall into the hand of the Lord for His mercies are great, but do not let me fall into the hand of man" (2 Sam. 24:14).

D. The Desire to Depart (v. 23b)

"Having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better."

The Greek word translated "desire" (epithumia) is most often used of a sinful lust. But occasionally it expresses a strong unfulfilled desire for something right and good. Paul had a compelling but unfulfilled desire to "depart" (Gk., anulusi), the same word used in 2 Timothy 4:6: "I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand" (emphasis added). He expressed the same idea in 2 Corinthians 5:8: "We are of good courage, I say, and prefer ... to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord." Unlike the desire of Greek philosophers for immortality of the soul in a vague sense, Paul's great desire was to be in personal, intimate, complete, unhindered, conscious fellowship with Christ.

Absent from the Body, Present with the Lord

When a believer leaves this world he goes immediately to be in the presence of Christ. There is no soul sleep or intermediate waiting place. Nor does the Bible teach that there is any place called purgatory. Paul's desire was "to depart and be with Christ" (Phil. 1:23, emphasis added).

Acts 7:59-60--As Stephen was being stoned to death "he called upon the Lord and said, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!' And falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, 'Lord, do not hold this sin against them!' And having said this, he fell asleep." Stephen's spirit was received into Christ's presence of Christ while his body "fell asleep"--died. The biblical writers often described death as falling asleep in light of the resurrection, which is when the body rises again.

2 Corinthians 5:6-8--"While we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord--for we walk by faith, not by sight ... and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord." When we are absent from the body, which sleeps until the resurrection, our spirits are at home with the Lord.

1 Thessalonians 5:10--The Lord Jesus Christ "died for us, that whether we are awake or asleep, we may live together with Him." Paul's point is that whether we are physically awake (alive) or physically asleep (dead), as believers we are with Christ. We are in His presence in a spiritual sense now and in a literal sense when our bodies are dead.

There is no time in the life of a believer when he or she will ever be out of the conscious presence of Jesus Christ.

According to Paul, being in Christ's literal presence is "very much better" (Phil. 1:23). More than "better" or "much better," to be with Christ so far surpasses anything in this life that it is "very much better." It's as though Paul could find no superlative adequate to express the comparison between being on earth and being with Christ in heaven.

E. The Need to Remain (vv. 24-26)

1. Its necessity (vv. 24-25)

"To remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. And convinced of this I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith."

One mark of a spiritual man is that his own desires are balanced by the needs of others. That's the kind of man who could write, "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (Phil 2:3-4).

The Philippians needed Paul. Philippians 2:1-4 indicates they needed to learn humility. Chapter 3 implies they were imperiled by the Judaizers. In 4:1-3 Paul had to deal with contentious women in the Philippian church. The Philippians needed to be reminded to rejoice and be content in their circumstances. And the Philippians were only one of many churches Paul felt needed him (2 Cor. 11:28).

Paul knew the churches needed him so badly that their need was likely to determine his future:

"Convinced [or confident] of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith" (v. 25). I think that expresses Paul's personal conviction concerning his future--not a revelation that he was going to remain on earth. That's because if he had received a revelation, he would have said so, and thus cleared up his friends concerns that he might be sentenced to death by the emperor. In Acts 27:21-26 Paul received a supernatural revelation that though the ship he was on would sink, the lives of all on board would be spared. He let that information be known to allay the fear of the crew, and I think he would have done the same here. Paul was convinced that he would meno (remain) and parameno (continue or come alongside)--a play on words. He would remain for the purpose of aiding the Philippians' spiritual "progress and joy in the faith" (v. 25). "Progress" (Gk., prokope) pictures blazing a trail for the advance of an army. By remaining, Paul expected to blaze a trail for the Philippians to follow onto victory. Their faith in Christ would increase, thus leading to an increase in their joy.

2. Its purpose (v. 26)

"So that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again." The verse begins with the Greek word hina, which when combined with a verb stated in the subjunctive mood ("may abound") indicates the writer is introducing a statement of purpose or explaining a reason. It is best translated, "In order that your proud confidence may abound in Christ Jesus in me." While the New American Standard places the words "in me" before "in Christ Jesus," the Greek New Testament has "in Christ Jesus" first. It's important that the Greek word order be preserved so it doesn't sound like Paul said, "That your proud confidence in me may abound"--something Paul never would have written. His point was not that the Philippians' confidence would overflow because of him, but because of Christ's working in him.

CONCLUSION

Although Paul desired to be with Christ in heaven, he equally wanted to remain on earth to help strengthen the church. He knew that if he stayed the church would better glorify Christ, and glorifying Christ was all he desired.

The natural question after reading so great a testimony is, What happened to Paul? Most likely he was released shortly before the burning of Rome in A.D. 64 (for which the Emperor Nero falsely

blamed the Christians). He was imprisoned again and beheaded sometime between A.D. 65-67. During the time of his freedom before his final imprisonment and execution, he helped many churches. Paul's assurance of release as expressed in Philippians 1:25-26 proved correct.

Philippians 2:19-23 indicates Paul intended to send Timothy to Philippi with the news of his release, and apparently he did so. He began a journey to Asia Minor, and on the way left Titus on the island of Crete to set the churches there in order and appoint leaders (Titus 1:5). He then apparently went on to Ephesus, traveled to Colosse (Philem. 22), and returned to Ephesus.

Upon his return to Ephesus he met Timothy, who brought news from Philippi. While at Ephesus Paul removed two of worst leaders in the church, Hymenaeus and Alexander, from leadership (1 Tim. 1:20), and left Timothy in charge. He went on to Macedonia as planned (Phil. 2:24; 1 Tim. 1:3) and from there wrote to Timothy with instructions and encouragement for the task of setting things in order in Ephesus (cf. 1 Tim. 3:14-15).

Paul also wrote to Titus from Macedonia, asking Titus to meet him in Nicopolis, which is on the west coast of Greece. Paul apparently spent the winter there with him (Titus 3:12) and then left for Asia Minor, leaving Trophimus sick at Miletus (2 Tim. 4:20). He may also have said a final and tearful goodbye to Timothy there (2 Tim. 1:4). He then traveled to Troas and visited Carpus, at whose house he may have left his cloak (2 Tim. 4:13).

It may be that in Troas Paul was arrested for the second time--in any event he was soon arrested. He was again taken to Rome and imprisoned briefly under very severe conditions, with only Luke there to comfort him (2 Tim. 4:11). Demas forsook him and the rest of his friends were elsewhere (2 Tim. 4:10). From Rome he wrote his last epistle, urging Timothy to come to him and bring Mark along as well (2 Tim. 4:9, 11). He was staring death in the face, and we don't know whether they were able to get to Rome before Paul's execution.

After his first imprisonment God gave Paul a few more years for fruitful ministry. He fully lived for Christ. That's all that ought to matter to us. It doesn't matter what trouble we're in or what detractors we have--even if we're facing death. What's important is that Christ is glorified and His kingdom advanced. Paul's example is a pattern for us as we grow in Christ and seek to honor Him.

Focusing on the Facts

1. How was Adoniram Judson like Paul?
2. What did Paul mean by the phrase "live on in the flesh" (Phil. 1:22)?
3. What did Paul expect if he lived on in the physical world?
4. As used in Philippians 1:22, what does the Greek word ergon refer to?
5. What did the author of Psalm 71 and King Hezekiah share in common with Paul?
6. True or false: The choice of going to be with Christ in heaven or advancing Christ's kingdom on earth was an easy one for Paul.
7. How does the Greek verb sunecho picture Paul's choice of whether to be with Christ in heaven or advance His kingdom on earth?
8. How does the desire of Greek philosophers differ from the desire Paul expressed in Philippians 1:23?
9. Where does a believer go when he leaves this world? Support your answer with Scripture.
10. One mark of a spiritual man is that his own desires are balanced by the _____ .
11. Why did the Philippians need Paul?
12. What was Paul confident of? Explain (Phil. 1:25)?
13. What does the Greek word translated "progress" picture that Paul expected to do for the Philippians?
14. What did Paul want the Philippians to be confident of (Phil. 1:26)?

Pondering the Principles

1. Paul's great desire was to serve and glorify God, wherever that might be and whatever the cost to himself. Yet such singlemindedness often characterizes those building earthly kingdoms more than those who ought to be building God's kingdom. The Puritan Thomas Brooks said, "Be ashamed, Christians, that worldlings are more studious and industrious to make sure of pebbles, than you are to make sure of pearls" (The Golden Treasury of Puritan Quotations, I.D.E. Thomas, ed. [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1977], p. 258). Is your life given to serving and glorifying God in the way that so many in this world are given to serving and glorifying themselves?
2. Philippians 1:12-26 shows a man content to be where God placed him. He would have been as content to go and be with Christ as to stay and serve the needs of Christ's church. That's because Paul's heart and mind were set on heaven and fulfilling the desires of heaven's master; his contentment was a by-product of his focus. Yet often we find ourselves discouraged and discontent because of our circumstances. Thomas Watson wrote, "Spiritual things satisfy; the more of heaven is in us, the less earth will content us.... Fly aloft in your affections, thirst after the graces and comforts of the Spirit; the eagle that flies above in the air, fears not the stinging of the serpent; the serpent creeps on his belly, and stings only such creatures as go upon the earth" (The Art of Divine Contentment [Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, n.d.], pp. 97-98). Consider what your heart and mind are set on. If they're set on the right things, you'll be content with the circumstances in which God has placed you.

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