

Joy in Spite of Death

Introduction

The New Testament passages that deal with Paul's life show that events went badly for him. Acts 9 records Paul's salvation, but by the end of the chapter people were already plotting to kill him and he was forced to flee to save his life. He was initially rejected by the church at Jerusalem (Acts 9:26). On his first missionary journey, he was publicly contradicted and accused of blasphemy. Mobs were stirred up against him. In Lystra Paul was stoned and left for dead.

Paul himself said, "[I am] in far more labors, in far more imprisonments, beaten times without number, often in danger of death.

Five times I received from the Jews thirty-nine lashes. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, a night and a day I have spent in the deep. I have been on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my countrymen, dangers from the Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers on the sea, dangers among false brethren; I have been in labor and hardship, through many sleepless nights, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. Apart from such external things, there is the daily pressure upon me of concern for all the churches" (2 Cor. 11:23-28). He was forsaken by unfaithful friends (2 Tim. 1:15).

Of Timothy he wrote, "I have no one else of kindred spirit" (Phil. 2:20).

Many of the churches into which Paul poured his time and energy fell into gross sin and erroneous theology. He had continual sorrow for the lost condition of his own people (Rom. 9:1-3). Many individuals he nurtured defected from the faith or had left him to serve elsewhere (cf. 2 Tim. 4:10). He was imprisoned at least five times--in Jerusalem, Caesarea, Philippi, and twice in Rome. One wonders if when Paul entered a city he checked out the local jail to see where he'd be spending the night!

Yet Paul never lost his joy. In the midst of trials he was "sorrowful yet always rejoicing" (2 Cor. 6:10). Bad circumstances increase the joy of those who respond biblically because they lead to a deeper trust in God. Joy derived from circumstances is fleeting, but joy derived from a relationship with Christ is unmixed and lasting.

Review

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

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

Lesson

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

"I know that this shall turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I shall not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ shall even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

Paul remained joyful though threatened with death as long as his Lord was glorified. All that mattered to him was that the gospel advanced, Christ was preached, and the Lord was magnified. The source of his joy was entirely related to the kingdom of God.

Very few in today's church are committed to Jesus Christ like the apostle Paul was. Paul exemplifies what Christ was talking about when He said, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me" (Luke 9:23; cf. 14:27). Paul was so given over to our Lord that he didn't care whether he lived or died. That's an attitude practically unheard of in our materialistic, self-centered, non-self-sacrificing day. Most people today live for everything but what Paul was focused on.

A. Paul's Confidence (vv. 19-20)

"I know that this shall turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I shall not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ shall even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death."

We see five ways the confidence of Paul was established in the face of death.

1. He was confident of being delivered by God

a) God's promise

When Paul said, "I know [Gk., *oida*] that this shall turn out for my deliverance," he was saying he had a settled conviction. He knew his present trials would turn out for his future deliverance, believing

that "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Rom. 8:28).

b) Paul's deliverance

The Greek word translated "deliverance" (soteria) is the word for salvation. That's how the King James Version translates it, although soteria can also be translated "well-being" or "escape." As a result of those varying possibilities, some say Paul was referring to his ultimate salvation. Others think he was referring to his deliverance from threatened execution. Still others think he was referring to personal vindication--that when his sentence from the emperor was finally rendered he would be vindicated. There are also commentators who think Paul was referring to eventual release from prison. I think there is a measure of truth in each of those interpretations. The key thought is that Paul knew his current distress was only temporary and that he would be delivered from it.

c) Paul's conviction

Why was Paul convinced of his deliverance? His statement, "I know that this shall turn out for my deliverance" is a quote of the Greek version of Job 13:16. Job was a righteous man who suffered greatly, yet he was delivered because God always delivers the righteous. Job said, "Though ... worms destroy this body, yet in my flesh shall I see God" (Job 19:26, KJV). He knew that either temporally or eternally God would deliver him.

Paul knew the Old Testament and may have identified with Job. He knew he could trust God to deliver him just as God had delivered Job. Like Job, Paul wasn't being chastened by God. He was confident his circumstances would work out for good whether he was released from prison, vindicated at his trial, was delivered from execution, or passed into glory as a martyr.

Paul didn't know whether he would be released from prison because he said his deliverance would come "by life or death" (v. 20). Like the affirmations found in many of the Psalms (Ps. 22:4-5, 8; 31:1; 33:18-19; 34:7; 41:1),

Paul was confident that God would deliver the righteous.

2. He was confident in the prayers of the saints

Paul was confident he would be delivered through the prayers of the Philippians (v. 19). He knew the Word of God is effected through the sovereign will and purpose of God, and that God brings His purposes to pass in concert with the prayers of His children. He also knew that "the effectual prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much" (James 5:16). The love and prayers of the saints in Philippi encouraged Paul greatly.

We see Paul's reliance on prayer in other passages of Scripture as well.

a) Romans 15:30--"I urge you, brethren, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to strive together with me in your prayers to God for me."

b) Ephesians 6:18-19--"With all prayer and petition pray at all times in the Spirit ... with all perseverance and petition for all the saints, and pray on my behalf, that utterance may be given to me in the opening of my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel for which I am an ambassador in chains."

c) 1 Thessalonians 5:25--"Brethren, pray for us."

3. He was confident in the provision of the Spirit

Paul was also confident in "the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ" (v. 19). The Word, prayer, and the Spirit all work together for the benefit of God's servants.

The Greek word translated "provision" (epichor[ma]legia) means "help," "bountiful supply," or "full resources." Paul was speaking of the resources of the Spirit, not of the Spirit Himself. He grants all that is necessary to sustain the righteous.

The Holy Spirit is called "the Spirit of Christ" and "the Spirit of God" (Rom. 8:9). He can be called by either title because He is within the Trinity and proceeds from the Father in the name of Christ (cf. John 14:26). Paul knew the Holy Spirit as his indwelling teacher, interceder, guide, source of power, and

all-sufficient provider. That's what the Spirit is for all believers.

- a) Zechariah 4:6--God provides for believers "not by might nor by power, but by [God's] Spirit."
- b) John 14:16--Jesus was referring to the coming of the Holy Spirit when He said, "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever."
- c) John 16:13--Jesus promised, "When He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come."
- d) Acts 1:8--Jesus said to the apostles, "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you."
- e) Romans 8:26--Paul's confidence that all things work together for good (v. 28) was based on the provision of the Spirit, who "helps our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we should, but the Spirit Himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words."
- f) Galatians 5:22--"The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control"--all that a believer needs.
- g) Ephesians 3:20--God "is able to do exceeding abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us."

Knowing the Spirit's provision, Paul could face death with tremendous confidence.

4. He was confident in the promise of heaven

In Philippians 1:20 Paul says, "According to my earnest expectation and hope, [I know] that I shall not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ shall even now, as always, be exalted in my body." He was surely confident of Christ's promise in Matthew 10:32: "Everyone . . . who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven. He also had the assurance of this promise at the time of his conversion: "the God of our fathers has appointed you [Paul] to know His will, and to see

the Righteous One, and to bear an utterance from His mouth. For you will be a witness for Him to all men of what you have seen and heard" (Acts 22:14-15; cf. Acts 9:15).

The extent of Paul's confidence may be seen by his use of the Greek word apokaradokia, translated "earnest expectation." It's "a picturesque word, denoting a state of keen anticipation of the future, the craning of the neck to catch a glimpse of what lies ahead" (Ralph P. Martin, New Century Bible: Philippians [Greenwood, S.C.: Attic Press, 1976], pp. 75-76). Paul rejoiced that he would never be put to shame before the world, the court of Caesar, or God Himself because he knew God would be glorified in his life.

The Old Testament affirms that the righteous will never be put to shame, while the unrighteous will (cf. Pss. 25:2-3; 35:25-27; 40:15-16; 69:6-7; 119:80; Isa. 1:27-29; 45:14-17; 49:23; 50:7; Jer. 12:13; and Zeph. 3:11). To be put to shame means to be disappointed, disillusioned, or disgraced. Paul knew that would never happen to him of God's promise to the righteous. He may have had Isaiah 49:23 in mind: "those who hope in me will not be disappointed" (NIV). In fact he quoted it in Romans 9:33.

5. He was confident in the plan of God

Paul didn't know the specific plan of God for his life, but he was confident in it whether it meant life or death (v. 20). In verses 23-24 he says, "I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that's very much better, yet to remain in the flesh is more necessary for your sake." Paul preferred the joy of being in Christ's presence in heaven, but apparently he thought the Lord would let him live because he knew the Philippians needed him.

Paul rejoiced because he knew that by either his life or death Christ would be exalted. If he lived he would be free to preach and build the church. If he died he would be executed for Christ's sake and his unwavering faith would serve as a trophy of Christ's grace. For Paul the issue was not his troubles, detractors, or even his possible death, but whether the gospel was advancing and the Lord was being magnified.

B. Paul's Commitment (v. 21)

"To me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

1. In life

That reflects what Paul saw as the summum bonum of his life. Christ was Paul's raison d'être--his reason for being. He wasn't merely saying that Christ was the source of his life, that Christ lived in him, or that Christ wanted Paul to submit to Him. Though all those statements are true in themselves, they are only parts of this great truth: life in its sum is Christ.

2. In death

Since Christ was Paul's whole life, dying could only be gain since it would relieve him of the burdens of his present life and free him to focus completely on glorifying his Lord. That's what he lived for in the first place--Paul truly had a one-track mind!

In Acts 20:23-24 Paul said to the Ephesian elders, "The Holy Spirit witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions await me. But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of grace of God" (KJV). He was warned he would be imprisoned and in chains, but his response was, "I am ready not only to be bound, but even to die ... for the name of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 21:13). That's to be the attitude of every Christian.

In William Shakespeare's play "Hamlet," the young prince wondered whether to relieve the sorrows of life by suicide, musing, "To be, or not to be: that is the question" (Act III, scene I, line 61). To Paul the issue was, "To live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21).

Conclusion

Personalize Paul's message for a moment. Read verse 21 as, "For me, to live is _____, and to die is _____." Then fill in the blanks. If you put "wealth" in the first blank, dying brings not gain but loss. The same is true if you selected prestige, fame, power, or possessions because none of those things remain after death: prestige is lost, fame is forgotten, power is useless, and possessions are given to others. For verse 21 to make sense as Paul wrote it, only Christ can fill the first blank. Otherwise death is inevitably a loss.

Many who read this will say, "I put Christ in my blank." But if

they think about it carefully, they will realize that what they really meant was Christ plus wealth, Christ plus power, or Christ plus possessions. For verse 21 to read as Paul wrote it, Christ can't share the first blank with anything else. Those who truly live for Christ have no fear of death and make the best use of life: in both they glorify Christ. That was Paul's attitude and is to be ours as well.

Focusing on the Facts

1. How do bad circumstances provide the opportunity to increase our joy (see pp. 1-2)?
2. What was it that really mattered to Paul when faced with death (see p. 2)?
3. How does the attitude of Paul compare with the attitude of most people in our own day (see p. 2)?
4. What does Paul's use of the Greek word oida in Philippians 1:19 imply (see p. 3)?
5. What are the varying interpretations of the Greek word translated "deliverance" (soteria) (see pp. 3-4)?
6. Why was Paul convinced of his deliverance (see p. 4)?
7. Why did Paul take comfort in the prayers of the Philippians (see pp. 4-5)?
8. What passages of Scripture show the confidence of Paul in prayer (see p. 5)?
9. What did Paul probably mean when he spoke of "the provision of the Spirit" (Phil. 1:19; see p. 5)?
10. Explain Paul's "earnest expectation and hope" (Phil. 1:20; see pp. 6-7).
11. What does the Old Testament affirm about the righteous and the unrighteous regarding shame (see p. 7)?
12. If Paul could have chosen life or death, which would he have preferred? Why (see pp. 7-8)?
13. What was the summum bonum of Paul's life (see p. 8)?
14. According to the example of Paul, what ought to be the attitude of every Christian (see pp. 8-9)?

Pondering the Principles

1. Our world knows little of what it means to be happy in the midst of trial. Happiness is understood to be a function of mood, possessions, or place--but not a confidence that rests completely outside of this world. The American pastor A.W. Tozer wrote, "In this day of universal apprehension when men's hearts are failing then for fear of those things that are coming upon the earth, we Christians are strategically placed to display a happiness that is not of this world and to exhibit a tranquillity that will be a little bit of heaven here below" (Signposts: A Collection of Sayings from A.W. Tozer, Harry Verploegh, ed. [Wheaton, Ill.: Victor, 1988], p. 96). Do those who know you see in your life a happiness based in heaven or on earth?

2. We often forget that the Christian life here on earth is by necessity a battle. Certainly Paul knew that reality, yet he also knew the battle was worth the cost. J.C. Ryle said, "The Christian's fight is good, because it ends in a glorious reward for all who fight it. Who can tell the wages that Christ will pay to all His faithful people? Who can estimate the good things that our divine Captain has laid up for those who confess Him before men?... The bravest generals must go down one day before the king of terrors. Better, far better, is the position of him who fights under Christ's banner, against sin, the world and the devil. He may get little praise of man while he lives, and go down to the grave with little honour, but he shall have that which is far better, because far more enduring" (Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots [Welwyn, Eng.: Evangelical Press, 1979], p. 62). Do not be discouraged if in the midst of your present battle to maintain your Christian testimony, you see little reward. You have Christ's promise that "everyone who shall confess Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 10:32-33).

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