

ISAIAH 55:6-9 AND PHILIPPIANS 1:21-20

ONE AFTERNOON, LUCY SHARED WITH CHARLIE BROWN HER CURRENT PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE- SAYING: "LIFE IS LIKE A DECK CHAIR, CHARLIE BROWN.

SOME PEOPLE PLACE THEIR CHAIR SO THEY CAN SEE WHERE THEY ARE GOING. OTHERS PLACE IT SO THEY CAN SEE WHERE THEY HAVE BEEN. AND SOME, SO THEY CAN SEE WHERE THEY ARE IN THE PRESENT."

AFTER LISTENING TO HER COMMENTARY, CHARLIE BROWN, LET OUT A DEEP SIGH AND TOLD HER, "I CAN'T EVEN GET MY CHAIR UNFOLDED."

IT IS EASY FOR US TO ACCEPT THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE DECK CHAIRS IN THE PEANUTS STORY AS BEING A SIMPLE MATTER OF DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES.

NOW SOME PEOPLE MAY WONDER IF ONE'S PERSPECTIVE MATTERS VERY MUCH, WHEN REAL FACTS ARE INVOLVED.

AFTER ALL, FACTS ARE FACTS, NO MATTER HOW THEY ARE PERCEIVED, AREN'T THEY? WELL, NOT ALWAYS.

CONSIDER THE QUESTION-"IS THE GLASS HALF EMPTY OR HALF FULL?" EITHER ANSWER IS CORRECT, BUT HOW ONE ANSWERS CAN OFFER INSIGHT INTO ONE'S PERSONALITY AND VIEWS.

A PERSON'S PERSPECTIVE CAN ALSO INVOLVE HOW WE CLARIFY OR CONFUSE THE FACTS AS WE KNOW THEM.

CONSIDER THE EXILES IN BABYLON. SOME HAD SETTLED INTO A RELATIVELY COMFORTABLE LIFE THERE, AND HAD THOUGHT LESS AND LESS ABOUT GOD, OR RETURNING HOME.

OTHERS COULD NOT TRULY BE CONTENT IN THE FOREIGN LAND, BUT FEARED GOD MIGHT HAVE ABANDONED THEM.

THE PROPHET WAS SENT TO CALL THOSE WHO SAW THEIR CAPTIVITY FROM EACH PERSPECTIVE TO LOOK TO THE LORD THEIR GOD.

THEY WERE REMINDED THAT WHILE FROM A HUMAN PERSPECTIVE GOD WAS FAR AWAY FROM THEM, THE TRUTH WAS -NO PLACE IS FAR AWAY FROM THE CREATOR OF HEAVEN AND EARTH.

HOWEVER FOR THOSE WHO FEEL GOD IS FAR AWAY THE SOLUTION IS NOT A CHANGE OF LOCATION BUT HEART.

IN THE VERSES OF THE PASSAGE NOT READ THIS MORNING, ISAIAH TELLS PEOPLE TO SEEK WHAT THEY TRULY NEED, WHICH IS A RIGHT RELATIONSHIP WITH THE LORD.

THEN IN VERSE SIX HE CALLED FOR THEM TO SEEK GOD, AND CALL UPON HIS NAME AND HE WILL ANSWER, FOR THE LORD IS NOT FAR AWAY.

AND WHILE IN THEIR VIEW THEY HAVE BEEN LEFT ON THEIR OWN IN BABYLON, GOD'S PERSPECTIVE WAS DIFFERENT.

THUS THE PEOPLE ARE CALLED TO LOOK TO THE LORD IN FAITH, AND PRAY FOR THE DELIVERANCE GOD HAS PROMISED TO PROVIDE.

THE LYRICS OF THE HYMN "SWEET HOUR OF PRAYER", ARE TAKEN FROM A POEM THAT SPEAKS ABOUT ONE CHRISTIAN'S PERSONAL CALL TO, AND COMMUNION WITH, THE LORD.

"SWEET HOUR OF PRAYER! SWEET HOUR OF PRAYER!  
THAT CALLS ME FROM A WORLD OF CARE, AND BIDS ME AT MY FATHER'S THRONE MAKE ALL MY WANTS AND WISHES KNOWN.

IN SEASONS OF DISTRESS AND GRIEF, MY SOUL HAS OFTEN FOUND RELIEF AND OFT ESCAPED THE TEMPTER'S SNARE BY THY RETURN, SWEET HOUR OF PRAYER!

SWEET HOUR OF PRAYER! SWEET HOUR OF PRAYER!  
THY WINGS SHALL MY PETITION BEAR TO HIM WHOSE TRUTH AND FAITHFULNESS ENGAGE THE WAITING SOUL TO BLESS.

AND SINCE HE BIDS ME SEEK HIS FACE, BELIEVE HIS WORD, AND TRUST HIS GRACE, I'LL CAST ON HIM MY EVERY CARE, AND WAIT FOR THEE, SWEET HOUR OF PRAYER!"

PRAYER WAS CERTAINLY SOMETHING THE APOSTLE PAUL WROTE A LOT ABOUT.

THIS BRINGS US TO THE NEW TESTAMENT READING AND PAUL'S MESSAGE FOUND THERE.

THE CHRISTIANS IN PHILIPPI WERE IN NEED OF ALL THE COMFORT AND STRENGTH THE LORD COULD PROVIDE.

WE MAY IMAGINE THEIR DISTRESS BECAUSE THE APOSTLE WAS IN PRISON FOR PREACHING THE GOSPEL.

PAUL, WHO HAD A CLOSE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE CHRISTIANS THERE WROTE TO ENCOURAGE THEM, AS THE PORTION OF THE LETTER READ EARLIER CONVEYS.

SO KNOWING THE APOSTLE PAUL'S PERSPECTIVE ON- LIFE AND DEATH FOR THOSE LIVING IN CHRIST, AS WELL AS ON THE IMPORTANCE OF SPREADING THE GOSPEL, IS HELPFUL FOR OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE EPISTLE.

FIRST, IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER HOW MUCH PAUL'S PERSPECTIVE CHANGED.

HE ONCE LIVED FOR THE TORAH AND OBEYING IT WAS ALL THAT MATTERED, WHEN HE WAS BETTER KNOWN AS SAUL THE PHARISEE.

BUT AFTER HE BECAME A BELIEVER AND AN APOSTLE FOR THE LORD JESUS, PAUL LIVED FOR CHRIST, AND OBEYING HIM BECAME ALL THAT MATTERED.

JUST LIKE HE ONCE WAS A FAITHFUL PHARISEE PURSUING PERFECTION IN THE LAW OF GOD, SO ALSO PAUL NOW STROVE TO LIVE AS A FOLLOWER AND APOSTLE OF JESUS CHRIST.

YES INDEED, PAUL'S RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST AND THUS WITH HIS FELLOW BELIEVERS, FOR THE MOST PART, GOVERNED HIS WORDS AND ACTIONS UNTIL HIS DEATH.

SO TURNING BACK TO HIS LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN PHILIPPI, IT IS HELPFUL TO KNOW HE HAD A VERY GOOD RELATIONSHIP WITH THE PHILIPPIANS.

FURTHERMORE, THEY WERE A GREAT COMFORT TO PAUL DURING HIS TIME IN PRISON.

THE LETTER OPENS WITH EXPRESSIONS OF GRATITUDE FOR THEM, AND WITH PAUL EXPLAINING HIS PERSPECTIVE ON BEING IN CHAINS.

HE WRITES THAT HE REJOICES, EVEN IN HIS CURRENT UNPLEASANT CIRCUMSTANCES, BECAUSE HE HAS HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO SHARE THE GOSPEL WITH HIS GUARDS.

THE APOSTLE IS ALSO GLAD FOR WHAT HAD HAPPENED ONCE WORD SPREAD THAT HE WAS IMPRISONED.

YES INDEED HE REJOICED BECAUSE THE NEWS ABOUT HIM ALSO WITNESSED TO CHRIST AND HIS GOSPEL.

PAUL WAS EVEN CONTENT WITH THOSE WHO SPOKE WRONGLY AGAINST HIM, WHEN THEY ALSO SPOKE RIGHTLY ABOUT CHRIST.

HE ALSO SHARED WITH THE CHURCH HIS VIEW ABOUT THE UNCERTAINTY OF HIS FATE, KNOWING HE WOULD EITHER- BE RELEASED, OR BE TRIED AND PROBABLY EXECUTED.

THEREFORE HE PROCLAIMED IN THE LETTER HIS PERSPECTIVE ON HIS UNCERTAIN FUTURE: "FOR ME TO LIVE IS CHRIST AND TO DIE IS GAIN."

WHAT PAUL MEANT WAS- ON THE ONE HAND, PHYSICAL DEATH WOULD BRING HIM INTO THE MORE INTIMATE RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST HE LONGED FOR.

BUT ON THE OTHER HAND, IF HE CONTINUED TO LIVE HE COULD SERVE JESUS BY SPREADING THE GOSPEL AND SUPPORTING CHRIST'S CHURCHES.

THIS IS WHAT WAS BEHIND HIS STATEMENT IN VERSE 22 ABOUT NOT KNOWING WHETHER TO CHOOSE LIFE OR DEATH.

THESE WORDS SHOULD NOT BE VIEWED AS PAUL SAYING HE WOULD LITERALLY MAKE THE CHOICE.

NOR SHOULD HIS STATEMENT BE CONFUSED WITH SOME SHAKESPEAREAN “TO BE OR NOT TO BE” CONFLICT INSPIRED BY DEEP DEPRESSION.

INSTEAD HE WAS SHARING WITH HIS FELLOW BELIEVERS AN INTERNAL STRUGGLE OVER WHAT HE HOPED WOULD HAPPEN.

THUS HE WROTE ABOUT HOW HE DID NOT KNOW IF HE SHOULD PREFER TO PRAY FOR CHRIST TO LET HIM LIVE OR LET HIM DIE.

YOU SEE, THE APOSTLE VIEWED DEATH AS BEING MERELY ANOTHER DESTINATION ON HIS JOURNEY AS ONE WHO LIVED IN CHRIST.

AND PAUL SHARED HIS PERSPECTIVE OUT OF A DESIRE TO ENCOURAGE THE PHILIPPIANS.

HE WANTED TO BE SURE THAT NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM, THEY WOULD NOT BE DISCOURAGED, BUT INSTEAD WOULD CONTINUE LIVING BY FAITH IN JESUS CHRIST.

YOU SEE, THEY WERE BEING INTIMIDATED BY SOME PEOPLE, AND GROWING FEARFUL ABOUT PERSECUTION.

PAUL, OF COURSE WAS ABLE TO VIEW THEIR FEARS FROM BOTH SIDES OF THAT EXPERIENCE.

REMEMBER-HE ONCE WAS AN INTIMIDATOR OF JEWISH CHRISTIANS, PERSECUTING THEM FOR WHAT HE SAW WAS THEIR ABANDONMENT OF THE TORAH AND THE TRUE FAITH.

BUT NOW, PAUL WAS ONE OF THOSE BEING PERSECUTED, AND YET HE FELT A JOY IN THE MIDST OF THIS SUFFERING HE NEVER FELT WHEN HE WAS PERSECUTING CHRISTIANS OUT OF RELIGIOUS ZEAL.

THEREFORE HE WROTE TO ENCOURAGE THE PHILIPPIANS, HOPING THEY WOULD NOT VIEW ANY SUFFERING THEY MIGHT EXPERIENCE AS A VICTORY FOR THEIR ENEMIES.

HE ALSO SOUGHT TO TEACH THEM TO ALWAYS REMEMBER AND REJOICE IN THE LASTING VICTORY THEY HAVE THROUGH JESUS CHRIST.

PAUL COULD DELIVER THESE WORDS TO CHRISTIANS FACING AS MUCH UNCERTAINTY AS HE WAS, BECAUSE HE FELT HIS PERSPECTIVE —“TO LIVE IS CHRIST, AND TO DIE IS GAIN”, APPLIED TO THEM AS WELL.

THEN THE APOSTLE FOCUSES THEIR ATTENTION ON HOW TO LIVE IN THE WORLD AS A FOLLOWER OF JESUS CHRIST.

HIS WORDS FOUND IN THE OPENING PARAGRAPHS OF THIS LETTER TIE INTO HIS STATEMENTS IN THE LATTER HALF OF TODAY’S READING.

IN PHILIPPIANS 1:9-12, HE PRAYS THEY WOULD OVERFLOW WITH LOVE GROWN OUT OF A KNOWLEDGE OF CHRIST, SO THEIR LIVES WOULD PRODUCE A HARVEST OF RIGHTEOUSNESS THROUGH JESUS CHRIST, TO THE GLORY AND PRAISE OF GOD

THEN, NEAR THE END OF CHAPTER ONE, PAUL DESCRIBES SOME OF THE WAYS HIS PRAYER CAN BE FULFILLED IN THE LIVES OF THE PHILIPPIANS.

PAUL’S MESSAGE IS THAT SPEAKING ABOUT JESUS AND THE GOSPEL IS NOT ENOUGH.

THEY MUST ALSO ACT IN WAYS THAT SHOW JESUS HAS MADE A DIFFERENCE IN THEIR LIVES.

THEREFORE HE INSTRUCTS THEM TO BE GUIDED BY GOD’S SPIRIT AND TREAT ONE ANOTHER IN A CHRIST-LIKE MANNER, WHICH OF COURSE MEANS TO LOVE GOD AND OTHERS.

THIS CALL TO RIGHT CONDUCT, IN THE GREEK LANGUAGE CARRIES A SENSE OF LIVING AS IS BEFITTING BOTH THE PRIVILEGES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF THEIR STATUS.

THE METAPHOR OF CITIZENSHIP IS A USEFUL TOOL IN GRASPING THE MEANING OF PAUL’S PRAYER FOR, AND INSTRUCTION TO, THE CHRISTIANS OF PHILIPPI.

PHILIPPI, YOU SEE, WAS NOT MERELY A ROMAN COLONY, IT WAS SOMETIMES CALLED “LITTLE ROME”, WHICH WAS A SOURCE OF GREAT PRIDE.

AND INDEED, TO BE A ROMAN CITIZEN, AS MANY IF NOT MOST OF THE CHRISTIANS THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN, WAS BOTH A GREAT HONOR AND A GREAT RESPONSIBILITY.

THUS PAUL'S WORDS ABOUT CONDUCT AS CHRISTIANS, WOULD HAVE BEEN PARTICULARLY MEANINGFUL FOR BELIEVERS WHO EITHER WERE, OR WISHED THEY WERE- CITIZENS OF ROME.

REMEMBER, CHRISTIANS ARE CITIZENS FIRST AND FOREMOST OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD, AND THEREFORE OUGHT TO LIVE IN WAYS THAT HONOR GOD AND REPRESENT HIS KINGDOM RIGHTLY.

SO PAUL'S DESIRE FOR THE CHURCH INVOLVED THEIR STATUS AS CHILDREN OF GOD, AND MEMBERS OF GOD'S KINGDOM AND FAMILY.

HE HOPED THAT, IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES, CHRISTIANS WOULD BE SPIRITUALLY MATURE ENOUGH TO LIVE AND SPEAK IN WAYS THAT WITNESS TO THE GOSPEL AND HONORED GOD.

HE CALLED THEM TO LIVE IN THE PRESENT, BUT TO ALSO MAINTAIN AN ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE SIMILAR TO HIS OWN.

AND FOR PAUL, EVERYTHING IN HIS LIFE WAS VIEWED FROM THE FACT OF BEING A FOLLOWER OF JESUS, AND MORE SPECIFICALLY FROM BEING "IN CHRIST."

THE PHRASE "IN CHRIST", APPEARS MULTIPLE TIMES IN THE LETTER TO THE PHILIPPIANS.

PAUL WRITES THAT CHRISTIANS ARE BOUND TOGETHER "IN CHRIST".

AND IT IS BECAUSE WE LIVE "IN CHRIST" WE CAN EXPERIENCE JOY, EVEN WHILE SUFFERING.

BEING "IN CHRIST" ALSO IS THE CONTEXT IN WHICH CHRISTIANS HAVE HOPE, PEACE, GLORY, CONFIDENCE, BLESSINGS, AND KINGDOM CITIZENSHIP.

AND WHILE NOT EXPLICITLY STATED IN THE LETTER, IT IS ALSO "IN CHRIST" THAT WE PRAY.

THIS IS THE ETERNAL PERSPECTIVE THE APOSTLE INSTRUCTS AND ENCOURAGES ALL CHRISTIANS TO EMBRACE IN WORD AND ACTION.

THUS HIS WORDS TO THE PHILIPPIANS CAN ALSO BE WORDS TO BOTH ENCOURAGE AND CHALLENGE US TO LIVE "IN CHRIST."

LET US PRAY:

ETERNAL GOD, LEAD US EVER CLOSER TO JESUS THAT WE MAY TRULY LIVE IN CHRIST, AND THEREBY EXHIBIT HIS LIFE AND LOVE TO OTHERS THROUGH OUR WORDS AND OUR DEEDS.

MAY YOUR SPIRIT GUIDE AND EMPOWER US TO LIVE AS CITIZENS OF YOUR KINGDOM, AND GLORIFY TO YOUR NAME.

MAKE US BOLD TO WORK WITH YOU TO BRING OTHERS TO FAITH AND NEW LIFE IN JESUS CHRIST, IN WHOSE NAME WE GIVE THANKS AND PRAY. AMEN

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