

TO DIE IS GAIN – PART ONE

The Book of Philippians #5

The last time we visited the book of Philippians was in November of last year just before Thanksgiving. In between then and now we have had one Thanksgiving sermon, three Christmas sermons, one Bible Sunday sermon, and two Preparation Sundays. Since so much time has passed since our last look at Philippians I feel a little review is in order before we dive back into the book.

Paul is writing to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, a city located on the northeastern side of Macedonia which is now in modern day Greece. As we looked at the first chapter we spoke of what it means to be a bond-servant of Christ, where grace and peace come from, the participation of the Philippian church in spreading the gospel of Christ and supplying the needs of the saints, the perfection of the good work God had begun in them, the real knowledge and discernment found in love, and the fruit of righteousness.

As we moved further into the chapter Paul addressed the circumstances of his imprisonment in Rome, how he was rejoicing even in his sufferings, and though he was unsure of his deliverance from this prison, he was confident that no matter what happened he belonged to Christ and Christ belonged to him.

He then made a statement which we glanced over the last time but which I want to go into more detail today. He said this in Philippians 1:21,

“To live is Christ and to die is gain.”

Paul says that to die is gain. Paul has no fear of death. In death he loses nothing but gains everything. As he will state later in his letter to the Philippians, he has already counted as lost the things of this world (Philippians 3:7-8). So whether he dies by the hand of Rome or goes to meet Christ in the air, death is no tragedy to him. On the contrary, he intends his death by whatever form it comes to be honoring to Christ.

Now we do know that Paul was eventually released from this imprisonment and was able to travel about freely proclaiming the gospel of Christ. So though he eventually died at the hands of the Roman emperor Nero, he did not die as a result of his initial imprisonment in Rome. In fact, he said that this imprisonment turned out for the great progress of the gospel. Nonetheless, Paul was unsure at the time of his writing whether he would be released from this prison or from this life.

Paul believed that death would be a good thing. He did not fear it but rather welcomed it. It is this theme that I want to concentrate on today.

You may remember the last time I spoke on Philippians I mentioned the story of the woman who wanted to “die with dignity”. She opted for assisted suicide because she did not wish to prolong the suffering that came as a result of the tumor in her brain. To “live” for her meant pain and suffering, not only for herself but also for her loved ones. To “die” was to avoid this suffering. So in her mind the gain from death was the elimination of suffering. This is the exact opposite of what Paul is saying. Paul knew that from his death would come much more than the elimination of suffering. From his death would come a face to face meeting with the One he loved and was willing to die for. And that was Christ Himself.

All of us will face death at one point or another. In all of Scripture there have only been two reported instances where someone did not die but passed directly from life into the presence of God. And that was Enoch and Elijah. But they were the exception to the rule. The chance that we might get so lucky is

extremely thin. So our expectation is very much like Paul's. We will either live or die. There is no other option.

And Paul said, "To die is gain". So Paul is obviously expecting something more after he dies than he has been experiencing while alive on earth. He suggests there is something to be gained in death.

Over the past several years there has been an increase in the number of books providing some people's experience with death and heaven and hell. Most of these have been called "near death experiences", meaning they were near death but had not yet passed through death's door. This would be the case of the young boy in the book and movie entitled "Heaven Is For Real." But others speak of their definitive death, their entrance into heaven and their return to their mortal body on earth. These events were documented in the book entitled "90 Minutes In Heaven" which was written by Don Piper, a pastor who died in a tragic car accident but brought back to life through the prayers of another pastor.

In all of these stories the people involved simply relate what happened to them. Some of their images or experiences are close to what we find in Scripture but most cannot be found anywhere in the Bible. This does not mean they could not have experienced them. It simply means we have no way to corroborate their experiences with Scripture. But then, they don't claim to be prophets or writers of Scripture. They're simply relating what they saw and heard.

When reading these accounts it would be easy to embrace these events as truth, as most of them are very comforting and bring about an expectation of good things when we die. But ultimately Scripture is our only guide for unfiltered truth. So it is to there we must look.

But what do the Scriptures have to say about what happens to us after death? Do we die and go into oblivion for a period of time before "waking up" in heaven or hell or some other unknown holding area? Do we wait our turn to enter into whatever place we are destined for after all those who have gone before have gone in? Most of you here already know the answer to this question. But you may not know why you know what you know. And you may not be able to defend your position. And that is why I thought it would be good for us to address this issue.

Paul said there was a "gain" in death. Is there an immediate "gain" or a delayed "gain"? There have been several theories and even several church doctrines through the years which seek to reveal what happens to us after death. So let's take a look at Scripture and compare what the Bible has to say to these theories, some of which are still around today.

First of all we know the Bible tells us that Jesus has left this world and is preparing a place for us in His Father's house. He told us so in John 14:2-3 and we look forward to that place. He speaks of His wedding with His bride, the church, and that there will be a feast to celebrate this wedding. All of these things we can look forward to because they are the promises of God. But some have stated there is an "in-between" place. A state or place we go to before our final destination.

The Roman Catholics call this 'in-between' place Purgatory. They claim this is a temporary state or place of punishment where those who have died in the grace of God can atone or make amends for their sins through their suffering. Their doctrine of purgatory, to quote their web site, *"comes from the belief that some die with smaller faults for which there was no true repentance, and also the fact that the temporal penalty due to sin is at times not wholly paid in this life."*

They further say that those who depart this life *“in God’s grace, are not entirely free from venial faults, or have not fully paid the satisfaction due to their transgressions.”* When they speak of “venial faults” they are referring to their belief that not all sins are equal before God and therefore some sins will be punished with more severity than other sins.

So what they are saying essentially is this: Grace will guarantee you entrance, but the punishment for sin must still be fully paid by the one committing the sin. And this payment depends on the number and type of sin which you committed. If your life runs out before your payment is completed on earth then you must make up the difference in Purgatory. That is the doctrine of Purgatory – an “in-between” place where the dead in Christ go after they die and before they are granted entrance into heaven. A place where you work out the penalty for your disobedience.

Another thought that is prevalent today is that we fall asleep for a period of time before we enter heaven. Groups such as Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-Day Adventists claim that we are no longer conscious beings at the time of our death but that our soul either ceases to exist or is asleep. They call this “soul sleep”, meaning that once a person dies, they enter a state of unconsciousness. They also claim the dead remain in this state until the Second Coming of Christ which brings about their resurrection from the dead.

So we must ask ourselves: Do either one of these theories line up with Scripture? Without knowing anything other than Paul’s simple statement, “to die is gain”, I would have to say no. I mean, how can Paul say “to die is gain” if what we will experience in death is either a sleeping soul without any sense of consciousness or a temporary place of punishment where we must atone for our sins before we can gain entrance into heaven? That sounds like a loss to me, not a “gain”.

Yet these theories don’t come out of the blue. Some Scriptural basis can be found for both of these theories. So let’s take a look at where these theories might have come from and test them in the light of other Scriptures. Let’s look first at the concept of “soul sleep”.

To set the stage, remember that Jesus said of His friend Lazarus, that he had “fallen asleep”. But when questioned by the disciples he explained what he meant by sleep. He said, *“Lazarus is dead”* (John 11:11-14). So in 1Thessalonians 4:13-18 Paul also talks about believers who have “fallen asleep”, meaning they have died, and gives instructions as to what will happen with them.

1THESSALONIANS 4:13-18

“But we do not want you to be uninformed, brethren, about those who are asleep, so that you will not grieve as do the rest who have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so God will bring with Him those who have fallen asleep in Jesus. For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord, will not precede those who have fallen asleep.

For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord. Therefore comfort one another with these words.”

So the concept of being in a state of “sleep” can be found in scripture. But it says nothing about being in a state with no consciousness until the Resurrection. To say that this Scripture says we enter a state of “soul sleep” is to imply something that this Scripture does not state. This would be an argument from

silence rather than an argument from what is actually written. So while we may understand how the concept of “soul sleep” may have started, we cannot justify or prove its validity by using these few verses.

So let’s move on to the idea of Purgatory. The idea of having to pay for your sins even after you have been forgiven can be found in the passage of the unforgiving slave. This passage is not talking about heaven per se, but Jesus does relate the actions of the human master to the actions of the Lord. We read about this in:

MATTHEW 18:23-35

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who wished to settle accounts with his slaves. When he had begun to settle them, one who owed him ten thousand talents was brought to him. But since he did not have the means to repay, his lord commanded him to be sold, along with his wife and children and all that he had, and repayment to be made. So the slave fell to the ground and prostrated himself before him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you everything.’

And the lord of that slave felt compassion and released him and forgave him the debt. But that slave went out and found one of his fellow slaves who owed him a hundred denarii; and he seized him and began to choke him, saying, ‘Pay back what you owe.’ So his fellow slave fell to the ground and began to plead with him, saying, ‘Have patience with me and I will repay you.’ But he was unwilling and went and threw him in prison until he should pay back what was owed. So when his fellow slaves saw what had happened, they were deeply grieved and came and reported to their lord all that had happened.

Then summoning him, his lord said to him, ‘You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you pleaded with me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, in the same way that I had mercy on you?’ And his lord, moved with anger, handed him over to the torturers until he should repay all that was owed him. My heavenly Father will also do the same to you, if each of you does not forgive his brother from your heart.”

You may remember when Jesus taught His disciples the Lord’s Prayer, He finished by saying “*If you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions.*” So the story He relates here does have a consistency of teaching about it.

But is it the specific action of unforgiveness that is at the heart of the matter, or is the real issue the attitude of the heart and the fruit that is brought forth from it? Conceptually all have been forgiven by God through Christ even though few recognize and accept it. “*God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son that whosoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have everlasting life.*” (John 3:16). But for the sake of argument, let’s say this unforgiving servant is a true believer and not simply someone who falls under the overarching concept of forgiveness.

If the unforgiving servant is a believer the issue then becomes whether or not this passage is speaking of heaven and our after-death experience, or is it speaking about something else? For instance, is it trying to make the point that God will require some sort of payment from us after we die if we live lives of unforgiveness here on earth? Or is the main point the theological issue of the impossibility of ever being able to pay back enough to compensate the God of the universe for all the sins which we have committed? Or is it addressing moral issues such as the actions we must manifest as our response to the great debt of sin which God paid for us? What is the context? Is Jesus speaking of future things to come or things that currently are?

Even though Jesus starts out by saying “*The kingdom of heaven may be compared to...*” there is nothing in this passage to say that He is referring to our future state after death. Just as the kingdom of heaven can be compared to a mustard seed or leaven, ten virgins or a hidden treasure found in a field, the Kingdom of Heaven is not these things. Neither is the kingdom of this harsh master the Kingdom of our Lord. All of these things are like the Kingdom of Heaven but none of them are the Kingdom of Heaven. And as in these other passages, I believe in this passage Jesus is referring to our life here on earth and how God will not tolerate our unforgiving spirits when we have been forgiven of so much. And, because He promised to make us into the image of His Son, God will do something in this life to make us realize the error of our ways. And that’s why Jesus speaks of payment for debt.

So though we can, from this passage, get a concept of payment for sin after receiving forgiveness for it, we cannot truthfully say this passage speaks of any repayment plan occurring in a place called Purgatory to which unforgiving people go after death. And I can find no other Scriptures to support this theory.

I don’t normally stop preaching after I have presented some negative ideas without any application. But due to time constraints today I am going to have to stop here. Next week we will look at the Scriptural reasons that refute these two positions and make application of these principles. We will also look further at what Paul meant when he said, “to live is Christ”. In the meantime know that Scripture does not provide any evidence to support these theories and we will see why next week.