

THE UPWARD CALL

*Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet;
but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead,
**I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God
IN CHRIST JESUS.***

(Philippians 3:13-14 NASB)

#05-1112

At Home with the Lord.

January 12, 2011

The Much Better – Resurrection

Continuing with Paul's thought as presented in the last issue (#05-1111), the following verses are also used by many to prove that Paul expected and taught that when we die we immediately go to be with the Lord; that is, *in* death, believers go to heaven apart from resurrection and transfiguration. Let us be very clear that Paul did not change his message; he simply elaborated on it.

(6) Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord—(7) for we walk by faith, not by sight—(8) we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. (9) Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. (2 Corinthians 5:6-9 NASB)

The first part is very obvious: if we are in the body, which is our earthly home, we are absent or away from home with the Lord. In the meantime, the earnest of the spirit leads us to walk by faith. Faith says that one day we will be with the Lord. On the basis of faith, Paul was encouraged that our preference is rather to be away from these bodies of humiliation and to be at home with the Lord. Notice that Paul in no way stated that death is the way that leads *immediately* to being at home with the Lord. One must read this into Paul's words. Unfortunately, some people do exactly this.

In verse 8, preferring **to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord**, Paul joined the two thoughts with the conjunction *and*. I have heard it preached many times: "Paul taught that to be absent from the body *is* to be with the Lord; therefore, you go to heaven when you die." Listen carefully next time this verse is recited from the pulpit and note if this is how it is stated. The problem is that this is not what Paul wrote. Please note that the verb *is* is not in Paul's words, and by using this verb, the meaning (i.e., timing) of the phrase changes. Paul made no such connection, as if one immediately leads to the other. Absent from our mortal body means we are dead or asleep in Jesus until the resurrection, at which time we will be at home with the Lord in our spiritual body.

Paul's final words of this section refer back to verse 6. We are ambitious, whether at home, that is, *at home in the body*, or away from home, that is, *away from the Lord*, to be well-pleasing to Him. It is merely the same thing expressed from different angles. Being ambitious and well-pleasing can only refer to our current walk of faith and not to life after death.

Now, as further proof, let us consider Paul's heart as expressed to the Philippians.

(21) For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. (22) But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. (23) But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; (24) yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. (25) Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, (26) so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again. (Philippians 1:21-26 NASB)

These verses, especially verse 23, are often used as one of the proofs that Paul taught that believers go to heaven upon death and that this was Paul's expectation.

There is no doubt whatsoever that Paul wanted to be with the Lord, but he never stated that he was going to be with Him immediately upon his death; this is what many preachers read into Paul's words,

but this does not make it a correct understanding. Paul's desire to be with the Lord cannot conflict with his desire for the resurrection when all will be changed, and this mortal puts on immortality.

Simply, Paul was contrasting two conditions, both of which would bring glory to Christ. If Paul lived, his life would be gain for the cause and glory of Christ; if he died as a martyr, this too would be gain for the cause of Christ. Throughout his epistles, Paul never wrote of seeking gain for himself; it was always for Christ and His people (e.g., 1 Corinthians 15:31; 2 Corinthians 8:23; 11:23-29; 2 Thessalonians 1:12; 2 Timothy 2:10). Paul died daily and suffered tremendously for the cause of Christ.

In spite of all his trials and even being jailed at the end of his life, Paul remained fruitful in the work of the Lord, and all of us are recipients of that fruit, even after 2,000 years.

We could say that Paul was caught between two outcomes, the better and the much better. He desired that in life or death he would bring glory to Christ; he never desired glory for himself. If he lived, he would be fruitful in Christ's service; if he died as a martyr, this too would bring glory to Christ. Either way, it would be gain to Christ and not to him. However, there was a much better.

Perhaps the Concordant Version's rendering of verse 23 helps to shed more light on this matter.

Yet I am being pressed out of the two, having a yearning for the solution and to be together with Christ, for it, rather, is much better.

Paul was struggling between life in the body or death; but he yearned for the much better solution, or, we could say, the very best solution, which is to be together with Christ. In other words, Paul injected a third option to remaining alive or death. The much better option was to be together with Christ, which according to Paul's teaching only comes at the resurrection, transfiguration, and the snatching away to meet the Lord. Paul's solution was the resurrection, for this was and is the hope of the evangel with which he was entrusted to take to the nations. This is the much better solution with which Paul very clearly encouraged the Thessalonians who were waiting for the Son to come from heaven.

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. (1 Thessalonians 4:17-18 NASB)

So we shall always be with the Lord. This is the comfort that Paul gave the saints. It was *not* death and then immediately going to heaven. It was death, resurrection, transfiguration, and glorification in the presence of the Lord. Notice that Paul never mentions "going to heaven." The air is not heaven!

Paul faced his imminent death with triumph and a shout of victory. What greater legacy could he leave to his beloved brethren than to remind them that there is a glorious hope on the horizon? There is "a much better" coming, just as there is *a better resurrection* (Hebrews 11:35), and all should set their hearts on this, as Paul did. Consider Paul's testimony to his beloved son of the faith, Timothy.

(6) For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure [dissolution] has come. (7) I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; (8) in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing. (2 Timothy 4:6-8 NASB [CV])

His death was imminent; his dissolution [departure] had come, which simply means he was about to die. Paul knew he would receive a reward in *that day*, which is the future day of Christ, not the day of his death. Paul joined *that day* to *His appearing*, which refers to the return of the Lord. All who love His appearing will be rewarded as Paul will be rewarded in that day.

In closing his last letter to Timothy, Paul brought the expectation into view again: **The Lord will be rescuing me from every wicked work and will be saving me for His celestial kingdom** (2 Timothy 4:18 CV). Paul and all who love the Lord will be saved for His celestial kingdom, which comes at His appearing. This is *the much better* we are encouraged to love and to expect, as Paul did.