

## ***The Un-disappointed Life***

Writing from his Roman imprisonment with the unlikely theme of joy, The Apostle Paul seeks to encourage the Phillipian church, under the threat of persecution from the Roman authorities and from the threat of inner division in their fellowship. Paul reports on how things are going for him. Although he had every reason to complain about unjust treatment, Paul shares how he rejoices over how the Gospel message is being proclaimed, both through his witness to the prison guard and through the witness of his friends as well as his rivals in Rome (12-18). The verses we consider today are also part of his personal status report, but also to his hope for the future.

### **Philippians 1:18b-26**

*18 What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true, and in that I rejoice.*

*Yes, and I will rejoice, 19 for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my salvation. 20 It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way but that by my speaking with all boldness Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me, yet I cannot say which I will choose. 23 I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better, 24 but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. 25 Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, 26 so that, by my presence again with you, your boast might abound in Christ Jesus because of me.*

Every one of my birthdays forces me to give greater consideration to the question of "what I want to be when I grow up." A few decades ago, I still had what the Germans call "angst" about my life, a deep-seated and disturbing anxiety that my life goals were possibly unattainable, and that life may be passing me by. Now I no longer have that anxiety. Most of my mortal life has indeed passed me by, and it is clear that I no longer have to worry about certain goals and ambitions being fulfilled. They are now clearly out of reach. Not that this is necessarily to my credit, but I am resigned to my advancing age and limited opportunity for achieving certain things.

The above being the case, I nevertheless find in the text for today reason to return to the sense of anticipation about life that I felt as a young man and even as a child. I have hope that my life, even though having had its share of disappointments, will not be in the final analysis a disappointed life. Verse 20 contains the image of the eager expectation of someone "looking out of the window in anticipation" of someone's arrival (Fred Craddock). New Testament and Greek scholar AT Robertson wrote that this word translated "eager expectation" is a "strong, striking word," portraying someone's watching eagerly, with the neck strained and head bent forward. So, this passage encourages us to join in the narrative of Paul's life of hopeful anticipation of what God has in store for our future with him. We have every reason to be like a child who dreams about his future, even as he or she strains to see the arrival of a long-absent parent, or the arrival of a parade, just around the corner, or waiting to greet arriving family and friends at the airport. We hope that we will not be disappointed by their greeting.

Paul writes that he eagerly expects and hopes that he will "in no way be ashamed" at the outcome of his prison ordeal and even of his entire mortal life. Let's see if we can identify with what Paul says about his hope for an "un-disappointed" life. He knew that he had an un-disappointing purpose for his life. He

had been “captured” by Christ at his conversion, and was brought into the purpose of living for Christ and of serving him (Acts 9:1-19; Phil. 3:12). Paul reflected that even the dire circumstances of his imprisonment did not deter him from his life's purpose, which could not be threatened or frustrated.

Paul's un-disappointing purpose included pursuing Christ. He had met Jesus on the Damascus Road, and since then his life was a constant pursuit of knowing Christ in a deeper, more intimate way (Phil.3:10). Paul reminds us as his fellow believers that Christ is also our life (Col. 3:4). He is our Co-Creator, our Redeemer, Lord and Master. He has, through the cross, forgiven our sins, and by his resurrection, given us new life. We live by him and for him, and are given the higher purpose of allowing him to shape and direct our lives according to his will and for the good of his kingdom.

Paul was clearly aware that the surrounding culture was offering other options for meaning to life. There were the Epicureans who sought to find meaning and purpose through an uninterrupted pursuit of pleasure. Paul quoted their life motto in 1 Corinthians 15:32:

*“Let us eat and drink,  
For tomorrow we die.”*

The context for that quote was Paul's argument that everything stands or falls for the Christian on the resurrection of Christ, which is evidence of our future bodily resurrection and supports the efficacy of Christ's atoning death for sinners. Paul says that if there is no truth to the saving Gospel and our future hope, we might as well immerse ourselves in self-gratification and indulgence like the Epicureans. Obviously, this is the mindset of many in our Western culture today. One bumper sticker that's been around for some time reads, “Whoever dies with the most toys wins.” This begs the question, “Wins what?”

Another option available in Paul's day was the mindset and lifestyle offered by the Stoic philosophers, who advocated strict discipline and self-control of the appetites and the “mind-over-matter” denial of bodily needs. They “preached apathy as the triumph of the reason over the passions” (AT Robertson). And today we have the many-faceted worldviews of postmodernism, which basically says, “Anything goes,” that is, anything except a biblical worldview, which many of them deem too rigid and confining. So, everyone has a life philosophy, an outlook and a worldview, whether or not one has bothered to reflect on it.

I remember in my college days reading a book by a survivor of a Nazi prison camp, psychologist Victor Frankl, titled, *Man's Search for Meaning*. While in prison camp, Frankl chronicled the lives of those who survived the horrors and deprivations of the camp. He noted that the survivors tended to be the ones whose life's meaning and purpose survived. Those whose life's purpose was in material gain and career success lost the will to survive when these things were stripped from them. The same was true for those whose lives were centered on family and friends, or on personal health and wellbeing. The survivors tended to be those who retained a reason to go on living.

No wonder that Paul survived prison. He thrived in prison, because his life's meaning was Christ, and fellowship with him and even meaningful service to him was uninterrupted by prison. In fact, his life and mission were enhanced by his imprisonment. Paul trusted in God's sovereign direction in every twist and turn of his life. His passion and purpose of pursuing Christ was unabated.

I wonder how many of us Christ-followers are dealing with disappointment and perhaps even a sense of lost purpose. Perhaps we have forgotten or even failed to see that life is Christ and not even family, marriage, children, career, comfort, security, or success. When these relationships or pursuits are taken away, even those who claim to be followers of Christ are plunged into despair and lost purpose. I know of Christian ministers who have fallen into deep depression and loss of life's meaning and purpose when they reach retirement from active ministry. If forced to state their life's purpose, they could not honestly say, "to live is Christ." They would have to say, "for me, to live is my ministry, and to be resigned, retired or to die is loss."

For Paul, even life in prison signified everything because it was life in and for Christ. Christ was his life, and all his life was a continual act of worship (Rom. 12:1-2). He offered his body to God as a living sacrifice and learned to worship God in his spirit, wherever he was. In fact, it was in the city of Philippi, where he and Silas were imprisoned for their deliverance ministry, that Paul and Silas worshiped at midnight, with prayers and hymns sung to God (Acts 16:25). Their worship was heard by the fellow prisoners, but also by God himself, who shook the prison and broke the bars of the jail with an earthquake. Paul's worship led to the conversion of the jailer and his entire household (Acts 16:34).

If worship can take place in a prison at midnight, it can happen in your life, in corporate worship with the church, but also in your home and in the workplace and wherever you live and move and have your being (Acts 17:28). The more I study Scripture the more clear it is that our life's purpose is the pursuit of God, which is the meaning of worship. God is most glorified when we his people are most satisfied in him, not in how well things are going for us.

Paul knew he would not be disappointed nor would the church be ashamed of him if he served Christ with faithfulness. His self-discipline was rooted in his fear of becoming disqualified after having preached to others (1 Cor. 9:27). He wanted to remain faithful to Christ and to not become a spiritual "castaway" because of a moral or spiritual failure or act of or lapse into unfaithfulness. Paul knew that the criteria of Jesus' judgment would not be success in the eyes of the world, but rather faithfulness in life and the work Christ gave him to do (Matt. 25:21). If he would but remain faithful to Christ, he would not be finally disappointed in his life and ministry.

Paul wanted to be faithful to Christ, and also to serve Christ with fruitfulness. His personal preference was to be with Christ in heaven, but he was willing to keep on living mortal days as long as he could serve God's people for their progress and joy in the faith (v. 25). Paul was willing to postpone heaven to help others through the bearing of the fruit of his godly life and spirit-anointed ministry that advanced the Gospel.

Our lives, including mine, will be un-disappointed if our focus is Christ and giving ourselves to others in faithful service. My desire is to be more fruitful in personal holiness and worship of God and faithful ministry than ever before. I am heartened by reading Psalm 92:14 regarding the flourishing of the righteous planted in the house of God:

*"They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green proclaiming,  
'The Lord is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him.'"*

The un-disappointed life has an un-disappointing purpose, but also an un-disappointing outcome. Paul's testimony shows that he will not be disappointed in his life or even in his death, but rather that he welcomes death as an ushering into the presence of God and hence, of more life (v. 21). The old body of flesh is left behind as a discarded tent, as we move on to "greener pastures."

Paul understood death as victorious transition. Death in our western culture, even in the Christian community, is often an embarrassment. We do all we can to extend mortal life, even trying to resist the inevitable aging process. We try to find the best diets, exercise regimen and health care that promise to add years to our lives. When finally death does arrive, the doctors deem their efforts a failure, and the body is carried by the undertaker out the back door of the hospital. Then at the mortuary the morticians practice their finely-tuned art of making the body look as life-like as possible.

Contrast this to Paul's bold confrontation with death's reality and confidence that he will not be disappointed by his life or his death. That last enemy we shall face, death, is a transition into the presence of the full glory of Christ. That's why Paul's life philosophy includes the phrase, "to die is gain" (v. 21). John Wesley said of those in his early Methodist societies, "Our people die well." To die well is to have lived well, and to see death as a passage from our temporary pilgrimage into the full presence of God, whose fellowship we have increasingly enjoyed on this earth. Paul assured the Romans that nothing, not even death itself, can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord (Rom. 8:39).

The un-disappointed life is one that looks forward to heaven and realizes, as Paul says, that this hope does not disappoint us, because God's Spirit is a reminder that he cannot disappoint those he loves (Rom. 5:5). The un-disappointed life knows that God delights in us and is most glorified when his people delight in him. And all that God is preparing us to be and receive in heaven will finally and fully be given us. In this life, God is preparing us for heaven and thus allows pain and gives us his discipline for our eternal good. But when we get to paradise, the time of preparation will be over. We will be finally free, not only from the power of sin, but also from the very presence of sin. We will see Jesus and become like him in perfect holiness and love (1 Jn. 3:2). Paul knew that heaven was gain. For him, to live was Christ and to die was more of Christ.

God invites us all to a life that is un-disappointed. This is a life that cannot lose.

Jim Elliott was one of five missionaries who were murdered by the Auca Indians of Ecuador, to whom God had sent them with the message of salvation. Elliott must have had a premonition of his early death and martyrdom. As an outstanding student athlete at Wheaton College, while praying about his possible future as a missionary, Jim Elliott penned these words in his diary, which proved prophetic of his own life:

*"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep in order to gain what he cannot lose."*

If for us to live is Christ, both in life and in death we will be un-disappointed.