

SEED & BREAD

FOR THE SOWER (SA. 55:10) FOR THE EATER
BRIEF BIBLICAL MESSAGES FROM

THE WORD OF TRUTH MINISTRY

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PAUL'S DESIRE TO DEPART

In the Philippian epistle many truths spring forth, and Paul does not deal with these at length. Exceedingly important statements are made within the flow of the message which are new and different. We often wish for more introductory words to lead us into the truths, also more explanation following, but it is not given. This can be clearly seen in Paul's declaration in 1:22 where suddenly he brings up the matter of a choice that is open to him, and declares that what his decision will be he is not making known. He did not want to close his options by stating what his choice would be.

The word *choose* is a common word, used every day in ordinary conversation, and it requires no defining. The Greek word here has to do with what one prefers as being the basis of a selection. However, a matter to be decided is before Paul, and if we go back to discover what this might be we find nothing that fits into the picture. He has been speaking of life and death in the previous passages, but it cannot be that in these two great issues he had any choice. This can be seen by asking if he will die if he chooses death. And we might further ask if he chooses death, will he make the choice effective by committing suicide? It is bordering on the ridiculous to interpret this choice as if Paul were playing Hamlet and mulling over the question "to be or not to be?"

As we go forward from Paul's statement, "**Yet what I shall choose I am not making known,**" we discover at once what he is talking about. His selection is limited to one of two things: 1) to depart and be with Christ, or 2) to abide (remain) in the flesh. Thus, the choice is between departing and

remaining, and not between living and dying, for "**departing to be with Christ**" does not mean death. It is tragic that this beautiful phrase has been taken and used as a description of death in the ritual of funeral services.

Of course this is bound to bring forth the question, "If departing to be with Christ does not mean death, then what does it mean?" This is asked as if there were no alternatives. And this can best be answered by pointing out three other departures in Scripture, none of which had any connection with the death of the one who departed.

There is the case of Enoch. We are told that "Enoch was not, for God took him" (Gen. 5:24); and this is further interpreted by the declaration: "**By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him**" (Heb. 11:5). Thus he departed and was in the presence of the LORD of heaven, but his was in no way related to death.

Then, there is the departure of Elijah. We are told in Scripture that "**Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven**" (2 Kgs. 2: 11). This plain and direct statement should not be contradicted by the words of our Lord in John 3:13, where all three occurrences of "heaven" mean God. See Issue No. **SB034** for a fuller treatment of this.

Finally, there is the departure of the man Christ Jesus, as recorded in Acts 1:9-11. This was by ascension, and not by death.

These three departures of living men are sufficient to show that the words "to depart and be with Christ" do not mean death, and that Paul was not expressing a death wish when he said that this was his desire. For it is from these words that we learn that one of the unique privileges that God gave to Paul was the right to leave this earth and ascend into heaven where he would be with Christ. These words concern Paul, and him alone, for he was the only one who could choose if he so decided to depart and be with Christ or to remain upon the earth.

It will probably be difficult for those who are Biblically illiterate to understand how this privilege could be given to Paul and to none other. They will ask why this should be true of him alone. Questions such as these can only be answered by establishing certain truths about God's greatest apostle, the man Paul.

Of that which we know about Paul, certain great facts that were true of him are revealed to us in very few words. These must be believed on the basis of these terse statements as there is no corroborating testimony. He declares: **"I have fought with beasts at Ephesus"** (1 Cor. 15:32); **"of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one"** (2 Cor 11:24); **"thrice I was beaten with rods"** (2 Cor. 11:25); **"thrice I suffered shipwreck"** (2 Cor. 11:25); **"caught up to the third heaven"** (2 Cor. 12:2). The five statements alone are sufficient to show that certain great experiences in the life of Paul are made known by and must be believed on the basis of very few words. Furthermore, there are certain great truths that were true of him alone which must be believed on the basis of one terse statement. We will consider five of these.

Paul states he was **"one born out of due time"** (1 Cor. 15:8); that he was **"the chief of sinners"** (1 Tim. 1: 15), a fact that can be true only of one; he was "a pattern to them which should hereafter believe" (1 Tim. 1:16); there was given to him "a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet me" (2 Cor. 12:7); and he bore in his body "the marks of the Lord Jesus" (Gal. 6:17). All these were true of him alone.

With the foregoing examples in mind, we are ready to consider Paul's desire to depart and be with Christ, a truth exclusively true of him. This unique privilege of his is revealed in one statement. There is no additional testimony. His terse statement reveals that it was within his power to elect at any time to depart from this earth and to be with Christ. He spoke of not making known what he would choose, so he must have had the power of choice.

Enoch departed from this earth, but he had no choice in the matter. Elijah departed to heaven in a whirlwind, but to choose this was not his privilege. So, there are three in heaven who have been men on earth. Paul could have made this four, if he had chosen to do so, for it was his privilege, not to live or die, but to depart and be with Christ. It follows then that if on the basis of very few words we can believe that Paul was shipwrecked three times and that three times he was beaten with rods, why then cannot we believe that it was possible for Paul to "depart and be with Christ" on the basis of one simple statement made in Phil. 1:22.

The problem that so many have in believing the actual declaration made in this passage is based upon the fact that men have long taken the words "to

depart and be with Christ" and used them to describe the death of God's people. This allows them to be used to support the orthodox theory as to what happens when a man dies, holding that at death he is immediately ushered into the presence of Christ. But, if this be true, of what value then is resurrection?

The question as to why, out of all others, this privilege was given to Paul is bound to arise. Why did he have this power of release and deliverance if he ever desired to use it? The answer to this is not difficult to find.

When Paul became the instrument of the Lord to bear His Name before the nations, and kings, and the sons of Israel (Acts 9: 15), God declared that He would "show him how great things he must suffer" for His name's sake. From this we know that he was given a preview of the rest of his life, so far as his sufferings were concerned. Before Paul was given his divine commission, he knew that as he carried it out every year would be one of intense suffering; Just how much he suffered is not revealed to us, but we can be sure that his afflictions have no parallel in history. We do get one quick look in his words in 2 Cor. 11:23-27:

In labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequent, in deaths oft. Of the Jews five times received I forty stripes save one. Thrice was I beaten with rods, once was I stoned, thrice I suffered shipwreck, a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeyings often, in perils of waters, in peril of robbers, in perils by mine own countrymen, in perils by the nations, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and painfulness, in watchings often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness.

There is no other man who has served the Lord save Paul who could write a catalog of sufferings such as these. He was the pattern believer, and as such he was the one chosen by God to demonstrate to all men just how much a man would willingly and joyfully suffer when he knew to what these sufferings were related. And Paul knew! For after God had given him a preview of his life of suffering, He caught him away to the third heaven, even unto paradise, giving him a view of the ultimate goal of all of God's purposes for the universe. What he saw was for him alone, since he was not permitted to tell what he had seen or heard (2 Cor. 12:1-4).

Since no one else has ever been called upon by God to suffer what Paul

did, no one else stood in need of hearing and seeing the things he saw and heard. He alone could speak from experience when he said: "**The sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that shall be revealed in us**" (Rom. 8:18).

In order that Paul's sufferings should be endured willingly, rather than being something forced upon him, and from which there was no way out, God made it possible for him at any moment to make the choice of being done with it all and departing to be with Christ. This, no doubt, must have been a continual desire upon his part. As he stood on the deck of a ship that was soon to be torn to pieces by tempestuous waves, how tempting it must have been to "call it quits" and depart and be with Christ, rather than to be plunged into the raging sea. As blow after blow rained down upon his bleeding back, what a temptation it must have been to have told God he had taken all he could (God would understand), and have departed to be with Christ. If he would have so chosen, he would have vanished from the earth before another blow fell upon him.

But, he did not do this, and the question arises at once, "Why did he not do this?" If he had this power, then why did he not use it? The answer is at hand. This would have taken him away from his work of magnifying Christ, and of ministering the Word of God to His people. He told the Corinthians: "**You are in our hearts to die and to live with you**" (2 Cor. 7: 3). He would not abandon God's people.

Many centuries before Paul, King David was experiencing a period of suffering which was more than he could bear. He describes this by saying, "**Fearfulness and trembling are come upon me, and horror hath overwhelmed me;**" following which he cried out:

Oh that I had wings like a dove! for then would I flyaway, and, be at rest. Lo, then would I wander far off, and remain in the wilderness. I would hasten my escape from the windy storm and tempest. Psa. 55:6-8.

David did not have these "wings." He had to stay there and see it through. But Paul, figuratively speaking, did have them. And it is to his glory that he never made use of them, giving as his reason: "**To abide in the flesh is more needful for you**" (Phil. 1:24).

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