

Notes from Sermon given by Ian Stackhouse Sunday 6th May 2007 Philippians 1:19 – 26. Paul in Prison

Pain is inevitable. Misery is optional. Joy can be chosen. Two people can react differently to the same circumstances - one may be crushed; another may see it as an opportunity to grow.

“Two men in a prison cell looking out of the bars
One saw mud, the other saw the stars.”

In Philippians, Paul is in prison, and knows that he could be executed, for saying that Jesus is Lord, in a city where Caesar is Lord. Paul sees this as an opportunity to share the gospel with the palace guard. Others were planning to make things difficult to Paul. But he says, “What does it matter? ... I rejoice!” v.18 (Jailhouse Rock!!) Paul continues to rejoice. He seems to suspect that he might get out of jail. He sees himself as like Job and takes courage from the Psalms. He is as irrepressible as a cork in a bath of water!

The Psalms can comfort us even in very difficult times and distress. Joy is a choice. Samuel Rutherford in prison in 1647 wrote, “Christ triumphs in me. This is my palace not my prison. I think this is all to gain Christ. All other things are shadows, dreams, fancies, nothing.”

A better translation of v.19 would be: “The abundant supply of the Spirit of Jesus himself, through your prayers will turn out for my deliverance.” When the church prays, God releases His Holy Spirit. Our prayers are critical to the release of Holy Spirit. So pray for those in difficult situations or seriously ill.

Paul knows he may die, so he reflects upon the situation. Like Hamlet in a soliloquy: “To be or not to be – that is the question”. But Paul reflects: “To die or not to die...” As the Bible records his thoughts: “For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” v.21 – 24. In Greek this is a play on words: *Christos/ Kerdos*. If life is lived in the power of the resurrection of Christ, fear of death is gone. Paul, as an act of sacrificial dying to self, chooses to live for Christ. v.24 “It is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.”

It's like being in the army. Striking camp and going home is like going to heaven – clean clothes, dry bed, home cooking! As Paul says: “To depart and be with Christ is better by far.” But even in heaven we await our resurrection bodies and a new heaven and earth. C.S. Lewis described it as “The term is over, the holidays have begun.”

There is an enormous difference between the funeral of a Christian and the funeral of a non-Christian. The liturgy, the songs, the attitude, the hope are all different. Christians grieve, but not as those without hope. Believers are secure with Christ. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, faced his own executioners only 10 days before the end of World War II and reputedly said this to them: “This is the end, but for me it is the beginning.”

Joy is the hallmark of the Christian faith. Dourness, being miserable, is not a Christian virtue. Joy is the serious business of heaven, and the church is a colony of heaven. So we ought to rejoice, not in the fleeting sense which comes and goes depending on what is happening; not in a happy, clappy sense as this is not the only way to express joy; but in a deep abiding sense. We should all learn to be joyful for the sake of our families – learn not to be gloomy and grumpy.

As Wesley's hymn “Rejoice the Lord is King!” says: ‘Lift up your heart, lift up your voice – Rejoice, again I say, rejoice!’