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Ready and waiting

"For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing," 2 Timothy 4:6-8.

'Readiness' to depart this life is something that, in a general sense, true Christians would gladly acknowledge.

However, few live with any real and daily awareness of that event drawing near.

That ought not to be!

I. PAUL IS AN EXAMPLE FOR US TO NOTE

Paul was able to say, "the time of my departure is at hand". His death featured very much in his thoughts. It was not something that lay over the horizon, as it is in the thinking of too many Christians, but he saw it looming large before him.

Now while it is true that we know "not what a day may bring forth," Proverbs 27:1, and that we "know not what shall be on the morrow," James 4:14; yet the approach of death is usually very visibly announced!

As the falling of the leaves in autumn herald the approach of winter, even so there are very visible signs of our approaching demise! The weaknesses of the body, increasing in number and severity, speak of the setting of life's sun. If we pay any heed to the calendar, in the light of Psalm 90:10: "The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away", then the passing years testify that time is growing short for us and 'The sands of time are sinking, the dawn of heaven breaks,!'!

However, be it known, there are sadly too few Christians who wish to observe the approach of their passing, for in truth, they love this earth and its ways a little too much. They would count as morbid any viewing of the approach of death and shudder at the thought.

That ought not to be. Paul's attitude, displayed in these verses, ought to be ours!

Precious

Death for Paul was most welcome. It is true that death is "the last enemy" but it is an enemy which, for the Christian, performs a most welcome act! Death opens for every redeemed soul the door of heaven and ushers us into the presence of Christ. For this reason, thoughts of Paul's approaching decease did not cast a gloom over his spirit.

He had said some six years earlier, "For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better," Philippians 1:23. Death was something which Paul was comfortable with.

II. WHAT MADE DEATH SO PLEASING TO PAUL WAS WHAT LAY BEYOND IT.

What he expressed in Philippians 1:23, that death with its departure from this world was 'far better', he enlarges upon in the verses we are looking at.

1. A right understanding of what death entails for the Christian will ease the burdens of this life most wonderfully. Paul was, quite literally, in a 'death cell'! That he states plainly. He expected soon to die for Christ and must have known that the death he would be called upon to endure was a most cruel one! He was to die an innocent man, a martyr for Christ and that at the hands of a Roman regime noted for its delight in creating suffering for its victims. It is not known for certain how Paul died but it was not the peaceful



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passing surrounded by loved ones that most of us have ahead of us!

Yet, there is not a note of fear or gloom or complaint in these final recorded words of his as he speaks of the approach of that horrific event.

2. A life of faithfulness to God is a wonderful comforter when death is approaching. "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith." Few Christians can truly and honestly utter these words. Indeed, whenever a servant of God has quoted them in application to themselves, they invariably hasten to add a humble qualification in which they disown any claim to the same degree of faithfulness as that of the great apostle. Nevertheless, we should strive to have it said of us that which was said by the Saviour of Mary when she anointed the Saviour's head. "She hath done what she could," Mark 14:8.

All of God's people show a degree of faithfulness to God. It is that for which they will be rewarded. "Well done, thou good and faithful servant," (Matthew 25:21) is what will greet every one of God's people on that great day!

But the faithfulness of very few will match that of Paul.

However, it is a most enviable thing to look back upon at least some degree of faithfulness to God and His Word as death is drawing near. Such memories will impart at least some of the joy that Paul experienced in his last days on earth.

3. Faithfulness to God entails three elements.

a. Fighting. "I have fought a good fight" says Paul. The word is linked to taking part in a contest such as athletic games, a striving in labour. Serving Christ requires us to enlist in His army and become involved in 'fighting the good fight'. "But thou, O man of God, flee these things; and follow after righteousness, godliness, faith, love, patience, meekness. Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, whereunto thou art also called, and hast professed a good profession before many witnesses," 1 Timothy 6:11-12. It is the prospect of such warfare that causes many to retreat from the service of the Saviour.

b. Finishing. Throughout my life, from a few days after I began my ministerial studies in January 1965, I have savoured the words of old Pastor James Kyle Paisley, who lectured upon 'The English Bible' back then, when in response to my rather despondent report of my efforts on the previous Sabbath, he said: 'It is not how you begin, but how you end that matters'!

Those words lifted my spirits then and have been as a guiding light before my eyes ever since!

Oftentimes it is hard to continue on. Paul, when giving his testimony before King Agrippa said: "Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day, witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say should come: that Christ should suffer, and that he should be the first that should rise from the dead, and should shew light unto the people, and to the Gentiles," Acts 26:22-23. To 'continue' 'witnessing both to small and great, saying none other things than those which the prophets and Moses did say' is continuance indeed! It cannot be accomplished in human strength or determination but requires that which Paul gave all credit to. "Having therefore obtained help of God, I continue unto this day." The help of God ALONE can enable us to continue despite our failures and weakness and the oppositions of the world and the devil!

c. Fervency. "I have kept the faith." The word 'kept' denotes 'to guard and attend to most carefully'. Oh how passionately Paul attended to his duties and watched over the truth of God! How highly he regarded his commission! He told the elders of Ephesus: "Ye know, from the first day that I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons, serving the Lord with all humility of mind, and with many tears, and temptations, which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews: and how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you, and have taught you publicly, and from house to house, testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward



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our Lord Jesus Christ," Acts 20:18-21.

These words ought to be studied most closely and burned upon the mind and soul and heart of every preacher.

Concerns About Salaries

The ministry of the gospel is not as any other calling, though all too many would compare the salaries of other professions and feel that they as ministers should be receiving the same!

No other profession has as part of its 'terms of employment' the promises given of God that the true preacher has. It is from Him we may seek 'our daily bread'. It is He Who has said:

"Therefore I say unto you, Take no thought for your life, what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink; nor yet for your body, what ye shall put on. Is not the life more than meat, and the body than raiment? Behold the fowls of the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they? Which of you by taking thought can add one cubit unto his stature? And why take ye thought for raiment? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: and yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? Therefore take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you. Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," Matthew 6:25-34.

Consideration of such a contract as this would abolish all covetousness from the preacher's heart.

III. IT WAS THE CONFIDENT CONTEMPLATION OF WHAT AWAITED HIM IN GLORY THAT REMOVED ALL ANXIETY FROM PAUL

"Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing."

The word 'henceforth' carries the meaning of 'what remains for me or awaits me'. Paul KNOWS that the Lord rewards His servants and that very well indeed. He gives "good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over."

1. It is not presumptuous to expect rewards for service. The Saviour has made clear His intention to reward His faithful people. The Bible abounds with His kind promises. Here is but one such indication of His kind intention toward His people.

"When the Son of man shall come in his glory, and all the holy angels with him, then shall he sit upon the throne of his glory: and before him shall be gathered all nations: and he shall separate them one from another, as a shepherd divideth his sheep from the goats: and he shall set the sheep on his right hand, but the goats on the left. Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me," Matthew 25:31-36.

There is none who rewards as does our glorious Master!

2. There awaits a crown for the faithful ones. How appropriate in that they have by faith gained the victory over all the enemies. They overcame the world, the devil and sin. They shall wear a crown in order to reign with Him throughout the Millennial reign and all eternity. Others as well as the Saviour have spoken



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"Blessed is the man that endureth temptation: for when he is tried, he shall receive the crown of life, which the Lord hath promised to them that love him," James 1:12; and ". . . ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life," Revelation 2:10.

Glorious Prospect

What a glorious prospect for those who, like Paul, have been scoffed at (Acts 17:32) and considered 'mad' (Acts 26:24). As our Saviour will be glorified before all nations, so it will be with His saints. "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy," 1 Peter 4:12-13.

"The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God: and if children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together.

For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us," Romans 8:16-18.

Joint Heirs

What a thing is this! We are joint heirs with Christ. That means He CANNOT enter into His glory without us also being present to share in His glory.

Oh truly, the 'half' has not been told (1 Kings 10:7).

3. Paul, ever the tender shepherd caring for the flock of God, utters these wonderful words to all who love the Saviour. ". . . and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing." Even in the midst of contemplating the unspeakable glory that awaits himself, he utters these words of encouragement for all the people of God. A crown awaits every believer.

True Believer

Please note the definition of a true believer. They are those who "also . . . love his appearing." A Christian is one who loves the appearing, or 'epiphany' of Christ as did Paul.

No servant of God preached more often of that event than did Paul. His writings all touch upon that wonderful subject. As an example of this you will find that in our English Bible, the Authorised Version, every chapter in 1 Thessalonians, a church where error regarding the return of Christ was circulating (2 Thessalonians 2:1-2) ends with a reference to the appearing of Christ.

Rebuke

This truth comes as a rebuke to us all. Is not the wonderful subject of the Saviour's return in glory sadly neglected today amongst us?

I believe it is. Let us be up and doing the Master's will in order to lay claim to that crown. "Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: for so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ," 1 Peter 1:10-11.

May the Lord stir our hearts as He did that of Paul as we meditate upon the 'hope' that lies before us.

Rev Ivan Foster (Rtd), 1st February 2021.