

'Life before and after death' – SJD - 23/9/17 – Phil. 1:21-26

It was Woody Allen who once said, '*I don't want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve it by not dying.*¹'

When we look at the OT we see that from the very beginning individuals have their births, lives and deaths clearly recorded, but with no suggestion that there is anything else afterwards. There are only 2 characters that I can recall in the OT who seem never to die a physical death. I wonder if you can recall the name of either? The first, before even Abraham was born, was the man Enoch. Enoch, we are told, '**walked with God; then he was no more, because God took him away.**²' Then much later there was the great prophet Elijah, who lived during the time of King Ahab and his infamous wife, Jezebel. We have the story of how Elijah, was viewed by his apprentice prophet Elisha, being taken up directly into heaven in a chariot of fire³.

It would appear that it wasn't till after the return from exile, about 300 years after Elijah, that the idea of life after death started to come into Jewish thinking. We know that even later still, during Jesus' time, it was a much debated topic. The Sadducees, unlike their main opponents the Pharisees, denied the resurrection⁴, as they only accepted the teaching of the 5 books of Moses⁵. It is perhaps worth noting that Jesus was able to refute the teaching of the Sadducees that there was no resurrection by quoting directly from the books of Moses. As Jesus said, '**Now about the dead rising, - have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the (burning) bush, how God said to him I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob? He is not the God of the dead but the living. You are badly mistaken.**⁶

Certainly Jesus believed and preached that life continued after a physical death, that there was eternal life as well as judgment. It made sense that a God who could sustain his people through 40 years in the desert/wilderness, through divinely given manna, could also provide the means to take life beyond the grave. The truth that lies at the heart of our Communion meal is that it was Jesus' death which delivered us from sin and death, providing us with a resurrection body and eternal life. It is one of the hard truths that come out of the Gospel reading⁷ of the Parable of the workers in the vineyard, that this gift is given equally to all God's workers irrespective of their labouring time. Just as the manna was divinely sent to all God's people, so eternal life is a gift from God – universal to all believers – a gift of grace from God.

But this begs another question. If life after death is a free gift to all God's children how should we live in the light of it? Even Paul appears to struggle with this in the epistle reading; he speaks of both certainties – eternal life but also uncertainties – is it better to die

¹ S Gaukroger & N Mercer (1993) 'Frogs II', Scripture Union p. 40

² Genesis 5 v24

³ 2 Kings 1 v 11-12.

⁴ Mark 12 v 18

⁵ See footnote comment in the NIV Study Bible, Zondervan Publishing House, 10th Anniversary Ed. P. 1516

⁶ Mark 12 v 26 – 27. Quoting Exodus 3 v 6

⁷ Matthew 20 v 1-16

or live? As Paul puts it, '**To live is Christ and to die is gain**'.⁸ *Omit for 8am* (Note straight away that both options are expressed positively – but the question is which is the better? It would be completely wrong to take a verse like this and see it as a justification for suicide as a solution to existing problems. No, Paul sees both as positives, just as we should see our lives which continue to stretch out before us.) But this also means that death is not a negative but a positive – opening into something good. This is contrary to so much contemporary thinking which sees death as a defeat, an end, something dreadful to be avoided at all costs.

It was Woody Allen again who said, '**I'm not afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens**'.⁹

As Christ's children we should see the falsehood of such thinking because death is not the end, rather it can open a door to an eternal life spent in the presence of God. The proof of this was Jesus' own resurrection, which the disciples and Paul experienced first-hand. So what does Paul mean when he says, '**To live is Christ, to die is gain**'? Later on in chapter 3 of Philippians, Paul counts up all the things that were valuable to him before he found Christ. These included his circumcision, his Jewishness, his pharisaic faith and even his obedience to the Law¹⁰. Yet when he candidly added all these together he found his discovery of Christ of much greater worth.¹¹ It was knowing Christ, the Son of God and his Saviour, that gave meaning and great value to his life. By continuing to live and serve Christ, his knowledge and the resulting blessing would grow. However, after death he would meet Jesus face to face with the obvious advantages that would bring. Both were positive as both involved '**the progressive abandonment of everything else in the interest of possessing more and more of Christ**'.¹²

Paul concludes that while death would bring him greater blessing – it remained right for him to remain alive in the service of others helping them, as well as himself, grow in the knowledge and love of God.¹³ For him immortality was already a reality won for him by Christ. But living also brought with it an opportunity to discover more of God's love and care. This was something to look forward to and grasp, while death would also eventually bring him the joy of seeing God face to face. '**To live is Christ and to die is gain**'. That is how we should see our Christian futures both here on Earth and in the life to come. Our goals are foolish if they revolve around possessions, or wealth or power. Ultimately they all bow into insignificance with the offer of a personal knowledge of the creator and sustainer of all things. May God help you catch this vision and be open to all God wants to give you. Amen.

⁸ Philippians 1 v 21

⁹ S Gaukroger & N Mercer (1990) 'Frogs in Cream', Scripture Union p. 52

¹⁰ Philippians 3 v 4b -6.

¹¹ Philippians 3v8

¹² J.A.Motyer (1966) 'The Richness of Christ' IVP. P.54

¹³ Philippians 1 v 25-26