

## PAUL'S EARNEST DESIRE.

"For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labor; yet what I shall choose, I wot not. For I am in a strait betwixt the two, having a desire to depart and to be with Christ: which is far better." – Phil. 1:21-23.

There are few passages of Scripture more frequently quoted, or, rather, misquoted and misapplied, than this. It is the favorite text for funeral discourses, and is inscribed upon innumerable tombstones, and repeated by religious teachers as the devout wish of Paul's heart, and the appropriate sentiment of every Christian heart, in view of death. These are the words that are attributed to the apostle Paul; and when taken in the sense in which they were evidently uttered they are every way creditable to his unselfish heart, and his supreme devotion to the service of Christ. But it may well be questioned whether the sentiment that has been put into them, in our version, and the sense in which they are generally taken, ever entered his mind, much less ever found any expression in any of his writings.

He is supposed to be considering the question, Whether it would be better for himself, to continue his self-denying labors for Christ till he should be called to his reward in heaven, or to die now, and go at once to glory; and though perplexed in view of these two alternatives, he feels that it would be real gain to himself and far better, to die now and go immediately to his reward in heaven, and he actually most earnestly desired this.

It is true, our English version seems to sustain this view, and, no doubt, the translators had this thought in their own minds, and so they put it into the rendering of this passage. But I am persuaded that a more careful examination of the text in the original, and of the context, will show that the "gain" he is here speaking of is not gain to himself, but to the cause of Christ, and the "departure" he is represented as desiring

so earnestly is not his own departure from life, but the departure, or, rather, the return – for this is what the word really signifies – of Christ; for this rendering is quite as close to the original Greek, and in accord with the grammar of the language, and it harmonizes infinitely better with what he has just been saying, and with the character of the man, and, indeed, with the letter and spirit of all his teachings, and with the teaching of the Scriptures generally.

This most affectionate and tender epistle to the Philippians was written while he was a prisoner at Rome. His life was in jeopardy, depending on the caprice of the Emperor. He knew not what would be the issue. But, instead of repining and complaining of his hard lot, he even exults and rejoices that his bonds have been the occasion of making Christ more widely known throughout the palace, and elsewhere, and that the disciples of Christ, by his example, had been confirmed in their faith, and emboldened "to speak the word without fear."

Again: He rejoices that even the contentions which had sprung up among them had contributed to the spread of the knowledge of the gospel, and though his enemies had desired "to add affliction to his bonds" by their manner of preaching Christ, he still rejoiced, and would rejoice that Christ was preached. Indeed, he was so devoted to this one object of making Christ known to others that he had utterly lost sight of every other interest. He had entirely gone out of himself, and had centered all his thoughts, hopes, desires and efforts in Christ. He was determined to know nothing else, nor did he, but Christ and him crucified. He was full of joy in the assurance that whatever might be his own lot, Christ would be honored, and in this he rejoiced. Hence he says, in the verse immediately preceding the passage under consideration, "According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also, Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life or death." Mark the expression whether it be by life or death. Then follows this utterance, which is but the repetition of the same sentiment

in another form – *Emoi gar to zen Christos, kai to apothanen, kerdos*: which literally translated is, "For me therefore to live, Christ, and to die, gain." This last word, *kerdos* which is here translated "gain" would better have been translated, benefit, advantage, profit. This is what it means; and then the idea would have been more clearly expressed. But as it is, there is [R820 : page 4] nothing in the text itself to show whether this gain or advantage or benefit is to accrue to himself, or to the cause of Christ; for the passage is very elliptical; but the context, and especially the preceding verse, most evidently shows that he is speaking of the benefit or gain, which his death by martyrdom would bring the cause of Christ. For if his imprisonment and ill treatment had been made to contribute to this end, inasmuch as he had endured them with so much Christian fortitude and patience, how much more his heroic death as a martyr for Christ? Indeed this is his joyful assurance, as he just said – "Christ shall be magnified in my body whether it be by life or death." Then he goes on to say: For or rather "therefore," – for this little word, *gar* connects the two sentences – therefore for me to live, and for me to die, in either case for Christ would be gain or benefit. It is impossible that Paul should drop down so suddenly from his supreme devotion to the cause in which he had so entirely lost sight of himself, as to speak of his own personal gain by dying, and to contrast this with what he might accomplish by continuing to live and labor for Christ. This would not be at all like this great apostle, indeed, it would be entirely out of harmony with what he had just been saying, nor can this selfish sentiment be found in the language he used, unless it be first injected into the passage by the reader: much less can we believe that after confessing that the advantages to the cause of Christ were so nearly balanced in his own mind, that he did not know which to choose, he actually did earnestly desire one of these same alternatives, because it would be gain to himself.

Surely, he would not stultify himself by saying that he did not know which of two alternatives to choose, and then, in the next breath express his earnest preference for one of them? But this is just the

inconsistency and folly that our common version of this verse charges upon him, thus: for I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better." The Greek word *to analusai*, here rendered "to depart," is composed of two words, *ana*, again or back again, and *luo* or *lusai*, "to loosen," "to let go," "to cast off," as a ship the lines that hold her to the wharf – "to leave" either to go or to come; but with the prefix *ana* it means to leave any place for the purpose of returning or coming back. It may have the meaning of "depart," but the prefix *ana* gives it the sense of again, or rather to come back or return. Let it be observed also, that the only other place in which this word *analusai* occurs in the Scriptures, is in Luke 12:36, and here our translators have rendered it "return:" "Let your loins be girded about and your lights be burning: and ye yourselves like unto men that wait for their Lord, when he will return (*analusai*) from the wedding."

There is no reason whatever why this word should not have had the same rendering – "return" in this passage, but that our translators had another idea in their own minds. They thought Paul believed, as they themselves did, that on dying a Christian goes immediately to Christ, and enters at once into heavenly glory, and that this was the gain Paul was thinking of; and hence they make him say he has a "desire to depart and be with Christ which is far better." And so they not only make him contradict himself, – for he has said he did not know which to choose, – but they put a forced meaning into this word *analusas*, which actually means "return," and which they have so translated in the only other place where it occurs. This word is in the infinitive mood and is used as a noun: (*eis, to analusai*) and is the object of the preposition (*eis*) "for," and should be rendered "having a desire for the Return." This was the great object of desire and of expectation of all the early disciples, and of which Paul often speaks – His coming in glory and power to set up his kingdom on the earth, to complete the work which he had only inaugurated by his first coming – his second advent to raise the saints who were sleeping in death, to change those who were living, to judge the world and purify it by the utter

destruction of Satan and all his hosts, and to begin the everlasting reign of righteousness and peace, which had been so fully promised to them.

"But I would not have you to be ignorant, brethren, concerning them which are asleep, that ye sorrow not, even as others, which have no hope. For if we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so them also which sleep in Jesus will God bring with him. For this I say unto you, by the word of the Lord, that we which are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord shall not prevent them which are asleep. For the Lord himself shall descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trump of God; and the dead in Christ shall rise first. Then, we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air, and so shall we ever be with the Lord." This is what Paul means in the passage we are considering by the return, and the being – (*einai*, another word in the infinitive used as a noun,) with the Lord, which is far better. Far better than what? Far better than either of the alternatives, between which he did not know which to choose. This is evidently a third object. It is a side thought, introduced by way of parenthesis – a practice so common to the apostle – and then leaving it, he goes on with the main current of his letter, and tells them how confident he is that he will be spared to them "for the furtherance of their joy."

What if the apostles and primitive disciples were in error respecting the time of our Lord's return, and supposed it might occur in their day? It was not an injurious error. Indeed it served to keep them active and vigilant in their Master's service, and to cheer and to comfort them in their trials. Would that the same expectation had been kept alive in every subsequent age – and especially, that this same expectation and hope were more operative at the present day – for surely, everything concurs to assure us that this long expected – long delayed consummation, must be near, very near at hand. But this mistake of these early disciples was not so great a mistake even with regard to its nearness, as may appear to us who look back upon them from this age, and count the generations that have come and gone since

their day, for the lapse of time is as nothing to those who are sleeping in their graves. To those who fall asleep in Jesus, the very next event of which they are conscious – if I correctly understand the teachings of the Scripture – is the coming of the Lord, and we shall see him together. We are expressly told in the passage just cited, that those who are alive shall not have any advantage of those who are asleep and conversely those who are asleep shall not prevent these who are alive. We all shall be caught up together in the clouds to meet him in the air, and so shall we ever be with the Lord. "Wherefore comfort one another with these words."

We are not to comfort each other – with the assurance that our friends go immediately into their promised inheritance, and beguile ourselves with the thought that those who have gone before us, are now rejoicing in the full possession of eternal glory, and that death is the gate by which we enter one after another into heavenly bliss, in the presence of our Lord, – or rather that death is the kind of messenger that Jesus sends to call us to him. I find no such teaching in the Scriptures, though our hymn-books are full of it. Death is everywhere represented as an enemy, the king of terrors, the great enemy. But it is indeed the last enemy that we have to encounter. He has been conquered by him in whom we trust, "the sting of death which is sin" is come already. He can do us no real harm, nor when our Lord shall come to call us can he hold us any longer in his power. But it is only when Christ, who is our life, shall appear, that we shall appear with him in glory – not before. "There is, indeed, laid up for us a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge shall give to us at that day, and not to us only, but unto all them that love his appearing."

Safe in his keeping, we can well afford to wait in peaceful unconscious sleep, till the place he has gone to prepare for us, is ready for our occupancy. For he says, "Let not your heart be troubled; ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions. If it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a

place for you. And if I go to prepare a place, I will come again and receive you unto myself, that where I am there ye may be also."

In view of these passages, and of others I might quote, and of the reasons I have given, I cannot but think that this is the true understanding of the text under consideration. Indeed, when I see how this construction is required to make it harmonize with the language and sentiment of the context, as well as with the spirit and character of the Apostle, I cannot put any other construction upon it. He writes this epistle to comfort and encourage the hearts of his dear friends at Philippi, who had expressed such concern for him, and had sympathized so deeply with him in the trials that had come upon him, and in the danger to which he was now exposed. He tells them, that, so far from being cast down, he exults and rejoices that all these troubles had been made to contribute to the furtherance of the gospel and the confirmation of the faith of the disciples at Rome; and he felt assured that whatever might be the issue to himself personally, Christ could be magnified in his "body, whether it be by life or by death," and that if his life should be spared, it would be for Christ that he would live and labor; and that if he should be put to death, his martyrdom would still operate to bring gain or advantage to the same cause. So that he really did not know which to choose – nor did he choose – but there was one thing he did earnestly desire – the return of his Lord, which would be far better than either.

I know that those who hold to the very popular notion that dying saints do not wait in sleep for Christ to come and call them, as he promises, but that they go themselves at once, into his presence and to their reward in heaven, will object strenuously to the rendering I have given. For this text, as it is commonly rendered, seems to confirm their view. Indeed it is the one main support of this doctrine. It would be difficult for them to make a plausible argument for their doctrine without it. It is quite natural that they should be loath to give it up.

But if they will for a moment consider how unworthy and inconsistent is the sentiment they attribute to the Apostle Paul, how out of character it is with his whole manner of life, and how it conflicts with what he is saying, and even makes him contradict and stultify himself, by declaring he did not know which of two alternatives to choose, and then immediately expressing his earnest desire for one of them, I think they will be constrained to admit – however reluctant they may be to do it, that the rendering I offer them is, no doubt, the one that should be preferred and accepted.

– *J. H. Pettingell.*

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