

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Broadcast Date: 12 August 2007

No. T0482

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In the world - not of it: To be with Christ which is far better

Recently the Open Doors magazine, *Frontline*, referred to the premature accidental death of a young UK evangelist and to the murder of three Turkish believers. Its author strongly rebuffed any suggestions of wasted lives using the text: "to live is Christ, and to die is gain". Shortly after I read the article, my 4 year old great-niece was killed in a hit-and-run accident. There was public outrage at the tragic loss of a young innocent life and I was left wondering how the text applied to her. However, at her funeral, it was poignantly affirmed that she's now with Jesus, her Saviour. To use the title of our talk, all these believers are now with Christ, which is far, far better for them. It's much better than the very best of life that they enjoyed, or could have enjoyed, here. And for believers still living on earth, who are "in the world but not of it", these scriptural views of such tragedies prove both a blessing and a comfort.

"To be with Christ which is far better" are the words of the apostle Paul in Philippians 1:21-25: "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labour; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you [Philippians]. And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith" (New King James Version).

Paul had just asked these believers to pray for his release from prison so that he could resume his service for them. Christ was Paul's only reason for living upon earth. However, he knew that to leave everything behind for heaven, that is, to depart to be with Christ, would be even better for him! It left him with this dilemma: to stay for the benefit of his beloved Philippian converts, or to go to Christ for his own personal gain? So I pause and I ask myself the question: is Christ so important to me that I experience that kind of spiritual dilemma? That it's either service for Him here in this world or fellowship with Him there in heaven above?

Deep down, every believer wants to be with his or her Saviour and Lord. This reality always surfaces when other believers die, especially in tragic circumstances such as I've referred to. But is this hope the same kind of consuming desire that Paul had? In the overall context of living as Christians, we wait for the Lord to come and take us to heaven without even dying! However, Paul stated in Philippians 3:10-11 that his desire for Christ even included the desire to experience everything that Christ as a man had experienced, and that included dying.

The Lord Jesus Christ wants His disciples to be with Him **where He is** and so He assures them that: "He who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life. If anyone serves Me, let him follow Me; and **where I am**, there My servant will be also. If anyone serves Me, him My Father will honour", John 12:25-26 (New King James Version). But to be with Christ is more than the outcome of faithfulness to Him and is so much better because:

1. Christ is now in heaven
2. it's to be with Him and to be near Him, beyond all suffering, sorrow and death
3. it's to be like Him
4. it's to see Him face to face and to be known as known
5. it's to behold His glory and to share in that glory
6. it's to serve Him
7. it's the consummation of our faith, eternal life in all its fullness!

It's better, first of all, because Christ Himself is in heaven. Heaven is His eternal dwelling place. He has promised: "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 and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that **where I am**, there you may be also", John 14:2-3 (New King James Version). Jesus said heaven is where His Father lives, that is, it's home to Him. The amazing fact is that He's making it home for us by being present there now as Man! Mrs JA Trench captures the reality of this wonderful truth in her hymn 'How blessed a home':

*How blessed a home, the Father's house!
There love divine doth rest;
What else could satisfy the hearts
Of those in Jesus blest?*

*His home made ours: His Father's love
Our hearts full portion given,
The portion of the First-born Son,
The full delight of heaven.*

*O what a home! The Son who knows -
He only - all His love;
And brings us as His well-beloved
To that bright rest above;
Dwells in His bosom; knoweth all
That in that bosom lies;
And came to earth to make it known,
That we might share His joys.*

*O what a home! There fullest love
Flows through its courts of light;
The Son's divine affections flow
Throughout its depth and height;
And full response the Father gives
To fill with joy the heart;
No cloud is there to dim the scene,
Or shadow to impart.*

*O what a home! But such His love
That He must bring us there,
To fill that home, to be with Him,
And in His glory share.
The Father's house, the Father's heart,
All that the Son is given,
Made ours, the objects of His love,
And He, our joy in heaven*

Nowadays, I have to work away from where I live in Newcastle upon Tyne. I enjoy my work very much, but I always have the feeling of returning home whenever I come back. If it's by train, it occurs when I cross the King Edward railway bridge, one of the seven bridges over the river Tyne. If it's by air, it's when the plane circles over St. Mary's Island off the North Tyneside coast. When it's by car, it's the sight of Penshaw monument from the south, or the panorama of the city either from the north or the west. But when I arrive at the front door of my house and step over the threshold, the reality of being back home with my family grips me! What will the reality of stepping into our heavenly home be? Nothing less than the surpassing, overwhelming joy of eternal bliss! Yes, to be with Christ will be so very much better than this world, even with all the blessings God bestows upon our lives here and now.

But the Christian hope isn't just a pie-in-the-sky-if-we-die. There's a present reality about eternal things. For example, in 2 Corinthians 4 and 5, Paul looked above and beyond the here-and-now by faith into heaven. He saw God's glory revealed in the face of the Lord Jesus Christ at God's right hand, 4:18 with 3:18. By doing so, he contrasted in-the-world-not-of-it with eternal realities. He knew that this world is only temporary, whereas spiritual things are eternal! Neither was he concerned that his body was mortal, for he realised that our present earthly bodies are only temporary shelters, or tents. But our heavenly bodies are permanent structures, designed by God for our eternal heavenly home – they're made to last for eternity! "He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee", 5:5 (New Revised Standard Version). It's the in-dwelling Spirit of God who makes good the eternal world within our hearts. The Spirit is the pledge or deposit of these future things. It's also the Spirit of God who gives us desires for heaven as expressed by Paul in the words which we have quoted: "To be with Christ which is far better".

In 2 Corinthians 5:8, Paul further expands upon what he means by: "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain", Philippians 1:21 (New Revised Standard Version). He says that he'd rather be absent from the body and be present with the Lord. We're to understand that if a believer dies, that only affects his body, which is put into the grave. However, the spirit and the soul, the real person, continue to be very much alive and fully conscious with Christ in heaven. But at the Rapture of all believers, the resurrection to life involves the reunion of body with soul and spirit to again complete the person. Whatever our lot, whether it's life here, or life there in heaven, even in the unclothed state of spirit and soul, we leave it to God's good ways with us. This brings us back again to Philippians 1:21: "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain". As Paul puts it in 2 Corinthians 5:6 and 8, it's either 'at-home-in-the-body-on-earth but away-from-the-Lord' or 'away-from-the-body-[on earth] but at-home-with-the-Lord-[in heaven]'. Although Paul earnestly wanted to be with his Lord in heaven, he also inwardly groaned for the fully clothed eternal state of life and

immortality, 2 Corinthians 5:2. All of this only made Paul, and it should also make us, more determined to be in the world but not of it: "So, whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please [our Lord and Master]", 2 Corinthians 5:9 (English Standard Version).

At this point, let me emphasise that believers look forward, not to death, but to their Lord's coming again at the Rapture. As my late uncle used to say "I'm waiting for the up-taker, not for the undertaker!" So for the remainder of this talk I'll view "to be with Christ which is far better" in its fullest sense - the everlasting state when our souls and spirits are clothed with their glorified bodies. As the hymn 'O Lord Jesus, How long' triumphs:

*"Oh joy! Oh delight, should we go without dying;
No sickness, no sadness, no dread and no crying;
Caught up through the clouds with our Lord into glory,
When Jesus receives 'His own'".*

Secondly, to be with Christ is so much better than living for Him in this world because we'll be with Him forever in heaven. Heaven is Paradise. To the repentant thief who died on the cross next to Him, the Lord Jesus said: "Truly I tell you, today you will be with Me in Paradise", Luke 23:43 (New Revised Standard Version). When they sinned, Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden, the earthly paradise. Heaven is much more than a restoration of that lost paradise. It's the "third heaven" to which Paul was transported when he saw and heard things too wonderful to describe in human language, 2 Corinthians 12:1-4. However we are given symbolic, or picture, ideas of it. For example, Revelation 21 describes it as 'the new Jerusalem', where God dwells with people. It says that: "God Himself will be with them and be their God". In that place: "God will [tenderly] wipe away every tear from their eyes". We are told about a lot of things which will **not** be present in the heavenly Jerusalem. There'll be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying. There'll be no more pain, for the former things will have passed away. There'll be no sin because nothing that defiles, or causes an abomination or a lie, can enter it, but only those who are written in the Lamb's Book of Life. There'll be no curse or night. Neither is there need of lamp or sun, for the Lord God is the light, see Revelation 21:1-4, 27 and 22:3 and 5 (New King James Version). The absence of these negative things, which so dominate and impact upon life in this present world, are so precious that they've spurred on believers to endure the worst experiences that a sin-blighted world can throw at them.

Although these truths do bring immense comfort, it's even more wonderful to know that we'll walk with Him in white and we'll sit down with Him upon His throne; that we'll have access to the tree of life in the midst of the paradise of God - and to the river of life flowing out from the throne of God. The ideas of eating and drinking symbolise intimate fellowship with Christ, so that in some inexplicable way, everyone shall be close to the Lord.

Thirdly, to be with Christ is so much better because we'll be like Him. In heaven we're given bodies like His body of glory: "Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is". This has a present practical effect upon us for: "[whoever] has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure", 1 John 3:2-3 (New King James Version).

When we're with Christ we'll see Him face to face. In 1 Corinthians 13:12, Paul says that we can only see a mere reflection of the Lord now: "For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known" (New King James Version). This caused Mrs. FA Breek to muse:

*Face to face with Christ, my Saviour,
Face to face - what will it be?
When with rapture I behold Him,
Jesus Christ who died for me.*

*Only faintly now I see Him
With the dark-ling veil between,
But a blessed day is coming,
When His glory shall be seen*

*What rejoicing in His presence,
When are banished grief and pain;
When the crooked ways are straightened,
And the dark things shall be plain!*

*Face to face! O blissful moment!
Face to face - to see and know!
Face to face with my Redeemer;
Jesus Christ who loves me so.*

*Face to face shall I behold Him,
Far beyond the starry sky;
Face to face in all His glory,
I shall see Him by and by!*

Yes, we shall see His glory! Before the cross, the Lord Jesus prayed: "Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me **where I am**, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world", John 17:24 (New King James Version). The words "You loved Me before the foundation of the world" describe what pervades eternity, the Father's eternal love for His eternal Son. Therefore the Son can demand of the Father that believers should see His unique glory in the place where it can be properly displayed, the Father's house above. The glory will express why the Father loves the Son. But there's also another glory, a glory to be shared. It's the glory which the Father gave the Son, when He completed the work of redemption. It ultimately explains why we're 'in the world - not of it': "I have given them [this glory], that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You [the Father] have sent Me [the Son], and have loved them as You have loved Me", John 17:22-23 (New King James Version). The Lord Jesus says in verse 25 that the world doesn't know, and refuses to get to know, the Father. Therefore it shouldn't really be very important to us, just a passing episode of time before the coming eternity. This should help us to adopt the 'not-of-it' lifestyle.

To be with Christ is so much better because we'll be eternally and completely occupied in serving the Saviour: "The throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in [heaven], and His servants shall serve Him. They shall see His face, and His name shall be on their foreheads. And they shall reign forever and ever", Revelation 22:3-5 (New King James Version). From other parts of Revelation, that service is shown to be worship. For example, chapters 4 and 5 describe the church in glory as the twenty-four elders who: "fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne, saying: 'You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power; for You created all things, and by Your will they exist and were created'...[They also fall] down before the Lamb...and...[sing] a new song, saying: 'You are worthy...You were slain, and have redeemed us to God by Your blood'... and [they] [worship] Him who lives forever and ever" Revelation 4:10-11; 5:8-9 and 14 (New King James Version). We anticipate this when we sing:

*I long to be where the praise is never ending,
Yearn to dwell where the glory never fades,
Where countless worshippers will share one song,
And cries of 'worthy' will honour the Lamb!*

Finally, to be with Christ will be so much better because it will be the consummation of our faith. It brings in the fullness of eternal life, promised by God who cannot lie. He gifts us it through our Lord Jesus Christ. It can be experienced and enjoyed now in this present world, so we're exhorted to lay hold of it. But eternal life belongs to the realm of eternity, outside of space and time. It's the very environment of heaven. The Lord Jesus said that believers are to have part with Him **where He is**. He's the One who preserves us unto His heavenly kingdom. Not only are we to be with Him, but we're predestined, that is marked out beforehand, to be conformed to His image for: "we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose", Romans 8:28 (New King James Version).

In closing, I'm reminded of a former female colleague who, at the time, was courting a man called Kim. She was besotted with him. Frequently work was interrupted whilst everyone in the lab was informed about what Kim had been doing, or what he had said. When she got engaged, she could barely wait until she married as then she'd be with him. As we think again today about Christians being 'in the world - not of it', let's encourage each other to be totally devoted and committed to Christ - just like this lady was to Kim. Specifically, believers should long to be with Him where He is, in heaven above.

Let's finish with a hymn of worship:

*Where the saints in glory thronging,
Where they feed on life's blest tree -
There is stilled each earnest longing,
Satisfied our souls shall be.*

*Safety - where no foe approaches;
Rest - where toil shall be no more;
Joy - whereon no grief encroaches;
Peace - where strife shall all be o'er.*

*Where deceiver ne'er can enter,
Sin-soiled feet have never trod;
Free - our peaceful feet may venture
In the paradise of God.*

*Drink of life's perennial river,
Feed on life's perennial food,
Christ, the fruit of life, and giver -
Safe through His redeeming blood.*

*Object of eternal pleasure,
Perfect in Thy work divine!
Lord of glory! Without measure
Worship, joy and praise are Thine.*

Amen.

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