



"We ought to give thanks for all fortune: if it is 'good,' because it is good, if 'bad' because it works in us patience, humility and the contempt of this world and the hope of our eternal country."
—C.S. Lewis

26-Mar-10

Death Is Not the End (Part Three)

In Part Two, we considered how [Jesus Christ](#) viewed death, both His own and that of His close friend, Lazarus, concluding that, though the terrors of His crucifixion and His separation from the Father affected Him, He looked beyond death, knowing the power of [God](#) and the hope of the resurrection. Even so, despite His humanity, He was the Son of God, One in whom the Holy Spirit flowed without measure ([John 3:34](#)).

For our edification, it behooves us to lower our sights somewhat and reflect on the viewpoint of a "normal" righteous man, the apostle Paul, a human being just like us, not God in the flesh as was Jesus. Having faced the perils of life with disturbing regularity ([II Corinthians 11:23-28](#)), Paul was intimately acquainted with the certainty of death, but being better spiritually educated and experienced than most of us are, he can provide us a positive example:

. . . according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.

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 labor; 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. And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and [joy of faith](#), that your rejoicing for me may be more abundant in Jesus Christ by my coming to you again. ([Philippians 1:20-26](#))

He realizes that it would better fit God's purpose if he stayed alive for a while longer because the Philippian brethren needed him and the teaching he would bring them, but if he had the choice, he says, he would far rather die to await the resurrection and thus be with Christ. He is torn between the two alternatives. Obviously, this is not a man who feels a morbid dread of death; like his Savior, he does not consider it an end but an interlude between physical life and eternal life with God.

In verse 21, Paul uses an interesting idiom, "to die is gain," which resembles a similar "death" idiom in English, "cashing in the chips." The apostle pictures life as a kind of game that he played for all he was worth, but when he must retire from it, he would gladly cash in his chips and take home his winnings, his "gain," as it were. By using this game analogy, he does not take death overly seriously. It is without doubt sobering and grievous because a life has ended and a person's companionship will be missed, but the apostle always keeps his priorities straight: Eternal life is always to be preferred to physical life. He knows he has far greater, more eternal winnings—"treasure in heaven," as Jesus phrases it in [Matthew 6:19-21](#)—than all the so-called pleasures and possessions he could enjoy on earth. He is very willing to endure death to claim the reward that God had promised to him in the resurrection. However, despite desiring to cash in his chips, he concludes that it would be better for the game if he kept his hand in it a mite longer.

Thus, like his Savior and ours, he is not morose and hopeless about death. On the contrary, he has "a desire to depart and be with Christ," because his next conscious act would be to rise from the grave to meet Christ in the air ([1 Thessalonians 4:16-17](#)) and live and reign with him forever ([Revelation 20:6](#))

). What a wonderful attitude to have! He would give his all in service to God while alive on the earth, but he would gladly give his life to be with Christ in His Kingdom.

Now that we have seen Paul's approach to his own mortality, we should also consider his attitude toward the deaths of others. Acts 20 contains the story of young Eutychus falling from the window during one of the apostle's long sermons:

Now on the [first day of the week](#), when the disciples came together to break bread, Paul, ready to depart the next day, spoke to them and continued his message until midnight. There were many lamps in the upper room where they were gathered together. ([Acts 20:7-8](#))

Luke mentions the lamps probably because they contributed to the subsequent event. The large number of lamps had likely been lighted so that all the brethren could see Paul and perhaps take notes on his teaching. However, lamps not only emit a great deal of light, but they also put off a lot of heat, so Luke almost certainly intends the reader to understand that the audience was becoming a little drowsy due to both the warmth and the late hour.

And in a window sat a certain young man named Eutychus, who was sinking into a deep sleep. He was overcome by sleep; and as Paul continued speaking, he fell down from the third story and was taken up dead. But Paul went down, fell on him, and embracing him said, "Do not trouble yourselves, for his life is in him." ([Acts 20:9-10](#))

Luke's verbiage is matter-of-fact and unemotional. The apostle remains calm and collected throughout the incident. He does not race down the stairs, fly into hysterics, or wail about how tragically this young man's life ended. Even the English expression of his "falling on" Eutychus is a bit overdone since the Greek word, *epiipto*, has the sense here of pressing or lying upon. In other words, the apostle stretches himself out on Eutychus as Elisha did with the Shunammite's son ([II Kings 4:34-35](#)), then he coolly tells everyone not to worry, for the young man would live. Before long, the brethren are eating a meal together (verse 11)!

Paul does not react to Eutychus' death with the proverbial weeping and gnashing of teeth. By his placid demeanor, he reassures the brethren and proceeds to exhibit God's power and mercy. Remaining so composed in such a situation may seem almost inhuman to be able to do. We humans are usually so full of emotion for our loved ones that we become absolutely distraught when a death occurs, but these examples from Scripture show that, while grief is normal, a hopeful, positive expectation of life to come is a more spiritually mature attitude toward death.

The faith of Jesus and Paul allowed them to consider death almost from a detached point of view. Certainly, they felt the same emotions as we do, but they suppressed them to a large degree, not because they were callous, but because their hope in what God offers beyond death far exceeded them. To them, death was not the end but a necessary step toward a better life. Jesus Christ, "who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God" ([Hebrews 12:2](#)). And for his part, Paul writes in [Romans 8:18](#), "For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us."

How could they do this? They knew what death really is, and along with their deep faith in God's plan, power, and promises, they could face it with unwavering hope.

- Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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by John W. Ritenbaugh

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by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

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