

WHAT'S THERE TO LIVE FOR?

by Ray C. Stedman

"What is there to live for?" That is a question that fills many hearts, both Christian and non-Christian alike, today. These are times of crisis. We feel them very strongly in this present hour. Many are troubled by the bleak look of the future. Teen-age suicide rates are rocketing as despair spreads. So, many are asking the question, "What is there to live for?"

There is a wonderful answer provided in this passage from Second Corinthians 5 which we will be studying today. I hope that many will be helped by it.

I was at a conference this week in Southern California where I listened the first evening to a very penetrating and perceptive message by Dr. Charles Malik, a splendid Christian statesman from Lebanon, who, at one time, was President of the General Assembly of the United Nations. He gave a very incisive analysis of where we are today in the world and the factors behind the crisis in which we live. He gave us twelve points that he felt we in the Western world were insufficiently aware of in which dangerous and significant events are creeping up on us.

As he went through these points you could see how, mounting on every side, is the pressure and the danger to our national life and to us as individuals as well. When he finished, as I think often happens in these days of looking only at the things that are seen, he left us with a great sense of almost hopelessness that we have gone too far and there is not much we can do about it.

The hopelessness of our age and times has never been more eloquently stated, perhaps, than by that most eloquent of men, Malcolm Muggeridge, speaking at the Hoover Institution here at Stanford not long ago. He summed up the end of Western civilization in these words.

The final conclusion would seem to be that whereas other civilizations have been brought down by attacks of barbarians from without, ours had the unique distinction of training its own destroyers at its own educational institutions and providing them with facilities for propagating their destructive ideology far and wide, all at the public expense. Thus did Western man decide to abolish himself, creating his own boredom out of his own affluence, his own vulnerability out of his own strength, his own impotence out of his own erotomania, himself blowing the trumpet that brought the walls of his own city tumbling. And, having convinced himself that he was too numerous, labored with pill and scalpel and syringe to make himself fewer, until at last, having educated himself into imbecility and polluted and drugged himself into stupefaction, he keeled over, a weary, battered old brontosaurus, and became extinct.

Well, the world of the 1st century looked very similarly bleak, and there was no more reason for hope in the days of the apostles than there is in our own times. Yet when you turn to the pages of the New Testament you never see the reaction of despair. There is a cry of triumph and of hope running through all these pages, although their circumstances did not look any more hopeful than ours.

Notice how Paul puts it as he introduces this passage to us here. Verse 6, "So we are always of good courage"; then again in Verse 8, "We are of good courage." That note has been sounded again and again throughout this passage. In Verse 1 of Chapter 4 he says, "Having this ministry by the mercy of God, we do not lose heart"; and in Verse 16 of Chapter 4 he says, "So we do not lose heart."

The key, of course, is the little word "so." Because of what he has been saying we do not lose heart, he says, we are of good courage. "So" -- what does that mean? Well, all through the account, of course, he has been talking about the power and activity and availability of God. That is the basis for Christian hope. That is the answer to flooding despair, the fact that God is going to do something, is doing something, and can be counted on to act. That is where the renewing of hope in an individual must arise. God is going to act both in

the future beyond death, and he is going to act and is acting in the present, right amidst the threatenings and the dangers of life as we know it.

In this passage, Chapter 5, Verses 6-17, the apostle sees three very practical, very helpful effects to us because of our relationship with God. The first he has already stated: "We are of good courage." Having this relationship, knowing this kind of a God, living in the midst of this kind of a life, nevertheless, we are of good courage. He sees two reasons for it:

So we are always of good courage; we know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. We are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. {2 Cor 5:6-8 RSV}

The first reason is that we are in touch with the Lord by faith, not by sight. We do not see him, he does not come and sit down beside us and talk to us and put his arm around our shoulders and encourage us, but, nevertheless, we have his presence with us. That is the first great reason always for renewed vigor and courage. No circumstance we go through ever means that we are abandoned and left to ourselves.

The Lord himself put it this way to the disciples in the upper room. That was a troubled moment; their lives were in danger, but he said, "Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me," {John 14:1 RSV}. And a little later on, "I will not leave you orphans. I'm not going to abandon you. I will come to you. By the Spirit I'll be there and my presence will go with you," {cf, John 14:18 ff}. He had promised, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age," {cf, Matt 28:20}.

I hope, as Christians, we never forget that promise. That is real and vital. That will sustain us and encourage us no matter what our situation may be. We are not alone. He is with us. We walk by faith and not by sight. We have a full supply of love and peace and joy to keep us in the midst of anything. That is reason enough, isn't it, to say, "So we are always of good courage"?

Paul sees another reason. He says, "We would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord." He is looking on to the future and summing up what we saw in the first five verses of this chapter, the great weight of glory that is awaiting us for which our present circumstances and trials are preparing us.

He is looking ahead. This is always characteristic of Christians who understand the message of Christianity. They are like children who are looking ahead to Christmas. They are not looking back to Halloween, or Thanksgiving even, but ahead to Christmas. That is what lies ahead of us now, and the joys of it awaken anticipation and a sense of hopeful excitement. That is what Paul says nerves us in our endeavors today. It has an effect upon us now. As he put it in Romans 8, "So, therefore, we wait for it with patience," {cf, Rom 8:25}. We are looking forward to being at home with the Lord.

I love that phrasing. Notice how it is put here. The word is used both for our life in the body and our coming presence with the Lord. They are both said to be an experience of being "at home." What does that mean? Well, you feel "at home" in your body, don't you, right now? You do not feel strange in it. You do not feel unnatural. You feel relaxed. You would feel very strained and unnatural if you did not have your body. You feel at home in it. That is what it means.

Now, using the same language, the apostle says when you leave this earthly body and are given the body of glory that is awaiting you, you will be at home there too. It will be an experience not of strain or difference, but natural. In fact, later on in this letter, in Chapter 12, he speaks of being caught up into the third heaven into the very presence of God. He says, "I didn't know whether I was in the body or out of it. I couldn't tell. I felt so much at home it didn't make any difference," {cf, 2 Cor 12:3}.

That is an encouragement to us that what we are headed toward is not something dreadful or so terribly different that we need to be afraid. We will be at home with the Lord, in his very presence, seeing him no longer only with the Spirit within, but face to face. If it is true, as Peter puts it, that "Without having seen him you love him" {cf, 1 Pet 1:8}, how much more will that be true when we see him face to face? So we are nerved to go through the difficulty of these days and to be of good courage because we are heading into light

instead of darkness. That is the first result.

Then the apostle sees another effect of our faith in the next few verses. He puts it very clearly in Verse 9:

So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. {2 Cor 5:9 RSV}

Notice what that says: Whether "at home" (that means with the Lord, because that is the last reference he has given to it), or "away" (from the Lord here in the body), either place, the purpose and aim of our lives to please God. That is an eternal principle. That is not something that is going to change when we leave this earth. The one real reason we have to be here on earth is to please God, to be a delight to him, to give his heart rejoicing as he watches us and works with us. As our children please us oftentimes so we are to please the Lord. That is the sole purpose for living, and that is what Paul is saying here.

There are two ways by which that is manifested. Paul deals with them very precisely:

First, in the area of our motives. This is where he brings in this whole matter of the "judgment seat of Christ," for in connection with pleasing God he says (Verse 10),

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body. {2 Cor 5:10 RSV}

This is oftentimes a very frightening and misunderstood concept to many people. The apostle speaks of a "judgment seat," and that always strikes terror to our hearts. Many people, I am afraid, identify this with that sobering and imposing scene in the 20th chapter of Revelation where all the dead, small and great, are standing before the "great white throne" of God. In an awesome moment of judgment "the books are opened" {cf, Rev 20:12}, it says, lives are reviewed and eternal destinies are settled. It is a terribly impressive scene, and many think that this is what this refers to.

But, if you read it that way, you have totally missed the point of the Scripture. This is not a judgment to settle destiny. This is a personal evaluation given to each individual by the Lord himself of what his life has really been like. It is as though you and the Lord walked together back through all the scenes of your life and he pointed out to you the real nature of what you did and what you said and what was behind it all.

The primary characteristic of the "judgment seat" is that it is a time of disclosure to us of what has been hidden in the silent, inner reaches of our own hearts. And not only a disclosure to us, but also to others. In fact, the word that is used here is a very interesting one. It says, "we shall all appear." Literally it is, "we shall all be manifested," "we shall all be unveiled," in a sense, at the judgment seat of Christ, in the eyes of everyone. That is the point. This is the moment Jesus spoke of when he said, "Whatever is spoken in the secret places shall be shouted from the housetops." And it is described for us in the First Corinthian letter, Chapter 4, where Paul says, "Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart," {1 Cor 4:5 RSV}. That is what he is talking about.

God's concern is not, as we often think, with what we do so much as why we do it. There are, of course, some things that we are not to do that would bother him if we did them. There are certain clear-cut areas of sin that are always sin. They are mentioned everywhere in the Scripture -- murder, adultery, lying, stealing, etc. These are always and invariably wrong, and to do them means to displease the Lord.

But also there are a great many things that are apparently right that you can do and still be displeasing to the Lord. If the reason you do them is to gain glory or fame for yourself or to get even with somebody else or to establish some wrong, inordinate relationship of which God does not approve, they are wrong. Your motive is important. And more than that, as we have been learning from this passage, what you count on, your resource, is important to God. On what do you count for success -- your ability, your education, your training, your background, something coming from you? Or do you count on the God who indwells you to do the work and to carry it through to success, in his eyes if not in the eyes of men? That is what pleases God.

There is a verse in Hebrews that tells us that, "without faith it is impossible to please God," {cf, Heb 11:6}. Faith must be present in what we do, or whatever we do is not pleasing to him. Paul understands this, therefore he wants that moment before the judgment seat of Christ to be a moment of disclosure that will not be of shame to him, of facing things that he refused to face in life, but a moment of joy. The Lord will have the joy of showing him many things that he thought were failures that were really successes, and things that he did that no one heard anything about will be brought to light and vividly displayed before others.

So it is a time of disclosure, but it is also a time of evaluation when we learn for the first time who was right and what attitudes we should have had or should not have had. It is a helpful time of seeing the truth about ourselves.

If that frightens you, I want to tell you this: There is something you can do about it. It is found in First Corinthians 11 where Paul says, "If we judged ourselves truly, we should not be judged," {1 Cor 11:31 RSV}. This is what he is talking about. The judgment seat of Christ, in a sense, has already started.

This is what the Lord does with me all the time.

Does he do it with you?

He is always, by his Spirit, pointing out to me that I had a wrong attitude or a wrong motive for doing something. Sometimes he points out a right motive and he confirms in me that I was doing the right thing with a right attitude and whether people accept it or not he understood. That is the judgment seat of Christ going on.

If we will allow ourselves to face truth like that now, we do not have to face it at the judgment seat of Christ. It will not be brought out there because it will already have been settled.

That is why it is so important that, as we grow as Christians, we allow the Lord to let us see ourselves the way we really are. We should not fight back and refuse to acknowledge that he is right about things. The mark of spiritual progress is always the awareness we increasingly have of all the possibilities and potential for evil that lie in our hearts.

That has been my case. I find that the older I grow the more aware I am of how wrong I have been, how many people I have hurt unwittingly, and the increasing sense of the control that evil has had over me in my life and in my relationships. Yet that does not make me despair because I know that God has seen it all from the beginning. He has dealt with it and set it aside. That is not the basis of my relationship to him at all. He has given me the gift of righteousness. He loves me. He likes me. That is my relationship to him.

Now all this is true at the judgment seat of Christ as well. It will be a time of disclosure, of evaluation, but also a time of encouragement where we will see and learn the real value of many things that we thought no one knew about and which we ourselves did not often understand.

At the conference I mentioned, I was with a pastor from San Antonio, Texas, who told me about the time when Hurricane Beulah came in and devastated that whole southern Texas area. Thousands of people were driven out of their homes, and the churches were opened to provide places of refuge for them. In this very strongly Catholic city, hundreds of the people that this pastor's Baptist church housed were Catholic. They were provided food and shelter for seven days or so; the people of the church cooked meals to feed them; they were allowed to sleep in the pews, and they provided recreation for them, worship services, etc.

At the end of it, he said, the Catholic bishop, a godly man, came over to thank him. They had been friends for some years, and this man said to him, "I want to thank you and your people for what they have done for our people. I know that probably doesn't mean a lot to you to hear me say that because I am just a man, but one of these days you are going to stand before the Lord himself. He will look at you with those beautiful eyes of his and say, 'Buckner, when you took in those refugees that was a wonderful thing to do, and I want to thank you for it.' That will mean something to you then," he said.

It is true, isn't it? The judgment seat of Christ is not only there for a time of honest evaluation and of

understanding of the need for proper motives in what we do and proper dependence on resource, but it will be a time of encouragement -- "and then shall every man receive a commendation from God."

Now many people ask the question, "Well, what about the rewards here? I'm interested in those." Let me tell you something. I have had to review and revise some of my concepts along this line. I was taught when I was a growing young Christian that all of those crowns, the crown of life, the crown of righteousness, the crown of glory, etc., that are mentioned in Scripture are the rewards you get at the judgment seat, if you deserve any rewards at all.

But I have come to see that is not true. A crown is a symbol, basically, of the gift of God to us, which is eternal life. Life in its various capacities, its various emphases and aspects are symbolized by crowns and they are always gifts in Scripture. You never earn a crown of glory. You never earn the crown of life. You cannot earn the crown of righteousness. Righteousness is a gift which none of us can earn. These are symbols, therefore, of the gift of eternal life which God gives us freely in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Well, then, what is it that you can win or lose at the judgment seat of Christ? The answer is, the opportunity to display the nature of the life that has been given to you. The degree to which you can manifest that is what we are determining by our faithfulness here, the degree to which you can display the glory of God, the opportunity that will be given you to manifest it. That differs according to the individual.

In the parable of the talents, Jesus said that certain ones who used their talents, who seized their opportunities, who were faithful in depending on God and motivated in a right way, shall be given charge over five cities, and others charge over ten cities. What does he mean? He means that these will be given a greater opportunity, a greater area of display of the nature of the life and the glory of God they have received as a gift.

That is what Paul means when he speaks of "running the race" {cf, 1 Cor 9:24}, and "pressing on toward the mark for the prize," {cf, Phil 3:14}. He is concerned lest he says he beats his body to "bring it into subjection, lest when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway," {1 Cor 9:27 KJV}. It is what he says in First Corinthians 3, "Every man's work shall be tried, of what sort it is" {cf, 1 Cor 3:13}, where it comes from, what is the motive behind it, and what is the resource upon which it depended. Then if a man succeeds, "he shall be given a reward" {cf, 1 Cor 3:14}, a great opportunity to display that life, or, "he shall suffer loss," {1 Cor 3:15}. He will not have that opportunity. That is what the judgment seat of Christ determines.

In that connection, Paul goes on to say, not only are we to lead God-pleasing lives in our motives, but also in our faithful actions, for he says:

Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men; but what we are is known to God, and I hope it is known also to your conscience. We are not commending ourselves to you again but giving you cause to be proud of us, so that you may be able to answer those who pride themselves on a man's position and not on his heart. For if we are beside ourselves, it is for God; if we are in our right mind, it is for you. {2 Cor 5:11-13 RSV}

What is he saying here? Well, looking at his own life, he says, "I find tremendous motivation from this awareness that all the hidden motives of my actions are going to come out in the open before everybody." He calls that the "fear of the Lord." Not the fear of the Lord in the sense of trembling before God, but the respect for God, the awareness that he is a God of truth and that no one can water that down, no one can escape seeing the truth about himself. And you cannot plead with God to get out from under this. He is no respecter of persons. Knowing this about God, Paul says, "It motivates me to be honest and faithful in the work he has given me to do, that of persuading men."

Do not read this as though Paul is saying, "I go around preaching hell fire and damnation so that people will come to Christ." That is not what he means by knowing the "fear of the Lord." It is in his own life he is facing that. He is saying, "Knowing that God will deal honestly and squarely and faithfully and yet lovingly with me, I want every moment of my life to count. I do not want to waste my life. I do not want to spend it pretending to be something I am not. I want to be honest and open and genuine about all that I say and do." That is why

he says, "Whatever I am is known to God, and I hope you see it too."

"Furthermore," Paul says, "my actions are motivated with the desire to answer my critics. I do this in order that you might have an answer to give to those who are criticizing me." Then he lists some of the things they were saying. Some of them were saying, "Oh, you know Paul. He's crazy. He's mad." They probably were referring to his account of his conversion on the Damascus road when the light suddenly shone and he saw the Lord. He told this story everywhere, and on hearing that people would say, "He's a dreamer. He's mad." Paul says, "If I'm mad, remember it is for God's sake. I see him, and whatever I do is for him. Or if I behave normally," he says, "even that is for you because that is what God has taught me." So his concern is that his actions be faithful and honest and open and properly motivated, and that he will use the opportunities he has while he has the time.

Then the last thing he sees here is that of living a life for others, motivated by love:

For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised. {2 Cor 5:14-15 RSV}

Here again is the second great motive in the life of the apostle -- "the love of Christ controls us." Actually it is a word that means constrains us, drives us out, motivates us, and then guides us after we get there, that sets the limits to what we should and what we should not do. That, he says, comes from the sense that Christ loves him.

I want to tell you, I do not know anything greater and more powerful as a motivating factor than that. I get terrified sometimes at what God can do to me if I do not behave. That motivates me sometimes. It is a low motivation, but it is there. But the thing that will get to me, when nothing else will, is the continuing experience of the love of Christ for me, a refreshment of spirit that I gain from the awareness that he loves me, he is for me, he stands beside me, he delights in me. I tell you that will move me like nothing else.

That is what Paul is experiencing here, the awareness that he is loved by God. There is nothing like it. It gives him a sense of security, a sense of self-worth, a good self image.

If you suffer from a bad image of yourself, then for goodness sake start thinking about what God says about you, how he loves you, and how Christ loves you and has given himself to you, and that will change everything.

He also says he has learned that the death of Christ freed him from the need to live for himself. I do not know anything more relevant to today than that statement.

Everywhere I turn I hear people talking about what they've got to do to "meet their needs." "I don't go here, I don't go there because it doesn't meet my needs." Now I want to tell you this. Jesus Christ died to set you free from that syndrome. You do not need your needs met; he has already met them. If you have not learned that he has met your needs, you will never get them met from any other source. No one else is able to meet them. If you lay that trip upon people, you will find yourself suffering rejection at the hands of others because they know they cannot meet your needs. That is what this means.

"Christ died for all," and that means "all have died" in order that they might understand that they live no longer for themselves. After having your needs met by Christ, when you turn and try to meet the needs of others, you discover that is the secret to life as it ought to be lived. That is what Paul is saying here. "He died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves," no longer with their needs at the center of their life, trying to build everything around them, "but for him who for their sake died and was raised."

What will this do for you? There are two things he goes on to say. First, it will make you see everybody else differently, and then it will make you treat them differently. For:

From now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; {2 Cor 5:16a}

RSV}

We do not look at them the way we once did. "Once," Paul says, "we were impressed with people who had power or money or fame. We followed them around, we imitated them, we wanted to be near them, we dropped their names and we wanted to be associated with them. There were other people we thought were obscure and of no value to us and we treated them like dirt," he says, "we had nothing to do with them. But no more. We don't treat people that way any more. In fact, there was a time," he says, "when we treated Christ that way." This is the only reference in the whole New Testament that indicates that maybe Paul personally heard Jesus. For he says:

... we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, {2 Cor 5:16b RSV}

What did he think of him? Why, he thought he was a lowdown, worthless rabble-rouser, a tub-thumping street preacher from a dirty little obscure town that nobody thought anything good could come out of. He thought because Jesus had no political standing, no family position, no training and no education that he was worthless. He tried his best to exterminate the religion that gathered about him because he regarded him as an imposter and a phony.

But, he says, "No more. We've learned to look at people differently. We now see Christ for who he was, the Lord of Glory, the King of the Ages, the Prince of Life, God himself become a man." All those great Christological passages that Paul uses come to mind here at this point. He says, "We don't treat him that way any more. We don't treat other people that way any more. We see them for who they are, men and women made in the image of God but they have fallen from it. They are victims of the lies of the devil, the power of Satan, but they are important, significant people because God's image is in them and it can be awakened to life again," he says. "We don't pay any attention to their wealth or their status or their fame or anything else. Everybody, even the most obscure and the lowliest and the weakest among us is a possible child of God, made in the image of God, and is tremendously significant."

That is the way Paul treated people. I have come to see that that is the mark of somebody who understands Christianity. He is freed from bias and prejudice and treating people according to their status. He begins to be the same to everybody, no matter where they are. Therefore, Paul says, we treat them differently:

Therefore, if any one is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has passed away, behold, the new has come. {2 Cor 5:17 RSV}

What does he mean by that in this context? Well, he means simply there is always hope for everyone. No matter who it is, it is possible that they may be born again. No matter how violent they are in opposition to the gospel, they can be changed. A creative God can reach the most hopeless, the darkest, the lowliest, the worst, the farthest away. And, when they are reached, you never need to give up hope for them because they are part of a new creation. God has started a work that he is going to finish.

I oftentimes write people off. Do you do that?

I met somebody just this last week whom I had met some years ago. He had so offended me and irritated me then by his immaturity that I wrote him off. I thought he would never amount to anything as a Christian. The mental image I had of that man at that point I have retained in my mind without permitting any thought that he has ever changed at all. But, when I met him last week, I was amazed at how he had grown and how much he had changed. I thought nobody could change him but God did, and he did it without any help from me at all!

That is what I have learned. If you just wait you may not be able to do anything, but God can and he will.

If you are in Christ, you are a new creation. He that has begun a good work in you will not fail to perform it until the day of Christ. So there is always hope, even for me and even for you. Therefore, we are to treat everybody differently because we no longer live for ourselves but for him who died and was raised again.

Well, what a change that makes.

What a reason to go on and live today. This is the hour to bear a Christian witness above all other hours in history.

What a privilege it will be at the judgment seat of Christ to know that we stood for his name and loved in his name in the midst of the emptiness and death and darkness of a dying world.

Thank you, Lord, for that privilege.

OUTLINE OF 2 CORINTHIANS 5:6-17

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