

GULF COAST BAPTIST CHURCH

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Paul's Perspective on the End of Life

Pastor Dan Brake

Adolescents rarely give thought to their mortality. When individuals enter their 20s and 30s, they are usually so busy with life that they have little time to consider their inevitable death. But as the decades go by, and the body breaks down, people begin to consider concepts like, "How much time do I have left?" "What have I done?" and, most importantly, "What's going to happen when I die?" The Apostle Paul was not exempt from this tendency. A chronological study of Paul's writings provides believers with an interesting and helpful insight into the apostle's perspective on the end of life.

Noted Bible scholar F.F. Bruce surmised that Paul was most likely born, "...in the first decade of the Christian era..."¹ Many other scholars place Paul's birth somewhere in the first decade of the Church's history. Because of the lack of evidence, we cannot pinpoint Paul's exact age, but the evidence does provide us with a useful approximation. The following is a list of Paul's approximate ages at major life events and when he wrote certain letters:

Conversion on the road to Damascus - mid-20s to early 30s

Writing of 1 Corinthians - late 40s to early 50s

Writing of 2 Corinthians - late 40s to mid-50s

Writing of Romans - early 50s to mid/late 50s

Acts 20:24 - early 50s to mid/late 50s

Philippians mid-50s to late 50's/early 60's

2 Timothy - late 50s to mid-60s

At the age in which many men in modern American society are going through a "mid-life crisis", Paul had undertaken the perilous task of traversing the Mediterranean world to share the Good News of the grace of God. Although he was around the age of fifty when he wrote his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul had already narrowly escaped death many times. This letter provides the reader with insight into his perspective on the end of life.

2 Corinthians 4:16-18 – While the physical body deteriorates, the inner man, or spiritual life, grows and matures

I. Due to the hardships and depravations Paul experienced in his ministry, his body was likely in bad shape by the time he wrote to the Corinthians

A. 2 Corinthians 11:23-27 - Paul wrote a manifest of the physical suffering he endured in ministry up to that point

¹ F.F. Bruce, Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 37.

1. These events would have led to premature aging, painful and debilitating physical limitations
2. Paul's ministry had already taken a terrible physical toll on his body
- B. "Outward man" - *exo anthropos* - outer shell of who we are; the physical body
- C. "Perish" - present passive indicative - *diaphtheiro*
 1. Strong's - "to rot thoroughly, to ruin (passively, decay utterly, figuratively, pervert)
 2. Vine's - "to destroy utterly"
 3. Interesting note - "Classic Greek used *phtheiro* to describe buildings which crumbled with age..." PreceptAustin - see 2 Corinthians 5:1- the tent of the human body
- D. Paul is stating that the physical body is in a continuous state of decline, deterioration, wasting away - some of us in here feel this reality more intensely
- II. The Appropriate Response to the Deterioration of the Physical Body
 - A. Old Testament Examples
 1. Psalm 103:14-16 - "For he knoweth our frame; he remembereth that we are dust. As for man, his days are as grass:..."
 2. Ecclesiastes 12:1-7 - "Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them..."
 - B. Paul's Perspective
 1. v. 16 - An appreciation for daily spiritual renewal - Phil. 1:6; Col. 3:10
 2. v. 17 - This deteriorating condition is light in comparison to the immeasurable weight of the splendor of eternity with God - Rom. 8:17-23
 - a) Paul did not view the end of life as the cessation of something good but the immediate entrance into something much greater
 3. v. 17 - This deteriorating condition is brief in comparison to eternity
 - a) "Is but for a moment" - *parautika* - Paul holds up his present state of physical decline alongside the future state of eternity
 - b) Paul's approach is that "this too shall pass"
 4. v. 18 - Paul's continuously focused on the unseen realm of the spirit: this is what is lasting, this is eternal
 5. v. 18 - Paul redirected his focus away from what he saw and experienced: these things are wasting away

2 Corinthians 5:1-8 - Paul was not looking forward to the process or act of death, but he was eager for what is on the other side of this life

- I. v.1 - Paul provided a useful illustration to compare the present human body with the promised glorified body
 - A. Paul compared the human body to a tent - *skenos* - a literal tent, tabernacle
 1. Acts 18:3 - When Paul met Priscilla and Aquila in Corinth, it was because they shared livelihoods as tentmakers
 2. The Corinthians would have had first-hand knowledge of Paul's illustration (miracle of inspiration)

- B. Peter also had the same perspective of our physical bodies
 - 1. 2 Peter 1:13-5 - here he refers to his body as a tent (a temporary dwelling place) which will be "put away" or "laid aside"
 - 2. Realizing his time on earth was short, Peter was reminding his audience of the magnificent promises God has made to believers in Christ regarding the potential to share in God's divine nature
 - 3. While the Greek word - *kataluo* literally means to demolish or destroy, it's best to understand this word in the context of "unloosening", like pulling up the tent pegs and breaking down camp
- II. v. 2 - Paul writes about his strong desire to experience this future body
 - A. In this "tabernacle", the believer is groaning
 - 1. *Stenazo* - indicates an inner grumble, groan, murmur
 - 2. Present tense - continuous and ongoing reality
 - B. The groan consists of an intense (*epipothéo*) desire to put on for oneself their permanent eternal body
 - 1. Not groaning about the difficulty of life but rather longing for the future glorified body
 - 2. House - *oiketerion* - a permanent residence
 - 3. This permanent residence is a spiritual body "out from" - *ek* - heaven
 - C. Why such a desire? - It will be in the likeness of Christ's glorified body
 - 1. 1 John 3:1-2 - when believers finally see Christ, they will be like him
 - 2. 1 Cor. 15:40-49 - Paul describes the difference between deteriorating physical bodies and those that await believers on the other side of this life
- III. v. 3 - Paul introduces the possibility of a temporary heavenly body
- IV. v. 4 - While Paul was eager to experience his glorified body, he was not necessarily looking forward to the process or act of death
 - A. Literally - "...not because we are desiring to be unclothed..." - not looking forward to the act of "unloosening this tent"
 - B. Seems that the act of death ("unclothed") did cause Paul some anxious moments
 - 1. 2 Corinthians 1:8-9- Paul gives evidence of anxiety about the process of death but not the finality of death
 - 2. "despaired even of life" - Paul experienced some anxious moments when he thought he was going to die
 - 3. This anxiousness made him recognize his dependence upon God even more
 - C. Christ's death provides the believer with confidence about what is on the other side of this life - Hebrews 2:14-16
 - 1. The child of God is freed from debilitating fear of the finality of death
 - 2. This fear enslaves those who do not have Christ
 - D. Rather..." but clothed upon" - with the permanent residence which is of a heavenly origin
 - 1. That - *hina* - denotes purpose
 - 2. Might be swallowed up - *katapino* - swallow, gulp, totally consumed
 - a) 1 Cor. 15:54 - Death is swallowed up in victory

- b) 2 Cor. 2:7 - repentant believer totally consumed by grief because of ungracious believers
 - c) Heb. 11:29 - the Red Sea totally consumed the Egyptian army
 - d) 1 Pe. 5:8 - the devil seeks to totally consume believers
- 3. "Of life" - literally, The Life or Eternal Life
 - a) Right now the believer is enjoying a measure of eternal life - 1 Jo. 5:13-15
 - b) The believer anticipates the fullness of that eternal life in the future - Jude 21
- V. v. 5 - God intended for believers to look forward to this future life
 - A. God worked out our salvation so that we might enjoy the fullness of eternal life in glorified, heavenly bodies
 - B. The Spirit is a down payment of that future glory each believer in Christ will experience
- VI. v. 6-8 - This inspires confidence in the believer that although they are presently away from their heavenly home, they have been assured of their future destination

Paul was gripped by a strong desire to evangelize the Jews in Jerusalem a few years after the writing of his second letter to the Corinthians. On this journey, Luke recorded Paul's speech regarding the Holy Spirit's warnings that he would be arrested and suffer. This record provides insight into Paul's mind regarding the time he had left in this life. While his writings to the Corinthians indicated an eagerness to "put on" his heavenly body, Paul also wanted to be faithful and complete the "good works" that God had planned for his life.

Acts 20:22-24 - Paul took little concern for his physical life, only to the extent that he wanted to finish his course

- I. v. 24 - Paul did not consider his life something particularly precious
 - A. "count" - *echo* - possess
 - B. "dear" - *timios* - precious
 - C. Paul's great concern was not holding onto his life with clenched fists, but being about the business God intended for him.
 - 1. Acts 9:15-16 - The resurrected, glorified Christ told Ananias that Paul was to be a witness before the Gentiles
 - 2. Gal. 1:15-16 - Paul wrote that God had called him to preach Christ among the Gentiles
 - 3. Eph. 3:7-8 - Paul had been made a manager and dispenser of God's precious truths and promises to the Church
 - D. All believers have a course
 - 1. John 17:4 - the Son sets the example of one whom the Father tasked with work
 - 2. Ephesians 2:10 - God has mapped out "good works" that he intends for all Christians to accomplish

Luke's record does not indicate that the apostle Paul was living a needlessly reckless life. It wasn't as if he had a "death wish"; rather, Paul realized that the "good works" God had called him to were fraught with danger, and he didn't prioritize length and ease of life over

obedience to God's plans for him. Paul's perspective should encourage Christian to have the same mindset. Our goal in life ought to be making the most of the time that God has provided us, however many days that may be. Paul's encouragement in Ephesians 5:15-17 is appropriate to believers today: "See then that ye walk circumspectly, not as fools, but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil. Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is." These desires include living a Spirit-filled life and demonstrating Christ's life in the brief time God has provided each of us.

Around the age of 60, likely struggling with a worn-out and broken-down body, imprisoned in the dank confines of the Mamertine prison in Rome, Paul wrote a final letter to Timothy, his dear brother in Christ and faithful co-laborer. Unlike his previous arrest and imprisonment, during which time he wrote the Prison Epistles, this time Paul knew his time on earth was short. There is no hint in Paul's final words of feelings of self-pity or regret; rather, they indicate that he was going into the next life satisfied with the knowledge that he had pursued the life God had intended for him.

2 Timothy 4:6-8 - Paul was mentally, emotionally, and spiritually prepared to meet God

- I. v. 6 - Paul states that he was prepared to be poured out like a drink offering, a reference to his impending execution
 - A. Old Testament background:
 - 1. Drink offerings were a common act of worship in the Old Testament
 - 2. Numbers 15:1-10 - many times offered with something else. The drink offering complements another offering. - see also Lev. 23:18, 37; Num. 29:6, 16.
 - B. Paul using drink offering is the loss of life (in the service of Christ) is the final act in a life of sacrifice for Him
 - 1. Philippians 2:17 - "Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all"
 - 2. Paul was willing to offer his life (drink offering) for Christ because what is on the other side of this life is of inestimable value
- II. v. 7 - Paul confidently stated that he had "agonized the beautiful agony" of being obedient to God's calling in his life and living the Christian life by faith in the promises of God
 - A. God enabled Paul to complete his desire and to finish his course
 - B. Phil 3:12-14 - Paul was not stating that he had lived the perfect life
 - C. Paul was stating that by God's grace, he had pursued what God intended for him to pursue
- III. v. 8 - Paul couldn't wait to see His Savior

Paul's God-given course was unique in the history of the Church. With that being said, God does have a course for each believer. These are the "good works" that God determined for you in eternity past. While our God-given course may not look like Paul's, do we share his sensitivity and desire to be used by Him in the days we have left in this life?

Paul's writings demonstrate that it is a normal part of the human experience to have anxious thoughts about what death is going to be like. Whether death might come by

execution, as in Paul's case, or debilitating disease, or accident, or even in the calmness of sleep, death can be a fearful thing, but what sets the believer in Christ apart from others is that we do not need to fear the finality of death. Every Christian can echo Paul's words when he wrote to the Corinthians,

"So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?" - 1 Cor. 15:54-55

While the Bible does not reveal all that the next life will entail, it does provide us with enough information to know that an eternity of fellowship with our gracious God and the possession of our glorified bodies will make even the greatest experience in this life pale in comparison. Now that is something to look forward to!

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