

# 735 *What Is Your Future?*

## *Phil Sanders*

### *God's Answers to Life's Questions*

Everyone one of us has a past, a present, and a future. Have you thought lately about who you are, why you are what you are, and where you are going? The apostle Paul was an amazing servant of Jesus Christ who had confidence in his future. Do you have confidence that one day you will go to heaven? Paul said in 2 Timothy 4:6-8, "For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing." I can't imagine any greater blessing in life than knowing I am right with God and have a home with Him in heaven. And I can't imagine a worse fate than being separated from Him for an eternity. I want to stay close to God.

Everyone has a past, a present, and a future. If you have lived long at all, it is likely that your past is mixed. Some things were loving and good, while others are filled with regret and hurt. Our past matters, because the experiences of our past shape our thinking in the present. Paul spoke about his past on several occasions. In 1 Timothy 1:12-16, Paul said, "I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into service, even though I was formerly a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent aggressor. Yet I was shown mercy because I acted ignorantly in unbelief; and the grace of our Lord was more than abundant, with the faith and love which are *found* in Christ Jesus. It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, among whom I am foremost of *all*. Yet for this reason I found mercy, so that in me as the foremost, Jesus Christ might demonstrate His perfect patience as an example for those who would believe in Him for eternal life."

You could imagine how Paul felt. He was Saul of Tarsus, who had put people in prison, who had taken away their homes, who had held the coats of those who stoned Stephen, and who had blasphemed the Name of Christ. We have all felt the sting of guilt at some point in our lives, but it must be especially difficult to think that once you were the chief of sinners. On the other side of the coin, Paul as Saul of Tarsus was deeply involved in his Jewish spiritual life. In Philippians 3:4-6, "If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless." Paul was no ordinary Jew.

He was circumcised the eighth day, according to the Law, and according to the covenant God made with Abraham. Circumcision was a sign of belonging to the family of Abraham; one could not be regarded faithful as a Jew and not be circumcised. Paul was by birth in the nation of Israel and in the tribe of Benjamin. The tribe of Benjamin remained with Judah when the kingdom of Israel divided. Paul was a Hebrew of Hebrews. A Hebrew was a Jew who was not only of pure racial descent but also deliberately retained the Hebrew tongue. Paul kept his native tongue. Paul was a trained Pharisee. The word "Pharisee" refers to a Jew who had pledged to keep the Law meticulously. They separated themselves from the common people in order to maintain their righteousness, based on the Law.

Paul could boast of his fleshly record with the best of them. He could say, "As to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless." In fact, in Acts 23:1 Paul said, "Brothers, I have lived my life before God in all good conscience up to this day." Paul was truly devoted to what he believed. But there was something more valuable to him than being a Pharisee. He said in Philippians 3:7-11, "But

whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead."

To know Christ and live with him eternally was more important than anything. More important that his being a Pharisee, his being of the tribe of Benjamin, his being a Hebrew of Hebrews, or his personal righteousness which is by the Law. A close, loving relationship with the Son of God, a person is more important than all his accomplishments. Jeremiah said in Jeremiah 9:23-24: Thus says the LORD, "Let not a wise man boast of his wisdom, and let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the LORD who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the LORD." Paul knew Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Creator, the Savior, and the Lord. Nothing was more important than that.

Do you know the Lord? Do you have a close, loving, peaceful relationship with the One who created you? Is He your Lord and Savior? Do you believe in Him? There must be something is having a relationship with Jesus that would make a man give up everything to maintain that relationship. Paul gave up a lot to become a Christian, but what he gave up seemed to him but rubbish, in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ. What Paul gained in Christ was far more valuable. Earlier in the book of Philippians, Paul had said, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). Paul's whole life and being were wrapped up in Christ, with Christ, and for Christ. Perhaps that is why he would not only give up anything, he would also endure anything to keep that relationship.

In 2 Corinthians 11:23-28 Paul said, "Are they servants of Christ? I am a better one—I am talking like a madman—with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches."

Jesus told two parables in Matthew 13 that make me think of Paul's sacrifice to be a Christian. The first is the parable of the hidden treasure found in Matthew 13:44, "The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which a man found and covered up. Then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field." In early days during war, people would hide their treasures in a cave or by a tree, so that the enemy couldn't take it. If the enemy then killed the people of that village, the treasure would remain hidden until someone found it. This man found a great treasure hidden and was willing to sell all that he had to get that treasure. Jesus and the kingdom is worth giving up everything to possess.

The second parable tells of the pearl of great price. Jesus said in Matthew 13:45-46, "Again, the kingdom of heaven is like a merchant

in search of fine pearls, who, on finding one pearl of great value, went and sold all that he had and bought it." It would take a pearl merchant to know one pearl from another. Some people think one religion is as good as another or one church is as good as another, but Jesus knew better. The kingdom of heaven is like the valuable pearl. You give up everything else to be in the kingdom of heaven. Nothing else compares. The kingdom of heaven, the kingdom Jesus purchased with his own blood, is more precious than anything. Paul gave up everything to be in the kingdom of Christ, the kingdom of heaven.

Paul said in Colossians 1:13-14, "For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins." The Lord Jesus gave Paul a righteousness that came by faith, not by the works of the Law. Paul's faith in Christ could do what the Law was unable to do. Jesus died on the cross to atone for our sins, and He was by His blood able to rescue us and forgive us. At the time He forgave us, He also put us into His kingdom, which is the church. Our whole lives changed; we are no longer controlled by the domain of darkness. The domain of darkness is Satan's domain, a domain of sin and condemnation. We are now children of light with promise and in the family of God. That is a pearl of great price, worth giving up everything else.

Paul wanted to go to heaven, to attain the resurrection. He said in Philippians 3:12-14, "Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus." Paul not only forgot what was behind, he was pressing on, stretching, straining, and reaching for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. He was pressing on in faith and dedication to go to heaven. He wanted to go to heaven that badly. My friend, how badly do you want to go?

Paul said he wasn't perfect. Nobody is perfect. Wish we could be, but nobody is. Paul hadn't arrived, hadn't attained the resurrection, but he was straining forward to reach it. He was staying faithful, keeping his heart right, keeping his life clean from sin the best he could, and focusing on the goal. He couldn't let his past get in the way, so he put it out of his mind. Now, no one can forget what they do and what happens to them. In fact, Paul mentions his past life as a persecutor six times. He said about himself in 1 Corinthians 15:9-10, "For I am the least of the apostles, and not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me." You see, Paul could put it behind him and stop focusing on his sin, because God had forgiven him. Paul understood the wonderful gift of God's grace and forgiveness.

Paul didn't let that grace prove vain. He worked harder than all the apostles, and God's grace worked with him and through him. Some folks go to church and "get saved." Then they leave the church and live as if nothing ever happened. The grace of God for them was some kind of emotional thing at church, but it never got into their daily lives. They could not say, "For me to live is Christ." Lots of people want Jesus to be their Savior, but they aren't sure about Jesus as their Lord. They want to be saved but not change from their old way of life. They want the grace of Christ, but grace has to work in their lives. Otherwise it proves vain. That's what Paul meant. We have to take the grace of God seriously enough to leave the old sinful things in the past and to begin a life of love and service for the cause of Christ.

You see, we are born again to serve Christ. Paul said in Ephesians 2:8-10, "For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand so that we would walk in them." Do you take that gift seriously enough to understand that you were created in Christ (that is born again) for the purpose of doing good works. God planned it that way from the beginning. He saved you from the domain of darkness and gave you the forgiveness of sins so that your life would be a blessing. He wanted you to be an example of good in an evil and corrupt world.

Has that grace proved true in you? When the Lord Jesus looks at your life, does He see how that grace made a difference? Some of you listening to me, no doubt, have made great changes in your life. You love the Lord, you help others, you attend church regularly, and you give of yourself. Others, however, have not taken the grace of Christ so seriously. Some are still living wicked lives, some haven't been to church to worship in years, and some only think of what they can get out of church rather than what they can give to the Lord. Knowing Jesus Christ is more than "getting saved"; it is living the Christian life everyday. Knowing Christ is a relationship with the Lord, loving the Lord, praising Him, praying to Him, being an active part of His family the church, keeping His commandments, giving of our time and talents to cause, and sacrificing ourselves to reach out to a lost and dying world. I pray the grace of God has proved true in you and not vain. How sad it would be to have known the grace of God but to lose it. Don't let that happen to you.

Paul lived with the future in mind. He said in Philippians 3:20-21, "For our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ; who will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory, by the exertion of the power that He has even to subject all things to Himself." I am very proud to be an American citizen. I love my country, but I am first and foremost a citizen of heaven. Citizenship in America is only temporary; my citizenship in heaven will last forever. My Lord is in heaven, my permanent residence is in heaven, my inheritance is in heaven, and my heart is looking to heaven. Paul said in Colossians 3:1-4, "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God. When Christ who is your life appears, then you also will appear with him in glory." I want to go to heaven when I die. I hope you do too. To make the transition from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of his beloved son, you must be saved by grace. To be saved by grace, you must believe with all your heart that Jesus Christ is the Son of God and Lord. You must repent and change your heart and life from the old way of sin to the new way of service and righteousness. You must confess the Name of Jesus before men. And, you must be baptized into Christ. You do this by being immersed in water in His name. The result of your baptism is that God washes away your sins and adds you to His church. He takes away the old man of sin and gives you new life. It is in baptism that you are born again. Perhaps you obeyed the gospel but have wandered away from the Lord and want to return to Him. You can do that today by considering the grace of God and seeing it as the hidden treasure or the pearl of great price. Let the cross of Christ touch your heart again. When your heart is open to Christ, you will put away the sin and start embracing the good once again.

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Concord Road Church of Christ  
8221 Concord Rd., Brentwood, TN 37027  
1-877-226-5747

[phil@God-answers.org](mailto:phil@God-answers.org)

[www.tv.God-answers.org](http://www.tv.God-answers.org)