

Installment 11

Saturday Night Special

And this is my prayer:

that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.¹

It had been a wonderful time and Ruth and I were returning with some friends from a delicious dinner under a quarter moon against a cold black sky. We were telling tales, some of them tall, and laughing when it happened. Ann was driving and our car was coming out of a short turn when we met another vehicle coming right at us; the driver had crossed the double stripe and was roaring toward us. It so happened that the left lane was full and there was a ditch to our right and for a split second there were three cars side by side, our car was to the right on this two lane road. Ann yelled that a car was heading for us but she had only a second to react. Sitting in the rear seat behind Ann I saw nothing but a blur out of my window. Ann yelled again: “The car is on fire!” Then, looking in her rear view mirror, she said, “The car has hit something! It exploded!” It had. The car behind us caught it head on. When the automobiles came to rest, the front of one car was in its back, two people were injured and another dead. It was 8:04 Saturday night, November 1, 2008, ALL SAINTS DAY.

“He almost died.”

In a short while we will study Paul’s letter to the Christians at Philippi, but for now I want to share a personal note with you about our experience Saturday night. However, it is appropriate that I give you a base for my thoughts, a base that comes from the Apostle’s encouraging words to some Christians under stress.

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.²

¹ Philippians 1:9-11, TNIV.

A word from Paul about a fellow worker:

But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety. Welcome him in the Lord with great joy, and honor people like him, because he almost died for the work of Christ. He risked his life to make up for the help you yourselves could not give me.³

It was not a chariot that threatened Epaphroditus or robbers from the hills, but a sickness, a sickness that almost killed him. And the sickness that overcame this Christian co-worker of Paul's was regarded in a way that almost made him a martyr for Christ. But what kind of death knocked at Epaphroditus' door? And when was he stricken with an illness that threatened his ministry, that might keep him from reaching his home and ministering one more time in the name of the Lord? We are not told. All we can do is speculate. Obviously it was not important enough for Paul to mention or the Philippians might have known from other sources already. It is likely that the Philippian church heard a rumor about Epaphroditus and Paul's paragraph is confirmation that the rumor was indeed true. The good and true Epaphroditus had come close—too close for comfort—and had made it! Yes! He came through! Praise God! Our friend made it!

Paul tells us how much anxiety he had over Epaphroditus' situation: *Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow.* Yes, God's "mercy" was poured out on this co-worker and on the Apostle. God spared Epaphroditus and Paul: but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. God spared Paul from "wave upon wave of grief."⁴ This is the only time in the New Testament that this phrase is used. Paul means that God spared him "one grief after another." Here we see Paul, the Apostle of hope, the one who wrote 1:23 as though he was the master of death: *Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn be-*

² Philippians 1:21-24, TNIV.

³ Philippians 2:25-30, TNIV.

⁴ Gerald F. Hawthorne, Word Biblical Commentary: Philippians, p.118f.

tween the two: I desire to depart and be with **Christ**, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

In the same letter Paul acts as though it was his to make the decision between life and death for himself. He is almost cavalier about death. Later in chapter 2 Paul shows us another face, that of a man who was on the brink of despondency at the prospect of the death of a good friend. After all, death was in fact an enemy⁵ to Paul, to all Christians. When one dies, this morbid reaper death calls the resurrection of Jesus into question, makes us hesitate at the notion of triumph over this evil. Some reading these words have lost a spouse, a child, a best friend and do not take it lightly. But perhaps Paul's two views on death in this letter do in fact help us understand the dynamics of death and hope. Death is too real; it opens our floodgates easily. Yet we do have hope; our Lord was resurrected and promises as much for us. We have a promise that overrides the stark reality of death. We can talk of heaven and not be filled with wishful thinking.

Now, how does Paul's letter address itself to what happened Saturday night? Paul depends on **the sovereignty of God** to make things right, regardless of how things are perceived by the human community: "**God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me.**" The idea here is that God moves men and nations toward His own end and for His own glory. But what do we mean when we say **God is sovereign**?

1. To say **God is sovereign** means that God created the worlds and has control of them and all that is on or in them.
2. To say **God is sovereign** means that God alone is Creator/Redeemer/Judge and that no other god exists beside Him.
3. To say **God is sovereign** means that God sets the standard of righteousness by which human beings live and are judged.

A more detailed definition of what the **sovereignty of God** means is given to us by A.W. Pink, a noted biblical commentator.

"The Sovereignty of God. What do we mean by this expression? We mean the supremacy of God, the kingship of God, the god-hood of God. To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that God is God. To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is the Most High, doing according to His will in the army of Heaven, and among the inhabitants of the earth, so that none can stay His hand or say unto Him what doest Thou? (Dan. 4:35). To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is the Almighty, the Possessor of all power in Heaven and earth, so that none can defeat His counsels,

⁵ 1 Corinthians 15:26.

thwart His purpose, or resist His will (Psa. 115:3). To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is "The Governor among the nations" (Psa. 22:28), setting up kingdoms, overthrowing empires, and determining the course of dynasties as pleaseth Him best. To say that God is Sovereign is to declare that He is the "Only Potentate, the King of kings, and Lord of lords" (1 Tim. 6:15). Such is the God of the Bible."⁶

I suggest you review the three points on God's sovereignty followed by a careful analysis of Pink's definition. Pink used some language which is not commonly used today and so you may have to look up a few words. The task is worth it however! You will see how important this teaching is when it comes to understanding the Biblical concept of God. Now, place your life alongside Pink's definition and see what it might mean to you. As far as our near miss and then direct hit on Saturday night is concerned the sovereignty of God may mean the following: **To know God's sovereignty is a matter of the hidden depths of God's own being. No human is permitted to know the inner character of God or, in fact, to question His motives, which are for our good whether we know it or not. Therefore we rejoice at being spared and grieve for those who suffer...trusting God's hidden goodness and design.**

The Deepest Knowledge

I realize that many would turn up their noses at that last sentence. But I am not speaking to non-Christians in this paper but to Christians, to those whose lives have been mysteriously touched by the redeeming love of Christ, to those who have turned their lives over to Him with full confidence in His care. I am talking to those who live in countries where it is a crime to be a Christian, to those who have learned that being "in Christ", as Paul liked to say, is no guarantee against pain and anguish. I am speaking to those who seem about to lose their faith, who suffer pain and death.

Years ago I discovered a small book that changed my Christian life for the better. It was written by a 17th century teacher, Jean-Pierre de Caussade, a book entitled Abandonment to Divine Providence. It seems like every page has some spiritual gem to be mined by those who genuinely seek God. For example, try this,

The realization that God is active in all that happens at every moment is the deepest knowledge we can have in this life of the things of God. It is a continuous revelation, an endlessly renewed traffic with God; the bridegroom is enjoyed without any stealth or secrecy, not in the wine cellar or

⁶ See A. W. Pink on the inter-net, The Sovereignty of God, Chapter One. Emphasis mine.

the vineyard but openly and freely and fearing no one. It is peace, joy, love and a feeling of of being at ease with God who is seen and known -- or, rather, believed – to be present and always active in the most faultless way in every happening.⁷

I am confident that the Apostle Paul knew this as a Christian truth: that God is at work for our good all the time and all we must do is trust God and rest in His grace. This goes for three automobiles side by side in the dark of night rushing toward a fiery destiny just as much as the making of vows between a man and woman in the free exchange of love at an altar of marriage. I am also confident that Paul learned this at Jesus' feet in the years of silence after the Apostle's conversion. I am also sure his natural mindset drew back on a first hearing of these words of Jesus: *Then Jesus said to his disciples, "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me."*⁸ Then he learned to rest in them, realizing that they are true and good.

The disciple of Matthew 16:24 is literally to "come after me," willing set aside his best interests and accept God's best interests instead, accept the world's rejection, and become openly a disciple (or student) of Jesus Christ, doing what He says. Go back over that long sentence, breaking it up into its several parts. This is what baptism means to us, dying to self willingly (the cross for us) and rising to new life by a standard we have not known before (a resurrection). To many this may seem hard. We are suddenly ripped apart and have no way to understand such violence except chance, being at the wrong place at the wrong time. Christians opt for another explanation. God is using pain and death to weave a tapestry of beauty unknown to us now. All we see is tatters, but God always works for our good and will redeem our anguish, making good of it. Christians praise God from a broken heart, assured that praise overcomes death.

There is more but we will have to save it for another time.

In the meantime: Let God be praised!

--Jerry Mercer

--November 6, 2008

⁷ P. 117, John Beevers, Tr. Emphasis mine.

⁸ Matthew 16:24, TNIV.