

HOW TO LIVE A MEANINGFUL LIFE

SERIES: PAUL, AN INSTRUMENT OF THE RISEN CHRIST

By Ron Ritchie

On Friday last I entered my 55th year on this earth. Usually, birthdays are joyful occasions. They are times when family and friends gather to celebrate the "numbering of our days." But birthdays can be sobering times, too. They are opportunities to take an account of life, to look back and see if we have redeemed our season on earth to the best of our knowledge and abilities, knowing full well that not every choice was filled with godly wisdom. Yet at the same time, birthdays are occasions for looking ahead in anticipation that the Lord might enable us to focus even more clearly on how we should live so as to please him.

This is what the apostle Peter had in mind when he wrote to the Christians in Asia Minor, "conduct yourselves in fear [in reverence for our Lord] during the time of your stay upon the earth." (1 Pet. 3:17). We all must give to our Lord an account of our lives, how we used our talents, spiritual gifts and resources, for, as the apostle Paul says in his Ephesian letter, "we are [God's] workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10). Birthdays, then, are suitable occasions to check and see if we are living a meaningful spiritual life, one that brings praise and honor to the One who has given his life for us so that we could experience eternal life even now.

This is what we want to talk about today, how to live a meaningful life, not in the sense that the world defines that word, but rather in the sense that it is defined by our risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, the giver of eternal life to all who are willing to place their faith in Him. Our guide will be the apostle Paul, as we seek to answer this question. We have reached the final study in the life of this great man. At last he has arrived in Rome, a city he long wanted to visit, but hardly in the circumstances in which we find him. It is spring of the year 60 A.D., and the apostle is chained to one of Emperor Nero's praetorian guards, awaiting an audience with Nero. Paul has already established contact with the leading Jews of the city and has had an opportunity to present his side of his case to them, declaring that in reality the Romans had no case against him; he had been trapped in a political corner and was forced to appeal to Caesar. So while awaiting his trial the Jews wanted to hear about the Christian "sect" of which Paul was a leader.

The apostle demonstrated to them that Jesus was the "Hope of Israel," and that at this time his kingdom was spiritual, not material as they had hoped. They responded in the fashion to which Paul was accustomed: some of them believed that Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah, while others rejected the whole idea. To those who rejected his message, Paul quoted the prophet Isaiah, warning Israel that if they rejected the good news of Christ, He would have it delivered to the Gentiles.

Concluding his history of the early church in the book of Acts, then, Dr. Luke writes these final two verses concerning the apostle, saying that Paul remained on in his rented quarters in Rome for two full years.

How does one live a meaningful life in light of these captivating circumstances? If you were to put this question to Paul, there is no doubt that he would respond,

I. Invite Jesus to be King of your life

Acts 28 : 30-31

And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters, and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.

Paul was free to love strangers. As we have already seen in our studies in the life of Paul, life in Christ is lived on the basis of faith. And living by faith means that God does not spell out the details in advance. Earlier, the Lord had said to Paul, "Take courage, for as you have solemnly witnessed to My cause at Jerusalem [in chains before the Supreme Court] so you must witness [in chains] at Rome also" (Acts 23:11). The apostle did not know that he would spend two years under house arrest in Caesarea and there have an opportunity to witness to two governors and a king. The Lord did not tell Paul that he would witness to a Roman centurion and 275 men on a ship bound for Rome; or that during a two-week storm he would be told by an angel of the Lord that he "...must stand before Caesar.." (27:24), only to be shipwrecked off the shores of Malta. The Lord did not tell Paul that he would witness on the island of Malta for several months before he arrived at Rome. When at last he came to Rome, Paul was merely told that he would have the opportunity to stand before Caesar, but the Lord did not tell him that he would have another two-year wait. When you live a life of faith in Jesus as your leader, you are given many opportunities to be hospitable. Whether in Jerusalem, Caesarea, or on board a ship bound for Rome, Paul was no different. He freely welcomed all who came to him, as he did in Rome during these two years.

Paul was free to reflect the life of Jesus. So what did the apostle do during the two years when he was chained to a Roman guard while waiting for an appointment with Nero? Paul's life and message had an attractiveness which resulted from the risen Christ's indwelling him. While it was true that he was imprisoned by Rome and chained to a Roman guard, so as to impair his physical movements, the righteousness, peace and joy produced in him by the indwelling Holy Spirit were not imprisoned or restricted in any way. His many disciples gathered around him: Luke, Aristarchus, Epaphras, Demas, Timothy, Tychicus and Mark, as well as the slave Onesimus. Paul's life and ministry were so attractive that people in the city of Rome wanted to see him and talk to him about his life and message:

Paul was free to preach the Kingdom of God. The apostle's message was radical in a city so heavily influenced by Nero and by his dark and powerful empire, where the emperor was heralded as a god/king. In a city filled with Roman and Greek temples dedicated to a variety of gods and goddess, Paul was free to herald the good news about Jesus, the King of kings, who could set people free from the darkness in which they walked. During his days on earth, Jesus had said, "the kingdom of God is in your midst." He was the only hope for both Jews and Gentiles to be set free from Satan and all his destructive powers. Jesus was the One whom the Law and the prophets had spoken about. He was the key who would open the door to the new kingdom to both Jews and Gentiles. That was how one could begin to live in a meaningful way.

Paul was free to write to his spiritual children. During this two-year period when he was not preaching about the Kingdom of God, he found time to write about the kingdom to his spiritual children in Ephesus. Paul had come to Ephesus in 56 A.D. during his third missionary journey. He remained there for three years, appointed elders, and then moved on to Greece. Five years later he wrote to this church (the letter was hand-carried by Tychicus (6:21-22), encouraging believers to remember all the new relationships they had entered into since they had invited Jesus into their hearts as King and were placed into the body of Christ. The Ephesian letter encouraged them how to live a spiritually meaningful life to the honor and glory of Jesus Christ in the center of a another wicked and corrupt society.

The Ephesian letter speaks of the many new relationships which the believer enters into upon his coming to faith. For instance, it refers to the Christian's:

Relationship with the Father:

Believers are chosen to be adopted sons by a holy and blameless God, to His glory.

Relationship with the Son:

They are redeemed by his blood.

Relationship with the Spirit:

They are sealed for eternity in God the Father.

Relationship with the Body:

Jew and Gentile are made into one new man. Christians are fellow-heirs, fellow-members, fellow-partakers.

Relationship with the World:

Walk as children of light.

Relationship in marriage:

Husband loves wife as Christ loved the Church; wives submit and respect husbands, as unto the Lord.

Relationship in family:

Children: obey and honor parents; fathers: do not provoke children to wrath; bring them up in discipline/instruction of the Lord.

Relationship of employment:

Employees work as unto the Lord; employers render service as unto the Lord.

Relationship to Satan:

"Be strong in the Lord and the strength of his might," because the devil will seek to destroy all of these relationships.

These then are the relationships which Paul wrote about in his Ephesian letter concerning the Kingdom of God. He sounded a word of warning in chapter 5 in the words, " For you know with certainty, that no immoral or impure person or covetous man who is an idolator, has an inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and God" (5:5). Faith in Christ, in other words, is a prerequisite to entry into this kingdom. Sinners must understand their need for a Deliverer, and that Jesus Christ is their deliverer.

Last month, a couple from this church told me they had met a young Frenchman named Eric, who comes from from Nice, on their plane trip back from France. They wanted us to met him for he was a growing Christian and hungry for fellowship. The following week he worshipped with us here and spent a few days with our family. Last week he went with us to Westmont, where we dropped off my son Rodd for his senior year. We had a wonderful time listening to Eric share his faith in Christ. His mother had come to faith through a Catholic prayer group. Two years later his father went on a spiritual retreat and was born again, and his character so changed that it had a great influence on Eric. Several months later his Catholic aunt, who was born again, invited him to stay at her house for a few days. He asked her if she would pray with him. They did so and he invited Jesus to deliver him out of the kingdom of darkness, to become King of his life and place him into the kingdom of Light. That was seven years ago and ever since that day he told us that he wants to serve his new

King all the days of his life. What a joy it was to be in his presence this past week!

How to live a meaningful life: Invite Jesus to be King of your life, and.

II. Invite Jesus to be Lord of your life Acts 28:31

...and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered.

Paul was free to teach that Jesus is Lord. During this same two-year period, the apostle not only used every opportunity to preach about the Kingdom of God, but also taught that Jesus of Nazareth was the risen Lord and Christ. As Peter preached on the day of Pentecost, "This Jesus God raised up again...therefore having been exalted to the right hand of God...therefore let all the house of Israel know for certain that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2: 32-33; 36).

The risen Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is inviting men and women everywhere to personally acknowledge his Lordship. And he is Lord whether men acknowledge it or not. Those who invite him to become Lord of their lives will be saved from sin and death and given eternal life, the forgiveness of sins, and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Paul was free to write three more letters. Again, when he was not teaching about the Lordship of Jesus, Paul was writing about this subject in a letter to the Philippian believers. In 51 A.D., Philippi was the first European city to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ from the lips of Paul and Silas. Here is where Lydia and her family heard the gospel; where the earthquake which resulted in Paul being freed from prison occurred, and his jailer and his family came to faith.

Now, some 10 years later, Paul writes a most encouraging and joyful letter about Jesus as Lord, setting out who Jesus was to him. For example, the apostle shares in this letter that

The Lord Jesus is my life:

"For to me to live is Christ and to die gain" (1:21).

The Lord Jesus is my example:

He became a servant (2:5-11).

The Lord Jesus is my quest:

"That I may know Him and the power of His resurrection" (3:10)

The Lord Jesus is my strength:

"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (4:13).

While Paul was under house arrest for those two years, the "chain reaction" of the gospel of the Lord Jesus was having its effect among the Roman praetorian guard. The apostle says this in the Philippian letter, "Now I want you to know my brethren that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard.." (1:12-13). And he signs off the letter by saying, "The brethren who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household" (4:22)

.Regardless of his circumstances, Paul continued to have a meaningful life in Christ as he wrote about Jesus as

Lord to the believers in Colossae, some 100 miles east of Ephesus. The apostle may never have visited this church, which was born because of his faithful teaching and the faithful shepherding of Epaphras, who told Paul of the faith and love among the Christians in Colossae as well as a heresy which was threatening to pervert the gospel. "As you have received Christ Jesus as the Lord, so walk in Him" (2:1), wrote Paul. Reflect the life of Christ in and through you, in other words. If Jesus is your Lord, then act in a way that glorifies him. In a word of encouragement to the Colossians, Paul says, "And whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father" (3:17). Live in such a way that in everything, word or deed, Jesus can be seen to be your Lord and Master. This is how to live a meaningful life.

Finally, during this same two-year period of his house arrest, Paul wrote the little note to Philemon, which is also part of our New Testament. He had met the runaway slave of Philemon, Onesimus, in Rome. This man had robbed his master, but while he was in Rome he had come to know Jesus as Lord under Paul's ministry. Now as a new creature in Christ, but still a slave on earth, Paul had persuaded Onesimus to return to his master and with him sent a letter to his friend on behalf of his new convert. He encouraged Philemon to receive Onesimus back not only as a slave, but as a new brother who had made Jesus His Lord, saying, "I hear of your love, and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus, and toward all the saints...(1:5) ...if he [Onesimus] has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account... (1:19) the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit" (1:25).

How to live a meaningful life? Invite Jesus to be King and Lord of your life. Then you will live each day knowing that your life is no longer your own, it has been brought with a price. You will be able to say that to live is Christ and to die is to gain. Your life will have a single focus--that everything you do in the age of the Spirit, whether in word or deed, you will do to the honor of your Lord and King Jesus Christ.

During the past two years we have studied the ministry of the apostle Paul and we have seen a meaningful life lived out before our eyes. In his example we have seen demonstrated how we too can live a meaningful life. We have met Paul, the new man in Christ. Intellectually, he was a brilliant, well-schooled zealot. Emotionally, he was compassionate, tender, fearful, loving, encouraging, and a little stubborn. Spiritually, he saw himself as a servant, slave, ambassador, apostle, preacher, teacher and prisoner of the Lord Jesus. His life was no longer his own. He had been converted on the Damascus Road in 34 or 35 A.D.; and called by the risen Lord to become a "chosen instrument to bear His name before the Gentiles, kings and the children of Israel and suffer much for His name's sake" (Acts 9:15).

Paul spent ten years in Tarsus, and then Barnabas brought him to Jerusalem and later to his home church in Antioch, a Gentile church in northern Syria. Three wonderful missionary journeys followed, with hundreds of new converts and dozens of new churches established in Turkey, Cyprus, Greece and Malta, together with scores of disciples and elders. And as for his letters, the Holy Spirit has kept intact some 13 letters which have guided the church of Jesus Christ for 2,000 years. Dr Luke may have used this two-year period of Paul's house arrest in Rome to complete his second letter to Theophilus, covering the 30-year history of the activities of the Holy Spirit working through his apostles and disciples to both Jews and Gentiles alike. Luke had joined Paul in Troas during the second missionary journey in Troas, and entered the European mainland with Paul and Silas. Now, some 11 years later, Luke places a period at the end of verse 31. He does not record anything of Paul's trial, whether he was convicted or released, so the question remains, Did Paul's accusers arrive from Jerusalem, win their case against "the pest of Israel," and see him taken outside the walls and beheaded? Or was Paul confronted by his Jewish accusers, declared innocent of all charges by Nero, and set free? Based on the internal evidence of Paul's letters, written to Timothy and Titus after 62 A.D., it appears that the apostle was set free for the following four or five years. He left Rome, visited Corinth, then traveled north to Macedonia (Philippi), and wrote to Timothy in Ephesus (1Tim.1:3), expressing the hope that he could visit him soon. He then took Titus to the island of Crete and left him there that "...he might set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city" (Titus 1:5). Finally, he may have fulfilled his desire to go to Spain (Rom.15:28). Somewhere along the line he was arrested again and taken to Rome (perhaps on a political charge during the time of persecution of Christians), according to 11 Timothy, and condemned to death, for he wrote Timothy and said:

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 course, I have kept the faith. In the future 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. ...To Him be the glory for ever and ever (11 Tim 4: 6-8, 18)

Clement of Rome, a bishop who ministered close to the end of the first century, reminded the Corinthian church how Paul, "...having preached in the east and west, attained the noble renown won for him by his faith, teaching righteousness to the whole world and reaching the farthest limit of the west, bore witness before rulers and thus passed from the world and went to the holy place..." (1 Clement 5:7). Tradition tells us that Paul was beheaded by the Romans on the Appian Way.

How to live a meaningful life? Like Paul and all the faithful saints in every generation in the Age of the Spirit, you must invite the risen Lord Jesus to become your King and Lord. He will deliver you out of the kingdom of darkness and bring you into the kingdom of light. He will forgive your sins and give you the gift of eternal life, which in turn will bring you into a life, of righteousness, peace and joy, a life full of adventure, trials and pain, but one filled with purpose, value and vision, a life full of spiritual meaning. Then when this life on earth is over, you can say with Paul,

I have fought the good fight. I have finished the course, I have kept the faith. In the future 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.

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