

So what did St. Paul Say About the Second Coming? (2/2)

(Philippians 1:3-11)

The 17th Century English Poet and one time Dean of St. Paul's Cathedral London, John Donne begins his 13th Holy Sonnet with the question "What if this present were the world's last night?" This is a question the New Testament asks in various ways. In the 260 chapters of the New Testament, there are 318 references to the Second Coming of Christ. 1 out of every 30 verses. Twenty-three of the twenty-seven New Testament books refer to this great event. When the Old Testament is also considered we learn that for every prophecy in the Bible concerning Christ's first coming, there are 8 which look forward to His second! Because this theme is one that is covered repeatedly in the Bible it is important that we should always take into account the Second Coming as we live out our lives in this present world.

Advent is that time of year when the Church invites us to consider the question "What if this present were the world's last night"? Last week we answered this question by looking at St. Paul's theology of the Second Coming. This week I will further answer the question "So what does St. Paul say about the Second Coming" by looking at how this theology is to influence our lives today. We will do this by studying Philippians 1:3-11.

The theme of the Second Coming is the foundation on which Paul writes this letter. Philippians 3:20 is the corner stone on which the letter is built. There, Paul writes "Our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul teaches us that Jesus' eventual return is to influence the way we live today. In chapter 1:3-11 he teaches us that when we accept the Gospel as true we have an assurance that what God has begun to do in us he will ultimately complete. Because of this we can live in the present with affection for each other and with attentiveness in how we live.

1. Acceptance of the Gospel as True:

In verse 3 we read "I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴ constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵ because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now." Here Paul is giving thanks to God because the Philippians

have accepted the Gospel as true. From the day he first arrived in Phillipi, beginning with the conversion of a woman named Lydia, until the present day there were those who accepted Jesus Christ. Because of this Paul is filled with thanksgiving as he remembers the Philippians. Paul understands that the life of faith is a shared life. When we have fellowship with Jesus Christ we also have fellowship with one another. This is a fellowship that will last for eternity and will, on the Day of Christ be perfected.

Because of this future perfection we are to establish now relationships that grow out of our faith in Jesus. One of the things Paul highlights for us in these verses is the blessing of pleasant memories and the fellowship that creates them. Pleasant memories are especially comforting during difficult times. Despite imprisonment, Paul could pray with joyful thanksgiving as he remembered the Philippians.

It has been said that "God gave us memory so that we might have roses in December."

But memory can be a curse instead of a blessing! If we have spent our lives in sin and have troubled those around us, memory can be a curse! It has also been said "Many people live the first half of their life making the second half of their life miserable!" For memories to be a blessing to us, we are to be a blessing to others! How comforting it must have been for Paul, though experiencing imprisonment, to be able to look back upon his relationship with the Philippians with such joyful memories!

What kind of memories are we creating today? When we live with an awareness of the Second Coming sometime in the future it will influence the way we live today so that we are helping to create memories that are life giving. Like roses in December.

2. Assurance that God will complete his work in us and the affection that flows from this.

Not only does Paul speak of the blessing of memories that flows from our sharing in the Gospel he also speaks with assurance that God will complete his work in us. This is one of the most important applications we can live by when we understand that Jesus will one day come again. As your priest I want to encourage each of you to remember this. There are times when we can be discouraged by what we see as the lack of growth in our walk with Christ. This can be particularly difficult for those people who suffer from or are prone to mental illness and depression. When in the throes of emotional vulnerability it can be helpful to remember Hebrews 11.1. "Now faith is the assurance of things hoped

for, the conviction of things not seen.” With this verse in mind we apply it to what Paul writes in verse six of our passage for today. “I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.⁷ It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.”

A faith that is able to believe in this promise is not based on our own mental and emotional health. Although, to truly hold onto it, can encourage us when overwhelmed and depressed. This is because it is an assurance rooted in the faithfulness of God Himself, as expressed throughout the Scriptures. But it is also an assurance that is supported by Paul’s realization that he is not alone as he remembers that the Philippians hold him in their hearts. Paul was able to bring to mind the memories he had of the Philippians because theirs was a shared life. It was a life they both shared with God by his Spirit and a life they shared with each other.

When we live with an awareness of Christ’s return we can be assured that when we have a faith that truly trusts in the true God as he is revealed to us through the pages of the Bible, he is at work in our lives. As we continue to "work out our own salvation", God is right there with us and we have one another to share in this life together. A life marked by the kind of love Paul describes in verse 8 when he writes: “For God is my witness how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ.” Here Paul is showing us that the believer has no yearnings apart from their Lord’s. Their pulse beats with the pulse of Christ. Their heart throbs with the heart of Christ as we share this love with each other.

3. Attentiveness to how they live:

As we live out the Gospel life in light of the Second Coming not only do we live with the assurance of God completing what he has begun in us and a growing affection for each other, we will also be attentive to how we live. This is the point Paul emphasizes in verses 9-11: “And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight¹⁰ to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless,¹¹ having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God”.

It was Paul's prayer for his people that their love would grow greater every day (verses 9 and 10). And that love was not merely a sentimental thing. It was a love which was to

grow more and more in knowledge, and more and more in sensitive perception, so that they would be more and more able to distinguish between right and wrong. Love is always the way to knowledge. If we love any subject, we want to learn more and more about it; if we love any person, we want to learn more and more about him or her; if we love Jesus, we will want every day to learn more and more about Him and about His truth. Love is always sensitive to the mind and the heart of the one it loves.

If love blindly and blunderingly hurts the feelings of the one it claims to love, then it is not love at all. If we really love Jesus and consciously live out the present in light of the Second Coming, we will be sensitive to His will and His desires. The more we love Him the more tender our conscience will become; the more we will instinctively shrink from what is evil and desire that which is right. Real love leads to knowledge and obedience increasingly every day.

The word which Paul uses at verse ten that is translated into English by the word “determine” is the Greek word used when describing the testing of metal. Just as metal has to be tested to determine if it is genuine, pure and unalloyed, and not false so too with real love. Real love is always to see the difference between the false and the true. So as Christians we will desire to evermore become pure and blameless so that our professed love for Jesus is also a lived love.

The word which is used for *pure*, in verse 10 is an interesting word. The Greeks themselves were not sure of its derivation. They suggested two possible derivations, each of which has a vivid picture. It may come from the Greek words for *sunshine* and *to judge*. It may describe that which is able to stand the test of the sunshine, that which can be exposed to the sun, held up to the light of the sun, without any flaw appearing. If that be the meaning of the word, it means that the Christian character can stand any light that is turned upon it.

But the word *pure* may be derived from another Greek word, which means to whirl round and round as in a sieve and so to sift until every impurity is extracted. If that is the meaning, it means that the Christian character is cleansed and sifted of all evil until it is altogether pure. It is Paul’s understanding that ultimately we will be able to stand up to any light that is turned upon our character because in the present Jesus is at work sifting out every impurity from our lives.

But not only is the Christian growing in purity he or she is also to be blameless. The Greek word that is translated here as blameless more accurately means “not causing another person to stumble.” There are people who are themselves growing in purity but who are so hard and harsh and austere that they in the end drive people away from Christ. There are people who are good, but they are so critical of others that they repel other people from goodness. The Christian is himself or herself pure, but their love and their gentleness are such that they attract others to the Christian way and never want to repel them from it by their own character.

Paul took to heart that question “What if this present were the world’s last night?” In answering it he teaches us here in Philippians that we are to be a people whose acceptance of the Gospel is shaping our lives in such away that

- We have assurance that God is at work in our lives
- A growing affection for one another
- A desire to be attentive in living lives that are becoming evermore pure and blameless.