

EXCEPT FOR THESE CHAINS: A TESTIMONY

The Apostle Paul, writing to the believers in Corinth, came to the subject of the freedom God gives us to eat anything we want. What do we do when we are around people who feel that certain foods are forbidden? Paul writes: *“Everything is permissible” – but not everything is beneficial. “Everything is permissible” – but not everything is constructive. None of us should seek our own good, but the good of others. So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God. Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God – even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ (1 Corinthians 10:23,24; 31-33; 11:1).*

How much instruction, how much information is contained in those verses! Obviously Paul is not only talking about food here, but of a lifestyle (“whatever you do”), a way of life that has three aims: the glory of God, the building up of believers and the salvation of others. Paul laid aside his own desires when they conflicted with the good of others. Sometimes things didn’t work out as he had hoped (“I try to please everybody”). Paul copied this lifestyle from the one on whom he had fixed his eyes: our Lord Jesus Christ. He was confident that if others followed the way he lived, they would actually be following Christ, and that is what he wanted more than anything else.

Years ago I heard a preacher give an excellent sermon on this Bible passage. When he came to “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ,” however, he made it clear that we are to follow Paul, not him. “I can’t invite you to follow me,” he said. I was stunned! True, I don’t know exactly what he meant by his statement, but I couldn’t believe someone would dare to preach if, in copying their lifestyle, people would not draw closer to Christ. I am not quite so naive now as I once was, but I still think the goal of God’s messengers should be exactly the same as Paul’s.

After the service I asked a young man, whom I knew to be devout, if he would like people to follow him as he follows Christ and he said yes. “I would too,” I replied.

* * * * *

This is the last of my transitional essays. I wrote the above section plus some notes in the autumn of 2005 while living in Drum Hill and am finishing it at Sky View in June, 2006. One of the reasons I delayed the completion of this essay is that other pieces demanded more immediate attention. But there was something else, something subtler that I had been trying to figure out for years to no avail. During a visit two days ago (on May 31) my son George, in response to an email I had sent him, gave a marvelous monologue that resonated with my soul. I awoke during the night with his words running through my mind. Not only did I find in them the elusive answer to my questions but I knew his words belonged in this essay. My bed became a place of worship as I marveled at what God had done for me!

If I had tape recorded George’s words, I would write them out for you verbatim. As it is, I must trust that God will draw from my memory a true representation of what he said. George had just finished mailing packages of essays and catalogs to a group of people dear to my heart. He let me know the job was done. I emailed back my thanks, acknowledging the size of the project, and then added: “Glad it’s done, though. Part of the Kingdom work assigned to me.” George began by referring to that email:

“You have a confidence, a certainty about you. You seem to know what it is you are supposed to do. And that brings with it a satisfaction, a sense of accomplishment when it is over.” I agreed that both thoughts were true. Then he continued:

“When you read the Bible, you believe it is talking to you. When Paul says we are Christ’s ambassadors, for example, most people would think that means Paul and perhaps Timothy. You think it means you are an ambassador for Christ! And when you read ‘Give thanks in all circumstances’ and ‘Pray without ceasing,’ you think you are actually supposed to do that.” I kept nodding in agreement. George was not saying I was wrong; he was just letting me know that not everyone approaches Scripture the same way I do.

George picked wonderful examples to show how I look at Scripture. Paul says: *We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:20).* I believe so much that I am one of Christ’s ambassadors that years ago I had Marty make some calling cards for me. Underneath my name I had her write “Ambassador for Christ.” My phone number was there and one more piece of information: 24 hours a day. Marty asked if I wanted to make that 23 and 1/2 hours, as some businesses do, but I said no. I think an ambassador is who you are, not what you do. We cannot take a break from who we are! When I was teaching on this passage, I would sometimes pass around small pieces of paper and suggest that people make their own ambassador calling cards. I thought that high calling belonged to all believers. Still do!

One habit I developed early is thinking about earthly things and then transferring those thoughts to the spiritual realm. Implied in this is the fact that I believe the spiritual realm is real: that there truly is a Kingdom of God and a place called Heaven. What’s more, I am a citizen of Heaven, well known by the King of Kings, loyal and accountable to him. Sometimes I do get special assignments from God (usually it’s a strong impression that will not go away) and there really is satisfaction when the work is completed. Earthly musing about countries, governments and ambassadors continues to give me new insights about this subject. The well never runs dry!

As Christ’s ambassador, I think of myself as living in a foreign country representing my native country, Heaven, and its rulers, God and Jesus Christ. Anywhere on earth is a foreign country to me, by the way, even the one in which I was born. Patriotism has been fast fading from my life as I pay more attention to my true home. My steady job is to interest people in Heaven and its rulers to the point that they will find desirable the same reality that thrills me. It is interesting to me that in the poem God gave me at age twenty on the day of my “Damascus Road” encounter with him, there is evidence that I was not only receiving a message, but also wanted to pass it on. The poem talks about nature proving that there is a God and ends with this line: “My friend, there is a God!” From that day on I have wanted to influence people for my Lord.

To help me keep my purpose in mind, I developed a scenario long ago that serves me well to this day. In every encounter that I have with people, I try to set the stage so that if an opportunity comes later to talk with them about God and Heaven, they will be inclined to listen. (On the other hand, a nightmare for me would be to have someone scorn the message of God because of my bad behavior or unkind words.) I am always representing my God, who is interested in everybody, but I am not perfect. If needed, I believe a heartfelt apology such as Paul gave when he spoke unwisely (Acts 23:1-5) can also open the way for talking profitably about spiritual things.

The apostle Paul mentioned several things that we are to do all the time, including rejoice, give thanks and pray. To me, “all the time” or “always” means 24 hours a day, whether awake or asleep. How can this be? How can we rejoice, give thanks and pray when asleep, or even all the time when awake, especially all three at once? For one thing, I decided that prayer must be more than saying words to God. It had to include a conscious connection with God, an awareness of his presence that would stay with us even during sleep. In his letter to the Philippian believers, whom he dearly

loved, Paul said, "I have you in my heart." I wondered if this might be a kind of wordless ongoing prayer. Rejoicing and gratitude can also be attitudes that are felt rather than voiced. As I was developing a constant communion with God through meditation such as this, I realized that prayer as well as rejoicing and thanksgiving must be on the inside of us where they can become part of who we are rather than just what we do. That would allow us to be thankful, praying, rejoicing people 24 hours a day. We do not lose our character when we sleep!

This section describes a lot about how I approach Scripture and how my mind works. I find such pleasure in meditating on eternal things! Rich thoughts are swirling around in my head all the time. Some get written down or told, but others stay inside where, even though consciously forgotten, they nourish my soul and spirit and become part of me, elements of my spiritual growth. All this seems "normal" to me, but now I know it may be just one of many ways of thinking that believers consider "normal."

When I was in college I read *The Normal Christian Life* by Watchman Nee. Before I opened the covers of the book I expected it to describe the average Christian life as I knew it. Was I in for a surprise! Nee let me know that there is a world of difference between normal and average, at least in the spiritual realm, with normal being much higher. I decided then that I wanted to be normal in Nee's sense of the word. I wanted to go on the heights, to soar on eagles' wings. The Psalmist says, "Delight yourself in the Lord and he will give you the desires of your heart." Yes, he will!

* * * * *

After many fruitful years as a traveling missionary, the apostle Paul spent years as a prisoner in various places, sometimes actually in chains. All this is described in the book of Acts and is fascinating to read. At his various trials Paul got to speak before rulers and officials who may not have heard his message otherwise, and he was thankful for those opportunities. Paul also had the time to write while in jail; many of his prison epistles are preserved for us in the New Testament. In reading all his letters, whether written from prison or not, I do not see that Paul's chains somehow deepened his spirituality or taught him new things about God. Rather, there is a consistency about him throughout his life. What he learned at the beginning of his walk with Jesus and practiced, taught and thought about in all the years since then prepared him well for his newest adventure with God: that of being confined by chains.

Since I am being confined physically by PLS, some of my friends are curious about the special comfort they suppose God is giving me now or the new teaching I am receiving because of my situation. They might be disappointed – though I am not – to find out that there has been nothing basically new. The everlasting arms that I rest in at Sky View were just as comfortable five, twenty, forty years ago. And what I write about God in these essays is the same message I preached as pastor of the Community Church of Yorktown, taught in my Bible Basics seminars and in various classes and personal witnessing stretching back more than fifty years. What I do have is a new point of view from which to think, a new illustration to use, a new situation in which to let God shine, and new sets of friends with which to share the message as I move from place to place.

Once during his prison years, Paul had the opportunity to present his case before King Agrippa and everyone else assembled with the king (Acts 26). Happily, Paul recounted his past, including his initial meeting with the resurrected Jesus. He told about his missionary work and about his arrest. "*I have had God's help to this very day,*" Paul testified. When he asked King Agrippa some personal questions, the king asked one of his own: "*Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?*" Paul replied, "*Short time or long, I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains.*"

Being in chains added nothing to the spirituality Paul wanted the others in the room to share with him; if it had, Paul would have wanted his audience to have that experience also. But oh, how he wished and prayed that they would have the same personal relationship with the living God that he had! I can truly say the same thing: I wish people would become what I am – except for this disease. I would never wish PLS or any debilitating disease on anyone. It is not necessary to be handicapped or limited by any kind of “chains” in order to be spiritual. On the other hand, vital, personal faith in God can keep you stable, no matter what life brings your way. I join Paul in saying, “I have had God’s help to this very day.” May this be your testimony, too.

Post Script: Before this essay had its final editing, two things happened that I want to include in it.

1. Yesterday (June 14) I had two very special visitors: my daughter-in-law Janet and her friend Mary, whom I was meeting for the first time. What a wonderful visit we had together! During our conversation, Janet said of me, “She does have the right to complain.” I knew she meant something far less than my becoming a chronic whiner, but I shook my head no. Then I typed, “I am not allowed to complain.” Lest they interpret that to mean I felt stifled by my family or the staff at Sky View, I continued: “Forbidden by God. Paul says, *‘Do everything without complaining or arguing.’*” *

Mary’s eyes popped wide open. She said, “And you think that means you!” She implied, of course, that not everyone feels this way. I nodded my head. That was exactly what George had said about my approach to the Scriptures. This time I did not feel puzzled by her comment, proof that I had indeed profited by writing this essay. Better still was the assurance that Mary had been encouraged by my comments. The Kingdom of God is always advancing. I believe an advance was made during our visit. What a joy for all of us!

*Philippians 2:14.

2. In flipping through Paul’s epistles, looking for the verse about complaining, my eyes fell upon a place where Paul called himself an ambassador in chains. I will write the passage and then make a few comments. *Pray also for me, that whenever I open my mouth, words may be given me so that I will fearlessly make known the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains. Pray that I might declare it fearlessly, as I should (Ephesians 6:19,20).*

How well I can imagine this set of Paul’s calling cards! Underneath his name were the words “Ambassador in Chains.” A change in circumstances did not change Paul’s calling or identity! And surely the card said “24 hours a day.” Acts 16 records a very exciting night that started with Paul and Silas, both God’s ambassadors, being brutally beaten and thrown into jail and ended with tremendous advances being made in the Kingdom of God as these two men, now ambassadors in chains, fearlessly made known the mystery of the gospel, as they should.

Notice that Paul said he was an ambassador in chains, not the ambassador in chains. All through the ages God has had his people who have gone about saying “*We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God.*” And what is the mystery of the gospel? The ambassador passage tells us as it continues: *God made him who knew no sin (Jesus) to be a sin offering for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Corinthians 5:21).* This is not something to be fully understood, but it is meant to be believed. Paul and Silas, in Acts 16, made the message as simple as possible when the jailer asked them what he had to do to be saved. They said, “*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved.*” He did believe and was transformed!

If you are a believer who is literally in chains – that is, in prison – or a believer in “chains” – that is, physically limited like I am, I would encourage you to think of yourself as an ambassador in chains, part of a vast company of God’s family serving him in unique places and ways. And if any reader wants to pray for me, I would appreciate a similar prayer to the one Paul requested.

To God be the glory.

© June, 2006
Verna Kwiatkowski