

# AWAITING CHRIST FOR THE TRANSFIGURATION OF OUR BODY

Scripture Reading: Phil. 3:17-21

## PAUL'S BASIC THOUGHT

In Philippians 3, Paul refers to two groups of people who were exerting a strong influence in the Mediterranean area. The first group was the Judaizers, the Jewish religionists, who were zealous for their traditional religion. Their concern was not for material things, but things related to religion, philosophy, and culture, things which have much to do with our mind. (Phil.3:2) They do not care to indulge themselves in such things as eating and drinking. In speaking of the Judaizers, Paul deals with the soul. The second group consisted of those who held to the Epicurean philosophy, which promoted indulgence in the pleasure of eating and drinking and self-gratification in other things, all of which are contrary to the cross of Christ (vv. 18-19). From verse 18 we see that those who practiced according to the Epicureans were also causing damage. In speaking of the Epicureans, he deals with the body. The believers in Philippi had been saved and regenerated in spirit, but there was still the need for them to care for their soul and body in a proper way. As Paul was writing chapter three, deep within him was the intention to give certain instructions to the Philippian believers concerning how to deal with the soul and the body. Therefore, he first spoke of the Judaizers in order to edify the Philippians in dealing with the soul. Then he referred to the Epicureans in order to instruct the believers in dealing with the body.

## TRANSFORMATION AND THE RENEWING OF THE MIND

If we would deal with the soul, we need to count as refuse all religious matters, philosophical things, and cultural elements. The main ingredients of religion, philosophy, and culture are things which appeal to thoughtful people. This indicates that religion, philosophy, and culture are intimately related to the soul and to the psychological world. The thoughts of many believers are still occupied with religious, philosophical, and cultural things, the very things mentioned by Paul in 3:7 and 8. These matters are related to the psychological world, to the world of the soul. Many are also taken over by a natural way of thinking. Such saints may be good, but they are the same in soul today as they were many years ago. A primary reason for our lack of transformation is that a huge rock, the rock of national characteristics, is occupying our soul, taking the place that belongs to Christ. In the case of every one of us, national characteristics occupy our soul. Our soul has been taken over by this rock. Therefore, the mind, the leading part of the soul, needs renewing for transformation. If our mind is not renewed, our soul will remain unchanged. To say that our mind is renewed means that a change has taken place in our way of thinking. (3:1-16)

## THE PHYSICAL BODY AND ITS ENJOYMENT

Paul goes on to deal with the body (3:17-21). These five verses deal with physical enjoyment, especially as practiced by the Epicureans<sup>1</sup>. As genuine seekers of Christ, we need surgery to eliminate our religious and philosophical thoughts, and we also need a proper dealing with the physical body. In verse 19 Paul speaks of those "whose God is the belly," but in verses 20 and 21 he says that we are awaiting the Lord Jesus Christ, "Who will transfigure the body of our humiliation, conforming it to the body of His glory." In these verses Paul deals with the physical body and its enjoyment.

Paul says in verse 17, "Be imitators together of me, brothers, and observe attentively those who thus walk as you have us for an example." The example here does not refer to what Paul has covered in the foregoing verses. Instead, it is the example set by those who deal with the physical body in a proper way. How do we know that verse 17 refers not to the things of the soul, but to the things of the body? We know it by the fact that verse 18 begins with the word *for*, indicating that this verse is an explanation of verse 17. Verse 18 says, "For many walk, of whom I have told you often and now tell you even weeping, that they are the enemies of the cross of

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<sup>1</sup> Epicurus, the founder of the **Epicurean philosophy**, noted that two things impede man from living happily: fear of God; *and* Fear of the horrors beyond the grave. He taught that nature and reason show us that pleasure is the sole good and that pain is the sole evil. One must not be possessed by pleasure, but must possess the pleasures. The wise man knows how to sift everything; he does not accept any pleasure without giving himself an account of its effects; he does not refuse pain when this can be a cause of greater pleasure.

Christ." They were enemies of the cross of Christ, which has terminated the indulgence of the lusts of the physical body. As we have pointed out, the Epicureans care for indulgence in the enjoyment of eating and drinking. Paul refers to this in verse 19, which says, "Whose end is destruction, whose God is the belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things." These are those who worship their belly and serve their stomach; their belly was their god. In promoting the enjoyment of eating and drinking, the Epicureans were more concerned with physical indulgence than with ethics or morality. Of the Epicureans Paul also says that they "set their minds on earthly things." By earthly things he means physical things, material things, matters of eating and drinking.

According to the book of Colossians, Paul did not agree with asceticism, with the practice of treating the body severely. But neither would he agree with the Epicurean indulgence in physical enjoyment. We need such things as food and clothing. Without them, we cannot live. However, we should not indulge ourselves in these things. In 4:11 Paul says, "I have learned in whatever circumstances I am to be content." The Greek word rendered "content" is a Stoic term, indicating a practice opposite to that of the Epicureans. The Stoics taught that a person should be content in all circumstances, caring neither for enjoyment nor for suffering. Paul used this expression in testifying that he had learned the secret to be content. In principle, we Christians agree neither with the Epicureans nor with the ascetics. In a sense, we may somewhat stand with the Stoics.

## **CITIZENSHIP IN THE HEAVENS**

Paul goes on to say, "For our citizenship is in the heavens..." (v.20) The Greek word rendered "citizenship" may also be rendered "commonwealth" or "associations of life." Our national life is not in any earthly country; it is in the heavens. Because our citizenship is in the heavens, we should not be occupied with earthly things, with the physical things needed for our existence. We should not place such a high value on material things. This does not mean, of course, that we should not have proper food, clothing, housing, and transportation. We definitely need these things. But anything that goes beyond need falls into the category of indulgence. Such indulgence is to be condemned. If we love the earthly things needed for human life, this is an indication that we do not treasure our heavenly citizenship. If we have food, clothing, housing, and transportation to maintain life, we should be content. Let us not indulge ourselves in any earthly, material things.

## **THE TRANSFIGURATION OF THE BODY**

The transfiguration of our body will be the ultimate consummation of God's salvation. In His salvation God first regenerated our spirit (John 3:6), now He is transforming our soul (Rom. 12:2), and, consummately, He will transfigure our body, making us the same as Christ in all three parts of our being. Paul refers to our body as "the body of our humiliation." This describes our natural body, made of worthless dust (v. 21; Gen. 2:7) and damaged by sin, weakness, sickness, and death (Rom. 6:6; 7:24; 8:11). But one day this body will be transfigured and conformed to the body of Christ's glory. Christ's body of glory is His resurrected body, saturated with God's glory (Luke 24:26) and transcendent over corruption and death (Rom. 6:9). No matter how we may feed and clothe our body it is nonetheless a body of humiliation. However, we should not hate or despise our body. If we despise our body, we shall practice asceticism. In a very real sense, we should love our body for the Lord's sake. We need to care for the body without allowing it to indulge itself. One day, the Lord Jesus will come and transfigure the body of humiliation and conform it to the body of His glory. In verse 21 Paul says that the transfiguration of the body of humiliation is "according to the operation of Him who is able even to subject all things to Himself." The transfiguration of our body is by the great power which subjects all things to the Lord (Eph. 1:19-22). This is the almighty power in the whole universe.

Our aim should be to care for the body in a proper way that it may be healthy for the Lord's expression. But our intention should not be to glorify the physical body through the over enjoyment of physical things. Our body is not to be glorified in this way, but is to be glorified at the time of the Lord's coming back. At that time, He will transfigure our body of humiliation. Thus, we are waiting for Christ to come back that we may be brought into the ultimate consummation of God's salvation—the transfiguration of our body. While we are waiting for the Lord's coming, we should take care of our physical needs without indulging in material things. At the same time, we should deal with our soul, counting as loss all religious, philosophical, and cultural things so that our soul may be transformed in full. Day by day, we are undergoing the process of transformation in our soul as we are waiting for the Lord to come to transfigure our body and thereby to bring us into the ultimate consummation of God's salvation.