

I have heard some people say that they would rather die and go be with the Lord, but all those persons were already suffering terribly or miserably depressed. But what kind of man is this, though, from whose text we read today, who loves life, who knows his life serves a greater purpose, and yet prefers to die and go to be with the Lord?

It is, of course, Paul the Apostle. Remember: Paul, named Saul, was an ardent Pharisee, actively pursuing the followers of the Way of Jesus Christ and persecuting them; when the Resurrected Lord Jesus Christ appeared to him on his way to Damascus. This life-transforming confrontation gave him a new name and put him on a new path in life. Paul never got over that Damascus Road experience. Paul gave his life, lock-stock-and-barrel, to this Jesus. So that with joy and exuberance, Paul witnessed to the Resurrected Lord throughout Greek-speaking Europe. Sometimes it even got him in trouble.

In Ephesus, for example, Paul found so many persons flocking to the Good News of the Grace of God in Jesus Christ, that it began to cut significantly into the profits of the artisans who made the idols and shrines at the Temple of Artemis. Furious that some religious zealot would be allowed to cost them business and profits, lead by one Demetrius, they lead the charges to run Paul out of town.

Later, in Jerusalem, preaching the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ at the Temple there, he ran afoul of the leaders of the Jews, who threw the book at him, demanding his death, when Paul appealed on the basis of his Roman citizenship, to be tried in the court in Rome. Thus began his interminable imprisonment. From Jerusalem to Caesarea, and finally to Rome, Paul spent years and years in chains, under guard, and in lock-up.

From prison, over the years, Paul corresponded with many of the new churches in Asia, including the one in Philippi, testifying to the hope he had in God. But what few knew is, that while in prison in Jerusalem, Paul's beloved Lord had appeared yet again to him and said to him: "Keep up your courage! For just as you have testified for me in Jerusalem, so you must bear witness also in Rome."

Ahh! A SECOND appearance of the Resurrected Lord! Perhaps also another conversion? From now on out, for Paul, loss became the way to gain! Giving up freedom became the way to a deep and abiding freedom; and giving up life became the way to a new, rich and profound experience of life.

So Paul was able to understand his imprisonment in a new and critical way. Thus Paul could find meaning in his predicament. And not only so, Paul knew that God was working through exactly his imprisonment to bear witness to Jesus Christ exactly in the center of the civilized world! Paul, who already spoke happily of himself as a "slave of Jesus Christ," now would gladly also call himself a "prisoner" for Jesus Christ. So, we are invited to ponder a second conversion, one that Paul needed, and perhaps we need too.

Perhaps it is only when we, too, find some higher meaning, some abiding purpose to our own suffering; perhaps it is only when we too sense the hand of God at work in even our most unjust, unfair, and even oppressive circumstances, perhaps it is only then that we too can have the same hope, a hope that does more than just enable us to endure,

to survive, but hope that will prevail in any and all circumstances. Perhaps then we, too, can say, as Paul said: “For me to live is Christ and dying is gain.” That’s what they call a “win-win” situation!

So, to help us see the hand of God in our lives, to help us discover the higher purpose of our lives, to have that hope that prevails in all circumstances of life, let us now go to the Table.