

EITHER WAY WE WIN

Scripture: Philippians 1:18b-26

One of my favorite movies is a 1993 film called *Searching for Bobby Fisher*. A 7 year-old boy named Josh learns to play chess from street people in New York. He displays a natural talent for the game not seen in anyone since Bobby Fisher won the United States Chess Championship as a teenager. The tension in the movie focuses on how hard the boy's father and coach will push to make him a champion and whether Josh will lose his compassionate heart in the process. At the end of the movie Josh plays in the championship game of a tournament against another boy who has also been driven by his coach to become the next Bobby Fisher. The parents and coaches are not allowed in the room where the game is played. They watch on closed circuit television from another room. Late in the game Josh's opponent makes a move, and Josh's coach in the other room says under his breath, "That was a mistake." Then, even though Josh cannot hear him, the coach begins talking as if he is talking to Josh. He says, "You've got him. Look deep, Josh. It's 12 moves away, but it's there. You've got him."

In the other room Josh is staring at the board. He senses that he has been given an opening but he can't see it. In the other room the coach says under his breath, "Don't move until you see it." Josh stares at the board imagining every possible combination, until suddenly he looks up, and in his eyes you can see that he has got it. He has seen the combination. Then in the most remarkable scene of the movie Josh reaches out to shake hands with his opponent. In the other room Josh's father asks, "What is he doing?" The coach says, "He's offering him a draw." Meanwhile in the game room Josh's opponent asks the same question: "What are you doing?" Josh says, "I'm offering you a draw. Take the draw, and we'll share the championship." That way they both win. His opponent says, "You've got to be kidding. Look at the board. I'm going to win." Josh says, "You've already lost, you just don't know it."

Keep this story in mind and turn back with me to our scripture reading today from Philippians 1:18-26 (NT, p. 196). In the preceding section, verse 15, Paul says, "Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. Then in verse 18 he says, "What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice." In other words, no matter what motives people have, if the gospel is proclaimed Jesus wins, and so does Paul.

Now, beginning in the middle of verse 18, Paul turns to the future and speculates about what will happen to him. He has been imprisoned by the Roman authorities for preaching that Jesus is Lord even over Nero, the Roman Emperor. This is a dangerous thing for Paul to say. Paul has been a faithful, law-abiding citizen of the Roman Empire. No one has convicted him of any crime except believing in Jesus. So by all rights he should be released. On the other hand, Nero, the Roman Emperor, did not always worry about whether someone was convicted before having them executed. If Nero decided he did not like Paul or his religion, he could have him put to death. But Paul is not worried. He says in verses 18-19, "Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance." In Greek Paul says literally, "I know this will turn out for my salvation."

What does Paul mean? Does he mean that he will be saved from prison, or does he mean that he will be saved in the sense of eternal salvation if he dies?

The answer is both. In the next verse, verse 20, Paul says, “It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death.” Paul knows it could go either way. He could be released or he could be executed. But either way he wins, because Jesus wins.

I like the way this is worded in *The Message*. It says,

I don’t expect to be embarrassed in the least. On the contrary, everything happening to me in this jail only serves to make Christ more accurately known, regardless of whether I live or die. They didn’t shut me up; they gave me a pulpit! Alive, I’m Christ’s messenger; dead, I’m his bounty. Life versus even more life! I can’t lose.

In verses 22-24 Paul speculates on the advantages or disadvantages of each option. In verses 23-24 he says, “I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you.” Whether Paul lives or dies he can still serve Jesus. That’s why he can’t lose.

Let me digress on one point for just a moment. Just this week someone again asked me this question: “When we die, do we go to heaven immediately or do we cease to have any consciousness until Jesus comes again and raises us from the dead?”

According to the Bible, the answer is yes. It is not one or the other, it is both. Here in Philippians Paul says, “My desire is to depart and be with Christ.” That sounds like we immediately go to heaven to be with Jesus when we die. Jesus gives us the same impression when he says to the thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in paradise.”

Yet, at the same time, Paul also uses the word “sleep” to describe Christians who have died. In I Thessalonians 4 he says, “But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died ...” In Greek he says literally, “... about those who have fallen asleep.” He then goes on to say, “For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel’s call and with the sound of God’s trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first.” This makes it sound like we are asleep—that we are not aware of anything—until Jesus returns and raises us from the dead.

So which is it? The Bible says both are true. Maybe the best way to understand this is to realize that time will have no meaning the minute we die and step into eternity. In the realm of God dying and being raised from the dead all happens in one eternal instant. From God’s perspective there is no such thing as a delay. Either way we win.

Now let me go back to the chess game in the movie. Toward the end of the game 7 year-old Joshua is behind in points. That means his opponent has more valuable pieces left on the board than Josh does. Anyone else looking at the board would think Josh is going to lose.

The same is true for the apostle Paul. Anyone seeing the apostle Paul in a Roman prison waiting for justice from Nero, of all people, would say he is in trouble.

But Josh has seen ahead. He has seen 12 moves away, and he knows the game is won. It is already won. It is all there. So he offers his opponent a draw. He has seen that the boy he is playing against is under as much pressure to win as he is. So he offers a draw so they both can win. But here is the point: Josh wins either way. The other boy cannot do anything to make Josh lose. He can only share in the victory.

That, friends, is the story of the apostle Paul ... and of us. Heaven is not a competition where for me to win you have to lose, where for me to get in you have to be left out. In Jesus we have already won, and our job is to invite others to share with us in the victory.

Unfortunately, in the movie the other boy does not accept the invitation to share the victory. Instead he moves to take one of Josh's pieces in order to beat him. But 11 moves later, he has lost.

The only thing that can keep you out of heaven, the only thing that can keep you from sharing in the joy and blessing of Jesus' kingdom is pride—pride and disbelief. Josh's opponent did not believe that the game was already won. His pride blinded him. He thought he was better than Josh. He thought that by his own skill and cunning he could take the victory away from Josh and have it for himself, so he would not have to share it with anyone else.

Do you see what can happen if pride tells you that you don't need Jesus, you don't need faith, you don't need to share your life with other people in a family of faith, you can do it all on your own? If you think that, you have already lost, and you don't know it.

But it does not have to be that way. Jesus has already won the victory, and that victory can be yours if you are only willing to accept it and to share it with others.

- Ken Onstot
May 27, 2007