

## Woe to Me if I Do Not Preach the Gospel

What was going through the mind of Paul when he said this? Have you ever wondered what Paul thought might happen to him if he did not preach the gospel? Obviously, Paul believed that if he did not preach the gospel, he would experience bad consequences. Does the phrase, “woe is me” give us any clue as to how bad the consequences might be in Paul’s mind? Did Paul think that the eternal destiny of his soul depended on him preaching the gospel? If so, is Paul the only one who should feel this way? Should other people have that same sense of danger? Should all Christians have that same sense of danger?

To understand a phrase or verse, we must consider the context. But I suggest that in this case, we cannot get a full understanding of Paul’s heart and mind about this phrase merely from looking at the immediate context. The phrase, “Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel” is not the main point of the passage in which it is found. It seems to be a secondary thought and one that Paul seems to almost be thinking to himself.

The ninth chapter of I Corinthians has to do with whether or not it is right for itinerate preachers<sup>[1]</sup> to receive money of their service. In this chapter, Paul says that even though he had the right to receive financial support from the Corinthians, he purposely chose not to do so even though he spent eighteen months there. Paul made this choice by faith believing that by supporting himself while at Corinth, the gospel would be advanced in greater measure.

*“But I have used none of these things, nor have I written these things that it should be done so to me; for it would be better for me to die than that anyone should make my boasting void. <sup>16</sup>For if I preach the gospel, I have nothing to boast of, for necessity is laid upon me; yes, **woe is me if I do not preach the gospel!** <sup>17</sup>For if I do this willingly, I have a reward; but if against my will, I have been entrusted with a stewardship. <sup>18</sup>What is my reward then? That when I preach the gospel, I may present the gospel <sup>s</sup>of Christ without charge, that I may not abuse my authority in the gospel” (I Corinthians 9:15-18).*

Because this statement, “woe is me if I do not preach the gospel,” is a secondary thought, we cannot answer our questions from the immediate context alone. But let us make observations that might offer some clues. In verse 16, Paul says that preaching the gospel was a necessity to him. (“Necessity is laid upon me.”) It seems that Paul believed it was absolutely necessary for him to preach the gospel. He believed that if he did preach the gospel willingly, he would be rewarded. (See verse 17.) And since he has been entrusted by God with this as a stewardship, he has a duty to preach the gospel even if and when he did not “feel like it.” Paul believed that how he executed his role as a steward of the gospel was not to be taken lightly. Being a man of prayer, he evidently believed that God desired for him to preach the gospel without receiving financial support while among the Corinthians. Rather than receiving financial support as he was entitled to do, he made a faith choice to support himself financially rather than lean on the more comfortable approach.

In the midst of this discussion we find our statement, “Woe is me if I do not preach the gospel.” Let us consider what Paul might have been thinking and feeling as he wrote this statement. As we have already observed, Paul considered it absolutely necessary for him to preach the gospel. But what bad consequences did Paul think might happen if he didn’t preach the gospel? Would he get ill or die? I don’t think this is what Paul feared because in this passage and in others like Philippians chapter one, Paul does not consider dying itself something to be feared. He thought it would be better to die and be with Christ than to continue living. So, the idea of illness or death does not seem to fit with his phrase, “Woe is me.” It appears that Paul believed that there consequences more weighty than death if he did not preach the gospel. It seems he thought that dire eternal consequences could result if he did not preach the gospel.

Now I am persuaded that Paul believed that all who are in Christ will be resurrected on the last day to live with Him forever. This thought is expressed in his words, “I am persuaded that neither death nor life, nor angels nor principalities nor powers, nor things present nor things to come, nor height nor depth, nor any other created thing, shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans

8:38-39). Since Paul believed that nothing whatsoever could separate him from the love of God in Christ, then how could dire eternal consequences result if he did not preach the gospel?

Though Paul believed that true Christians cannot “lose their salvation,” he also believed the warning of Jesus, “*He that endures to the end will be saved*” (Matthew 24:13). In other words, Paul believed that he had to remain vigilant as a steward of Jesus and not passively sit back and coast. In the same chapter nine of I Corinthians, Paul expresses this concept:

*<sup>24</sup>Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. <sup>25</sup>And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. <sup>26</sup>Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. <sup>27</sup>But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified” (I Corinthians 9:21-23).*

These things were also taught by Jesus:

*<sup>21</sup>“Not everyone who says to Me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. <sup>22</sup>Many will say to Me in that day, ‘Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?’ <sup>23</sup>And then I will declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!’*

*<sup>24</sup>“Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, and does them, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: <sup>25</sup>and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock.*

*<sup>26</sup>“But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine, and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: <sup>27</sup>and the rain descended, the floods came, and the winds blew and beat on that house; and it fell. And great was its fall.” (Matthew 7:21-27)*

From these teachings of Jesus, we learn that mere church attendance does not guarantee eternal life. People can attend church and even Bible college all their lives. They can acquire vast theological knowledge and know the Bible inside and out. Yet, if they only learn it but fail to actually obey Jesus, they will go to hell in the end. Jesus is Lord but not everyone relates to Him as their Lord. Only those who obey Him prove that they are His subjects. All others will hear the words, “Depart from me, I never knew you” (Matthew 7:23).

The obedience Jesus spoke about, extends to every aspect of life. We are deceiving ourselves if we say that it does not extend to our stewardship responsibility to advance Jesus’ Kingdom. After all, this is THE GREAT MISSION of the church. Every Christian has a role to play in the advancement of Jesus’ Kingdom and one of those responsibilities is ambassadors who testify of Him. In the twenty fifth chapter of Matthew, Jesus warns that only those who steward well will be with Him in glory. All others will be cast into outer darkness.

*<sup>14</sup>“For the kingdom of heaven is like a man traveling to a far country, who called his own servants and delivered his goods to them. <sup>15</sup>And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey. <sup>16</sup>Then he who had received the five talents went and traded with them, and made another five talents. <sup>17</sup>And likewise he who had received two gained two more also. <sup>18</sup>But he who had received one went and dug in the ground, and hid his lord’s money. <sup>19</sup>After a long time the lord of those servants came and settled accounts with them.*

*<sup>20</sup>“So he who had received five talents came and brought five other talents, saying, ‘Lord, you delivered to me five talents; look, I have gained five more talents besides them.’ <sup>21</sup>His lord said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.’ <sup>22</sup>He also who had received two talents came and said, ‘Lord, you delivered to me two talents;*

*look, I have gained two more talents besides them.’* <sup>23</sup>*His lord said to him, ‘Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.’*

<sup>24</sup>*“Then he who had received the one talent came and said, ‘Lord, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you have not sown, and gathering where you have not scattered seed.’* <sup>25</sup>*And I was afraid, and went and hid your talent in the ground. Look, there you have what is yours.’*

<sup>26</sup>*“But his lord answered and said to him, ‘You wicked and lazy servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown, and gather where I have not scattered seed.’* <sup>27</sup>*So you ought to have deposited my money with the bankers, and at my coming I would have received back my own with interest.’* <sup>28</sup>*So take the talent from him, and give it to him who has ten talents.*

<sup>29</sup>*‘For to everyone who has, more will be given, and he will have abundance; but from him who does not have, even what he has will be taken away.’* <sup>30</sup>*And cast the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness. There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’* (Matthew 25:14-30)

With such dire warnings as these, should we not have a sense of fear and trembling about our role as stewards assigned with the task of advancing Jesus’ interests? It seems that these warnings affected Paul’s outlook about preaching the gospel. He feared that if he failed to fulfill his role as steward by preaching the gospel, he would end up in hell. Such a failure would prove that Jesus was never actually Paul’s Lord. If anyone had reason to have strong assurance of his salvation, it would be Paul. Yet, he trembled about these things. If Paul trembled, shouldn’t we?

Near the end of his life, imagine Paul looking back on all the disciples and churches planted. Do you think he ever thought, “Surely I am safe. What other person has been used so greatly to advance Christ’s Kingdom.” No, from the words of Paul and teachings of Jesus, I just can’t picture Paul ever retiring from his duties as preacher.

To me, it is not just about preaching the gospel. I think that our stewardship extends beyond preaching the gospel to how we conduct every aspect of our lives. Yet, for me, preaching the gospel cannot be separated from it. After preaching the gospel to the woman at the well, Jesus told His disciples, “My food is to do the will of my father.” In this context, Jesus was obviously speaking about the will of His Father to save that woman. After His encounter with the woman, Jesus felt He had received essential nourishment for His soul. It was food He depended upon for life. This is what preaching the gospel is to me. It is essential nourishment. Without it, I fear I would wither away and become indifferent. My spiritual vitality would surely diminish and my heart would grow dull and cold. Because I view preaching the gospel as absolutely essential for my spiritual wellbeing, I too say, “Woe is me if I don’t preach the gospel.” I fear that if I were to retreat, I might end up withering away and eventually disqualified (in hell).

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[1] . Most Christians claim that this includes pastors. But the immediate context seems to address those who move from place to place. “Do we have no right to take along a believing wife, as *do* also the other apostles, the brothers of the Lord, and Cephas?” (I Corinthians 9:6). In light of Paul’s instructions to the elders of Ephesus to have jobs so they can provide for the poor (Acts 20:32-35), and the immediate context of I Corinthians 9, it is a stretch to assume that pastors should not have regular jobs since they do not move from city to city like itinerate preaches.