

“The Fruit of My Labor”

Philippians 1:22

By Irwin J. Habeck

What prompted the writing of this article is the contrast between Paul’s attitude toward his remaining years in this life and the prevailing attitude that in thinking about his future a man ought to anticipate a span of comfortable retirement between the end of his working days and the time of his death.

For one who himself has reached three score years and ten to undertake to write about this subject might make his motives suspect. It might seem that he is seeking to counteract pressures being exerted upon him to consider retirement. Such is not the case. He is heartily in favor of the policy being followed at our institutions that when a man reaches the age of sixty-five he is to be interviewed annually by a representative of the board of control to discuss whether he feels able to carry on with his full load of work, whether he is seeking a lightened schedule, or whether he is beginning to consider retiring. Unless there is this regular review of the situation, any spasmodic discussion of a man’s condition might be interpreted as a hint that he ought to retire. As it is, the good both of the institution and of the individual is being safeguarded.

It seems that it would be well to follow a similar procedure with all who have been called into the preaching or teaching ministry. The visiting elder could do for them what boards of control do for those whom they have called and after they have reached sixty-five annually discuss their situation with them. We favor a review of the situation with a responsible second party, for older people often assume a defensive posture and instead of facing the facts of their competence objectively may insist that their capacity is unabated even though the evidence is to the contrary. Annual interviews would avoid the suspicion that visiting elders are reacting to complaints. If such interviews are conducted in a spirit which shows concern both for the church and for the individual worker, they could become a source of blessing.

Another misconception which we would like to prevent is that anything that might be written in this article is intended to pass judgment upon someone who has retired from the ministry. “To his own master he standeth or falleth” (Ro 14:4).

But now to the essence. When Paul wrote about the fruit of his labor, he was a prisoner in Rome. What the outcome would be he had no way of knowing for sure. He might be executed. But death held no terrors for him. “To me...to die is gain. I am...having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better” (Php 1:21,23).

But what if he should be released? Ever since Paul had been called to be an apostle, his had been a hard life. Jesus had told Ananias: “I will show him how great things he must suffer for my name’s sake” (Ac 9:16). This prediction had been fulfilled. In the familiar epistle for Sexagesima Sunday in 2 Corinthians 11 Paul lists some of the hardships and sufferings which he had endured up to the time of writing those words. Since then things had not become any easier. Now he was suffering the anguish of being a prisoner, chained while before he had been restlessly active. Furthermore, it is supposed that by that time he was in his early sixties. In his day that was considered old. Paul himself in his contemporary letter to Philemon calls himself “Paul the aged” (Phm 9). What if he should be released? Would it have been surprising if he had said, “If I get out of this alive, I’m going to retire and take it easy for the rest of my life”?

But not Paul. “If I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labor” (Php 1:22). If he got out of this alive, no matter how hard his life had been up to this time, no matter how old he was, he would continue to labor. Why? When the Lord called him, He had not negotiated a contract with him which stipulated a retirement age and retirement benefits. He had called him to labor. Period. To labor for his Lord Jesus Paul considered a high privilege: “Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Eph 3:8). So labor for Jesus he would if the Lord gave him the opportunity.

Paul speaks not only of labor, but also of fruit: “the fruit of my labor.” His would not be mere busy work given him to occupy his time even though nothing worthwhile would be accomplished. On the contrary, his labor would produce fruit. The activity which he had in mind in particular was that he would return to his beloved believers in Philippi. The fruit which he expected was their spiritual growth. “To abide in the flesh is more needful for you...for your furtherance and joy of faith” (Php 1:24–25). Beyond that, even though he does not mention it specifically, was the prospect of doing what he had once done at Philippi, of bringing the gospel to those who had not heard it and being the means through which they would be brought to saving faith. So all that Paul could think about as he thought about his future here on earth was labor for Jesus and fruit in souls won for Christ and souls edified. He had no thought of retiring.

As was mentioned before, many people in our present society do have thoughts of retiring. In fact, one of the phenomena of today’s economic system is compulsory retirement at sixty-five. And so people are being encouraged to think about retirement, to plan for retirement. The main purpose of Social Security insurance is to provide people with a retirement income. Developers plan and promote retirement communities. Retirement is in the air.

Under such circumstances it is only to be expected that those who have been entrusted with the ministry are going to be drawn into thinking about retirement. When retirement has become a goal for so many and has been painted in attractive colors as the golden years, they can hardly escape being infected. Family and friends and parishioners will ask them as they reach the sixties, “What are you going to do when you retire?”

Paul’s attitude toward his future, if adopted by us, will hardly permit us to look upon retirement as a desirable goal. But as the number of years spent in the public ministry increases and there are grim reminders that we are not as young as we once were, the question of retirement will force itself upon us. Questions like this will have to be asked and answered: “Am I still apt to teach? Am I still able to do everything that I have been called to do? Am I still more of an asset than a liability?”

If the answer is negative, retirement no longer remains an option, but becomes a duty. When we weigh a call to a new field of labor, the dominant question is: “What is best for the church?” And that same question will point out the path of duty when we have to tell ourselves that we are no longer able to do what we have been called to do and are becoming a detriment to the welfare of the church: the good of the church will be best served if I retire. Being afraid of not having enough means for a livelihood or of not knowing where to live dare not be allowed to tip the balance. It is a tragedy when men hang on to their call for economic reasons even when they realize that they no longer have the ability to do what they have been called to do. The antidote for worry is to contemplate the implications of the opening words of the Lord’s Prayer: “Our Father” and, in the faith which these words call forth and strengthen and confess, to add: “Give us this day our daily bread.” His love is proved, His resources are unlimited, and He will find a way to supply each day’s needs as they arise.

What if the carefully considered answer to the questions mentioned above is in the affirmative: “Am I still apt to teach? Am I still able to do everything that I have been called to do? Am I still more of an asset than a liability?” Then the question of retirement ought to be dismissed for the time being and, following Paul’s example, the decision concerning the future be found in the words: “The fruit of my labor.” What a privilege to labor for the Lord in the ministry, to preach and teach His Word, to shepherd His flock. He bought the flock with His blood; He created the gospel by suffering and dying. To work with such a message, to serve such people is a privilege which angels well might envy us. The going might not be as easy as it once was; fatigue may assert itself more quickly; there may be ailments and infirmities which work like a dragging anchor, but the work remains the same privilege which it has always been.

Then there’s the fruit. Paul was convinced that if he were to be released and could return to his beloved Philippians, his ministry would result in the furtherance of their faith. He knew that he was not indispensable, as none of us is. He had reckoned with the possibility of being executed without supposing that without him around the church at Philippi would disintegrate. But he was thinking of what he could do if he were permitted to return to them. So if the older worker is convinced that he is still able to continue working, he will anticipate not only the privilege of continuing to labor for his Lord by being active in his calling. He will also anticipate what he will be able to do for those whom he has been called to serve. Paul had seen fruit of his labor at Philippi

before. His entire epistle to the Philippians testifies to that. Now we are not called to produce fruit or to see fruit. We are called to preach the Word as we fulfill the many-sided responsibilities of our ministry. God produces fruit, and He alone (1 Cor 3:7). But in the vast majority of cases we have been permitted to see fruit: souls brought to faith in Jesus, souls helped to grow in knowledge and spiritual understanding, souls comforted, souls recalled from the error of their ways, souls equipped for Christian service, souls helped to die triumphantly.

So we have the assurance from past experience that as the Lord permits us to continue to labor there will be more fruit. Furthermore, we have His comforting promise concerning the power to produce fruit which He has placed into the Word we proclaim (Is 55:10–11). This prospect of fruit will make us eager to continue to labor. For a man at the stage of his life where he must consider the question of retirement there is something significant in the term “elder.” We are apt to read over it rather lightly as a title given to congregational officers in the apostolic age. But it had not only an official, but also a chronological significance. They were older men, and also because they were older entrusted with leadership in the church. Older men have learned much from experience. Experience has deepened their appreciation for many a word of wisdom in Scripture. So as older men continue in the ministry, they bring with them the added equipment of experience which they lacked in their younger years. As we follow Paul’s example of not thinking of our own comfort but rather of the needs of our people, we shall not want to deprive them prematurely of the benefit of our experience. While it does not add to the power of the Word, it may serve to help determine which portion of the Word applies to a given situation. And that too will result in fruit.

The prospect of fruit among the Lord’s people and the prospect of more work for the Lord will serve as an antidote to the alluring prospect of a long and grand vacation in retirement. Not retirement will loom large in the future, but rather, as was the case with Paul, “the fruit of my labor.”