

TO LIVE IS CHRIST, TO DIE IS GAIN
(SUNDAY, DECEMBER 8, 2013)

SCRIPTURE: JOB 13:13-28; PHIL. 1:18B-26

INTRODUCTION

I remember at Mr. Sherman's Memorial Service sharing a powerful quote by John Calvin on the subject of death.

We may positively state that nobody has made any progress in the school of Christ, unless he cheerfully looks forward towards the day of his death, and towards the day of the final resurrection.¹

I have wanted to preach on the subject of death from Philippians 1 for some time, because it gives such important instruction regarding both life and death.

This passage is not simply that it is better to be dead. Paul did not simply want to escape life and suffering but wanted to be with Jesus Christ. He wanted to see the powerful and precious message of the gospel be advanced. And so even though it would have been much better for Paul to die, he realized it was God's will for him that he continue to live and serve the church of Jesus Christ.

Here are some of the lessons that we will consider from this text.

- 1) Is your greatest desire to be with Jesus Christ and to see that Christ is magnified in your life and in your death?
- 2) Following Jesus Christ often makes life much more difficult. To truly follow after Jesus Christ is to live a life of self-denial. The blessing is also very great, but the call to follow after Jesus Christ is a call to suffer.
- 3) For the believer, to die is gain. This is an incredible statement that we make by faith, not simply because we want to escape the trials of this life, but because we desire to be with Jesus Christ and also to give encouragement to those who will follow us.

I first want to present some historical background for this passage before we consider these verses in greater detail and the lessons I have introduced.

1. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Let me give a brief chronology of approximately the last 8 years of Paul's life.

Paul wrote the book of Romans from the city of Corinth in the early part of A.D. 57. Paul then traveled on his way to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost through Philippi and a number of other

¹ John Blanchard, eds. *The Complete Gathered Gold: a Treasury of Quotations for Christians*. Accordance electronic ed. (New York: Evangelical Press, 2006), n.p.

cities. This journey to Jerusalem was very dangerous even as some prophesied. As the book of Acts describes in great detail, Paul was arrested and then transported north to the coastal city of Caesarea. There he would spend the next two years in prison. When Paul had the opportunity to appear before the governor Festus, Paul made an appeal to appear before the Roman Emperor. Festus honored that request, in part because it let him get off the hook. Eventually Paul made it to Rome by about the year 60. The end of Acts tells us that Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house (house arrest), and received all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.²

We have good reason to believe that Paul was then freed after this time of house arrest in Rome. Afterwards it is very possible that Paul eventually did travel as far west as Spain. From the book of Titus we also believe that Paul ministered on the island of Crete, because he left Titus there to continue the work. The great fire in Rome took place in the year 64. Paul was likely arrested again near the end of the year 64. He would have had two hearings that next year before being executed some time in 65.³

So about three years before his death, Paul wrote the book of Philippians during his two years of house arrest in Rome. Philippians, Colossians, Philemon, and Ephesians are sometimes called the Prison Epistles. There is some disagreement about their date and where Paul was when he wrote them, but a very reasonable position is that these four letters were written from Rome during his first Roman imprisonment, 60-62.

Look at Philippians 1:12-14 which in part is proof of this position.

Phil. 1:12 But I want you to know, brethren, that the things *which happened* to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel, **13** so that it has become evident to the whole palace guard, and to all the rest, that my chains are in Christ; **14** and most of the brethren in the Lord, having become confident by my chains, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Now before we give closer attention to our text, it is important to consider that Paul was writing while under house arrest. Although Paul could have died from a disease or an accident, Paul likely knew that for him death would come at the hands of the Roman empire.

For many years, Paul lived a very difficult life as slave of Jesus Christ. Because of his sufferings, we know that many people even questioned whether Paul was really a true apostle of Jesus Christ. To suffer and to be a prisoner in Rome was a shameful thing in the eyes of many. Verse 16 (17 in the ESV)⁴ adds to this picture by stating that there were some preaching Christ from selfish ambition, not

² Acts 28:30-31.

³ Following both Eckhard Schnabel and William Ramsay.

⁴ Nestle-Aland Text has verse 17 before verse 16.

sincerely, hoping to add afflictions to Paul's chains. So although we can appreciate some aspects of Paul's suffering there are some social aspects more difficult for us to appreciate. All this is important background for our text which we now consider.

2. PHILIPPIANS 1:18B-26

18b and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.

Phil. 1:19 ¶ For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, **20** according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.

One of the beautiful themes in the book of Philippians is that of joy. The book of Philippians is only 4 chapters and yet the verb translated as rejoice is used 8 times. Here at the end of verse 18, Paul's joy is that Jesus Christ is preached, even though some are not preaching with the correct motives. Paul rejoices in the preaching of the gospel. This is the object of the first use of the verb rejoice. The second use of the verb rejoice at the end of verse 18 is connected to what Paul then discusses in verses 19 and 20.⁵

Paul was joyful because he knows God will bring about his deliverance.

The word deliverance in verse 20 is literally the word salvation.

I didn't catch this allusion until I consulted some commentaries, but the first part of verse 19, *this will turn out for my deliverance*, is an exact quotation from the Greek translation of Job 13:16.⁶ You might see this as a cross-reference in your Bible.

Job was confident that he would be vindicated in the midst of his sufferings. Paul could rightfully identify with Job. Paul also had confidence that he would be delivered or vindicated.

There is some question about what this deliverance means. Was Paul speaking of the ultimate nature of salvation, deliverance on the day of judgment. This is how some understand what Paul is saying. Others suggest that Paul is speaking of his eventual release from house arrest. I think there are good reasons for both. The ESVSB suggests Paul intentionally used this word to be ambiguous. That is possible, because Paul speaks both about being released from arrest in this passage and also His focus on his eternal deliverance and being with Christ.⁷

⁵ Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians*, vol. 43 of Word Biblical Commentary. Accordance/Thomas Nelson electronic ed. (Waco: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 48.

⁶ Ibid., 46. See also Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 11 of Tyndale New Testament Commentaries. IVP/Acordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1987), 82.

⁷ Lane T. Dennis and Wayne Grudem, eds. *The ESV Study Bible*. Accordance electronic ed. (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2008), n.p.

If I had to choose, I think Paul is more likely referring to his release from his chains, but we should see a connection to the ultimate deliverance that we find in Christ.

Looking further at verse 19, we see Paul was assured of this deliverance for two reasons – the prayers of the Philippians and the supply or help of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

When Paul called for the Christians he knew to pray for him, he wasn't just saying nice things that Christians are expected to say. Paul believed that God would indeed answer the prayer of the Philippians.

There is an important application here in terms of our own prayers as a church and as individuals. Do we seriously pray for those imprisoned? Do we believe that God in His infinite wisdom, power, and sovereignty, uses the humble but persistent prayers of God's people? For those of you who do not come to our corporate prayer meeting, do you take time for serious prayer? Would Paul, the other apostles, or any other Christian in prison today, write to the Church of Christian Liberty and express confidence in being released because he or she knew we earnestly prayed for such?

Scripture speaks of the great blessing of prayer and also the great blessing of the help of the Holy Spirit. The reference here to the help of the Holy Spirit connects very well with the words of our Lord Jesus who taught us not to fear when we have to speak before those with great earthly power.

Mark 13:11 But when they arrest *you* and deliver you up, do not worry beforehand, or premeditate what you will speak. But whatever is given you in that hour, speak that; for it is not you who speak, but the Holy Spirit.

For those this day troubled by many cares and concerns, rejoice this day in the powerful assistance of the Holy Spirit. God has not left you in your own strength. We can rejoice with Paul in this same confidence.

Verse 20 finishes the thought of verse 19.

What Paul wants most of all, his earnest expectation and hope, is that Christ will be magnified in his body. In verse 20 connected with this great expectation and hope is that in nothing Paul would be ashamed but would have great boldness.

We have to keep in mind the context of Paul's imprisonment and defense in Rome. Paul desired to be released not simply because he was not able to stand the suffering of his imprisonment. His release would bring glory to Christ giving further opportunity to proclaim the gospel and giving even legal precedence for the continued preaching of the gospel. And if somehow, Paul were to be found guilty, Paul would show the glory of Jesus Christ by dying for his name. And Paul's trial itself would never be something of embarrassment but an opportunity for bold witness.⁸

⁸ Hawthorne and Martin, 51-52.

Some believe that the phrase at the end of verse 20, whether by life or death, is simply an expression for Paul's entire existence rather than an expression of uncertainty concerning his release.⁹ That might be the best understanding, and yet the expression does show that Paul was certainly ready to die and that in both life and in death he was determined to bring great glory to Jesus Christ.

I think this is very important. In thinking of death, which the Christian should desire, it is not simply that we have freedom from fear of dying, but that we should desire that even the process of our death will bring glory to Jesus Christ.

And this brings us to verse 21.

Phil. 1:21 For to me, to live *is* Christ, and to die *is* gain.

This verse is often considered when the subject is that of death. But this verse does not just simply speak of dying but also living. In times of discouragement and trouble, we might want to simply focus on the last part of the verse, to die is gain. But in the midst of trouble and difficulty, we must also declare, that as God gives me life, I am going to live for Jesus Christ.

Indeed this verse gives both great comfort for the Christian and great challenge. While you live, you enjoy the Spirit of Jesus Christ. While you live, you have purpose for each day – to bring glory to Christ and to seek that others come to know of His saving power.

To be able to say, to die is gain, is also a test of faith. Observe here that Paul doesn't just say, death is gain but speaks actually of the process of dying. Paul likely here speaks of his dying as a martyr, a witness of the true glory of Jesus Christ. If you are a witness, then you are also to say in faith, however the Lord Jesus calls me home, it will be gain. And as I mentioned before and what we should also see here, is that Paul speaks of gain for at least three reasons. There is gain in dying, most of all in being with Christ. Second, there is gain in dying, because there is finally deliverance from all our earthly cares and suffering. Third, we must also consider Paul believed there would be gain in terms of witness to the truth of the gospel.¹⁰ And so even as you face death, your reasons should also encompass these three. It is not wrong to want to be delivered from suffering, but God in both life and death calls you to witness to His glory. This is the great challenge in both living and dying.

Phil. 1:22 But if *I* live on in the flesh, this *will mean* fruit from *my* labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell.

Commentators point out that the way that Paul writes these verses bears testimony to the struggle that he faced. It is not that Paul in anyway is contradictory or inconsistent or that Paul in anyway lacked faith.

⁹ Ibid., 54.

¹⁰ Ralph P. Martin, *Philippians: An Introduction and Commentary*, 84.

Verse 22 shows that Paul recognized that although it would be gain for him and the gospel to die, there was also still work for him to do in life. The reason we should desire to live should have nothing to do with fear of dying, but rather because you also recognize there is still fruitful labor for you. The end of verse 22 says in our translation that Paul could not tell what he would choose in terms of living or dying. It might be better to translate this with the NET version as, I don't know which I prefer. Or if we stick with the translation in our version, the idea is not that Paul is going to make a choice either to live or to die, but that he dares not reveal his preference.¹¹ Truly for Paul there is an incredible tension that he faces which we see in verse 23.

Phil. 1:23 For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, *which is* far better.

This verse indicates the incredible tension Paul faced because of his present suffering, his desire to continue to serve while on earth, and yet his desire to be with Christ, which is far better. The word hard-pressed speaks of the distress, the torment he faced in desiring to serve Christ in both his life and in his death.

What you should again see from this verse is not simply that Paul viewed death as escape from life and its problems but that death for the believer means to be with Christ in a way much greater than what we enjoy on earth.

Now importantly Paul later speaks of the resurrection in chapter 3. Death is not the end of our salvation. No, we still wait for the resurrection, the uniting again of our soul and body. Paul's words here in verse 23 testify that death is not entrance into purgatory; death is not the beginning of soul sleep. No, death for the believer means entrance in the presence of Jesus Christ.

Can you honestly say that this is your great desire also? This passage should encourage you to examine what you most desire. Are your desires merely set on earthly things or is there an honest desire to experience the blessed presence of Jesus Christ? Let us pray that God would strengthen and focus what should be our central desire. Let us also ask that God might enable us to not simply set our desires on merely earthly things. Let us then seek to live in sincerity to what we confess and pray.

Phil. 1:24 Nevertheless to remain in the flesh *is* more needful for you. **25** And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith, **26** that your rejoicing for me may be more abundant in Jesus Christ by my coming to you again.

The final verses of this section testify also to why Paul was hard-pressed. He wanted more than anything to be with Jesus Christ. Paul knew that it was God's timing when he would enter the blessed

¹¹ Martin, 84

state. He further believed and was confident that God would give him additional years of service for the sake of the Philippians and others. From what we can tell, Paul lived perhaps just another three years after he wrote this letter.

There are a number of things that mark Paul as such an effective missionary. I think near the top of such a listing we would have to include Paul's great love for those he served. We see that earlier in Philippians where Paul says in verse 8,

Phil. 1:8 For God is my witness, how greatly I long for you all with the affection of Jesus Christ.

We see Paul's great love for the Philippians in terms of his desire to remain in the flesh so that he could continue to encourage them to mature and demonstrate true joy as a fruit of faith.

Because Paul realized still how much the Philippians needed him, he was confident that he would be released from house arrest and would have opportunity to again be with them. I think we have to say that here Paul was given knowledge and assurance that we cannot claim in the same sense. Our ministry cannot also be directly compared to that of Paul's as being made part of the great foundation for the Christian faith.

Verse 26 is a bit difficult to translate and the NKJV translation is perhaps not the best. Let me read from the Holman Christian Standard Bible.

so that, because of me, your confidence may grow in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

As Paul had opportunity to travel back to Philippi he would encourage them to also make their boast in Christ Jesus through his own example and witness.

I am sure you know or have known another believer who serves as a great testimony and encouragement to you that following Christ is truly worth every effort and sacrifice. This is what Paul desired to do in returning to Philippi. By God's grace this is who you are to be to others.

Conclusion:

- 1) What do we desire most?
- 2) The challenge in following Christ.
- 3) The incredible gain for the believer in death.

Closing Hymn: 602

Benediction and Commission –

1 Cor. 15:57-58

But thanks *be* to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.