

Philippians 1:21-30 “A Sign of Destruction and Salvation”

Do you think that death is *far better* than remaining in the flesh?

I think most of us prefer remaining in the flesh!

For most of us, we would say,

“For to me to die is Christ, and to live is gain.

After all, if I am to live in the flesh,

that means fruitful labor for me.

I wouldn’t mind departing to be with Christ,

but it would be better to remain in the flesh,

because I like it here – and the people I love are all here.”

Our identity – our meaning and purpose –

are found here – in the flesh.

Only when our loved ones start dying here

do we begin to turn our hearts and minds to the hereafter.

John Calvin comments that “the mind is never seriously aroused

to desire and ponder the life to come

unless it be previously imbued with contempt for the present life.” (III.ix.1)

Contempt?

Isn’t that a little strong?

Paul will say in Philippians 3:8 –

“Indeed I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth
of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as
rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness
of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the
righteousness from God that depends on faith –

that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may
share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may
attain the resurrection from the dead.” (3:8-11)

Paul considers all his *best* accomplishments as “rubbish” –
as “dung” – to put it bluntly, as “shit” –
in order that I may gain Christ.

I *want* to share in his sufferings – becoming like him in his death,
if by any means I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

And so Calvin is right when he says that

“there is no middle ground between these two:

either the world must become worthless to us

or hold us bound by intemperate love of it.” (III.ix.2)

This life has value for us only because here
“we begin...to taste the sweetness of the divine generosity,”
but that taste of divine sweetness
should prompt us to long all the more for the heavenly life.

Therefore, Calvin concludes,
“no one has made progress in the school of Christ
who does not joyfully await the day of death and final resurrection...
Is it reasonable, I ask you,
that what our Lord meant to be sufficient to arouse us
to rejoicing and good cheer
should engender nothing but sorrow and dismay?”

If you do not “desire to depart and be with Christ,”
then you are not thinking rightly about your life in Christ!

I would suggest that you will only come to say that “to live is Christ”
when you believe from the heart that “to die is gain”!

1. “To Live Is Christ, and to Die Is Gain” (1:21-26)

21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. 23 I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. 24 But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.

Paul believes that “to depart and be with Christ...is far better”
but he sees greater benefit to the Philippians if he stays.
He desires to depart –
that is the trajectory of his heart –
but he is willing to remain for the sake of the church.

Paul has a church-centered piety –
a sense of duty that recognizes that his calling –
his reason for remaining on this earth –
is wrapped up with the church (the body of Christ).

We saw last time that Paul’s deliverance does not depend on whether he lives or dies.
Through the prayers of the saints in Philippi (and elsewhere)
and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ,
his imprisonment will turn out for his salvation,
because Christ “will be honored in my body,
whether by life or by death.”

25 *Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.*

Notice three reasons for Paul's "staying and remaining" with them:

- 1) for your progress in the faith

In verse 12 Paul had emphasized how the gospel was advancing.

Now he says that the Philippians own "advance" in the gospel is connected to his ministry among them.

This is true for us as well.

Your progress in the gospel

is intimately connected with my progress in the gospel.

(Another reason why you need to be praying for me!

Your spiritual well-being depends on it!)

- 2) for your joy in the faith

The theme of joy runs throughout Philippians,

and here Paul brings it back again.

Paul is not just interested in "progress" and development.

He wants to see their *joy* in the faith!

This is one of my concerns for you:

because until you see that "to live is Christ; to die is gain" –

until you realize that the suffering of the present life

is the way it is supposed to be! –

you will not find joy in the Christian life.

Your progress and joy in the faith

is all about learning to rejoice in the midst of suffering.

Remember that part of Paul's suffering was brought about

by "brothers" who preached Christ out of envy and rivalry.

Part of your suffering may come from your fellow Christians –

even your spouse, your parents, your children.

What you need to learn is that *this is what Christ has called you to endure.*

(Of course, if you are the one *causing* the suffering of others,

then you need to repent!

Don't say, "I'm just the instrument of God

in teaching you to rejoice in suffering!

Remember that God generally *destroys* such instruments

when he is finished with them!)

- 3) so that in me you may have ample cause to glory (boast) in Christ Jesus

We have become so wary of boasting that few translations dare to render

kauchema in its literal sense.

But Paul here says that we have reason to *boast* in Christ Jesus because of Paul.

We *should* brag about our king Jesus, and what he has done in his servants:

No, not their triumphant exploits!

It is not B. B. Warfield's theological essays that deserve praise, but his devoted care for his invalid wife – his patient and joyful endurance of the cross that he bore – that should call forth our boasting in Christ Jesus.

Anyone can be an intellectual giant:

but only the Spirit of Christ can give us joy as we bear the cross!

And this is why Paul then turns to how we ought to live as “citizens of the gospel”:

2. Therefore, Live as Worthy Citizens of the Gospel (1:27-28a)

27 Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, 28 and not frightened in anything by your opponents.

The first word in verse 27 is important:

“Only.”

This is the *one* thing that Paul is concerned about.

Indeed, verse 27 signals that Paul is turning to the central concern of his epistle.

This is the *one thing* that Paul will exhort the Philippians to remember.

If you forget everything else remember this *one thing!*

“*Only* let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.”

The word translated “manner of life” is the verb *politeuomai* – it has to do with how one lives in relation to others and with the “polis” root

it is connected to the idea of citizenship.

Paul will use the noun *politeuma* in 3:20

to speak of how our citizenship is from heaven,

so it is important to see that Paul is using the same idea here.

Philippi was an important Roman colony,

and its governors were appointed directly from Rome,

so the Philippians would have understood fully

the importance of citizenship.

But Paul here is saying that their Christian citizenship –

their “gospel citizenship” –

is of far greater importance.

Certainly the early fathers understood this point.

The Epistle to Diognetus says Christians are those
“who pass their time upon the earth,
but...have their citizenship in heaven.” (5.9)

After all, if the Philippians are to join Paul in his motto: “to live is Christ; to die is gain,”
then they must consider all other allegiances as “rubbish” (3:8).

Did you get that?

If *you* are to adopt Paul’s motto, “to live is Christ; to die is gain,”
then *you* must consider all other allegiances as *dung*.

Your manner of conduct in this life –
your allegiance to your city – your people –
must be “worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Your manner of life –
the character of your relations with one another (and with outsiders) –
should be worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Before you open your mouth in conversation with your neighbors,
think: “how does the gospel call me to speak?”

Does the gospel inform your interactions with others?
How does the gospel shape the way we live as a body?

Now, pay attention to the *content* of this “worthy citizenship” in verse 27:
“that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you
*that you are standing firm in one spirit
with one mind striving side by side
for the faith of the gospel,
and not frightened in anything by your opponents.*”

Some people have made connections to Roman military practice here,
pointing to the remarkable efficiency of the Greek phalanx.
The phalanx was a body of spearmen who were trained to march in close ranks,
with shields all around and above,
making them an impenetrable wall of spears.

It’s a great picture –
but not one that the Philippians would think of –
because the phalanx had dropped out of military tactics
about 200 years before the time of Paul!

The verbs here “standing firm” and “striving”
would either make them think of military *or* athletic competitions.
They certainly emphasize *teamwork*.

This is the fundamental error of Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress*.
While the book has many wonderful (and powerful) images –

the message of the book emphasizes the individual pilgrim
only loosely associated with other pilgrims here and there.
Paul's image of the citizen pilgrim
is that we are marching side by side –
we are laboring together –
and that is why the prepositional phrases are so important:

“in one spirit”
“with one mind”

We stand firm *in one spirit*
We “co-strive” *with one mind*

This is the central insight that drives Paul's exhortation towards sanctification.
Sanctification is not an individual project.

We need each other!
Paul needed the prayers of the Philippians to be saved.
If an apostle needed that –
how much more do you or I?!

We also need one another in the *work* of the church.
Paul didn't go out and try to plant churches by himself.
It was always a team effort.
We need to work together – “co-strive” – in the work of the gospel.

We could certainly improve in our discipline of study and prayer together.

But the area where we are most lacking is our corporate witness.
We need to be bringing our unchurched friends and colleagues to church.
And we need to be striving together with one heart and mind
in engaging them with the gospel.
Don't just assume – “oh, that John's friend, he'll take care of it!”

And we need to engage in corporate witness however we can in our community.
The one place where we, as a church, engage in corporate witness
is through the Michiana Covenant Academy.
I said last week that we should not view our academic interests
as a liability.
Far from it – instead we should be using those academic interests
in the service of Christ, *together*.

But there are other places, where one or two of you are engaged.
If we are to strive “side by side for the faith of the gospel”
then we need for people to come alongside Steve
as he labors at the juvenile correction facility.
We need for people to come alongside Stasia

as she labors at Camp Ray Bird.
We can't do everything in South Bend.
But then again, we are only one part of Christ's body here!

But we need to do more to "stand firm in one spirit,
with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,
and not frightened in anything by your opponents.

Don't be afraid of those who would mock.
Don't be afraid of those who would trouble you.

Why?

I have taken the last sentence in verse 28 as the title of this sermon
because I wanted to show how all the other parts lead to this:

3. This Is a Clear Sign of Their Destruction and Your Salvation (1:28b)

This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.

What is "this"?

What is "a clear sign"?

Your standing firm in one spirit.
Your striving side-by-side with one mind.

When your enemies see how they church stands firm in one spirit,
when your opponents see how you strive side-by-side with one mind,
that is a "clear sign" to them.

Paul envisions a world where there are "opponents"
who seek to undermine the church.

Paul thinks that there are *people* (not just impersonal forces)
who will oppose the people of God.

They will be hostile.

But this is not just a psychological opposition-
there will also be a corresponding behavior.

There are those who will "stand against" you –
even as the church is to stand together.

Notice that Paul does not name the opponents.

Notice that Paul *never* names opponents.

(Why provoke them?)

But of course, as Paul will remind the Philippians in chapter 3,
he was once one of those opponents!

There is always a chance that your opponents will be converted to the Lord!

But whether they are converted or not,
the united, fearless stand of the church will be a sign to them of *your* salvation
and *their* destruction.

“And this from God”

- not merely the salvation, but the whole complex of events is from God!

“Conflict, destruction, perseverance and salvation” is all from God. (Silva, 93)

4. Because God Has Given You the Gift of Suffering for Christ’s Sake (1:29-30)

29 For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, 30 engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Moises Silva summarizes Paul’s point very well:

“The conflicts that you are experiencing may appear frightening
and thus threaten to discourage you,
but you cannot allow that to happen.

Perhaps you are tempted to interpret these conflicts as a bad omen,
as though God is displeased with you and intends to destroy you.

But that is exactly wrong.

You must interpret what is happening as evidence of God’s design to save you!

Why?

*Because suffering is the way to glory,
God’s gift of salvation for His children.”*

I want you to hear v29:

“For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ
you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.”

You need for this to become engrained in your hearts!

Suffering for the sake of Christ is a gift from God!

We tend to think of suffering as something to get over as quickly as possible,
so that we can get back to enjoying life.

(And I should note Paul is not talking about every kind of suffering –
he is talking about suffering for Christ – especially persecution.

There is nothing wrong with taking an aspirin for a headache!)

But all sorts of suffering can become suffering for the sake of Christ.

The devil will use all sorts of trials and suffering
to urge you to forget the Lord your God.

This brings us back to the importance of meditating on the future life.

This is why Paul sees suffering as a gift from God.

“It has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ

you should not only believe in him
but also suffer for his sake.”

Again, Calvin says this beautifully:

“Now we see how many good things, interwoven, spring from the cross.
For overturning that good opinion
which we falsely entertain concerning our own strength,
and unmasking our hypocrisy,
which affords us delight,
the cross strikes at our perilous confidence in the flesh.
It teaches us, thus humbled, to rest upon God alone,
with the result that we do not faint or yield....
“And it is of no slight importance for you to be cleansed of your blind love of self
that you may be made more nearly aware of your incapacity;
to feel your own incapacity
that you may learn to distrust yourself;
to distrust yourself
that you may transfer your trust to God;
to rest with a trustful heart in God
that, relying upon his help,
you may persevere unconquered to the end;
to take your stand in his grace
that you may comprehend the truth of his promises;
to have unquestioned certainty of his promises
that your hope may thereby be strengthened.” (III.viii.3)

The Stoic endures suffering because “that’s the way things are” –
the Christian endures suffering (and indeed rejoices in suffering)
because we see the glory that is ours in Christ Jesus.
He endured the cross – “for the joy set before him” –
and we also suffer for his sake
because we see that to live is Christ; to die is gain.

And as evidence of this, Paul points out that the Philippians are
“engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.”

Here, with the language of “conflict” (*agwna*)
the imagery of the athletic contest emerges again.

Paul engages in the agony (the conflict) of the Christian life.

I don’t think that most of us think of the Christian life as something agonizing.
How often do you “push yourself” in your sanctification?
I fear that too often we simply “play” at sanctification,
as though it were a computer game:

Oops! I got blown up!
Push restart – let's try again!

Paul rejects that attitude to the Christian life
and says that your standing firm together in one spirit,
with one mind striving for the faith of the gospel,
is a clear sign of your enemies' destruction
and your salvation.

So, how do we do this?

We do this by studying the word of God together,
praying with and for one another,
and talking seriously about how we live.

We do this in service projects in demonstrating our care for one another.

We do this by inviting our unchurched neighbors, colleagues and friends
to come and hear the gospel – and let them see how we love one another.