

Perspective in a Pandemic: The Christian's View of Life and Death

Philippians 1:21–26

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Introduction

Jonathan Edwards—the man who sparked the First Great Awakening in the 1730s and 40s, the man whom many consider to be America's greatest theologian—as a 19 year-old, began writing in his diary a list of resolutions. Edwards, as a young man, was awakening to the full breadth of the glory and holiness of God, and he knew that a life lived in the presence of such a God required resolve and commitment. And so he penned what would eventually be seventy resolutions that would act as a rudder for his life—declarations of his commitment to live all of life to the glory of God, which he knew he could not do unless he was resolved to do it.

In his ninth resolution, Jonathan Edwards wrote the following. “Resolved, to think much on all occasions of my own dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death.” Imagine that. A 19 year-old! Resolving to think much about his own death! I'm not sure I could think of something so totally opposite to the moors and values of our culture than that. “You're 19! You've got so much of your life ahead of you! Why would you burden your heart with thinking about death?”

Our society hates thinking about death. We can't stand it. It is so repugnant to the sensibilities of this culture, that the world does everything it can possibly do to shut out the reality of death from our minds, from our consciousness. We pile up endless distractions in our lives that divert our attention from the one reality that we know we're certain to face but that we can't bear to think about. Endless entertainment! Anything to keep our minds occupied, so that there would never be that quiet reflectiveness of spirit that comes to grips with the reality of our own mortality, so that we never have to ponder what waits for us for eternity after these 80 short years are over, so that we snuff out the testimony of our conscience, which tells us we are accountable to God as our Creator, that we have rebelled against Him by breaking His law, that we deserve to die because of it, and that we *will* die and face His judgment. Our culture teaches us to stick our heads in the proverbial sand. “Live it up!” “Go for the gusto!” “Don't worry about it!” “You only live once!”

And then: there's a global pandemic. Then a virus escapes from a laboratory and infects 17 million people across the globe. Thousands upon thousands die. All of a sudden this world that wants nothing to do with thinking about their own death is forced to grapple with the reality that their lives may be in danger. So what happens? The entire world shuts down. *Our* entire world shuts down. No work. No school. No restaurants. No gyms. No beaches. No parks. No church. Don't leave the house if you can help it. Don't allow anyone into your house outside of your immediate family. And after a few months, when things begin to ease up: don't go anywhere in public without a mask, and stay six feet away from everybody.

Edwards recited his resolutions every morning; he reminded himself to think about his death every day of his life. And through him God changed the world, in 1730s and 40s New England. *Our* culture is awakened from its frivolity-induced coma by the Coronavirus, and is confronted with the reality of death, and the result is panic, and terror, and chaos. What's the difference? The difference is: Edwards was no slave to the fear of death. Hebrews 2 says that "through death [Christ rendered] powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and [freed] those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives." The world, through the fear of death, is subject to slavery. The Christian, through Christ's conquest of death, has been set free from that fear.

Because: what has Christ done? He has atoned for sin by His death on the cross! The reason we die is because we sin. Romans 6:23: "The wages of *sin* is death." Ezekiel 18:4: "The soul that *sins* will die." And yet Jesus Christ, the Son of God, fully God and fully man, came to earth to live as a man, to live the life of perfect obedience to God that we have failed to live, and then died on the cross as a substitute in the place of His people—to bear the penalty of sin in the place of all those who trust in Him—and then rose from the grave three days later in victory over sin and death. He bore our sins in His body on the cross, so that for those who receive Him by faith alone, the end of our lives here on earth only ushers us into eternal life in His presence forever. Death, what was the last and great enemy, Scripture calls it, has now become the seal of our victory in Christ—a friend that takes us by the hand and leads us to our eternal joy and rest.

It can be easy to forget that sometimes. Even for Christians. We're so bombarded by the world's messages of total and utter panic. And of course it's a natural and proper desire to preserve God's gift of life. When we add those things to taking the eyes of our heart off of the rest and the joy and the glory of our heavenly home—setting our minds on earthly things rather than on the things that are above—even you and I can begin to walk back into the open, unlocked prison cell of the fear of death.

I've spoken to some Christians—some members of Grace Church—who are sincerely struggling with the fear of death and dying during this time. I spoke with one brother who said he was fearful about returning to church, and he asked if I had any recommendations to help him battle

his fear. And I told him I totally understood, but I asked him, “What is it that you’re afraid of?” And he said, “Well, just being around people after staying home for five months.” And I said, “What is it that you fear will happen?” And he said, “That I’ll be exposed to or contract the virus.” And I said, again, “I totally understand. But think this all the way through with me. What will happen if you get the virus?” And he said, “Well, I really have no idea.” I said, “What’s the worst that could happen?” And he said, “I could end up in the hospital and die.” And I said, “What happens then?” And he took a second and replied, “Go to heaven. Eternal life.” And I smiled and said, “Yes! And is that something to be fearful of?” And he said, “No, of course not.” And I said, “The worst-case scenario chases you to your reward in heaven!” And he eventually said, “Thank you for reasoning this out with me. I wasn’t thinking it all the way through, but now I feel better.”

Now, I’m not saying that there aren’t legitimate reasons for staying away. There are. But what I am saying is that we have to have a biblical, Christian perspective on life and death. So many of us can think about a Covid diagnosis as a death sentence. And for some, it *is*. But what *is* death, for the Christian? What is *life* for the Christian? We need a little “Perspective in a Pandemic,” which is the title of this sermon: Perspective in a Pandemic: The Christian’s View of Life and Death.

And to get that perspective, we’re going to turn to the first chapter of the Book of Philippians, where the Apostle Paul is awaiting word about his own death sentence. The Apostle Paul writes the letter to the Philippians while he is under house arrest in Rome, chained to a Praetorian guard twenty-four hours a day, and waiting to stand trial before Nero—the psychotic emperor of Rome who, just a few years after the writing of this letter, would light the city of Rome by making human torches out of Christians. It was Nero who would decide whether Paul was to be released, or whether he was to be executed.

And Paul writes this letter, first of all to calm the Philippians’ fears, and to let them know that God has been at work through his imprisonment. So far from hindering the spread of the Gospel, Paul’s house arrest has actually served to advance the Gospel. Verse 12: “Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel.” He’s been able to preach the Gospel throughout the whole Praetorian guard, verse 13, such that many of Nero’s own personal soldiers were getting saved. The Gospel is being preached, people are being saved, and so Paul, verse 18, is rejoicing: “Christ is proclaimed, and in this I rejoice.”

And he’s going to keep on rejoicing, verse 18 again: “Yes, and I will rejoice.” As he anticipates his trial before Nero—as he awaits what may be his death sentence—he says, “I will go on rejoicing!” Why? Because his joy is rooted—not in security, not in the absence of conflict, not in pleasantness of circumstances—but in what? Verses 19 and 20: in the glory and magnification of Jesus Christ. Look at verse 19: “Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that [my circumstances] will

turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.”

Whether Paul is exonerated and released, or whether he is condemned and dies at the hand of Nero, Paul’s joy is unshakeable. Because whether he lives, or whether he dies, the passion of his life—the very foundation of all of his affections—would remain absolutely constant. And what is that foundation? It is that Christ will be exalted! That He will be lifted up! That He will be magnified! That He will be glorified! “As long as Christ will be magnified in me—whether I live or whether I die—I will rejoice!”

But how does Paul know that Christ will be glorified in Him whether he lives or dies? If all of his joy is based on Christ being magnified, how can Paul be so sure that he will magnify Christ in life or in death? And the answer to that question is the treasure chest that is verse 21: Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death, “*for*”—or *because*—“to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

That sentence is the very heart of Christianity. The essence of Christianity is the worship and magnification of Jesus Christ. And according to Philippians 1:21, the Christian magnifies the supreme worth of Jesus when he can honestly say: “To *me*”—that is, in my estimation, my subjective appraisal of the matter is—“To me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” We magnify the worth of Christ—we make Christ look great to the world—by experiencing Him, or esteeming Him, or counting Him to be so worthy, so glorious, so satisfying, such a treasure, that we consider death—which is the loss of everything this life has to offer us—to be a gain to us, because we gain Christ. It is to say, as Paul does in chapter 3 verses 7 and 8: “But whatever things were gain to me”—notice that key word: *gain*—“...those things I have counted as *loss* for the sake of Christ. More than that, I [do now presently] count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish, so that I may gain Christ.”

How does the Christian magnify the supreme worth of Jesus? How do we display Christ to look as great as He is? By experiencing Christ as so surpassingly valuable that everything else in this life is as refuse by comparison. “To die is gain” means to survey all the wonderful things of this life that death can take from us, and to prefer Christ as more valuable, so that, to us, death is not loss, but gain. “To live is Christ” means to survey all the wonderful things that this life can offer, and to prefer Christ as more valuable, so that, to us, laying down our lives in service to Christ and His people is not losing our life, but finding our life (Matt 16:25).

Paul can be absolutely certain that Christ will be magnified in his body—whether by life or by death—because He is more satisfied by Christ than by all that life can offer and all that death can take.

And as we come to verses 22 to 26, Paul begins to elaborate further on what it means that for him to live is Christ and to die is gain. And in doing so, he lets us in on the inward deliberation of his own heart, as he contemplates what one preacher has called: his sanctified dilemma. Should he set his hope on leaving this world—dying, and enjoying unhindered fellowship with the Lord Jesus face-to-face? Or should he instead set his heart on remaining in this life, and laying *down* his life in fruitful service to Christ and His church?

In this passage, Paul finds his heart gripped by these **two holy ambitions**—each so attractive and so compelling that he’s torn between them and he’s not sure which one he should set his affections on. And as we examine Paul’s sanctified dilemma, we gain the **perspective** that we need in the midst of a pandemic. We gain something of the Christian’s philosophy of life and death. How should a Christian view the prospect of dying? And how should he view the prospect of living?

Paul’s Dilemma (vv. 22b–23a)

Well, let’s look first at the way Paul describes this sanctified **dilemma**. Beginning in the second half of verse 22, he says, “And I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.”

Paul says he doesn’t know which to choose. And that can potentially be confusing, because it makes it sound like Paul actually had some choice in the matter—some say in the outcome of his trial. But this is speaking less of Paul making the decisive choice that will determine his fate and more of his personal preference and how he should direct his heart. He’s saying, “If you were to give me the choice between (a) leaving this life and going to unhindered fellowship with Christ on the one hand, and, on the other, (b) remaining on to make His name famous through all the world and to strengthen His church, I wouldn’t know which to choose. I don’t know which outcome to hope for.”

He says he’s hard-pressed from both directions—literally, “pressed between the two.” Jesus uses this word in Luke 19:43, when He speaks of the enemies of Jerusalem hemming them in on every side. This is an intense dilemma. Paul is hemmed in—he is hard-pressed—between these two ambitions.

And recognize: these are *holy* ambitions. Paul views these as two positive, attractive alternatives. The choice that Paul is at a loss to make is not which misery he can avoid—the miseries of life, or the misery of terminating life by death. No, his indecision comes as a result of being unable to choose which *blessing* he prefers. Because: for him to live was Christ, and to die was to gain even *more* of Christ.

Do you think this way? If you were presented with the choice between continuing life or certain death, would this be a delightful dilemma for you? Is Jesus Christ all things to you, whether in life or in death? Well, I pray that as we look more deeply into these **two holy ambitions**, that your hearts would be ignited to make these your own ambitions—that you would know the joyful tug of your affections between the blessing of immediate, face-to-face fellowship with Christ and the blessing of sacrificial ministry to God’s people.

I. To Die is to Gain Christ (v. 23b)

Well let’s look at the **first** of those **holy ambitions**. Number one: Paul longs to depart and be with Christ. Verse 23: “But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better.” And we could summarize this point by saying: **To die is to gain Christ.**

Notice how Paul speaks of death as a departure. I have the desire to *depart* and be with Christ. That’s the word *analuō*, and literally means “to loosen up” or “to untie.” It’s often used in a military context to refer to packing up a tent. After dwelling temporarily in a particular camp for some time, the time would come for the soldiers to break camp, pack up their tents, and depart for their next expedition. The word is also used in a nautical context to refer to the releasing of a ship from the moorings that tied it to the dock. The time has come to set sail and depart, and so the moorings that tied the ship down must be cut. By using this metaphor of **departure**, Paul teaches us that death, for the Christian, is simply the breaking of camp—the packing up of our temporary earthly tent, and moving on to our heavenly home. It’s simply the cutting of our moorings, so that we might be free to set sail to the place our Lord has prepared for us. What beautiful imagery, this imagery of departure!

Notice, also, the close connection between the reality of death and fellowship with Christ. “...having the desire,” Paul says, “to depart and be with Christ.” The grammar of the original makes it clear that that phrase is to be read as a unit. You can’t separate the Christian’s departing from this life, on the one hand, and being with Christ, on the other. Paul says the same thing in 2 Corinthians 5:8, that “to be absent from the body [is] to be at home with the Lord.” There’s no in-between state when you’re absent both from the body *and* the Lord. There’s no such thing as Purgatory, like the Roman Catholic Church teaches. There’s no such thing as “soul sleep,” as some of the cults teach. For the one who has repented of his sin and trusted in Christ for

righteousness, to leave the present state of this life is to enter immediately into the presence of the Lord Jesus.

It's no wonder, then, that Paul longs for death with such intensity. That longing to be with Christ is expressed in the phrase, "having the *desire* to depart and be with Christ." This word speaks of earnest desire, an intense longing and yearning. Paul intensely longed to break camp. He longed to cut his moorings, so that he could be in the presence of the Savior he so loved and cherished. This was not, "Oh, yeah. Sure. Heaven would be nice." This was a yearning homesickness and lovesickness for the Savior that was the ground and substance of all his joy. Note what he says back in 2 Corinthians 5:8: "We are of good courage, I say, and *prefer* rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord." Paul says, "Not only am I not fearing death—not only am I not allowing the potential for death to drive me to despair and to paralyze me into seclusion and uselessness! But my settled *preference* is to be absent from this body and to go and be with Christ!" Charles Hodge summarizes it by saying, "Death is not an object of dread, but of desire" (2 Corinthians, 499).

Is that true of you? When you stop and survey your life, and consider the prospect of death, can you say that death is not an object of dread, but of desire? Do you so desire Christ—is He the heaven of heavens to you—such that the prospect of death brings joy? Have you been able to wean your affections off of the fading pleasures of this world, so that you can truly say, "To die is gain! I can lose everything I have in this life and call it *gain*, because I will gain Christ!"? Or have you gripped this world so tightly that, rather than a pilgrim in exile in a foreign land, you've grown so comfortable and so complacent that *this* world feels like your home? That when confronted with the loss of all that this life has given you and can give you, you backwardly cling to *that*, and say, "I have the earnest desire to stay in this life away from Christ, for to me, *that* is very much better"? "I can't die yet; I need to get married!" "I can't die yet; I need to have kids!" "I can't die yet; I need to see my kids grow up and see *them* get married and have kids!" "I need to enjoy retirement!" "I still need to make my mark in this world!"

If you're tempted to think that way, dear friends, I tell you that one sight of Christ in His exalted glory in heaven will absolutely dwarf the most magnificent glory of the very best this life has to offer! Christ is the great gain and glory of Heaven! *He* is the great end of the Christian life! And that is why death is "very much better," as Paul says in verse 23. Literally, the phrase is "much more better." Paul just piles on the comparatives one after another to try to find some way to express how wonderful it will be to finally be with Jesus. And so he uses bad grammar to express good theology. Just as much as marriage is "much more better" than engagement, so is death "much more better" than life, if it means that it will bring us to Christ.

The Puritan pastor Richard Sibbes, in a sermon on this text, puts it like no one else can put it: "Why doth [Paul] not say, I desire to be in heaven? Ans. Because heaven is not heaven without

Christ. It is better to be in any place with Christ than to be in heaven itself without him. All delicacies without Christ are but as a funeral banquet. Where the master of the feast is away, there is nothing but solemnness. What is all without Christ? I say the joys of heaven are not the joys of heaven without Christ; he is the very heaven of heaven. ... To be with Christ is to be at the spring-head of all happiness.”

And the Scriptures agree with him. Listen to these passages from the worship songs of the saints of old. Psalm 16:11: “You will make known to me the path of life; In Your presence is fullness of joy; In Your right hand there are pleasures forever.” Psalm 17:15: “As for me, I shall behold Your face in righteousness; I will be satisfied with Your likeness when I awake.” Psalm 27:4: “One thing I have asked from the LORD, that I shall seek: That I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, To behold the beauty of the LORD And to meditate in His temple.” Psalm 65:4: “How blessed is the one whom You choose and bring near to You to dwell in Your courts. We will be satisfied with the goodness of Your house, Your holy temple.” Psalm 73:23–28: “Whom have I in heaven but You? ... My flesh and my heart may fail, but *God* is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.” And as the Apostle John brings his glorious report of his heavenly vision to a close, he speaks, in Revelation 22:1–5, of the great end of God’s people. And he summarizes the consummation of their entire lives lived by faith when he says in verse 4: “They will see His face.”

Oh friends, Jesus is what makes heaven *heaven*. Jesus is what makes death “much more better” than the best this life can offer. And I ask you this morning: Is He enough for you? We’ve been able to answer that question for a pretty long time. Now we can answer it a bit more practically. Is He enough for you? If He is, then there’s no need to slavishly cling to this life. Every glittering gem this life could offer you is absolutely outshined by the light and the beauty of the glory of Jesus. And if He is enough for you, then there’s no need to fear death. By repentance and faith in Christ, the death which was once our greatest and final enemy has now become our friend—merely the passageway to our greatest delight.

And I can’t resist going back to Jonathan Edwards to drive this point home—to just marinate in the glory of heaven just a bit longer. In a sermon called, “The True Christian’s Life a Journey Towards Heaven,” Edwards wrote, “God is the highest good of the reasonable creature. The enjoyment of him is our proper happiness, and is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven, fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here: better than fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of any or all earthly friends. These are but shadows; but God is the substance. These are but scattered beams; but God is the sun. These are but streams; but God is the fountain. These are but drops; but God is the ocean. Therefore, it becomes us to spend this life only as a journey towards heaven” (*WJE*, 17:437–38).

And then, in the sermon he delivered at David Brainerd's funeral, Edwards wrote, "O how infinitely great will the privilege and happiness of such be, who at that time shall go to be with Christ in his glory." It is "the privilege of being with Christ in heaven, where he sits on the right hand of God, in the glory of the King and God of the angels, and of the whole universe, shining forth as the great light, the bright sun of that world of glory, there to dwell in the full, constant, and everlasting view of his beauty and brightness, there most freely and intimately to converse with him, and fully to enjoy his love, as his friends and spouse, there to have fellowship with him in the infinite pleasure and joy he has in the enjoyment of his Father, there to sit with him on his throne, and reign with him in the possession of all things, and partake with him in the joy and glory of his victory over his enemies, and the advancement of his in the world, and to join with him in joyful songs of praise, to his Father and their Father, to his God and their God, forever and ever" (*WJE*, 25:243–44).

And then, in one of Edwards' most famous sermons called "Heaven is a World of Love," he ravishes the heart with the thoughts of our glorious reward. And excuse me, as I quote an extended portion of this sermon. "There, even in heaven, dwells the God from whom every stream of holy love, yea, every drop that is, or ever was, proceeds. There dwells God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit, united as one, in infinitely dear, and incomprehensible, and mutual, and eternal love. ... The great God who so fully manifests himself there, is perfect with an absolute and infinite perfection. The Son of God, who is the brightness of the Father's glory, appears there in the fullness of his glory, without that garb of outward [humility] in which he appeared in this world. The Holy Ghost shall there be poured forth with perfect richness and sweetness, as a pure river of the water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. ... There, in heaven, this infinite fountain of love — this eternal Three in One — is set open without any obstacle to hinder access to it, as it flows forever. There this glorious God is manifested, and shines forth, in full glory, in beams of love. And there this glorious fountain forever flows forth in streams, yea, in rivers of love and delight, and these rivers swell, as it were, to an ocean of love, in which the souls of the ransomed may bathe with the sweetest enjoyment, and their hearts, as it were, be deluged with love!"

And though I might be accused of preaching another man's sermon, I still can't resist going on. Edwards says, "There are many principles contrary to love, that make this world like a tempestuous sea. Selfishness, and envy, and revenge, and jealousy, and kindred passions keep life on earth in a constant tumult, and make it a scene of confusion and uproar, where no quiet rest is to be enjoyed except in renouncing this world and looking to another.

"But oh! what rest is there in that world which the God of peace and love fills with his own gracious presence, and in which the Lamb of God lives and reigns, filling it with the brightest and sweetest beams of his love! where there is nothing to disturb or offend, and no being or object to be seen that is not surrounded with perfect amiableness and sweetness; where the saints

shall find and enjoy all that they love, and so be perfectly satisfied where there is no enemy and no enmity; but perfect love in every heart and to every being; where there is perfect harmony among all the inhabitants, no one envying another, but everyone rejoicing in the happiness of every other; where all their love is humble and holy, and perfectly Christian, without the least carnality or impurity; where love is always mutual and reciprocated to the full; where there is no hypocrisy or dissembling, but perfect simplicity and sincerity; where there is no treachery, or unfaithfulness, or inconstancy, or jealousy in any form; where there is no clog or hindrance to the exercises or expressions of love, no imprudence or indecency in expressing it, and no influence of folly or indiscretion in any word or deed; where there is no separation wall, and no misunderstanding or strangeness, but full acquaintance and perfect intimacy in all; where there is no division through different opinions or interests, but where all in that glorious and loving society shall be most nearly and divinely related, and each shall belong to every other, and all shall enjoy each other in perfect prosperity and riches, and honor, without any sickness, or grief, or persecution, or sorrow, or any enemy to molest them, or any busybody to create jealousy or misunderstanding, or mar the perfect, and holy, and blessed peace that reigns in heaven!

“And all this in the garden of God — in the paradise of love, where everything is filled with love, and everything conspires to promote and kindle it, and keep up its flame, and nothing ever interrupts it, but everything has been fitted by an all-wise God for its full enjoyment under the greatest advantages forever! And all, too, where the beauty of the beloved objects shall never fade, and love shall never grow weary nor decay, but the soul shall more and more rejoice in love forever!

“Oh! what tranquillity will there be in such a world as this! And who can express the fullness and blessedness of this peace! What a calm is this! How sweet, and holy, and joyous! What a haven of rest to enter, after having passed through the storms and tempests of this world, in which pride, and selfishness, and envy, and malice, and scorn, and contempt, and contention, and vice, are as waves of a restless ocean, always rolling, and often dashed about in violence and fury! What a Canaan of rest to come to, after going through this waste and howling wilderness, full of snares, and pitfalls, and poisonous serpents, where no rest could be found!

“And oh! what joy will there be, springing up in the hearts of the saints, after they have passed through their wearisome pilgrimage, to be brought to such a paradise as this! Here is joy unspeakable indeed, and full of glory—joy that is humble, holy, enrapturing, and divine in its perfection! Love is always a sweet principle; and especially divine love. This, even on earth, is a spring of sweetness; but in heaven it shall become a stream, a river, an ocean!

“All shall stand about the God of glory, who is the great fountain of love, opening, as it were, their very souls to be filled with those effusions of love that are poured forth from his fullness, just as the flowers on the earth, in the bright and joyous days of spring, open their bosoms to the

sun, to be filled with his light and warmth, and to flourish in beauty and fragranciness under his cheering rays.

“Every saint in heaven is as a flower in that garden of God, and holy love is the fragrance and sweet odor that they all send forth, and with which they fill the bowers of that paradise above. Every soul there, is as a note in some concert of delightful music, that sweetly harmonizes with every other note, and all together blend in the most rapturous strains in praising God and the Lamb forever. And so all help each other, to their utmost, to express the love of the whole society to its glorious Father and Head, and to pour back love into the great fountain of love whence they are supplied and filled with love, and blessedness, and glory.

“And thus they will love, and reign in love, and in that godlike joy that is its blessed fruit, such as eye hath not seen, nor ear heard, nor hath ever entered into the heart of man in this world to conceive; and thus in the full sunlight of the throne, enraptured with joys that are forever increasing, and yet forever full, they shall live and reign with God and Christ forever and ever!”

Dear brothers and sisters: Don’t fear death. Think *every day* about your death! Set your heart and your affections on the glory to be enjoyed in that blessed place! And I trust that by the power of His own Word, you will see that **to die is to gain Christ**, and that the Holy Spirit will kindle in you **a holy ambition**—an earnest longing—to depart and be with Christ, just as He had done with Paul.

II. To Live is to Serve Christ (vv. 22a, 24–26)

But what if you don’t die? What if God’s will for you is to remain on in this life? What was the other side of Paul’s sanctified dilemma? We saw that to die is to gain Christ. Here we learn that **to live is to serve Christ**. Read with me, starting in verse 22: “But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me.” Skip to verse 24: “...to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith.”

As much as Paul yearns to die and be with Christ, he also recognizes that living on in the flesh will mean fruitful labor and increased benefit for the people of God. And as he considers and assesses the situation, he recognizes that the Lord intends to use him as an Apostle to strengthen the churches. There are issues in the churches on which believers will greatly benefit from apostolic instruction. And so without any direct revelation from God, but with a keen understanding of God’s providential workings as Christ builds His Church in those formative years, Paul becomes convinced that God’s sovereign plan includes his remaining and continuing on in his ministry. Again, this is not because of any special revelation, otherwise there would be no reason to say that he didn’t know which to prefer. If God told him directly, he’d set his heart

on what God told him. But because of his perception of the situation, he comes to a conviction that he will most likely be released from prison, and will continue on for the benefit of God's people.

So, the previous point gave us a fuller understanding of what it means for the faithful follower of Christ that "to die is gain." Now, as we turn to this **second holy ambition** of Paul's, we discover more of what it means for the godly person that "to live is Christ." In other words, how does the Christian, who would be overjoyed to depart and be with Christ forever—how does that Christian *live* faithfully, when he realizes that, at least for now, it's not God's will that he be taken home? What is the Christian life about?

Well the first thing that Paul speaks about in verse 22 is fruitful labor: "But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean *fruitful labor* for me." He's speaking there of the toilsome labor of Gospel ministry. In verse 25, he calls it laboring for the Philippians' "progress and joy in the faith." The point is: Paul's alternative to dying and being with Christ did not mean an easy, refreshing retirement! To live on in the flesh did not mean playing relaxing games of shuffleboard while he cruised the Mediterranean! It meant *work!* Labor! Toil! Striving! He wrote in Colossians 1:28: "We proclaim Him, admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ. For this purpose also **I labor, striving** according to His power, which mightily works within me." In Galatians 4:19 he compared his travail on behalf of the church's spiritual progress to a mother's labor pains: "I am again in the anguish of childbirth until Christ is formed in you!" This is the picture of one for whom to live is Christ. It is the laying down of your life in order to aid in the progressive sanctification of God's people.

And he regards none of that as a grim, burdensome duty! Paul's not saying, "Well, Lord, if I have to stay here on earth, I guess I'll do it if I *have* to!" No! He says he's *hard-pressed* between the two! He doesn't know which to choose! His own desire and longing for this difficult, toilsome, wearisome, diligent labor rivaled his desire for the eternal rest in heaven with Christ face-to-face! Oh, that we would so love God's people! that we would be torn between serving them and seeing Christ face to face—that we would be so eager to do difficult ministry as a labor of love!

But the way to get to that place, friends, is not to see it as a choice between serving Christ's people and seeing Christ Himself. Note that Paul's sanctified dilemma was not a battle between being with Christ and not being with Christ. It was not a choice between (a) Christ and (b) the people of Christ. Instead, to minister Christ to others—to labor so that others would come to treasure Christ as more valuable than anything—that itself is an act of worship. It *is* an act of fellowship with Christ. There is communion with Christ to be enjoyed as you labor to raise Christ in the affections of others. And so as one commentator said, Paul's "was a dilemma

between Christ and Christ, Christ much and Christ more, Christ by faith and Christ by sight” (Moule, 257). For Paul, to die was to gain more of Christ, but to live was Christ also. And so Paul was not choosing to serve the people of Christ over against serving and worshipping Christ Himself. He was choosing to worship and serve Christ *by* serving Christ’s people.

And that’s how this text fits with the previous one. Follow me here. In verses 19 to 21, we said that “to live is Christ” means to be more satisfied by Christ than by all that life can offer. So, verses 19 to 21 teach us that the first great duty of every Christian is to open your own eyes and tune your own heart to the Word of God, so that you are more satisfied by Christ than by anything else in this entire world. But now, what we learn from verses 22 to 26 is: if for you to live is Christ, such that *you* count all the world—and even your very life—as rubbish so that you may gain Christ, then you must lay down your life in the diligent labor of ministry, so that others will come to have that same passion—so that others will see Christ clearly and be so satisfied in Him that for *them* He becomes more precious than all that life can offer and all that death can take.

This is exactly what Paul means when he says he labors for their “progress and joy in the faith,” verse 25. What is spiritual progress but growing to *worship* Christ more fully in all areas of life? And what is joy but the experience of satisfaction in Christ that overflows out of the magnification His worth? Put simply, as we pursue *our* joy in Christ above all else, we diligently labor to help *others* pursue their joy in Christ above all else. We live to put Christ on display as magnificently glorious. Living for God’s glory, and living so that others come to find their joy and satisfaction in Christ—those are not two separate pursuits. They’re the same. We live for the glory of Christ when we surrender our lives to make others glad in God, because it is their enjoyment of and satisfaction in God that glorifies Him most. When He can satisfy the hearts of a people once dead in sin—with no taste for holiness and beauty, with no taste for righteousness—when He can bow them in humble wonder, so that they will come and sit in a tent, outside, in upper 80s-degree heat, in the middle of August, under threat from public officials, to hear His Word preached and His name exalted: God looks *great* when His people are that satisfied by Him!

And so, following Paul’s example of godliness, as we continue to live on in the flesh, our lives must be characterized by the diligent labor of Gospel ministry, for the increasing progress and joy of God’s people. We don’t lock ourselves away in seclusion, even in the midst of a pandemic. Sure, we have to be responsible in a very extraordinary season. We don’t put the Lord our God to the test by acting foolishly and declaring that God will just *have* to protect us. We need to steward God’s gift of life well. But brothers and sisters: what is life about? To live is Christ! And preeminently, to live is to be so satisfied in Christ that we joyfully lay our lives down to serve His people. It means that, to the extent that we can be, we are actively involved and actively participating in the ministry of the local church—big church, fellowship group,

Bible study, one-on-one discipleship, meals in one another's homes, developing relationships, using your spiritual gifts to serve the body, preaching the Gospel to the lost: all of it.

Friends, if you're not giving your life away in ministry like that, you are wasting your life. Because to you to live is Christ! To live is not comfort. To live is not ease. To live is not safety. To live is not security. To live is not vacations and cars and trucks and boats and homes and TVs and computers and cell phones and entertainment. To live is Christ! And that means fruitful labor in the service of Christ's people. *That* is what life is about.

And what is the end result of ministry that labors for the benefit of God's people? Ultimately it is so that God's people will come to **boast**—to rejoice—all the more in Christ. Here is a literal translation of verse 26: "...so that"—Why do I labor? "So that your proud confidence"—or your happy boasting, or your confident glorying—"may abound in Christ Jesus *in* me through my coming to you again."

The point is: When you live like that, when you think like that, when you feel like that, and when you serve like that, God's people see clearly the grace of God that is evident in the diligent labor of ministry. And their perception of God's grace—not in *your* glory, but in the glory of God reflected through you—that gives occasion for their boasting—not in you—but in Christ *in* you. Again, "...so that your proud confidence may abound in Christ Jesus *in* me."

Conclusion

We need a little **perspective** in our pandemic. We need to think of life and death in the way that Paul thought of them. May it be for us, as it was for Paul, that the most important thing in our life is to magnify the worth of Jesus. May it be that for us to live is Christ, and so serve His people, and to die is gain because it brings us even more of Christ. To die is to go and be with Him face to face—to serve Him and worship Him unencumbered by sin and suffering. To live is to spend your life laboring so that others would come to worship Christ as He is worthy of.

And to those of you who are here not worshiping Christ as He is worthy of—that is to say, for those of you who are outside of Christ, who don't know Him to be Savior and Lord by faith alone—this glorious Christ, that glorious world of love that we read about from the pen of Jonathan Edwards and from the Scriptures: that is all open to you this very day! You're not guaranteed tomorrow. If there's anything that this pandemic should teach you, it's that none of us should presume that we'll wake up tomorrow. But here you are, today, with the door of mercy flung wide open, with breath still in your lungs, with life still in your veins. And that means you are welcome to this glorious Christ, who is so surpassingly valuable that He is worth the loss of all things!

You are a sinner, just like the rest of us. You've broken God's holy law. And God is not some kindly grandfather who pats us on the head, and says, "Oh, kids are going to be kids. All humans are sinners. Ah, I say we let them all in!" That's not how He is! He is perfectly holy! And He will see to it that justice be served in every single life in every corner of His universe.

And that means, for those of us who have sinned, we all deserve His judgment. The justice of God that we deserve—that our lives have merited—is eternal torment in hell, forever, in the most excruciating agony that you could possibly imagine. And there's nothing we can do get out. No good works that we could perform, no amount of services we could attend, no amount of Bible reading we could do, no amount of charity we could give that gets us out of that punishment.

But God, the Father, who loves us, sent His Son into the world to live and die as a man—to live a perfect life of obedience that you and I have failed to live; to die a sacrificial, substitutionary death, so that He would receive in His own person on the cross the full weight of the fury and the righteous wrath of His Father that we were due in hell—so that what would happen to sinners in hell was happening to Christ on the cross—so that our penalty could be paid, so that God's justice could be righteously disposed of. And then He died, and then He rose again—not to stay submitted to death, but to rise again in victory over death to show: that everything that is necessary to come to God and eternal life has been accomplished by His Son.

And He promises that if you disclaim any and all efforts of your own to earn any part of that—if you say, "Lord, I *am* a sinner. I *cannot* earn my salvation. I *deserve* Your just fury. But I trust that what Christ has done on my behalf avails for me with You,"—wonder of wonders! He will receive you! The wretch, the vile, treasonous, adulterous rebel that you are, that I am: He receives us into that world of love, and into the sure hope *of* that world even here and now, while we live to serve one another.

I would invite you: lay down your sin—whatever sin you've been clinging to, whatever would keep you from trusting in Christ and following after Him as a committed, wholehearted disciple of His: leave that! It's not worth it. Come to Him by faith alone, and friend, you shall have Him.

And brothers and sisters, let me ask it again: What are you living for? In what are you pursuing your satisfaction and joy? And what are you dying for? I pray it's Jesus.