

Far Better To Be With Christ
Philippians 1:21-30
January 29, 2023
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Read Philippians 1:21-30

“Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.” (Matthew 4:4b)

Introduction

Have you seen those shirts that say “Life is Fishing” or “Life is Dance” or “Basketball is Life”? There are any number of sports, hobbies, and interests that you can wear to tell the world what consumes you.. If you’re a golfer like I am, you have several options that I’ve seen: “Golf is my Life” or “Life is Golf, Everything Else is Just a Game” or “Life is Simple. Eat. Sleep. Play Golf” or even “Golf is Not a Matter of Life or Death. It’s Much More Serious Than That.” What someone wears on their chest or has on their bumper sticker gives you an insight into what the most important thing for that person is; you could even call it an idol. What “Life is” shirt would you wear? At different times in my life, my shirt would have said “Life is friendship,” “Life is guitar music,” “Life is sports,” “Life is dating and marriage,” “Life is knowledge,” “Life is work,” or “Life is family and kids.”

In our Scripture passage this morning, the Apostle Paul tells us what his t-shirt would say: “Life is Christ.” His all-consuming commitment was to His Savior and Lord, and everything he did was a response to Jesus’ sacrifice and love for him. Even writing this letter while being imprisoned by Rome, unable to freely move about and start new churches, Paul’s thoughts were how he could share Christ and spread His kingdom. And even staring death in the face, he wanted to die in a way that glorified the Lord.

The controlling thought of this passage comes early:

I. Whether I Live or Die, I Will Glorify Christ (vv. 21-24)

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.

In my youth ministry days, we’d sometimes play “get to know you” games, otherwise known as icebreakers. One of those was called “Would you rather?” and you had to pick between two scenarios, sometimes both bad, sometimes both good, and then explain why. For example:

Would you rather lose your sight or your hearing?

Would you rather be a wizard or a superhero?

Would you rather be completely invisible for a day or be able to fly for a day?

Would you rather give up bathing for a month or give up the internet for a month?

Well, here, Paul has his own weightier version of “Would you rather?” where he ponders the implications of the question “Would you rather live or die?” Let’s be very clear that Paul is not talking about killing himself, he’s not Hamlet pondering the question “to be or not to be.” He’s talking about the fact that he may be executed. He doesn’t actually get to choose his fate, it will be chosen for him. But he can explain how he’s feeling to the Philippians. At first, Paul says that he can’t figure out which one he wants more – *“which I shall choose I cannot tell.”* But then in the next verse he says that, actually, I would prefer death, where I would be in the presence of Christ.

As soon as someone starts talking about death today, we tell them to stop being so morbid; let's talk about something happier. But is that being morbid, or is it coming to grips with the ultimate fate of every human being? We shouldn't avoid all talk of death, we should be realists. If we never talk about dying, we'll be completely unprepared when it comes, either for us or those we love. But how can Paul say that *"to die is gain"*? Doesn't he know how much we give up when we die? All the things we leave behind, all the friends and family we abandon? Maybe because he had already been stripped of everything during his missionary journeys and he was in prison anyways, maybe death looked like a better option? But for us who own nice houses, have lots of family we love, good jobs – we don't want to leave all of this. We are more apt to say: *"To die is devastating."* But is it? It is if you have not made peace with God, if you don't know what will save you when you stand before Him in judgment. But for the Christian, the joys of heaven, the treasures we will find and the experiences we will have are beyond our imagination here. And the greatest joy will be seeing Jesus face-to-face and being in the presence of the Triune God. Paul knew that death would bring untold joy and pleasure. And his suffering would be over, as **Revelation 7:16-17**, *"They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore; the sun shall not strike them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb in the midst of the throne will be their shepherd, and He will guide them to springs of living water, and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes."*

So Paul is ready to die, but he says that if he lives, he'll be able to have more fruitful labor, that he would be of benefit to the church and believers. He doesn't say that he needs to check off his bucket list items of travel and personal goals before his time on earth is through. He doesn't say, "If I die, I won't get to take that snorkeling trip to Bora Bora that I've always wanted to go on. I won't get to play those great golf courses in Scotland and Ireland." No, he says that if he's **not** going to die, he's going to get back to advancing God's kingdom and being of benefit to the Philippians. *"To live is Christ"* means that following and pleasing Jesus is the ultimate reason and purpose of life. That's what every Christian commits to when they come to faith in Christ, but it's not actually what every Christian embraces with their lifestyle.

Now, there's a caution here that some people might think Paul is saying "to live is Christ" means that you have to become a pastor, a missionary, or some other "professional" ministry person. You don't need to be like Martin Luther who, as a young man, was caught in a violent thunderstorm and vowed to God that if he survived that he'd become a monk. You don't have to do that. It worked out for him eventually, but you can live for Christ anywhere doing anything. And sometimes you have to be very obsessed with something very "worldly" – Steph Curry has had to practice his jump shot for multiple hours every day for decades to be able to shoot like he does; and he can still represent Jesus and live for him. His dedication to his craft brings glory to God. Living for Christ doesn't rule out finding the ways that He's gifted you and your calling in life, and then devoting your career to those things. We can understand that phrase "fruitful labor" in verse 22 not only as the ministries you do, but also your work for DeLDOT, for the Air Force, for the school district, in construction, or in running your home. The Christian glorifies God in those pursuits and finds ways to honor Christ in the midst of them.

In the next three verses, Paul turns from his situation to theirs:

II. Whether I Come to See You or Am Absent, You Should Glorify Christ (vv. 25-27)

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. 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,

Paul looked forward to the possibility of being released and even entertained thoughts of returning to the Philippians. That would be a wonderful reunion, and he knew that they would have been greatly encouraged in their faith. But it might not happen, so his message is that they shouldn't pin all their hopes on him coming in the flesh. They shouldn't wait to see him to follow hard after Jesus. Regardless of what happens to our spiritual leaders and mentors, we need to walk the Christian walk of faith and obedience. I'm reminded of the all-important time when kids who have grown up in the church and been part of the youth group and followed Jesus when their parents and youth pastor were around then go off to college. When they don't have that spiritual leadership present, do they still pursue Christ, do they still look to grow in their faith? Many don't, but those who do truly own their faith and reap the rewards of following Him.

Verse 27 – *“Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel.”* Can we ever be worthy of the gospel? A lot of people think that Christianity is about cleaning up your act and making yourself good enough for God to accept you. But the Bible is very clear that we can never be good enough to earn God's love and forgiveness. Our salvation is a gift from God given to us through the work of Christ on our behalf. Paul is not saying they should make themselves worthy and try to earn God's love and salvation, but that after they became new creations in Christ, that they should live up to what they had been changed into. It's vitally important that we match our conduct with our words, that we don't just share the gospel with our lips but also with our lives. We have received amazing privileges as children of God, and Jesus says that *“to whom much was given, of him much will be required”* (Luke 12:48).

The end of verse 27 helps us remember that the best help in godly living is drawing strength from the believers around you. *“Stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side.”* Standing firm means that we don't back down when people question our faith. I can do that much better when I'm not alone, when I have others to help me stand strong in courage. We're going to read later in the book about Paul's admonishments to put away pride, selfishness, grumbling, and disagreements that hinder our unity and ability to stand together in one spirit. We'll deal with those in later sermons. But the bottom line is that living well in a community of faith will help you walk the Christian life much better than going it alone.

The final three verses say that

III. Whether You Overcome Opposition or You Suffer, Glorify Christ (vv. 28-30)

²⁸ and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. 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.

Many of you know that last spring was Kath and my first season coaching high school tennis. We learned as we went and eventually figured out most of what's involved by the end of the season. And not being from Delaware, we didn't know which high schools had the strong tennis programs. I assumed, for example, that A.I. DuPont High School was a fancy school with players who had grown up playing in country clubs, when the reality was that they only had two players on their team. But what happened a lot was that we would show up to a match and as we watched them warm up and saw how talented they were, I would hear the girls talk about how intimidated they were and that we had no shot against them. And we've had that experience with our volleyball and basketball teams as well. It's easy to be intimidated by your opponents. Here in verse 28, Paul says that the believers are not to be *“frightened in anything by your opponents.”* How do they overcome those fears? The way any team does – by standing together, by encouraging one another. This is a

continuation of the last thought – of standing side by side, of striving together. And by drawing strength that, no matter what comes, “*in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us*” (Romans 8:37). And according to verse 28, their perseverance in the face of persecution shows two things: that they are indeed saved and that their opponents are headed for destruction.

Suffering is inevitable in the Christian life. Paul told Timothy that “*all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted*” (2 Timothy 3:12). The Philippians are facing the same kinds of conflict that Paul had, and they might have to decide for themselves how they would answer that question of whether they were ready to face death. They couldn’t just sit back and read Paul’s letters and think, “Wow, that sounds really tough, we’re going to pray for Paul. Good thing we’ll never have to deal with that.” No, persecution would come for them, as it will come to you in some way, shape, or form. Will you be ready to bear up under it and cling to Christ, willing to suffer for Him?

Conclusion

Tony Merida and Francis Chan imagined a conversation between Paul and his Roman guards:

Guards: “Hey, Paul, we don’t like you and your Messiah. We’re going to kill you.”

Paul: “That’d be great! Dying is gain! Bring it on!”

Guards: “On second thought, we’re going to allow you to live.”

Paul: “Fantastic! Living means fruitful, joyous labor!”

Guards: “Well, we’re going to let you live, but we’re going to make you suffer.”

Paul: “Hey guys, I consider the sufferings of this present world not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed. It would fill me with joy to suffer for the Name!”¹

Do you see the power and the freedom that this perspective gives you? You can’t lose, no one can actually stop God’s purposes in your life. You can’t be kept from joy and meaning when the worst thing that they can do to you brings you closer to Jesus. Easier said than done, I realize, I don’t want to die and leave my loved ones behind; and I’m intimidated by suffering. But if we are truly going to internalize and apply this passage, we need to ask ourselves whether we are ready to embrace whatever God sends our way – whether that’s life, death, or suffering.

A man named Mehdi Dibaj was imprisoned in Iran in 1984 on charges of apostasy, for converting from Islam to Christianity. After ten years in prison his case finally came to trial. His written defense included the following lines that show he had truly internalized this passage: “Jesus Christ is our Savior and He is the Son of God. To know Him means to know eternal life... Life for me is an opportunity to serve Him, and death is a better opportunity to be with Christ. Therefore I am not only satisfied to be in prison for the honor of His Holy Name, but am ready to give my life for the sake of Jesus Christ.”²

I read a book a couple of years ago called *The Hardest Peace: Experiencing Grace in the Midst of Life’s Hard* by Kara Tippetts, who found out that she had terminal cancer in her late 30s. The book is her wrestling with the emotions of her impending death that would make her absent from the lives of her husband and three young children. Her writing is honest and vulnerable, and she describes the times that she despaired and cried out in anger. But she also found the strength to find joy in her cancer and her dying, and she attempted to glorify and honor God in her final interactions with her friends and family. Here are some things that she said:

¹ Tony Merida & Francis Chan, *Exalting Jesus in Philippians* (Nashville: Holman, 2016), p. 68.

² Frank Thielman, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), p. 89.

“My firstborn, Ella... and I read through the first chapter (of Proverbs) and talked through the rich language. Then we were both struck by the last verse: *‘Whoever listens to me will dwell secure and will be at ease, without dread of disaster’* - Proverbs 1:33. We talked through what this verse really means. When we listen - really listen - to the Lord, looking Him straight in the face, He removes the dread. It does *not* say that He removes the disaster. But the *dread* of disaster... we bowed our heads together and asked if Jesus would help us take hold of this new, startling truth.”³

“The story is cancer growing, and Jason and I just looking for Jesus in the midst of it. I have to still keep going, and so while I still have this breath, I’m planning on using it faithfully.”

“I do not feel like I have the courage for this journey, but I have Jesus—and He will provide it. He has given me so much to be grateful for, and that gratitude, that wondering over His love will cover us all. And it will carry us—carry us in ways we cannot comprehend.”⁴

Is your faith strong enough to get a diagnosis or a sentence of death and accept that that is God’s will and that you’re ready for it? Of course, there will be sadness that you would be leaving loved ones and there will be things that you wanted to do in this life that you never got to do. But your very first moment in eternity, in heaven, will show you that everything that you leave behind on earth will pale in comparison to the treasures that await you there. Everything that we sacrifice here will be worth it, we will never regret committing to live our lives in a manner worthy of the gospel.

The first question in the Heidelberg Catechism, that was written in Heidelberg, Germany in 1563 is timeless; as relevant today as it was in the 16th century and in Paul’s day: “What is your only comfort in life and in death?” And the answer is:

“That I am not my own, but belong – body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the devil. He also watches over me in such a way that not a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven; in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to him, Christ, by his Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for him.”⁵

I could not say it any better than that. If you don’t have the perspective that God knows everything that will happen to you, and that your death will come in His sovereign timing, then you don’t truly have the comfort of the Gospel. But when your life is united to Christ who conquered death, when your salvation is assured, you have the strength to face anything in this life. You can truly embrace the fact that living is great because you can honor Jesus, but dying is greater because your struggles will be over and you will rest in the arms of your heavenly Father. Amen.

Benediction

2 Peter 3:18 - *“But grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To Him be the glory both now and to the day of eternity. Amen.”*

³ Kara Tippetts, *The Hardest Peace: Expecting Grace in the Midst of Life’s Hard* (Colorado Springs: David C. Cook, 2014), pp. 129-30.

⁴ <https://wng.org/sift/remembering-kara-tippetts-a-life-of-faith-1617252294>

⁵ <https://www.crcna.org/welcome/beliefs/confessions/heidelberg-catechism>