

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

Philippians 1:19-30

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Thanatophobia is the intense fear of death, to the point one can no longer function in their daily lives. While you may not have Thanatophobia, the fear of death has spawned many ideas throughout history of how to cheat death. Ponce de León searched for the fountain of youth. A number of Chinese Emperors died from taking elixirs seeking to live longer. Other rulers received blood transfusions from younger people, while apothecaries here in Europe used to sell powder that supposedly came from Egyptian mummies. All of this was done to avoid death.

A recent article on CNBC recently said, *“Innovation in genome science, big data and ‘immortality’, which includes wearable technology and products in the so-called wellness space, could soon prolong healthy human life well beyond 100 years.”*¹

The fear of death is common, but in these verses we will see how Paul viewed death. As Christians we have much to learn and benefit from as we listen to God’s Word on this subject.

Yes, and I will rejoice,¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance,²⁰ as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.

In the previous verses, Paul had spoken of his joy even in the midst of imprisonment and others coming against him. Now he continues to rejoice, confident that because of the Philippians’ prayer and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, that his present situation will end in his deliverance. This should be our confidence, too. God has chosen to work in our world through His people as they pray. Paul had experienced the power of prayer and seen the power of the Holy Spirit work miraculously so many times, that Paul had full confidence that God would work in the midst of his situation and that he would be delivered. Paul was confident of God’s working, even though he was unsure what God’s deliverance would look like.

It is Paul’s eager expectation and hope that he will not be ashamed, but with full courage will honor Christ in his body. The word for “hope” here means to hope in, to fix one’s eyes on one goal, forsaking all other desires. It is like a racehorse wearing its blinders that only allow him to look

¹ <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/05/08/techs-next-big-disruption-could-be-delaying-death.html>

straight ahead. Paul is locked in on one mission, to honor Christ. In the midst of his suffering, his hope is that when life is at its toughest, he will not bring shame to Christ but instead will have the courage that will be required to honor Christ.

How do we think we will respond if serious persecution ever comes against us? Some may proclaim loudly, like Simon Peter did during the last supper, "I will never deny Christ!", but do we really know? Our confidence is that if and when persecution comes, that by the grace of God, He will provide us with the courage, faith and wisdom that we will need to stand and still honor Him in the midst of intense pressure. In that moment, when we seek to honor Christ, our confidence is that His grace will be there, sufficient to uphold us.

Verse 20 then ends with Paul's desire to honor Christ in his body, whether by life or death. Paul has already stated his confidence that he will be delivered. Now we see that Paul will allow God to define deliverance. Paul is confident in God's sovereign will. He does not know if it will require life or death, but he is at peace with whatever happens. God is in control. Paul knows that God will bring deliverance one way or another, and Paul longs to honor God in the midst of it.

Paul then goes on to explain his comment about life or death:

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. 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.

This is a passage of worship. It reveals Paul's ultimate desire, contentment, hope and joy. We see here that God has pruned Paul of all lesser desires and left him with an unending desire to be in the presence of Christ. In life or in death, Paul's longing is to bring God glory as he serves Christ wholeheartedly and waits for eternity.

His life is no longer his own. He belongs to Christ and longs to do whatever is best for the glory of God and the salvation of man. He longs for the ultimate reward, but if that must be delayed so that He might serve His king a little longer, then glory to God. That is how Paul can say, "***For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.***"

It would be similar to a courtship and an engagement, where a couple enjoys every minute that they spend together. Even though it is sweet and joyous, they still yearn for the day that they will be married, as husband and wife, truly belonging one to another. Our earthly Christian life is the time of courtship, where we grow to know more of Christ as He walks with us through the ups and downs of life. We experience Him as Comforter, Provider, Counselor, Consoler, Protector, Companion and our Beloved. It is a precious, abundant life, but it does not compare to the day that we will pass from this life to the next. It is only then that we, the Bride of Christ, will be ushered into the eternal presence of Christ, where we truly belong. This is how Paul can understand the need to live, even though to die will be even better.

When Paul says, ***“For me to live is Christ”*** he meant Christ had become his everything. Christ now lived in him and he in Christ. He longed to live for Christ, follow Christ, love like Christ, and have the mind of Christ. Whether in word or deed, he sought to bring glory to Christ and point people towards Him.

In the words of Paul, ***“Whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him”*** (Philippians 3:7-9).

For Paul to live meant He would live every day fully devoted to Christ. Practically speaking, that meant that if Paul was able to live through his situation, he would be able to stay in the game working alongside the Philippians and so many other early Christians and young churches that he had begun.

The other option was ***“for me to die is gain”***. This is not how we usually view death. We are usually deeply saddened at the end of one’s earthly life. We fear death, run from death, despise the thought of death, but as Christians we should long for heaven. There is where we will finally be ushered into the presence of Christ, our ultimate reward.

Our longing for earth and our despising of heaven exposes a heart whose love is misdirected and whose hope is misplaced. As mentioned before, this life is meant to cause us to long for the next. This world is not our home, we were created for so much more. As we draw nearer to Christ, our desires and affections should begin to become discontented with the things of this world and begin to yearn, more and more, for the things of heaven.

That is what had happened in Paul’s life. In his early years Paul had known the success and respect of being a young Pharisee in Jerusalem, but now that he knew Christ, the things of the world had become increasingly fleeting and empty to him, and now the precious presence of Christ was all that he longed for.

Paul’s phrase, ***“My desire is to depart and be with Christ”*** would have created a very vivid image in the mind of the Philippians. It was the words for striking camp, taking down your tents, pulling up your tent stakes, and continuing on. These words were also used for untying the ropes that held a boat to the dock or pulling up the anchor when at sea. Paul now realized that this world was not his home. He was just passing through.

In James 4:13-14, James calls this life a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes. He knows that this life is only the beginning. This life is only the introduction for what we were truly created for. We were created for something so much more than paying rent, keeping a job, using social media, or a thousand other things that we spend our time doing. Do what life requires, but never forget that this is only the beginning.

Living with an eye on heaven allows us to face death knowing that it is not the end, but only the beginning. We know that heaven awaits all who have chosen to follow Jesus Christ. We mourn, but not as those who have no hope. We are saddened for ourselves, but we celebrate for the deceased who are in Christ.

We each were dead in sin, but at salvation we were brought into a newness of life in Christ. Because of this, when we die, our body stops functioning, but our soul and our Spirit continue to live as they enter directly into heaven. Because of this our eternal life has already begun. Eternal life does not start after death, it started the very moment that one put their faith in Jesus Christ.

This was the reality that held Paul's heart. He was alive in Christ, and nothing, not even martyrdom, could stop the eternal life that he already possessed in Christ. That was the reason for his joy and his deliverance. He longed for the day that he would be in the presence of His Savior, and He knew that nothing, not even death, could keep him from this final reward.

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. 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.

“Letting your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ” is not just right theology or doctrine. It is more than being the person in your Bible study group who knows the answers to more questions than anyone else, or being able to pray eloquent prayers in public. It is a person in whom the truths of the gospel are governing their daily lives.

It is a knowledge and wisdom that results in a person walking in a manner that is worthy of the Lord. It is the person who, day by day, is growing in likeness to Christ in her nature, character and attributes. It is beyond rightly knowing and has overflowed into right living.

It is living a life that shows one's gratitude and indebtedness to the fact that the Son of God descended from heaven, taking on the form of a man, and willingly laid down his life on a Roman cross so that our debt of sin could be paid. It is living a life that gives evidence that Jesus Christ is the Lord and Savior of our lives.

It is interesting to see that the words “you” in this paragraph are all plural. Paul was not only turning their attention to their individual spiritual lives, Paul was seeking that their entire church, together, would live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. As this was accomplished the result would be that they would be able to stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.

When the gospel is deeply ingrained in the life of a church, the fruit of the spirit are at work to a large extent. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control become the norm, not the exception. Forgiveness and mercy are given more readily. Service and humility are prized. Their identity in Christ crowds out feelings of offense, insecurity and competition. Unity is strengthened as they focus together on kingdom work instead of their own individual spiritual agendas. Living in the reality of the gospel truths binds us together.

As the Philippians stood together in the truths of the gospel, this would help them not to be frightened by their opponents. We know nothing more about the “opponents”, but whether it be

persecution by Romans, false teachers, or those who were rivals of Paul, their unity in the gospel would give them the strength to not fear.

Their opponents would see this surprising courage and strength, and it would be a sign of the opponent's destruction and the salvation of the saints. Paul was continuing to talk in a plural "you". It would be their combined courage that would perplex their opponents.

Paul encouraged them in this way, confident that suffering would be part of their lives as they walked in commitment to the gospel, longing to be in the presence of God. A love for this world would give the fear of suffering great power over one's life, but as the hymn says, *"turn your eyes upon Jesus. Look full in His wonderful face. And the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of His glory and grace."*

As we think back through this passage, may we take the time to evaluate our love for this world and the strength of our desire to be in the presence of Christ. For now, may these verses be a goal we consider and seek to take hold of as we grow in our faith. May our longing for Christ only grow as we move towards that day when we finally pass from this life to the next.

Discussion questions:

1. What from this sermon did you find interesting?
2. Why do you think people fear death so much?
3. Paul was confident of God's deliverance, no matter if his deliverance was through life or death. Do you find it hard to pray and then let God answer how he chooses? Why do you think that is?
4. What did you think about Paul's greater desire for death than life?
5. Why do you think we love the things of the world so much when we know we are going to heaven?
6. What might a Christian do to nurture a stronger desire for heaven in their lives?
7. What from this sermon do you need to remember?
8. What does God want you to do in response to this sermon?
9. How can we help you?