

Life and Death  
Philippians 1:19-26

Acts 28:11-31

Hebrews 9:16-28

Congregation: Luke 23:20-21, 32-34, 39-43

This morning's reading in Acts shows the account of Paul's imprisonment during the time that he wrote this letter to the Philippian church. We see here that he was under house arrest held by Roman guards awaiting trial, for 2 years. During this time people came to him, and he preached the gospel to them, including the guards that were there daily.

One thing in the passage we went through last week that I was trying to understand was how Paul's imprisonment would encourage others to preach, whether by envy and strife, or some from goodwill. One thing that I read this week, was that because of the circumstance of his arrest, being that it was a house arrest, and he was given great freedom in that. His arrest actually worked to encourage others to not be afraid of being arrested for preaching. It

As far as from envy or strife, I am still not completely clear on how preaching would as Paul said, add affliction to my chains, unless it was people who Paul previously had been calling out for teaching false doctrines, being emboldened now to preach and hoping to cause frustration to Paul because of it. But he says, Whether in pretense, or in truth Christ is preached and in this I rejoice.

Last week we talked about the witness of persecution. How God seems to use times of great persecution to spread the truth of his gospel. It is amazing to me that throughout history some of the largest times to gospel growth are times under great persecution. I think what this shows us is that we can have great confidence in our God, that even in times of persecution and suffering his children do not fall through the cracks.

Paul understood this, he knew that nothing would happen to him outside of what God had intended for his life, and he took comfort in that, so much so that his own fate was of little concern. Whether it be suffering, imprisonment, or freedom no matter what circumstance he found himself in he was determined that he would be faithful to preach the word to everyone around him.

We can see this confidence that Paul has in God in our passage that we are looking at this morning. Let us read starting in verse 19-26. He starts out saying that he is confident that this will end up turning out for his deliverance through prayer, and supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. As we saw in our reading in Acts this morning, Paul had appealed to Caesar about his arrest, and was confident that when Rome heard his case that he would be set free for when he was transferred into the hands of the Roman's they wanted to let him go because they found no cause for the death sentence that the Jews were seeking for him.

But even that hope of deliverance did not change Paul's message, or what he saw as his mission. Whether in chains, or out of chains, whether traveling or stationary did not matter to Paul for wherever he was, he was solely intent on preaching the gospel to all around him. We see this here in verse 20. "According to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.

It didn't matter to Paul ultimately what the outcome was going to be, that did not change his focus. He saw all things as an opportunity for the gospel, this house arrest was nothing but an opportunity to reach new people that he otherwise may not have had the chance to reach.

Paul stands as an example to us, as a model of how we should be. We already looked at how his prayer here for the Philippian church stands as a model of how we should all pray for each other, and last week we saw Paul as an example of how we should act when under persecution, and this week we see an example of how we should live our lives. Every day, exalting Christ, no matter our circumstance.

It was Paul's priority, and it should also be ours. It is clear in this verse here that Paul's priority is to magnify Christ above all else, whether by life, or by death. This is a great challenge to us today, we see this man who in all things glorifies Christ, prays to him, worships him, and shares the gospel to all those he can, and he does so with great boldness not being ashamed or worried.

When opportunity arises in our day to day life, do we exalt Christ, or are we ashamed of him? Annie Dillard who is an American once said, "How we spend our days is of course, how we spend our lives." Each day builds upon each other, time passes and is fleeting next you think you know those days have become years and how you lived those days do truly become how you live your life. Do we spend our days exalting Christ in the hundreds of small everyday moments we experience?

We who claim Christ, claim him as our everlasting life. If you remember what I said back in the book of John, this everlasting life isn't just a promise of a future after these bodies are dead and gone, this is the everlasting life of Christ living in us today! If we are claiming Christ, we should live as those who have Christ as their life. Our number one priority should not be about ourselves, but it should be about exalting Christ to those around us.

Look at this example of Paul, he gave his life to expanding, and building and encouraging the body of Christ, We see this in the following verse here verse 21. "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Paul knew that it would just be easier if he was to be put to death, he would then be with his savior, but he also understood that in life, he had this ministry and through it the church would benefit.

This falls right into this theme we have seen running through each and every book we have been going through. This idea of loving your brothers and sisters in Christ, and not only them but those around you as Christ loves the church. It is this idea of dying to self for the good of others, putting yourself, your needs, your desires aside for others. If we skip a head a bit over to chapter 2 of Philippians, verse 3 this is the very thing we see Paul living out in his own life.

"Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus. Who being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bond servant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross."

This sits as a challenge to us, our life in Christ is not about fulfilling our own desires, but it should be about fulfilling Christ's desires, which is to love one another, and to preach the word. So looking now at verse 21 here, Paul makes an astounding statement. For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

The Christian faith is counter culture in every single aspect. Culture tells us to do what makes us feel good, Christ tells us to live for others, to be a living sacrifice. Culture tells us to pursue riches, strive for our desires, but Christ says to be humble, meek, and content with what you have been given. What we see here is no different, our world fears death, seeks to avoid it at all costs. Look at the rise of cosmetic surgeries, or the money spent to prolong life even by another few days. Our culture fears death, we obsess over life and youth to suppress the ever present thoughts of aging and dying.

We see it even in our churches today, everything has become so youth focused, so full of entertainment, even in our services we try to avoid the depressing topic of old age and dying, that doesn't make anyone feel good and we are here to get pumped up and feel good! But look what Paul says about dying...to die is gain.

When this body dies, we are present with the Lord. Paul lives his life so completely Christ centered that even in the face of death he thinks of nothing but being united with his savior. This peace that we as Christians have is a peace that astounds and confuses the world. That is Natasha who we read about last week could continue in her faith, even if it meant her death. She determined just as Paul, as long as I live this life I will exalt Christ, and if I die, then I shall be with him

Death of a believer isn't a sad occasion, sure there are elements of sadness to be felt by those around them, but the reality is they have run the race and have reached the finish line to gather the prize. Christ has overcome death, and those who are with him will be more than conquerors in death also. Our greatest treasure lies on the other side of death, it is Jesus Christ himself.

Ligon Duncan writes, "On the one hand, death is the last enemy. Believers, too, are sinners, and so unless the Lord comes soon, we will all taste death. The Christian views death as an enemy, it is not a natural part of life. Death is actually the way things were never intended to be. Death is a judgment of God against sin. Death is the most unnatural thing in this world, yet on the other hand death has become for the believer his entrance into glory."

Can we say like Paul, to live is Christ, and to die is gain? We should be able to if our lives truly are hidden in Christ. This peace, this ability to handle death in such a way is nothing other than a gift from God. It goes against our very nature, to see the end and not fear it, but rather embrace and rejoice knowing our Savior is waiting on the other side. If you don't have this peace, if you fear death, I challenge you today to ask yourself if you truly have Christ?

James' big theme in his book that we went through is about those who are religious yet have not truly been born of Christ, people who have deceived themselves into believing they are righteous, but who are rather like how Christ described the pharisees, being white washed tombs. Pretty and clean on the outside, but inside full of rotting dead men's bones.

As Christians our greatest desire should be to be with our savior, not being reunited with our family and friends who have died, but to be in the very presence of our Lord and Savior. Blake White records his experience with a youth evangelistic even called Heaven's Gates, Hell's Flames. He said that their gospel message to the youth was not one of hope and peace in Christ, but rather the focus was to manipulate emotions and to scare the hell out of kids. One scene they used portrayed a young girl who had died in a car accident. Her parents had died years before, and as the little girl entered Heaven's gates, she ran past Jesus and into the arms of her parents. Then came the appeal, You want to see your family again after death don't you? Pray this prayer, and you will.

Yes, we will once again be unite with those who have died before us, but that should not be our focus, should not be our reason and hope after death. Our hope, and our reason, our peace is in Christ, Our life now is in Christ, and our death when it comes will also be in Christ. To die, isn't gaining back our family, to die is to gain the fullness of God's promises to his children.

John Chrysosom, a monk who was born in 349AD said, “ If the empress wishes to banish me, let her do so, the earth is the Lords. If she wants to have me sawn asunder, I will have Isaiah for an example. IF she wants me to be drowned in the ocean, I think of Jonah. If I am to be thrown in the fire, the 3 men in the furnace suffered the same. If cast before wild beasts, I remember Daniel in the lion's den. If she wants me stoned, I have before me Stephen, the first martyr. If she demands my head, let her do so John the Baptist shines before me. Naked I came from my mothers womb, naked I shall leave this world. Paul reminds me, If I still pleased men, I would not be a servant of Christs.

This is the meaning and purpose of life, this is what we were put here for, to make much of Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. In whom is redemption, and forgiveness, grace, mercy, and peace. So we too like Paul can say, For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Continuing on, Paul explains exactly what he means by to live is gain. Verse 22 “But if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor; yet what I shall choose I can not tell. For I am hard pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better. Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you.

Paul had an inner conflict, he desired more then anything else to be present with his Lord and savior, to spend eternity in the presence of God, yet he also had a desire for his ministry, and for those who have been affected by it. He understood that as long as God allowed him to live his ministry would be a benefit to those around him. Working to expand the church, to encourage his brothers and sisters in the faith, to instruct, and even rebuke at times had such an important role in Paul's life that he says if he was to choose between dying and being with Christ, and living and being able to continue in this ministry he would have a hard time deciding between the 2.

In many ways we are the same are we not? As we look at life, especially as we get older instead of fearing death and trying to live in denial of it as the world does, we start to embrace it for we understand that in death we will be finally free from this body of sin, to finally live holy, worshipping our God fully and without blemish. Our death becomes not an end to our life, but rather just the beginning. Death for a Christian is release from the world, from the pain, from the strife, from the sin. We understand that upon the death of this body, just as Christ told the thief on the cross. “Today we will be with him in paradise.”

This sounds pretty good eh? So I guess if we were to continue to the logical conclusion of this, we could ask ourselves. So why not just end it? Why wait, why bother suffering through this life when we have so much better ahead? Well Paul here answers that, he says, because to live is Christ. Our lives are not our own, we have been bought, we have been purchased with the blood of Christ. We are now bond servants to Christ, we owe him our life, and our all.

Our focus then is not on ourselves, but rather should be on Christ, instead of focusing on our suffering or strife we remember Christ who suffered for us so that we may become God's children.

Christ did not take an easy way out, he was betrayed, stripped, beaten, shamed, and died a cruel death of a criminal having done no wrong himself.

We have no justification to take the easy way out, if Christ, God's innocent Son, suffered then should we not also expect to have suffering? There is no easy way out, remember while dying maybe gain, and indeed as Paul says he is hard pressed to choose between the 2 if he had the choice. Our life is not our own, our purpose is for Christ. There is little justification for Christian to commit suicide, as we looked at last week the suffering of the Russian girl, and she is just one of countless thousands who have suffered for their belief even to the point of death. If there is anyone who would seem to want to take the easy way out surely it would be someone under such heavy persecution....yet God gives the strength to endure for the purpose of his Glory, for the purpose of his ministry.

While I don't think that anyone here is necessarily suicidal, I think that it isn't bad to make this point because one could easily look at this passage and see it as a deliverance when they feel they have no hope left..but that is not what Paul is saying here. Paul has hope, understanding and knowing his life is in Christ, it did not matter whether he lived, or died, if he suffered, or lived comfortably he would do whatever God put before him to the glory of his savior. He did not focus on himself, but rather upon the seeking to glorify his savior.

This pretty much ties the last few weeks together here, as I have said about myself often times I end up allowing myself to go fairly deep in dark thoughts of the emptiness of life, forgetting that my meaning is not really to be found in this life, but rather is found in Christ. When I look at the world around me, I can get depressed by everything that is happening yet, I know that somehow, someday this is all for God's glory. Focusing on Christ, being in prayer, seeking to live a life for him, and not for ourselves is what gives us meaning, it is what gives us purpose and hope, and it is all bound in Christ himself. He is our reason, our purpose, and our hope.

If we die, we gain a life with him in paradise, if we live we live for him here witnessing and praising him for all he has done for us. Let us be ever mindful of Christ, let our thoughts ever be focused upon him so that when those times of difficulty do arise, because they will, we will already be in prayer, we will already be trusting our savior and instead of seeking our own deliverance, we will be focusing on how God may use our lives for his Glory.