

Prepared To Live, To Live Is Christ, To Die Is Gain

We have spent the past two Sundays talking about the implications of Paul's statement, "to live is Christ." If you weren't here, you can go to our website, www.Carbondaleassembly.org and listen to the message or download the manuscript and read it for yourself.

This morning I want to examine the last half of Paul's statement in Philippians 1:21, **"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."** Turn with me to Philippians 1 and let's look at the greater context. You recall that Paul is in prison at the time of this writing. He has been falsely accused and has appealed as a Roman citizen to Caesar. He spent about three years in prison defending himself and the gospel before kings and magistrates and then was taken to Rome where he is held for another two years awaiting trial. Most scholars believe it was during this time, while in prison in Rome that he wrote this letter to the church at Philippi. Think of this, five years of imprisonment at the height of his ministry. One commentary pointed out that Paul was somewhat forgotten while he was in prison in Rome, noting that according to 2 Timothy 1:17 Onesiphorus had to search hard in order to find him while he was in Rome. Forgotten by others, facing possible execution, yet in spite of it all this letter of Philippians is full of joy and confidence in the Lord. Seventeen times in the first thirty verses Paul mentions Jesus Christ. It is obvious that though in prison, forsaken by others, Paul knows the abiding presence of Jesus and for him truly to live is Christ. Jesus is the center of his life. Regardless of the circumstances, live or die, Paul's desire is to honor the Lord.

Paul begins in verse 12 encouraging the church to recognize the good that has come from his imprisonment. It has turned out to advance the gospel and that is what Paul's life is all about. He points out in verse 15 that some preachers have apparently tried to use Paul's imprisonment as an opportunity for their own self-advancement and gain. Rather than being angry about it, notice what he says in verse 18. **"But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached, and because of this I rejoice."** What an amazing attitude. When you've decided that your only purpose in life is to make Christ known and to magnify him, then nothing else matters. He counts everything as loss compared to knowing Christ and making him known to others.

Then beginning in verse 19 he begins to express something of his attitude concerning his present circumstances and the possibility of his execution. He is believing that he will be

delivered from prison and from death and be able to continue his ministry. His prayer is expressed in verse 20, “...that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.” **Philippians 1:20-24**

Paul is torn between two desires: 1) to depart and be with Jesus and 2) to live and keep ministering to others. “Now as always...” This wasn’t a new position for Paul, brought on by his imprisonment. Now that I am facing trial and possible execution, nothing has changed. Now as always, I want Jesus to be exalted by whatever happens to me. It is always about bringing honor and glory to Jesus and advancing the gospel of Christ (v12).

It is obvious that Paul’s view of life and death is different from most of us in the Western world. As we shared last Sunday morning, most of us struggle somewhat with being able to say “for me to live is Christ.” Most of us put other things before Christ. Most of us live for too many other things. For Paul it had become about one thing. Life for him meant living for Jesus!

But it wasn’t just in his living that he wanted to honor Jesus. He desired to honor him in his death as well and in so doing, Paul had an entirely different take on death. Death for Paul would be considered gain. And Paul would argue that should be the perspective for all of us. For the believer, to die is gain. So here we are once again asking the question: Can we say we live with the same attitude as Paul? As we mentioned last Sunday, if we are struggling to say “for me to live is Christ”, what about saying “to die is gain”? Is that our view of life and death? How could Paul say that and what does that mean for us, that to die is gain?

To live is Christ and to die is gain starts with a paradigm shift. In our post-modern culture we have come to some strange conclusions about living and dying. We value physical life so much that we will do almost anything to extend it. We hook ourselves up to all kinds of machines, take all kinds of drugs, subject ourselves to all kinds of procedures and surgeries in an attempt to keep on living. We fear death and run from it, trying to postpone it in every way possible for ourselves. However, in our selfish desire to improve the quality of our own life, we are willing to deny life to the unborn and to the weakest among us. We want to live and to live free of any moral restraint or responsibility. No wonder Paul’s statement, to live is Christ and to

die is gain sounds so foreign and strange to our ears.

Even in the church, among Christians, it is hard for us to consider death as gain. We would testify that, “I know we are going to heaven...” but even at that when the doctor says there is nothing else they can do, we are asking for a miracle of healing for our 94 year old uncle who has cancer. No offense, but what happened to “for me to live is Christ and to die is gain”? What happened to the view expressed in Psalms, **“Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints.” Psalm 116:15.** Or the view expressed by the prophet, that **“...the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil. Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death.” Isaiah 57:1-2.**

I said it requires a paradigm shift and it should begin the moment we are saved and become followers of Jesus Christ. **Dying is not what we do when our heart stops beating, it’s what we do when our heart starts beating with his heart.** We’ve talked about it the last two Sundays. “I am crucified with Christ.” What happens to a person that is crucified? They die. “I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.” The life I live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.” Galatians 2:20

Paul wrote, **“We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that just as Christ was raised from the dead, through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life...Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.” Romans 6:4, 8.**

We aren’t fearing death because we already died. When I asked Jesus to come into my heart and save my soul, I died to my old self and sin and was given a new life in Christ. I’m a new creation with Christ living in me. I’m not fearing death because death is behind me and life is before me. That’s why Paul can say “for me to die is gain”. Death isn’t the end of something, it’s the beginning of something for the child of God. Death isn’t waiting on me, heaven and all its’ glory is waiting on me. Jesus in all his glory is waiting on me. For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.

I read the obituaries in the paper every day. It’s interesting that when a Christian dies many times they say he was born this day and he entered into eternal life on this day, the day of his death. Is that true? We enter eternity on the day our physical heart stops beating, but we entered eternal life on the day we repented of our sins and in faith received Christ as our Savior

and Lord. Jesus said, **“Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.” John 17:3.** And the bible says, **“And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life.” 1 John 5:11-12**

We didn't just enter into eternal life, eternal life entered into us when Jesus saved us, imparted his righteousness to us and took up residence in us by the presence of His Holy Spirit. I'm not hoping to gain eternal life, I'm already living with his eternal life at work in me. That's why death is not loss but gain for us when Jesus is living within us.

How can we say with Paul to die is gain? **We can say to die is gain because this is not unfamiliar territory to us.** You see, not only did we die to our sin and our self when we came to Christ, but we responded to his call to be a disciple and his commission to each of us then was “take up your cross and follow me.” For us as believers, dying has been a way of life. Dying to ourselves has always been gain because as we died to ourselves, Christ was made more and more manifest in our hearts. All of our life has been a journey of the cross, becoming more and more like him until we finally lay aside this physical body and then we see him as he is and we are finally and completely conformed to his likeness and share in his glory.

For us, dying has always been a journey towards gain and glory rather than loss. As we said at the beginning, living and dying, it's always been about honoring Christ and advancing his kingdom. That's why Paul says he is torn between two choices. It's not the lesser of two evils, it is the joyful choices of a servant wanting to find the best way to honor and serve his beloved master. And understand, for Paul it wasn't about escaping life or escaping his prison cell or all the physical pain and torture. Remember, Paul says for him to live is Christ. Read the letter of Philippians. It isn't the words of someone trying to escape life. He isn't escaping, but he is always longing for more of Jesus and he acknowledges that physical death would put him finally at home with Jesus where he longs to be.

Notice there is no fear of death here. **Because death is gain it should no longer frighten us.** Although Paul tells us in his other writings that death is an enemy, it is an enemy that Jesus conquered by his death and resurrection and it will eventually be vanquished once and for all when Christ returns. In the meantime, it has lost its' permanent grip of terror for us. Although death still brings sorrow when we are separated from a loved one, we face it without

fear and with a new understanding: death made the list. Remember Paul's list of things that cannot separate us from the love of God? Death made the list. "For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." Romans 8:38-39 Death can't separate us from God's love. Death can't convince us that God has stopped loving us. Death can't frighten us anymore, it is simply a doorway that leads us into his holy presence.

Because we know that the way of the cross is the way of Christ, that it is the way that leads us ever closer to him and his eternal presence, we have no reason to fear death. The writer of Hebrews tells us, "**Since the children have flesh and blood, he too [Jesus] shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is the devil – and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.**"

Hebrews 2:14-15

We stare death in the face without fear because we know Jesus who is the resurrection and the life. He said if we believe in him, even if we died, yet shall we live. There is no fear of death for those who know Christ, the giver of life.

Knowing to die is gain means we can risk living our life for Christ. If this life was all there was, we would be tempted to live it too safely, avoiding risk for the cause of Christ and his kingdom. But we know to die is gain. That knowledge enabled Paul to keep going when others tried to get him to stop, to play it safe, to avoid taking a risk.

In Acts 21, Paul is with the church at Ephesus saying goodbye to them. He tells them that he is headed to Jerusalem, not knowing what lies ahead for him. "**I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.**" Acts 20:23-24.

How could he do that? Risking his life and his health and his future? Paul knew it was worth the risk. You can risk your life for Christ because you know that to live is Christ and to die is gain.

We've rested our lives and our future and our eternity with Christ so death cannot be loss for me nor can life. Physical death means no longer being hindered by these bodies but instead it means being fully alive with Christ and in Christ. It means gain in every sense of the word. One

scholar said the choice Paul was facing, between living and dying was actually a "...dilemma between Christ and Christ, Christ much and Christ more, Christ by faith and Christ by sight."

To live is Christ and to die... that's gain. That's home. That's being like Jesus. That's being done with evil and sin and struggle and strife. That's having all the tears and the source of every sorrow wiped from our eyes. That is being complete in every sense of the word. It is the realization of every plan and purpose of God. That's is rest and peace. For me to live is Christ and to die is gain. And with that knowledge, we are freed to live and to risk and to run and to expend every ounce of our life and energy and effort and time for Jesus. We cannot lose. **You could waste your life on a thousand different things but a life lived for Jesus is never wasted. With Christ, life is full and death is gain.**

Jim McGuigan in his book *The God of the Towel*, quotes from John Bunyan's classic, *Pilgrim's Progress*. He tells us "Christian and Hopeful are near the end of their journey to the Celestial City but have yet to cross a river, deep and mysterious, if they are to enter the city. The sight of it worries Christian, but since there was no alternative, he and Hopeful enter. Christian begins to sink and calls out to his friend, **'I sink in deep waters; the billows go over my head, all the waves go over me.'** Hopeful calls back, **'Be of good cheer, my brother, I feel the bottom, and it is sound.'**

"Despite our fear, there is nothing to fear. Death is no bottomless pit; there is a bottom to it, and it is sound." We have nothing to fear. To live is Christ and to die is gain. For us, surely there is nothing else.

We are all facing death. If you are alive, you are facing death. But don't be frightened. Jesus has gone ahead of us and shouts back to us, "Be of good cheer my brother. I have crossed before you and I can touch the bottom of death's river and it is sound. Don't be afraid."

With Christ, life is full and death is gain!