

## Philippians 1:21-30 To Live Is Christ

The gospel task for us today is to ask the meaning of Paul's statement in Philippians, "To live is Christ and to die is gain."

The weather has been delightful here lately, and I am thankful for it; though I am aware that in other places it has been severe. I have been able to take several walks just to be a part of it as the hints of fall color appear.

It would be nice if we could live without the inconvenience of pain and suffering, worse for some than others, worse at certain times in life than at other times. In our text today, Paul speaks of the "struggle." Sooner or later the reality of struggle and death come around and force us to life's most pressing questions. What is the meaning of it all?

Can we find meaning in success or pleasure? Can we find meaning in knowledge or technology? We spend a great deal of time pursuing them. Can we find meaning in goodness or in uprightness? Can we find meaning in relationships with family and friends? Most days I would rather take a walk in the sunshine.

Paul

Paul was in prison when he made this suggestive statement, "To live is Christ and to die is gain." On the

surface we may conclude that Paul had reached the point where he had faced a truth most of us avoid when we can, that heavenly life is better than earthly life and is to be preferred.

Chesney, Jim Collins, and Marty Dodson

I am reminded of the country music song by Kenny Chesney, written by Jim Collins and Marty Dodson, which expresses a youthful understanding of things:

"Everybody wants to go to heaven  
Have a mansion high above the clouds  
Everybody wants to go to heaven  
Nobody wants to go now"

In the verses they suggest, "Someday I want to see those streets of gold . . . , but I wouldn't mind waiting at least a hundred years or so,"

"Everybody wants to go to heaven  
Get their wings and fly around  
(It beats the other place, there ain't no doubt)  
Everybody wants to go to heaven  
Nobody wants to go now"

The song is meant to be clever and funny, which it is, and it reveals an attachment to this life that is understandable. Much of our experience here *is* wonderful, very pleasing, rewarding, fun even. It is the mission of medical science and modern industry to

proclaim a gospel that this life is so good it is to be extended as long as possible, and wherever possible, to be improved.

### The Gospel Philosophy

Clearly, Paul does not believe in such a philosophy of life. Paul has concluded that he would like to go now, but he will stay if he has to. Instead of a self-centered life bent on fulfillment, Paul claims a Christ centered-life bent on service. And the service is not mere service for the sake of it, but dedicated to God.

The traditional understanding is that Philippians was written later in Paul's career, nearer to the end than to the beginning. In his earlier letters he seemed attached to the idea that Christ's return would occur within his lifetime.

Here he is contemplating the possibility that he might die first. This development is one of maturity that not only occurred in individual Christians like Paul, but the whole of the Christian faith was forced to confront by the passage of time.

For Paul, this meant travel, not really having a home; it meant great trouble from a variety of sources, and an uncertain future. But what does it mean for us?

What does it mean, "to live is Christ?" if one is a doctor, a teacher, a business person, a farmer . . . etc.

And all of these are general categories to which we can give general answers: to assist the healing process, provide education, create wealth, feed the world . . . etc.

But we will not be satisfied with these answers. Each one of us will pursue a more specific answer, what does it mean for me, that to live . . . is Christ?

### To live . . . To Struggle

It is fair to say that the depth of Paul's understanding has been impacted by his imprisonment and other experiences, which means that for him service to Christ meant a hardship that is not meant to be everyone's plight.

Paul's inherited faith taught him well how to deal with the hardships. The name "Israel," for instance. It stems from Jacob's experience at the Ford of the River Jabbok, where he wrestled with an angel all night and would not release his grip until he had received a blessing. Your name shall now be called Israel, for you have struggled with God and prevailed.

Perhaps it is in this regard that a gospel philosophy differs more from the superficial song about going to heaven than in any other way. The reason to remain here in this life will never be so that we can have more enjoyment of life's pleasures. Rather, it is to be

engaged in the struggle with God that leads to salvation.

When we encounter trouble, from any quarter of life, health concerns, natural disaster, sin, consequence of decisions, strife with neighbors and enemies far and wide, we are exhorted not to turn away from it, but toward it; not to deny but to affirm its reality, in the confidence that we will meet Christ in the struggle, and in that meeting, find stronger fulfillment than in any other way. TO LIVE, to be alive, is Christ.

## Christ

For Paul, as for the rest of the New Testament, Christ is Jesus, the crucified; and the image of Jesus on the cross is ever before us. There is no way around the issue of self-sacrifice. Jesus becomes the great example of someone whose life was lived as a sacrifice to God for the benefit of others.

But to live is not to serve, or even to sacrifice; for in and of themselves, these things are not any more meaningful than pleasure or any other form of self-seeking. To Live is Christ.

These words are actually a good prayer, not to ask, but to listen; each day to pray that we would come to love the Lord with all our heart and soul and strength and mind; and to love our neighbor as ourselves, to live is Christ.

To live is Christ, which means, as clumsily as I might be saying it, that in the storm we do not so much find fulfillment, as it means that we meet Christ, God, and in that encounter we are shaped and molded, wounded to be sure, but also healed and transformed, so that our conclusion will be like Paul's, that as long as it is God's will, we will remain; and continue with one another for mutual progress and joy in the faith, conducting ourselves in a manner worthy of Christ, without fear, until the blessed day comes when we gain the completion of our salvation.

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