

Sermon Summary #6

When Dying is Gain Philippians 1:18b-26

The art of living well comes from knowing that dying is gain. Contrary to what many may think, that is not morbid. In fact, there is nothing quite as exhilarating and life-giving and joy-filled as pondering death. At least that's true for the Christian.

For most people, death remains a mystery, a dreaded, unexplored black hole in the future that threatens in the present to suck out of one's life all lingering joy and hope. The questions that come my way regarding death and dying are almost too numerous to count: What precisely is death? When does it occur? Is it irreversible? Is there anything that awaits us on the other side of life? Should I fear death or embrace it?

The Apostle Paul thought long and hard about death. He had to, given the fact that he faced the possibility of it at virtually every moment of his life. That's certainly the case once again here in Philippians 1. Paul was in prison. He was threatened with execution. Even if he were to be released, his enemies had plotted against him and were determined to rid themselves of his presence.

But what makes Paul's comments in this passage so helpful for us isn't simply that he talks about dying but the way he talks about ***living in the light of dying***. Paul had one ambition, and one only. ***He passionately yearned and desired that Christ be honored in his body, whether in life or by death.*** And what he will tell us in this remarkable text is that, for the Christian, ***the art of living well comes from knowing that dying is gain.***

Let's look at how he makes sense of this.

Prayer, Prison, and the Provision of the Spirit (vv. 19-20)

Whereas I used to think that by the word "deliverance" (v. 19b) Paul was referring primarily to his anticipated release from prison, after further study I've come to a different conclusion. Although his release is probably in view, it isn't the primary point of emphasis.

The word translated "deliverance" in v. 19b is actually the standard term in the NT for "salvation." What is most important for us to see is that Paul's language here alludes to **Job 13:16-19**, where Job cried out to God in his distress. His counselors had tried to convince him that his suffering was punishment for his sin. But Job knew they were wrong and waited patiently for God to vindicate him. This is precisely what Paul is facing. As we saw in vv. 12-18, some had it in for Paul, perhaps even thinking that he deserved to be in jail, and thus went about their preaching of Christ in a way that they hoped would aggravate his distress.

Paul's words here clearly suggest that he believed God would vindicate him as being in the right. He fully expected that whatever resulted from his imprisonment, whether life or death by execution, he would not be put to shame. All would see that Paul was innocent of wrongdoing and through his ordeal Christ would be glorified.

And precisely how will all this come about? Paul clearly points to two things, and they are closely related:

(1) First, the ***"prayers"*** of the Philippians themselves will prove instrumental in his vindication (v. 19a). Paul is confident they will intercede on his behalf and that God will do whatever is necessary to strengthen him and support him and ultimately vindicate his name and the gospel.

(2) Second, he anticipates that in response to their prayers on his behalf God will supply him with ***"the Spirit of Jesus Christ"*** (v. 19b). I disagree with the ESV at this point. There it is translated to suggest that the Spirit gives "help" to Paul, when in fact ***the provision Paul receives is the Spirit himself!*** In other words, it is God the Father,

through Jesus Christ, who provides Paul with more of the Spirit than he had heretofore experienced. Paul anticipates being the recipient of a richer, deeper, fuller, more powerful outpouring of the Spirit into his life to sustain him, to give him wisdom, to direct his thought and words, to equip him for ministry. Much the same thought is found in **Galatians 3:5** where Paul asks this question: “Does he who supplies the Spirit to you and works miracles among you do so by works of the law, or by hearing with faith?”

Some of you may be wondering: “*But if Paul already had the Spirit indwelling him, how could he expect to receive an additional supply of the Spirit? Don’t we get all of the Spirit at conversion? How can we pray for more?*” I hate to break this news to you, but Paul wasn’t at all bothered by this in the way you are! He had no hesitation in speaking of an increased and expansive experience of the Spirit beyond what happened at conversion. ***The Spirit can be given and supplied and poured out fresh into the lives of God’s children well beyond the indwelling that we experienced when we first came to faith in Jesus.***

What’s crucial to note is that Paul believed this would happen ***as the Philippians prayed for him!*** Are you burdened like Paul was? Are you facing opposition from enemies who accuse you unjustly and slander you in the presence of others? Are you feeling weak and inadequate to stand firmly as you know God wants you to? Do you need a fresh infusion of strength to remain loyal to Christ and courageous in your faith? ***Then pray and ask others to pray on your behalf that God would infuse you with a fresh provision of the Spirit, that he would supply you with the Spirit above and beyond what you’ve ever known before!***

Yet another important thing for us to observe is that ***Paul did believe he would be released from prison.*** He says in v. 25, “I know that I will remain and continue with you all,” and then again in v. 26 he refers to the fact that he will be “coming” to them “again.”

Remember that Paul never sought out suffering, persecution, or deprivation for its own sake. If in God’s providence it should turn out that he was imprisoned, he intended to take full advantage of his circumstances to preach the gospel to those who otherwise might never have heard it. But Paul was not a masochist and was not opposed to taking reasonable steps of self-preservation. He did not suffer from a martyr complex! But he was also willing to endure whatever hardship and opposition might come his way as the result of his faithful proclamation of the gospel.

He longed for his release not because he feared suffering but because he knew that it would demonstrate his innocence and show that the gospel was not a subversive force in society.

But most important of all, regardless of what might happen to him, whether he is set free or is executed, he prayed that he would be an instrument of glory to Christ. Whether he continues to live or should he die, in either case he wants only one thing: that Jesus be seen as glorious and great and sufficient!

Notice how he explains this. He says that he is expectant and hopeful that he will not be “ashamed” (v. 20a). This does not mean what we typically have in mind when we use the word. This has nothing to do with personal humiliation or embarrassment or the feeling of worthlessness. Rather, to be brought to shame is to be disappointed, to discover that one’s trust and hope were misplaced with the result that one is left alone, abandoned, hopeless, and helpless. Personal and public embarrassment may well follow from that, but Paul is talking about the devastation that would come should he stand before his accusers and fail to clearly articulate the gospel and find out that God was not sufficient for his needs after all.

Notice also how he puts his hope in the *passive* voice: “*Christ will be honored in my body*” (v. 20b). I think he does this because he cannot bring himself to say, “I will honor Christ in my body.” With characteristic humility he makes Christ the subject of the verb and himself only the means by which such action will be accomplished.

Thus his expectation and hope is that if he lives on in the body, Christ will be honored. And if he should die from his imprisonment or by execution, Christ will be honored. He doesn’t want to do anything that might bring reproach on the name of Jesus.

Note: To say that Christ will be “honored” is to say that he will be magnified and praised and shown to be glorious. “So what Paul is saying is that his earnest hope and passion is that what he does with his body, whether in life or death, will always be worship” (Piper). Can we say that about ourselves? Think deeply on

what you do and how you live and the use of your body and mind and spirit and money and time and where you go and with whom you associate and ask yourself: “Do I have one simple goal in all things, that Christ be *honored*, both in how I live and in the way I die?”

To Live is Christ / To Die is Gain (vv. 21-26)

This reference to “life” and “death” at the close of v. 20 triggers in Paul an urge to comment on the attitude he has toward both. It can be summed up in 8 powerful words: **“To live is Christ. To die is gain.”**

The options before us all are clear: **either** “to depart and be with Christ” (v. 23) **or** “to remain in the flesh” (v. 24). On the one hand, “to remain in the flesh” or to continue living on this earth means the opportunity to serve and love and minister to others in a way that bears great fruit in their lives and brings great glory to God. On the other hand, to die means to enter immediately into the presence of Jesus himself, to live with him, to see him, touch him, hear him, and to enjoy the intimacy of unbroken fellowship with him and to worship him together with all others who have died before us in faith.

This perspective on life and death creates for Paul something of a dilemma, highlighted by the term he uses in v. 23. He says, “I am hard pressed” (ESV) or “I am torn” (NIV) or “I am in a strait betwixt the two” (KJV). This word has an interesting history in the NT. It is often used to describe a person who is hemmed in on every side, without a way of escape. No room is left to move or maneuver. See Luke 8:37, 45; 19:43; and especially 2 Corinthians 5:14.

The only way we can fully appreciate this dilemma is to pause briefly and address the question of *what happens when a Christian dies*.

The NT is crystal clear that when a believer dies physically, his/her life continues instantly and immediately and consciously in the presence of Jesus. Several passages bear this out, such as Matthew 17:1-8; Luke 16:19-31; 23:42-43; 2 Corinthians 5:1-10; 1 Thessalonians 4:14; Hebrews 12:22-24; Revelation 6:9-11. Theologians refer to this as *the intermediate state* because it is the condition of Christians in between their life here on earth and the day of Christ’s second coming when their bodies will be physically raised and glorified. Every born-again child of God who has died physically is at this very moment in the presence of Jesus: conscious, filled with joy, vibrant and excited as they celebrate continuously the glory of their Savior.

These many passages are the basis for my consistent declaration at the funeral service of every Christian: This brother or sister in Christ, though dead, **is alive!** He/she is at this very moment **more alive** than he ever was while he walked this earth. She is more alert, more knowledgeable, more conscious, more vibrant in her affections and feelings and thoughts than she **ever** could have hoped to be during her many years on earth. The believer in Jesus is more alive than any of you here today who still walk this earth and breathe its air.

After the death of Lazarus, Jesus spoke to his sister Martha and said: “Your brother will rise again.’ Martha said to him, ‘I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.’ Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die’” (John 11:23-26).

When Jesus said that everyone who believes in him “shall never die” he wasn’t denying the reality of physical death. **He was denying that physical death is the termination of human existence.** For the believer in Jesus Christ, physical death is but a momentary transition into true and eternal life.

The Apostle Paul said much the same thing in 2 Corinthians 5:6-8. There he declared that “while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord.”

If the Christian is not physically alive, he/she is with Jesus Christ.

If the Christian is physically alive, he/she is away from Jesus Christ.

For the Christian, there are two and only two possibilities.

You are either physically alive and therefore apart from Christ, or you are physically dead and therefore present with Christ. There is no third option.

Some of you may be wondering to yourselves: “But Sam, if the Christian enters into the conscious presence of Christ immediately upon death, why does the NT so often refer to physical death as ‘falling asleep’?” (See Mt. 27:52; Luke 8:52; Jn. 11:11-13; Acts 7:60; 1 Cor. 7:39; 11:30; 15:6,18; 1 Thess. 4:13.)

There are several reasons for this. For example, sleep implies rest from *earthly toil*, the cessation of activity in *this* realm. Thus one is asleep to *this* world, but alive and very much “awake” in the next. The imagery of sleep is also used to describe death because the *body* does sleep, in a manner of speaking. In other words, the body is at rest, without activity or life. But nowhere does the Bible say that the “soul” or “spirit” sleeps or is unconscious. Finally, sleep is used to illustrate that the pain of death as a penalty for sin is gone for the Christian. ***Death for the believer, rather than something to be feared, is utterly lacking in spiritual trauma and is rather like dozing off for a nap.***

So let’s return to unpack Paul’s language. What does he mean when he says that “*to live is Christ*”? He means that for him . . .

The preaching of Christ is the business of his life.
The presence of Christ is the joy of his life.
Being conformed to the image of Christ is the aim of his life.
The Spirit of Christ is the strength of his life.
The love of Christ is the encouragement of his life.
The will of Christ is the moral compass of his life.
The death and resurrection of Christ are the hope of his life.
The glory of Christ is the purpose of his life.

Jesus Christ is the all-consuming passion, the singular focus, the foundation and goal, of all he is and does.

If he traveled, it was on Christ’s errand. If he suffered, it was in Christ’s service. If he spoke, Christ was his theme. Whatever he wrote, Christ filled his words. “The person and work of Christ are the foundation rock upon which the Christian religion is built. . . . Take Christ from Christianity and you disembowel it; there is practically nothing left. Christ is the center of Christianity; all else is circumference” (John Stott).

When did Paul utter this statement? It wasn’t when he traveled the Damascus Road and witnessed firsthand the blazing and blinding glory of the risen Christ. It wasn’t as he sat in solitude in the Arabian desert while the Spirit spoke to him and unveiled to him the majestic truths of the gospel. It wasn’t during a time of robust health and physical safety. It was during his imprisonment, his bondage, his captivity in chains, after a lifetime of persecution, beatings, rejection, etc.

Can you and I say this? Can we sincerely examine our lives and how we speak and act and spend our money and time and walk away saying: “For me, to live is Christ”?

So, what can he possibly mean when he says “*to die is gain*”?

I can understand Paul saying that for him and for us “to live is Christ.” But how is it that death can be viewed as anything but a horrible end to a wonderful life? How can death be anything other than the shattering of hopes and dreams and the end of one’s life work? How can it possibly be viewed as “gain” over life?

Be assured of this: Paul is not saying he is dissatisfied with life or that he desires to be done with the troubles of earthly existence. Far less is Paul suggesting that he is contemplating suicide. As he will later declare, if I had a choice in the matter I’d probably prefer to be executed and immediately enter into the presence of Jesus. But in point of literal fact I don’t have a choice. God alone is the one who determines and decides whether we live or die. It is not our right to make that decision. But if I had my “druthers,” I’d choose to be with Jesus!

Paul can say “to die is gain” because in death he lays hold of more of Christ than he could ever experience in life.

Now, he is only present in spirit; then in person.
In dying he trades earth for heaven.
In dying he transitions from toil to rest.
In dying he moves from imperfection to perfection.
In dying he no longer lives by faith alone but also by sight.
In dying he moves from tears, sorrow, grief, pain, and persecution to the bliss of unbroken, unending intimacy and communion with Jesus.

The reason the Christian can confidently declare that death is “gain” boils down to a simple, two-word prepositional phrase in v. 23: **“with Christ”!** For all the glory and opportunities and blessings that life may bring, death brings one that trumps them all: we get to be “with Christ”!

Paul saw all of life as an opportunity to magnify Jesus, to show him great and good and worthy of his trust. His life was energized by his beauty and empowered by his grace. Even the smallest of his daily tasks, the most routine of his responsibilities were undertaken for the glory of his Savior. Everything in his life served his purpose and praise.

But having said all that, “to die is gain”! I know some of you are wondering how a sane person can say that death is “gain” over life. For a Christian, it’s easy. ***Death is gain over life simply because death provides the Christian with more of Christ than life does!***

This is highlighted yet again in v. 23b with his use of the word **“depart.”** It’s interesting that he doesn’t say “die,” but “depart.”

This word was often used of an army striking camp and moving on into battle; they would fold up their tents and continue their march. More relevant here, though, is its use to describe a ship as it was released from its moorings. As a ship would weigh anchor and sail off into the sea, so Paul envisioned death. It is as if he envisioned the duties and responsibilities of this life as a rope that kept him securely fastened to the dock. The gentle but firm tug or pull which he feels from the waves of the sea is the inclination of his heart calling him home to be with Christ. He says: “Lord would that you might loose me from the restraints of this life and guide my ship into heaven’s ocean!”

But Paul doesn’t desire death for the same reason many pagans did in that day. They viewed it as a way of escaping the prison house of the body. Paul, on the other hand, sees it as the way in which a believer enters into a deeper and more intense fellowship with Christ.

Look at the words translated “far better” in v. 23b, literally, **“much rather better!”** There is implied here what we might call a triple comparative! It is “better.” No, it is “rather better.” No, it is “much rather better!” It is by far the best. Nothing can top it. Clearly this rules out “soul sleep,” for how could entrance into a state of unconsciousness be “far better” than the present state of being physically alive? At least in the latter he experienced conscious fellowship with Jesus.

Thus, when he says “to live is Christ” he means that to continue living brings new opportunities to magnify Christ, to serve Christ, to make Christ known. When he says “to die is gain” he means that whatever of Christ life might give him, death brings him more! It’s as if he says to the Philippians, “Earth knows no love such as I have for you. But I must confess, I love Christ more!”

Adolphe Monod put it this way:

“The Apostle is asking here which is most worthwhile for him, to live or to die. Often has that question presented itself to us, and perhaps we like the Apostle, have answered that ‘we are in a strait’ [or, we are hard pressed]. But I fear we may have used the words in a sense far different from St. Paul’s. When we have wished for death, we meant to say, ‘I know not which alternative I ought most to dread, the afflictions of life, from which death would release me, or the terrors of death, from which life protects me.’ In other words, life and death look to us like two evils of which we know not which is the less. As for the Apostle, they look to him like two immense blessings of which he knows not which is the better.”

Thus the way you glorify God in your death is by regarding it as “gain” over life. That doesn’t mean you disregard life or that you fail to embrace it as a wonderful blessing from God or that you waste your time on earth. You live it fully and fruitfully. It simply means that *you so value and treasure and prize Jesus Christ that life on this earth in his absence is regarded as less appealing than death which brings you into heaven and his presence.*

Here’s a challenge for us all. On one side of the scales of balance pile up all the losses that you will endure should you die. Add up what death will cost you, whether that be your family, your career, your wealth, your friends, your hobbies, together with all your unfinished plans and dreams and personal projects. Now, on the other side of the scales of balance put being “with Christ” (v. 23). If you can look on the latter and sincerely and joyfully say, **Gain!** then Jesus is magnified in your dying.

Paul, as well as you and I, honor Christ in our deaths only if *we are so utterly satisfied with him and so completely enthralled with his beauty that losing everything in this life in order to be with him is considered ‘gain.’* As Piper has put it, “*Christ is glorified in you when he is more precious to you than all that life can give or death can take.*”

So, whether we live or die, may we at all times and in every way honor Christ!

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