

To Die Is Gain

Philippians 1:21 | April 12, 2020 | Bryce Beale

Not long before the time of Christ, when Rome still ruled the world, one of its greatest poets, Horace, penned these words in his native Latin tongue:

It is *dulce* [sweet] and *decorum* [fitting] to die for one's country.¹

Dulce et decorum. With these words the poet wished to stir up the Romans in their ongoing conquest of the globe.

But about one hundred years ago, someone saw through this empty charge. A British poet named Wilfred Owen took up the same Latin line, *dulce et decorum*, and set it beside the unparalleled slaughter of the First World War, which he had witnessed.

And so he ended his famous poem by saying that if you could see the atrocities of that war, you “would not tell with such high zest // To children ardent for some desperate glory, // The old lie: *Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori* [It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country].”²

We honor those who lay down their lives in just conflicts, to protect the innocent. But that was not what Horace meant—he urged men on to wars of aggression, to the conquering of other peoples for personal gain.

Still, his words have value and are true if we change but one word of them. It is sweet and fitting to die—for Christ.

Do you believe this? Horace believed it for something as insignificant as Rome, a nation which does not even exist today. He thought it a joy to die for the progress of that kingdom.

Do you think the same of Christ and his kingdom? When you consider death, whether the martyr's death which honors Christ, or the Christian's death which brings you to him, can you say not

¹ *Odes* 3.2.

² “*Dulce et Decorum Est*.”

that it is bitter and morbid, but that it is *dulce et decorum*, sweet and fitting?

Scripture does not hesitate to call death our enemy or to show its painful aspects—Jesus himself, after all, wept in the face of his friend’s death.

But neither does it deny this statement: it is sweet and fitting to die for Christ.

Unless you believe that, you cannot enjoy what we celebrate today, on this Resurrection Sunday. This is the glory of Easter—not a rabbit, not candy, not eggs, fun as all those may be. The glory of Easter is that Christ, in coming out of his tomb, brought with him the key that unlocks our shackles, our fear of death, which for so long had held us captive.

And so, because of Easter, we can say with Scripture that death, our own death, however bitter and painful in itself, nonetheless is something sweet, something right and fitting, something to look forward to rather than to dread.

These are large assertions, and if you find it hard to believe them I can think of no better fix than the Scriptures themselves. Horace’s lines may have been inspiring, but they were not inspired. Now we turn to lines which were.

The Apostle Paul is in prison for the sake of Christ, facing possible execution, death, and he writes to his friends in Philippi.

PHILIPPIANS 1:12-26

One statement among these all has always struck Christians the strongest—do you know which it is? “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”³ Verse 21. And that is the one verse we are considering this morning, even just half of that, “to die is gain”—but since it comes as part of Paul’s experience, which he describes in all the verses around it, we have to consider those too.

Our aim all the while will be to understand how this man, who did die by sword for Christ, could consider that death sweet and fitting. It hurt as much as any beheading hurts. Yet Paul considered it not something dreadful, some horrible stroke of fate

³ ESV.

to end his otherwise happy existence. He thought of death as *gain*.

He preferred dying to living, despite the pain of it! “My desire,” he says in verse 23, “is to depart”—that is, to die!—“for that is far better.” Death is far better than living, he says! It is gain. It is sweet, and it is fitting, *dulce et decorum*.

And he is an example for you. If death is a thought that strikes fear in your heart, God intends that it strike fear no longer. Christians die well, because we do not dread death; when we are in our right mind, we even welcome it. Not for its own sake, but because of what death can accomplish for Christ and for us.

That is what we wish to see in our brother Paul this morning, so that we might by God’s grace imitate him, and be free from any other way of thinking.

To that end, I want to begin by looking at Paul’s attitude toward life in general, before we focus more narrowly on his attitude toward death. You cannot understand the one without the other. So let us zoom out and see Paul’s strange opinions on all of life, recorded in this letter.

A Backward Attitude

The most noticeable part of Paul’s attitude toward life is that everything is backward for him. Let me show you what I mean.

What do you think is better, freedom or captivity? We would, rightly, say freedom. It is better to be a freeman than to be in prison, isn’t it?

But when Paul is put in prison he says, beginning in verse 12:

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.⁴

⁴ Vv. 12-14.

This is not Paul playing Pollyanna, pretending he likes his circumstance simply because he cannot change it. He writes with conviction—he believes this! He believes that in this instance, in the wisdom and sovereignty of God, it is good for him to be in prison. It is sweet and fitting for him to have lost his freedom, to be chained to a Roman guard, to await possible execution.

That is backward. Who else is happy to be imprisoned?

Let me ask again, when you hear of someone who is going about speaking badly of you, trying to turn your friends against you—are you glad? Paul was.

See verses 15 on:

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.⁵

“I rejoice,” he says. “I’m glad!” “About what?” we ask. “That some preachers are trying to spite me, but are preaching Christ in order to do it.” This is backward. Some of our hardest times occur when people speak ill of us, think badly of us. But Paul is glad.

We could follow Paul’s backward attitude all the way through this letter if we had the time. What do you think of suffering and pain? Paul says in verse 29 that it has been *granted* to you, gifted to you, “that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake.”

On the other hand, what do you think about accomplishments, about getting an education and becoming prominent in society, successful in work, respected by your neighbors? Paul says in chapter 3, “For [Christ’s] sake I have suffered the loss of all [these] things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ.”⁶

And when the Philippians sent a financial gift to poor Paul, he said in effect, “Thank you for your gift—although I have no income and

⁵ Vv. 15-18.

⁶ V. 8.,

no way of knowing where my next meal will come from, I didn't and don't need your money. I'm glad to have much, and I'm just as glad to have little. God always supplies my needs. But, I'm glad for your sake that you gave, for God will reward you."⁷

Who truly thinks along these lines, not in a cliched Christian way, but in a truly Christian way? Who welcomes suffering, and pain, and betrayal, and poverty for Christ's sake?

Christians do. We do not expect others to do so, but we expect it of ourselves. And if we have not yet reached the point of having such backward attitudes toward life, one thing we must do: forgetting what lies behind, we must press forward to what lies ahead, to the attitudes and way of life to which God is calling you now.

Death

But because we usually grow in only one way at a time, and slowly, we must focus our attention now just as does Paul on only one of his backward attitudes: his attitude toward death.

For you and I must face that fact either sooner or later on, and if you make no effort to adjust your thinking on the subject, you will by default think of death the way the world thinks of death. You will fear it, despise it, avoid it, even compromise to avoid it. You will not risk your life for the sake of the gospel, by bringing it to dangerous people groups who need to hear it. You will not honor Christ by your courage at its approach, nor will you have the joy of Easter at the thought of it.

This attitude of Paul, this odd and peculiar way of looking at life and at death, takes nothing less than an act of God in the heart. And this act he performs through his word. Therefore he sets before you now the example of Paul, in the inspired word of God. I do not know what your attitude toward that final act of living is at present, but I know what it must become. I know what God wants it to be and what, I pray, he will make it through his word today.

So then, let us direct our attention to this one, narrower aspect of Paul's unworldly attitudes, as he considers death—his own death—in verse 21 of the first chapter.

⁷ This is my own paraphrase.

To refresh your memory, he gives his opinion of his own death with these words: “For to me...to die is gain.”

Many do not see death in this light, so we must ask Paul, “Why? Why is death gain to you?” And he offers us two answers.

Magnifies Christ

Here is the first. Death is gain for Paul, and for any follower of Christ hearing this now, because our death is an opportunity to magnify Christ.

There is some question here whether Paul expects that he will be executed or not. At one moment it sounds as if he thinks he will be spared, and then he suggests he might face the blade instead. Perhaps he was uncertain about the when and where and how of his death, just like you and I are. But he is confident of one thing—that at the end of the day, however he might die, Christ will be exalted in his death. And that is a far better reward for the apostle than any promise of physical survival.

See this at the end of verse 18 onward:

Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance [so, survival?], 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 [well, perhaps not survival].⁸

Notice that whether Paul thinks he will be spared or not, his eager expectation and hope is not his survival. He is not a mere animal trying to preserve itself. His eager expectation and hope is that Christ will be exalted in his body. And that may happen by his survival, for which Christ must be thanked. But that could also happen, he says, “by death.”

There is a way to die that exalts Christ. And since, for Paul, to live is Christ—life itself is all about exalting Christ, that is its highest aim—then a death that exalts Christ is good, is sweet, is fitting. Paul’s goal in life is not survival, but exalting Christ, and so death does not foil his purpose. It fulfills it.

⁸ Vv. 18b-20.

We have lost in our place and time the martyr's zeal, haven't we? I have heard that among some of our persecuted brothers and sisters in China, it is not seminary which prepares a man for ministry, but suffering. That is the qualification they expect of a pastor, not a degree. They are standing in the long line of Christians who have loved not their lives unto death, and are more eager to see Christ exalted than themselves spared.

In the early church, some Christians were so earnest to seal their testimony with blood that their leaders had to tell them not to seek persecution and death. I have never needed any leader to tell me that! And those men and women whom God chose to usher in a new age of light at the time of the 16th century Reformation, almost all of them risked life for Christ, and many of them had their risk fulfilled by strangling, by burning, by drowning, or by other painful means.

We are today living in an unusual blip upon the long timeline of Christian suffering and martyrdom, where we face no immediate threat to our lives for the sake of Christ in this one small place and time we occupy. So you do not have death for the name of Christ pressed into your face as it was and is for those who must risk life for their testimony. Therefore it is more important, not less, that we take in these words of Paul and let our souls marinate in them. "To die is gain." Why? Because, as every martyr knows, death can exalt Christ.

At Faith Bible Church, we exist for this purpose and no other, to exalt Christ. And we have been called upon to exalt Christ in this body by life. But if tides should turn and we must exalt him by death, may we be found ready servants of the truth. Our aim does not change when our circumstances do.

Remember those words recorded at the end of John's gospel, when Jesus told Peter that he too would be executed. "This [Jesus] said," we read, "to show by what kind of death [Peter] was to glorify God."⁹

If you truly believe that Christ's glory is worth more than all else, is your highest purpose and joy in life, and that in death you can glorify him with more force, more power, more lasting influence

⁹ John 21:19.

than in any other way, you too would embrace death as a friend, not a foe.

You may here have a concern. Since we are not presently in danger of dying for Christ, can we, in our context, really exalt him by our deaths? We do not expect our faith and testimony to be confirmed by the jaws of the lion, as with the early Roman Christians. Can we exalt Christ in our bodies by death?

And the answer is certainly, “Yes.” In fact, you may have a greater opportunity to magnify Christ in your death than you ever had in your life. How so? If you live as Paul lived, who said, “For to me *to live is Christ*” then, for you as for him, no matter how it occurs, “to die” will be “gain.” It will magnify Christ.

For whatever your influence in life, it will be deepened in your death. You know this from experience—if you have known a good man or woman, perhaps someone close to you, who in the midst of serving Christ and loving others, died, then you know the power of a Christian’s death. I have a friend who for a long time wavered between Christ and the world, but when our sister Meredith Opal was taken suddenly from us several years back, that was the turning point for him. Suddenly her living for Christ struck him, its force deepened, and he committed himself to living for Christ, and has done so ever since.

If you live for Christ now, know that if you are faithful to the end you will exalt Christ in your death, and in powerful ways. And if you are convinced of that, then you can say with Paul, “to die is gain”—it is sweet, it is fitting.

[Brings us to Christ](#)

But this Resurrection Sunday message would be incomplete if we did not turn now from this first reason for Paul’s joy in the face of death, to his second. How is death “gain” for this apostle? First, as we have said, because by his death he expects to exalt his Savior. But secondly, because he knows death is the bridge that brings him to Christ.

See again the apostle contemplating his own demise in verses 22 and 23: “If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.”

Brothers and sisters, your faith is not complete until you can take these words as your own. Paul has said, “To me, to die is gain.” Can you say the same, with that same pair of words at the start: “To me”? None of us have fully attained it yet, but we press toward that mark. I intend to say those words with confidence by my journey’s end. “To me, death is gain.” And again, as Paul explains just afterward, “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.”

For so long death held power over Paul. I do not doubt he spent much of his life afraid of death, if he thought about the subject. Always, in all his activities, there loomed that grim figure of Death, that enemy who would strip away all Paul had and cast him into an eternity of suffering.

But then, suddenly, there was a light. From the cross of Calvary there came one shackle that locked itself around Death’s left wrist; and from the tomb came another that bound itself around his right. The book of Paul’s offenses, by which Death had the authority to destroy this man, was burnt up in the blaze of Christ’s resurrection. And a robe, white as the angels’ at the empty tomb, was wrapped around Paul’s soul. He was forgiven. Death no longer had mastery over him.

But he could say, “Now, Death is mine.”¹⁰ Death has been forced itself to serve the people of God, including Paul, by escorting them to Paradise.

The Scriptures teach that there is no happiness in this life which can in the slightest compare to the happiness of being with Christ. There is nothing you will lose when you close your eyes in death that you will regret having lost once you open your eyes and see Christ. This is what Paul means when he says that dying, for him, is “far better” than living.

Yes, death is not good in itself. Neither is the pain that attends it. But death, for us who believe, is like jumping into the pool. You hesitate beforehand because you know it will be a little cold, but once you have jumped in, you are glad you did, and the fun begins.

And death will be strange, because none of us wishes to be unclothed—we do not know what it is like to leave these bodies,

¹⁰ See 1 Cor. 3:22.

so we may feel the nervousness we feel before any trip to an unknown place. But if your beloved is in that place, a boyfriend or a girlfriend, say, then you will be both nervous and excited.

Our beloved waits for us. And just after the cold splash, we will find ourselves in his warm embrace, with him.

Therefore we say, "To us, to die is gain."