

Bethel Fellowship Church
Minneota, MN
May 15, 2022
Sermon by Todd Mitchell

Introduction¹

Many years ago I went on a 911 call to a plant in Fridley where there had been a fatal accident. A fellow had been burned to death. What seemed so tragic to most of us about the whole thing was that this man was only two weeks from retirement. That's what came across the most in the evening news on TV that night. People saw that, and they thought, how sad, to work all those years only to die just two weeks from retirement—now he'll never get to enjoy his retirement!

Death is something that most people don't like to talk about. They know that they will die someday, but they don't want to think about it. I'm not just talking about the people of the world. I'm talking about professing Christians, too. Many professing Christians would rather just live for the moment. And many other professing Christians have plans, big plans—they have worked hard, saved their money, and they hope to enjoy that money before they die. For some, one of the worst things they could imagine would be to die two weeks before they get to retire and go on permanent vacation.

Of course, you younger folks probably don't think about retirement. But young people often think the same way. You don't want to die. You don't want to even think about dying. No, you have plans, big plans. Depending on how old you are, maybe your big dream is just to get that next toy you've always wanted. Maybe your big dream is to drive a car, or to get married, or to finish school and get a job and buy a house. If you live for these things, one of the saddest things you could think of would be to die before you got to live out your dream.

In hospice volunteer training, I was taught that some people get angry when they find out they only have months to live. They feel cheated, they think it isn't fair, because the best thing they can imagine—living their life in this world—is being taken away from them. In the opinion of the teacher, "It's okay to die screaming at God." So much for those who love the world.

Others get so discouraged, so depressed, so despondent that all they can think about is death. Some of them even try to commit suicide—and some of them succeed. They hate being alive so much that nothing else but death will do. They want to end their lives because as far as they're concerned their lives aren't worth living anymore.

Both of these attitudes are wrong. Both of them are selfish, worldly ways of thinking that we all need to fight against. I know I do. We ought not to be self-centered—we ought to be Christ-centered. We ought not to be worldly-minded, but heavenly-minded. We should neither cling too tightly to this life, nor should we give up on this life in despair.

How should we think about life and death? That's what I want to show you this morning. The apostle Paul shows us how we should think about life and death in his letter to the Philippians. As he writes this letter, he is in chains awaiting the trial that will settle whether he goes free or

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gets the death penalty. He knows he could die, but he isn't angry about it, nor is he even sad about it. Nor has he given up in despair to simply accept whatever happens to him.

After telling the Philippian Christians that he is rejoicing at the advance of the gospel in Rome, this is what he says:

Philippians 1:18b-26 18 . . . Yes, and I will rejoice, 19 for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, 20 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. 21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. 23 I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. 24 But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. 25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

Here Paul faces death in the eye and says, whatever God wants for me, whether I live or die, I will rejoice as long as I honor Christ with this body of mine. Death is not a sad thing for Paul—he looks forward to the day he will die and be with Jesus. But he is not suicidal, either—as long as God wants him to stay alive on this earth, he will rejoice. What made him eager to die was the very thing that made him eager to live—Jesus Christ!

That's the way we ought to think. But to think this way takes a lot more than just agreeing in our heads that it's the right way to think. We have to agree in our hearts. We have to love God so much, we have to long for Christ's glory so much, that we can and we do say to God, with all sincerity, with all eagerness, from the bottom of our hearts, meaning every word, "Use me, and use me up, God. I can't wait to die and be with Jesus—but until then, just use me, however you want, wherever you want." And whatever may come—whether it be persecution and imprisonment like Paul's, whether it be poverty, disability, cancer, or death—we face it with joy, revelling in the great privilege of honoring Christ in our bodies, whether by life or by death.

This way of thinking, this way of feeling, doesn't come naturally. The only way it will come is with the leading of the Holy Spirit. So this morning let us listen to what the Holy Spirit has breathed out here in the Word of God. Let us look closer at what Paul is saying here, and meditate upon it this morning and this afternoon and in the days to come, and grow to think and feel like Paul does as he writes this letter.

First, I want to show you what Paul wants more than anything, and then I will turn to what Paul wants for himself, in God's good timing.

Exposition

I. What Paul Wants More than Anything: To Honor Christ

The first thing we see here is that what Paul wants more than anything is to honor Christ.

A. Paul is sure he will be delivered

Paul writes, “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” (vv. 18b-19). There’s some debate about what Paul means here. It’s pretty clear that he is thinking about his imprisonment and his trial before the Roman ruler, and it’s also clear that he is confident that it will turn out well—he says that he knows it will turn out for his “deliverance,” or “salvation” (KJV). But what does he *mean* by that?

Some say Paul is talking about his ultimate salvation when one day he faces God. Others say he is talking about his deliverance from the sentence of death there in Rome. And others say that he is talking about his vindication when he goes to trial—that whether or not he gets the death penalty, he is confident that he will be vindicated as one who has defended the gospel.

By the time we get to v. 25, we know that he really is confident that he will be delivered from a death penalty. So that could be the deliverance he’s talking about here in v. 19.

But I think the very next verse, v. 20, tells us what Paul is talking about here. In v. 20, Paul talks about how things will turn out perfectly whether he gets the death sentence or not. So I think that the deliverance he’s talking about here in v. 19 is either his vindication at the time of his trial in Rome—proving that he is a gospel-preacher, not a rabble-rouser—or his ultimate deliverance one day before the judgment seat of God.

And now we begin to see what is really on Paul’s mind. He’s not wringing his hands, worrying if he will get the death-penalty. He’s not lying awake at night, fretting about being killed. All he cares about is that he honors Christ—by life or by death.

B. Paul is concerned only with honoring Christ

That’s what we see in v. 20. In v. 20 he explains why he is so confident that through the Philippian Christians’ prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will all turn out for his deliverance: “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.”

That’s all Paul cares about right now. It isn’t his “eager expectation and hope” to be rescued from death. No, what he looks forward to is simply being a courageous Christian as he faces his trial, so he will bring honor to the name of Jesus.

To Paul, this is more important than life itself. To Paul, the one fate worse than death would be to falter, to waver, to back down, to waffle, to stop short of proclaiming the gospel at his trial or even to deny Christ altogether. That would bring shame upon Paul, because it would bring shame upon Christ himself.

Paul is relying upon the prayers of the Philippian Christians and the help of the Spirit of Christ to give him courage, to stand fast, to be confident in the Lord and to boldly speak the word without fear. He is counting on a plentiful *supply* (That word “help” in v. 19 is translated better in some translations as “supply.”) of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, who courageously went to the very cross in obedience to his Father. He isn’t confident in his own strength, his own ability to be brave, but he is confident in the God who hears the prayers of his people and will supply Paul with the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

And this is why Paul says, “Yes, and I will rejoice.” This is what brings him joy, sincere, deep, overflowing, unending joy—the assurance that in his darkest hour, Christ will be honored in his body, whether by life or by death.

Do you realize what this means? It means that Paul thinks of his body as nothing but something to be used to bring honor and glory to the name of Jesus. He isn’t living for the pleasures and treasures of this world. He doesn’t think of things like toys or riches or retirement as his reason for living. His mind is on things above. Nothing he has, not even his own body, exists for anything but honoring Jesus.

Now you might think, “Well, sure, but this is Paul the apostle we’re talking about. Of course *he* would think like that. But for the rest of us, for us normal Christians, we don’t *really* have to be so extreme. We’re not apostles, we’re just regular folks.” But if you think like that, you’re missing the point Paul is trying to make. Don’t forget that he’s trying to teach the Philippians something here, something that *we* need to learn, too. Don’t forget that in this letter Paul is going to say, “Brothers, join in imitating me!” (3:17).

There aren’t two categories of Christians—there aren’t Super-Christians, and normal Christians. There is only one kind of Christian. And as Paul said in his letter to the Romans, we’re all supposed to think like this about our bodies. All of us ought to think that the only reason we draw our next breath, the only reason we walk and talk and have money in our bank accounts and children in our care, is to bring honor to Jesus. “For,” Paul tells the Romans, “if we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s” (Rom 14:8). And he tells the Colossians, “Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth. For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” (Col 3:2-3).

Is this the way you live? Is this the way you think of your body, your life? Have you died to the world, and is your life hidden with Christ in God? What matters more to you—your toys, your house, your wife, your husband, your children, your parents, your brothers or sisters, your plans for the future? Or *the honor of Christ*?

When you face other people, what matters more to you? That they accept you? That they like you? That they be nice to you, that they smile at you, laugh with you, welcome you? If so, then you will try to fit in. You will try to avoid anything that will attract attention to how different you are. You might even talk always about the weather, anything, instead of about Jesus. You might even laugh at dirty jokes, *anything*, just so long as they look up to you in their worldly minds. I can

tell you from experience that you will be ashamed. As my mentor, Dr. Bauder, once said, “There is nothing more devastating to Christianity than the desire to be accepted here.”

But if what matters most to you is that “you will not be ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in [your] body, whether by life or by death,” then you will not be ashamed. And yes, you will rejoice, with overflowing joy, at being used by God as a fire burning bright in this world of darkness to bring glory to your Lord and Master, Jesus Christ.

What did Paul want more than anything? To honor Christ. Now, let us turn to what Paul wants for himself, in God’s good timing: to die and be with Christ.

II. What Paul Wants for Himself: To Die and Be With Christ

Look at v. 21: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

The way Paul says this in Greek is beautiful, because it rhymes. How many times must Paul have joyfully repeated this rhyme to himself? How many times must the Philippian Christians have repeated it after learning it from Paul? “To live is Christ, and to die is gain. To live is Christ, and to die is gain!”

I used to focus just on the last part, but even unbelievers somehow seem to think that “to die is gain” something. Whenever someone dies, it seems there is always somebody to say, “At least he’s in a better place, now,” even if neither the one saying it nor the one who has died have the slightest hint of faith.

The only way we can possibly understand what Paul is saying here, when he says, “To die is gain,” is if we understand the first part, “To live is Christ.” Pay attention to both parts of this! Paul starts by saying, “To me, to live is Christ.”

A. Paul says that for him, to live is Christ

We know what he means by this, because he tells us in the next verse: “If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me” (v. 22a). As long as Paul is alive, he labors, he works, he serves his Lord and Master Jesus Christ.

And Paul loves it! Just look at the way he is saying this in v. 21. He’s not contrasting something bad with something good. He’s comparing something good with something better!

And that shows you just how much Paul cares about serving Jesus, because the only life of “fruitful labor” he knows is a terribly hard life. Don’t forget where Paul is as he writes this. He’s in chains. And don’t forget what he told the Corinthian church, in his letter to them:

2 Corinthians 11:24-28 24 Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. 25 Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; 26 on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the

city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; 27 in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. 28 And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

Ah yes, Paul says, “To me, to live is Christ . . . that means fruitful labor for me.” He’s not talking about just enduring all these things with a stiff upper lip. He’s talking about going through all these things *because of* the gospel, to bear fruit.

And it is all worth it to Paul—more than worth it, it brings him joy and contentment. Because the fruit that his labor bears is a sweet, succulent fruit. He talks about some of it in v. 25—his labor brings “progress and joy in the faith” to other Christians. This brings honor to Christ, and Christ is whom he lives for.

What do you live for? I’m afraid that too often, to live is self-indulgence. Too often, we live first and foremost for ease and comfort, for safety and security, for toys and hobbies, for movies and games, for food and fun, for land and houses, for paychecks and job security.

Now, some of these things are good things. But if you are *living for* these things, then you are not living for Christ, but for this world. No matter how good it is, if you are just living for it, then you aren’t living for Christ. If to you, to live is marriage, or to you, to live is children, or to you, to live is work, then you aren’t living for Christ—with all the terrible consequences of that choice to you and to the ones you hold so dear.

To Paul, to live is Christ—and that meant labor, labor in the service of Jesus, labor that bears fruit in the lives of all the people he holds dear—but always, always, for the honor and glory of Jesus. Jesus comes first, and everybody and everything else comes second. Last of all comes Paul.

But this brings us to the one thing that Paul would have, if he could have it—death!

B. Paul says that for him, to die is gain

Paul says, “To me . . . to die is gain!” As much as he rejoices to labor for Jesus in this life, he says:

Philippians 1:22b-23 22 . . . Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. 23 I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.

Paul longs to be with Jesus. Oh, how he wants to be with Jesus! He loves Jesus, he loves him so much that he would rather be with Jesus than anything in this world. If he could fall over dead in the next minute, nothing would make him happier.

You might think that’s a bit strong. But that really is what Paul is saying here. This is his *desire*. This is what he *wants*. To die and to instantly be with Jesus is *far better* than to draw even one more breath.

Stop and think about that. How do you think about dying and being with Jesus? Is it something that you really look forward to? Or is it just something that you know is going to happen, and at least it's better than going to hell?

Let me ask it another way. If you got to heaven and Jesus weren't there, would you still be happy? Paul wouldn't be. If he dies and doesn't meet Jesus, then he's in hell. No amount of jewels or riches or friends or anything else would make it heaven.

What do you think of when you think of heaven? A lot of people think of it as a place that has all their favorite things on earth, but even better. You hear it at funerals when you hear people talk about old Joe going to that "great golf course in the sky." And a lot of professing Christians seem to look forward to heaven mostly because then they'll be reunited with their loved ones who have died. But Paul longs for Jesus. He longs for Jesus so much that he would rather die and be with Jesus than keep living here on this earth.

People who don't understand this have said that Paul himself must be suicidal, that he is thinking of killing himself. But that is ridiculous! They are ignoring what Paul is saying. He isn't mulling over a choice, here, as if he were trying to *choose* death or life. He's simply explaining to the Philippians that if it were up to him—which it isn't—he would prefer death so he could be with Jesus. But as long as God would rather that he keep living, he rejoices in "fruitful labor," that "now as always Christ will be honored in [his] body, whether by life or by death."

Conclusion

Ponder what Paul has said. Examine yourselves. What is it that matters most to you? What are you living for? Can you say, with Paul, "To me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain?"

If you truly want to be with Jesus in heaven, what more than Jesus are you looking for in this life? Live for him! God grant "that [we] will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in [our bodies], whether by life or by death."

I can't say it any better than how the great hymnwriter, Isaac Watts said it:

Nor earth, nor all the sky,
Can one delight afford;
No, not a drop of Thy real joy,
Without Thy presence, Lord.²

Love him, oh brothers and sisters, love him! Love the one who came to earth and died for you!
Love the one who bore the cross for your sins! Love the one who has offered you eternal life,
and live for him!

Make this your motto: "To me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

2 Isaac Watts, "Hymn 93," *The Psalms and Hymns of Isaac Watts* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria Publications, 1997), 469.