

August 2, 2009
Pentecost 9
Philippians Sermon Series

“A Heaven-Bound Christian’s Joyful Dilemma”

PHILIPPIANS 1:21-30

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²² 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! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me. ²⁷ Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel ²⁸ without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved-- and that by God. ²⁹ For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, ³⁰ since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

A group of United States Marines are about to go on a dangerous night patrol in Afghanistan. They huddle together before breaking apart into smaller groups. Their final words to each other are the familiar words, “Semper Fi!” an abbreviation of the Latin phrase, “Semper Fidelis” which mean “Always Faithful!” “I will faithfully guard your back. I will not leave your body whether you are dead or alive.”

Today we start another week on this earth as soldiers of our Lord Jesus Christ, gathering together for worship to arm ourselves for battle. Satan has already planned the booby traps and roadside bombs that are intended to rip our lives apart. We call them temptations. The world in which we live is a very real world that wants to mold and shape us into its way of thinking that is so different from the way Jesus wants us to think and live. Sinful thoughts and evil desires suddenly well up inside of us with ugly names like pride, greed and lust. Brothers and sisters, we need each other to help us on the field of battle.

In the words just read to you the Apostle Paul is offering a battle cry well known to Christians throughout the world. These are the familiar words, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” Paul cannot even begin to predict how the Roman government will deal with his powerful witness to Jesus and to his resurrection from the dead. Will they take him away for execution by sword? Will they let him grow free? Will they let him languish for years in some filthy prison? If he dies he knows that he will immediately be with Jesus. If he lives it will mean more time on this earth to bear witness to Jesus by word and example. He will come out a winner whatever the outcome is.

Will this be the week the Lord ends this world and takes all of us home to be with him? Will this be the week we personally face death and go home to be with the Lord? Will we

come together in this worship service next Sunday as soldiers to prepare ourselves for battle? This morning I want to speak to you about this joyful dilemma that faces us every day, the joy of either going home to be with the Lord or the joy of staying here to glorify his name. "Whether we live, we live unto the Lord, and whether we die we die unto the Lord. Whether we live therefore or die, we are the Lords!"

To die is gain

We can never minimize or downplay what a joy it is to know that when we die we are privileged to go home immediately to be with the Lord. "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Death is an immediate gain for the Christian. It involves leaving this body behind and going immediately to the Lord. That is why Paul is torn between the benefit or blessing that comes with living in this life and the blessing that is waiting for him when he leaves this life. "If I am going 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."

What happens to our bodies when we die? I recall visiting an elderly man who was dying. It was a terribly hot and humid day in Tucson, Arizona. The hospice nurse said, "I am so happy you are here, because I think he in last moments." I held the man's hand. His eyes were closed and you could hardly perceive that he was breathing. I said the 23rd Psalm and then prayed the Lord's Prayer. As I looked down at his hands, I noticed the color leaving them. His heart was no longer pumping blood. Death had come and life was leaving his body. His soul had gone immediately to be with the Lord, waiting for the resurrection of the body on the last day.

From what Paul shares with us there is an immediately joy that we experience when we leave this body and go home to be with the Lord. Our lives are no longer subjected to the problems our bodies bring, such as pain and suffering and anxious moments. We leave behind the people we love, but immediately experience the full joy of being with the Lord. We leave behind this world with all its problems and troubles. We leave behind our temptations and struggles as soldiers of the cross of Christ.

Paul uses the word "gain" to describe the life that was waiting for him after he died. "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." The word translated as "gain" was used as a banking term. Jesus said, "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?" If I gain the world, or make a fortune, or just do well in investing, the money cannot be used to guarantee that my soul will immediately go to be with the Lord. When we were little children, my parents taught us how to save money by giving us little banks with a tiny slot in which we could put a dime. Every so often, my mom would take the key, open the bank, roll the dimes into rolls, and deposit them in the bank account. We had little passbooks, and thought our few dollars were a large amount of money in the account.

I have met people who sincerely believe with all their hearts that they can deposit a little good here and there, and somehow that will wipe away the huge debt of sin. As much as acts of kindness are a good investment for gaining respect in the community or even earning favor and love in your family, they cannot be used to remove the huge debt of sin

that builds up in our life time here on this earth. The Apostle Paul was sure of where he was going when he died, because he did not place his hope and trust in what he was able to accomplish in his lifetime. Listen again to what he says later in this letter. "But whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ-- the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith."

To illustrate what happens when we die, I want to hold up this envelope with this color piece of paper inside. Just as I can take this piece of paper out of the envelope, so the Lord can take our souls to be immediately with him at the moment of our death. That is why Paul also wrote in his letter to the Christians in Corinth: "We groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling." In Romans 8 the Apostle writes, "I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that will be revealed in us." This glory comes to us immediately at the time of death when we go home to the Lord, and it comes later on judgment day when our bodies are raised to life again. So we speak about our loved ones who died believing in Jesus as "going home with the Lord" or "being with the Lord."

In preparing for this sermon, I read an interesting comment on this section of Scripture I want to share with you. A very beloved Bible teacher who died of cancer wrote these words in his commentary on Philippians. "Death for the Christian is never portrayed in the Bible as a gain over the worst in life. It is portrayed as an improvement on the best." As much as we love the hymn, "Heaven Is My Home" we cannot dwell too much on the words, "Earth is a desert drear." The Apostle Paul now shows us that our life on this earth is not a desert drear, but a glorious opportunity to live for Christ and serve in his kingdom.

To live is also gain

As much as Paul wanted to go home, he also wanted to stay here and live his life for Jesus. In verse 24 he says, "But it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me." He wants their joy in Christ to overflow through his contact with them. The pessimist sees the cup half empty. The optimist sees the cup half full. The Christian sees the cup overflowing. One of the joys of living on this earth for Jesus is to see other Christians overflowing with joy in the Lord. If somehow we can be used to help others see the blessings they have in Jesus, our lives on this earth are really blessed and worthwhile. (Show cup of water overflowing.) With Paul we want people we love to overflow in their understanding of Jesus' love for them even more than we want them to appreciate our love for them or their love for us.

Living for Jesus will not always be easy, but it will be something that fills us with great joy. That is why Paul calls these soldiers of the cross in Philippi to stand together in tight rank to live their lives for Jesus. "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit contending as one man for faith of the gospel." It is tough work to live up to who you already are in Jesus. It is not always easy

to bear fruit out of love for Jesus especially when the world hates the fruit you produce in your life. Roman soldiers, like our US Marines, found their strength in sticking together. The soldiers would carry large wooden shields into battle, and lock them together in a phalanx to protect themselves from arrows coming at them or flying over their heads. New born soldiers of the cross are led by the Holy Spirit to close rank, protect each other as Paul says, "contending as a man for the faith of the gospel."

I want to close this morning by focusing on the words of verse 29. "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him." When you count your blessings this week, one by one, don't forget the privilege of suffering for Jesus. Remember that Jesus is always guarding your back as you joyfully say with Paul, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." Amen.