

“HONORING CHRIST IN LIFE AND DEATH”

I. Introduction

- A. Life can put all sorts of pressures upon us.
- B. If we are not careful, these pressures can easily demoralize us.
- C. For Christians, the key to avoiding that temptation is to keep our focus on what is primary.
- D. This is what we see the apostle Paul doing in the verses we are studying this evening.
- E. Paul was in prison for preaching the gospel, and he had to face the possibility that this imprisonment might end in death.
- F. But he avoided falling into despair by drawing upon the truths of the gospel to cultivate a hopeful attitude.

II. A Christian Attitude about Deliverance

- A. Our passage begins with Paul saying that he knows that his imprisonment will turn out for his deliverance.
 - 1. This might seem to contradict what he says a few verses later about the prospect of being put to death.
 - 2. But this is not a contradiction because Paul is not talking about being delivered from prison here.
 - 3. Instead, he is talking about the continued outworking of God’s saving purpose in his life.
 - 4. This becomes clear when we note that the Greek word translated as “deliverance” in verse 19 is the same word that is translated

elsewhere as “salvation.”

5. This is the sense in which Paul is using the term in this context.
 6. He is saying that his imprisonment will be used by God to continue advancing his saving work in Paul’s life.
 7. This is confirmed by the fact that the term is part of a citation from Job 13:16 as translated in the Septuagint, the Greek rendering of the Old Testament that was widely used in Paul’s day.
 8. In that verse, the phrase “this will turn out for my salvation” expresses Job’s confidence that he will be vindicated before the Lord on judgment day.
 9. That is the kind of deliverance that Paul has in view in our text.
 10. He is not thinking about being delivered from prison, but about being delivered from judgment on the last day.
 11. There is a powerful lesson for us in this.
 12. When we go through various trials, we have a tendency to fixate on being delivered from them.
 13. Paul’s example teaches us to look beyond our trials and focus on the certainty that the Lord will work through whatever trials we face to further his saving purpose in our lives.
- B. This explains why Paul can say that he *rejoices* in the midst of this imprisonment.
1. True joy is not something that is only experienced when things are going well.
 2. Joy is not primarily an emotion.
 3. It rooted in the conviction that God is both sovereign and good.

4. When you trust that the God who loves you and gave his Son for you is in control of everything that happens to you, you have a joy that transcends your feelings and circumstances.
 5. You can rejoice at all times because you know that God will be faithful to his promise to cause all things to work together for the good for those who love him.
- C. Verse 19 also speaks of the means by which Paul's deliverance will be brought about.
1. He tells the Philippians that his imprisonment will turn out for his deliverance "*through* your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ."
 2. In the Greek text, the grammatical structure of this phrase indicates that there is a connection between the prayers of the Philippians and the help of the Spirit.
 3. That is, it is through the Philippians' prayers that the help of the Spirit is being given to Paul.
 4. This reminds us why we need others to pray for us.
 5. While Paul himself surely prayed for God to grant him the Spirit's help, he also understood that he was dependent upon the prayers of his fellow Christians.
- D. Paul coveted the prayers of God's people because he believed that prayer is one of God's appointed means for providing help to his people.
1. This is why it is so important to be praying for those who serve as ministers, elders, deacons, and missionaries in Christ's church.
 2. There is a connection between our prayers and the Holy Spirit's help to those who minister in Christ's name.

3. The same is true for all of Christ's people.
 4. The Christian life depends upon the support that is provided by the Holy Spirit.
 5. If prayer is neglected, there is no reason to think that the help of the Holy Spirit will be given.
 6. And without the Holy Spirit, the Christian ministry and the Christian life are as devoid of power as a house that is disconnected from the electrical grid.
- E. Because of the prayers of the Philippians and the help of the Spirit, Paul is able to say, "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."
1. The term translated as "honored" here literally means "to make large" or "to exalt."
 2. Paul is confident that Christ will be held in greater esteem by people because of how he conducts himself during this imprisonment.
 3. This is a confidence that every Christian should share.
 4. As we rely upon the help of the Holy Spirit, we can trust him to help us endure trials in a manner that advances the prestige of our Lord.
 5. It is not presumptuous for us to have such confidence.
 6. After all, as Paul points out in 1 Corinthians 1, our Lord has promised to sustain his people "to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ." (1 Cor. 1:8)
 7. We can be confident that our lives will bring honor and glory to Christ because our God has promised to help us remain faithful to

him.

III. A Christian Attitude about Life and Death

- A. Paul's mention of life and death at the end of verse 20 leads him to make the memorable declaration found in verse 21, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."
1. The fact that Paul sets life and death alongside each other in this manner indicates that he does not know whether his imprisonment will end in his release or his execution.
 2. This prompts him to reflect upon these two possibilities, and to see if he can discern which one is more likely.
 3. As he considers the prospect of continuing with his life, he says, "If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me."
 4. This is a good summary of the perspective all Christians should have when it comes to the meaning and purpose of our lives.
 5. Your life is not primarily about your own happiness, comfort, security, prosperity, or self-fulfillment.
 6. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 5, you are no longer to live for yourself, but for the one who for your sake died and was raised. (see 2 Cor. 5:15)
 7. Your focus in life should be upon the service you can perform for the Lord in whatever he has given you to do at this stage in your life.
 8. As long as God grants you life in this world, he intends to use you here as his servant.
 9. And like Paul, your focus should especially be upon how you can use your life for your fellow believers' "progress and joy in the

faith.”

- B. The Puritan minister Thomas Watson suggests three aspects of what Paul means when he says, “For to me to live is Christ.” [*A Body of Divinity*, 290-291]
1. First, Christ is the *source* from which the Christian derives life.
 2. As Watson puts it, “I fetch my spiritual life from Christ, as the branch fetches its sap from the root.”
 3. Second, Christ is the *purpose* of the believer’s life.
 4. As we have noted, we live, not to serve ourselves and seek our own happiness, but to serve Christ and seek his glory.
 5. And third, Christ is the *joy* of the believer’s life.
 6. As we said earlier, the fact that our joy is located in Christ is what enables us to rejoice even when earthly joys are taken away from us.
 7. Another way to explain the phrase “to live is Christ” is to say that it means conducting our lives in this world while keeping our supreme focus on the world to come.
 8. In the words of Geerhardus Vos, “The Christian is a man... who lives with his heavenly destiny ever in full view. His outlook is not bounded by the present life and the present world. He sees that which is and that which is to come in their true proportions and in their proper perspective. The center of gravity of his consciousness lies not in the present but in the future... The air of the world to come is the vital atmosphere which he delights to breathe and outside which he feels depressed and languid.” [*Grace and Glory*, 150-151]

- C. We now turn to how Paul responds when he considers the possibility that his imprisonment might end in death.
1. He says, "to die is gain."
 2. This is something that is only true for a Christian.
 3. Death is not gain for non-Christians.
 4. For those who are apart from Christ, death means the loss of everything that is good for all eternity.
 5. But for a Christian, death really is an advance, an improvement.
 6. Of course, death does not usher us immediately into the final state of glory that we will enjoy when our bodies are raised on the last day.
 7. But death does bring us into a much deeper experience of communion with Christ than we could ever enjoy in this life.
 8. Death will result in our being with Christ in a manner that far surpasses the fellowship we can have with him in this life.
- D. Consider the things that are gained by Christians at death.
1. We gain the freedom of no longer having to contend with sin and with the many troubles and sorrows that flow from sin in this fallen world.
 2. We gain the distinction of being made perfect in holiness, so that we measure up to God's righteous law in every respect.
 3. We gain the blessing of seeing God face to face and having his face constantly looking upon us with full approval.

4. We gain the possession of our heavenly inheritance, “a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens” (2 Cor. 5:1)
 5. We gain the blessing of living in the sweet society of glorified saints and angels.
 6. We gain the benefit of being able to partake in the marriage supper of the Lamb.
 7. And we gain the unfading crown of glory, the height of honor and dignity for beings created in the image of God.
 8. As believers, the only things we lose when we die are the things that are bound up with this sin-cursed world.
- E. Having considered this, we can understand why Paul would go so far as to say that he actually *desires* to depart and be with Christ.
1. We usually think of those who express a desire to die as being mentally unstable.
 2. In those situations, the person is embracing death in order to renounce life.
 3. This is not what Paul is doing in this passage.
 4. His desire is not to *escape* from life, but to *enter more fully* into life.
 5. He longs for the heightened experience of communion with Christ that he will enjoy when he dies.
 6. It is in this sense that he welcomes the prospect of death.
 7. It is entirely fitting for a believer to think this way.
 8. It is only in communion with God that our souls will find supreme satisfaction and rest.

9. This is why the psalmist says that the Lord's "steadfast love is better than life." (Ps. 63:3)
 10. Certainly, we should be grateful for the gift of life in this world and we should use it well.
 11. But ultimately, we too should desire to depart and be with Christ.
- F. As Paul tries to discern whether death or life would be the preferable outcome of his imprisonment, he measures his desire against his responsibilities.
1. As we have just seen, his desire is to depart and be with Christ.
 2. He knows that death will bring him into a more complete experience of Christ's love, which far surpasses everything in this life.
 3. On the other hand, he knows that remaining alive will give him more opportunities to serve others in Christ's name.
 4. This is what leads him to conclude that, while death would be better for him, remaining alive would be better for the Philippians.
 5. As Paul weighs life against death, the thing that tips the scales is the spiritual help he can extend to others.
 6. As a result, his preference and his prediction is that he will remain alive for the Philippians' sake.
- G. One thing we can learn from Paul's reasoning in these verses is that our Lord wants us to live our lives not for ourselves, but for the benefit of the people around us.
1. As you think about what you should do with the life you have been given, don't just think about what would be in your best interest.

2. Think of how you can use your life in service to others, especially your fellow Christians.
3. How can you use your resources, your abilities, your words, your acts of service, your company, and your prayers for the sake of other believers' progress and joy in the faith?

IV. Conclusion

- A. Life is a wonderful gift, and God always wants us to treat it as such.
- B. At the same time, the fact that we have been set free from fear of death means our main priority in life should not be delaying death, as it is for the people of the world.
- C. Instead, our focus is to be on living faithful and fruitful lives, lives that bring honor to the name of Christ and blessing to others, especially our brothers and sisters in Christ.
- D. This passage teaches us that the fact that we hold title to a glorious future should have a transforming effect on how we approach life in this world.
- E. In the words of Geerhardus Vos, the Christian "lives in the presence of the world to come and allows it to be the ruling factor in all he thinks and does." [162]