

The Christian's Contentment

To Live Is Christ

Philippians 1:18b-30

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Scripture

We are in a series of sermons on Paul's letter to the Philippians that I am calling, "The Christian's Contentment."

Paul planted the church in Philippi on his second missionary journey. About ten years after planting the church, Paul was under house arrest in Rome. His future was uncertain, and so he wrote this letter to his beloved Philippians.

After the opening greeting, Paul gave thanks to God for them, and prayed for them. As he began the body his letter, Paul wanted them to know that despite his imprisonment, the gospel was advancing. Then, he urged them to live for Christ.

Let's read about living for Christ in Philippians 1:18b-30:

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.

²⁷ Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am

absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸ and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. ²⁹ For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, ³⁰ engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have. (Philippians 1:18b-30)

Introduction

In his commentary on Philippians, Dr. Kent Hughes tells the story about Dr. Andrew Chong, who was a former elder in the church that Dr. Hughes pastored for many years. Several weeks before Dr. Chong passed away, he was taken to Northwestern Hospital in Chicago to have a stent cleared of blockage. The procedure was invasive, and after some time the surgeon came out and indicated that he could not go on because there was too much bleeding. He said, “You’d better get your family here. He may not make it through the night.” So all the children were rushed to Dr. Chong’s bedside, where they gathered weeping and saying their good-byes.

Dr. Chong had just come out of the anesthetic and was in intense pain and unable to speak. Seeing his family’s distress, he made a curious motion with his finger, which they finally understood as a request for a pen. Of late he had been unable to write in a straight line. But now, very slowly and with intense deliberation, he wrote twelve words in a single column: *For—to—me—to—live—is—Christ—and—to—die—is—gain.*

Underneath this column of single words, Dr. Chong wrote another word: *Hallelujah.* The writing of that last word took him a full minute as he made sure he spelled it correctly.

And then he spoke: “Nothing has changed. Nothing has changed.” Dr. Hughes concludes, “It was his soul’s spontaneous last will and testament.”¹

Dr. Chong’s words are, of course, the words of the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Philippians. In fact, Paul’s words—“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain”—is perhaps the most quoted verse in all of Philippians. It stands at the heart of the doctrine of the Christian life for Paul—and for us, too.

Lesson

Philippians 1:18b-30 teaches us to live for Christ.

Let’s use the following outline:

1. The Christian’s Rejoicing (1:18b)
2. The Christian’s Resolve (1:19-26)
3. The Christian’s Request (1:27-28)
4. The Christian’s Reminder (1:29-30)

I. The Christian’s Rejoicing (1:18b)

First, let’s look at the Christian’s rejoicing.

Paul concluded the previous paragraph in his letter (about the advance of the gospel) by saying that he rejoiced because Christ was proclaimed. But Paul not only rejoiced for what happened in the past, he would also rejoice in what was in the future, as he wrote in verse 18b, **“Yes, and I will rejoice....”**

This is amazing! I mentioned in my first sermon that Paul’s letter to the Philippians is sometimes called “The Epistle of Joy.” The words “rejoice” and “joy” appear thirteen times in Philippians. However, the joy that appears in Philippians is

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), 55.

a particular kind of joy—the joy of contentment even in difficult circumstances. Even though Paul was under house arrest in Rome, and even though his future was uncertain, Paul wrote, **“Yes, and I will rejoice....”**

Are you able to say that? Are you able to say, regardless of your circumstances, regardless of your uncertain future, **“Yes, and I will rejoice”?**

The reason for Paul’s rejoicing was because of his resolve.

II. The Christian’s Resolve (1:19-26)

Second, let’s examine the Christian’s resolve.

There are two constituent parts which make up the Christian’s resolve.

A. *The Dilemma (1:19-23)*

First, there is the dilemma.

For Paul, the dilemma was a two-fold dilemma. On the one hand, to live would result in fruitful labor. On the other hand, to die would mean being with Christ. Let’s examine this.

First, to live would result in fruitful labor. Paul said in verse 19, **“...for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.”** The word **“deliverance”** in this context does not mean release from prison, but rather something far more important: his ultimate vindication before his heavenly Father, when he hears him say, “Well done, good and faithful servant. You have been faithful over a little; I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master” (Matthew 25:21). This **deliverance**, Paul wrote to the Philippians, would come **“through their prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.”**

Paul wanted to be found faithful above all else, as is made clear in verse 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.”** Paul’s driving concern was not that he would be delivered from house arrest, but that he would **not be at all ashamed** of anything **by life or by death**. To this end, he fervently asked that the Philippians would pray for him.

To summarize Paul’s thinking, he said in verse 21, **“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”** D. A. Carson writes, “In the context, ‘to live is Christ’ surely means that for Paul to keep on living here means ministry, Christ-centered ministry, Christ-empowered ministry, Christ’s presence in his ministry.”² In fact, Paul put it this way in verse 22a, **“If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me.”**

John MacArthur notes in his commentary that Adoniram Judson was the first overseas missionary sent out from America. In the early nineteenth century, he and his first wife went to India and, a short while later, to Burma, where he labored for nearly four decades. After fourteen years, he had a handful of converts and had managed to write a Burmese grammar. During that time he suffered a horrible imprisonment for a year and a half and lost his wife and children to disease. Like Paul, he longed to be with the Lord, but, also like the apostle, he considered his work for Christ to be infinitely more important than his personal longings. He therefore prayed that God would allow him to live long enough to translate the entire Bible into Burmese and to establish a church there of at least one hundred believers. The Lord granted that request and

² D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1996), 29.

also allowed him to compile Burmese-English and English-Burmese dictionaries, which became invaluable to the Christian workers, both foreign and Burmese, who followed him. He wrote, “If I had not felt certain that every trial was ordered by infinite love and mercy, I could not have survived my accumulated sufferings.”³

And then MacArthur notes, “Part of spiritual greatness is to know Christ intimately and to long to be with Him. But spiritual greatness also includes being totally committed to the advancement of the kingdom and serving Christ on earth.”⁴

So, the first part of the dilemma is to live because that would result in fruitful labor.

And second, to die would mean being with Christ. This is clear in the second part of verse 21, “**...and to die is gain.**” Carson writes, “To die is to bring that ministry to an end. But even so there is only gain, since the ministry is not an end in itself, and it is now swallowed up in the glorious delight of the unshielded presence of the exalted Jesus himself.”⁵ That is why Paul went on to say in verse 23, “**I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.**”

So, the dilemma is to live so that there would be fruitful labor for Christ or to die in order to be with Christ. How does one decide what to do?

B. *The Decision (1:24-26)*

And second, there is the decision.

³ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Philippians*, MacArthur New Testament Commentary (Chicago: Moody Press, 2001), 77.

⁴ John F. MacArthur Jr., *Philippians*, 77.

⁵ D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians*, 29.

Paul's decision was to remain, as he said in verse 24, **“But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.”** Paul believed that he would be acquitted of the false charges against him, and that he would continue his apostolic ministry.

What is astonishing is that Paul's decision was not based on his own welfare or comfort, but on the opportunity to serve others. In fact, Paul was imitating Jesus when he said in verse 25, **“Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith....”** Paul's ultimate goal for his Philippian disciples was for them to grow and glory in Christ, as he said in verse 26, **“...so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.”**

Paul's decision completed his resolve to serve others. D. A. Carson makes the following application for us to consider:

Paul's deepest hopes for his own immediate future turn neither on the bliss of immediately gaining heaven's portals nor on returning to a fulfilling ministry and escaping the pangs of death, but on what is best for his converts. Often we are tempted to evaluate alternatives by thinking through what seems best for us. How often do we raise as a first principle what is best for the church? When faced with, say, a job offer that would take us to another city or with mortal illness that calls forth our diligent intercession, how quickly do we employ Paul's criterion here established: What would be best for the church? What would be best for my brothers and sisters in Christ?⁶

Kent Hughes sums it up this way:

The clarity and sanity of Paul's confident dictum “For

⁶ D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians*, 30.

to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” shows up the shallow tragedy of so many in Paul’s day and now. Among the ruins of ancient Carthage there is an inscription carved by a Roman soldier: “To laugh, to hunt, to bathe, to game—that is life.” “For to me to live is to hunt, go to the baths, and party!”...It is the same today because most will fill in the blank of “For to me to live is—” with anything but Christ.

According to the tabloids and celebrity magazines, “for to me to live is” to fornicate, to accumulate, to dine well. Or on a more prosaic level, “for to me to live is” to golf, to work, to garden, to travel, to watch TV, to ski—to shop ’til I drop. Of course, if this be our life, then death is the loss of everything. When Queen Elizabeth I, the idol of European fashion, was dying, she turned to her lady-in-waiting and said, “O my God! It is over. I have come to the end of it—the end, the end.”⁷

III. The Christian’s Request (1:27-28)

Third, let’s observe the Christian’s request.

Paul said to the Philippians in verses 27-28, **“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.”** Paul was urging the Philippians to live in a way that was consistent with their profession of faith. They were living in a Roman city that put enormous pressure on Christians to conform to the Roman culture. Nevertheless, they were to live like Christians and not like non-Christians.

⁷ R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel*, 59–60.

Much more could be said about this, but for the sake of time, let me simply ask you: is the manner of life worthy of the gospel of Christ? Do your family, neighbors, and colleagues know that you are a Christian? If you were on trial for being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict you?

IV. The Christian's Reminder (1:29-30)

And fourth, let's look at the Christian's reminder. There are two reminders.

A. *Trust in Christ (1:29a)*

First, Christians trust in Christ.

Paul wrote in verse 29a, **“For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him....”** The word **“granted”** is from the root word for “grace.” So, Paul could be translated as saying, “For you have been graced for the sake of Christ to believe in him.” Kent Hughes writes, “The gracious gift of believing in Christ is a magnificent blessing. It is the grand evidence that God looks on you with favor.”⁸

B. *Suffer for Christ (1:29b-30)*

And second, Christians suffer for Christ.

Paul goes on to say in verses 29b-30, “For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should...**also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.**” Becoming a

⁸ R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel*, 69–70.

Christian does not mean freedom from suffering for Christ. While many do not suffer for Christ, many others do (particularly those Christians who live in countries that persecute Christians). In fact, as Hughes writes, “The suffering that comes to a Christian (as a Christian) is not a sign of God’s neglect but rather a proof that grace is at work in his or her life.”⁹

So, let us be reminded that living for Christ involves salvation and suffering.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed Philippians 1:18b-30, let us live for Christ.

Remember Dr. Chong’s written statement to his family? Slowly say the first seven words as Dr. Chong wrote them for his family: *For—to—me—to—live—is—Christ.*

Can you say this? Do you know Christ? Is he in you? Have you taken up his cross?

If so, then you can confidently add: *and—to—die—is—gain.*

And if you can do that, then you can joyfully also say: *Hallelujah!*

⁹ R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel*, 70.

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The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church
is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

Sermons by Rev. Freddy Fritz

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