

**Sept. 21, 2014 – Philippians 1:12-14, 19-30 (OT: Isaiah 55:6-9 Gospel: Matthew 20:1-16)**

*To live is Christ, and to die is gain.*

In our epistle reading, Paul says in v. 21 that for him, “*to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*” These words make a great motto. They summarize Paul’s view of life – and death – after God called him to be a Christian.

In May of 2012 several high school students, Professor Joel Gullerud from Immanuel Lutheran High School, and I went on a trip to Peru. We went to visit Daniel Pfeiffer, who was working as a missionary there with a man from Lima who wanted to start a conservative Lutheran church in Peru. In preparing for the trip, one of the students selected this verse as the theme verse for the t-shirts we were having made. Without giving it much thought, I said it seemed like a good verse. It did until we were in Peru walking through some the neighborhoods, which to me looked a little questionable. Wearing a t-shirt with “*to live is Christ, and to die is gain*” written on the back in Spanish for everyone to read, no longer seemed such a good idea. Instead of the stylized cross above those words, I wondered if we really had a bullseye painted there.

We did all return safely. While we may not have been in any real danger, Paul was facing life or death. He wrote this letter to the Philippians during his imprisonment at Rome. Because the Jews had plotted to kill him during transport, he had appealed to the supreme court of Caesar, as was his right. Instead of being ambushed on the way to Jerusalem for trial, he had been sent to Rome. Thing initially had gone well, but that was no guarantee that Paul would be acquitted and released.

Paul had founded the church in Philippi on his second missionary journey (Acts 16:12-40). It must have been discouraging to have their founder sitting in chains in Rome. Perhaps they had even begun to question what he had taught them. Paul wrote to encourage them to remain faithful to the truth and to tell them: “*Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or death. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain*” (v. 20-21).

These nine small words seem very simple, but they encompass so much! And you cannot separate them. The last part depends on the first, and the first part on the last.

Without Christ, to die is not gain. God tells us that after death, we will face judgment (Hebrews 9:27) and each one of us will give an account of himself to God (Romans 14:10). God “*will render to each one according to his deeds*” (Romans 2:6). In looking at the things you have done, or not done, how will you fare in this judgment?

God requires that we be perfect as He is (Matthew 5:48). But we all have sinned and have not lived the perfect life that God requires. By ourselves we can expect only God’s wrath and condemnation in the final judgment. Without Christ we would be sent “*into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels*” (Matthew 25:41).

The gospel – the good news of Christ – is that Jesus came to fulfill the law by living a perfect life. He then “*put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself*” (Hebrews 9:26). On the cross, He took the condemnation and wrath that we deserve upon Himself and died to pay the price of our sins. Through His death He destroyed “*him who had the power of death, that is, the devil*” so that we no longer need to fear death (Hebrew 2:14). He rose from the dead so that we are declared righteous and no longer need to fear God’s judgement.

When Paul says “*for me...to die is gain*”, he is not talking about gaining something as a reward for being martyred. He was facing death because he was a Christian, but such a death would not earn him anything. His death would be gain only because of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

Look at how different this is from Islam. Mohammad taught that if one dies in the jihad – the fight in the cause of Allah – Allah will bestow upon him a great reward (Quran 4:74). According to Sunni Islam, Muhammad said any muslim who is martyred will go paradise and live a luxurious life (Sahih Bukhari 53:386). In Islam you earn your reward and go to paradise by fighting and dying as a martyr.

But God tells us that it is Jesus' death, not ours, that will bring us to paradise. We have an inheritance in heaven because of what Jesus has done, not because of anything we do. Because of Jesus' death and resurrection, "to die is gain", for all who believe in Jesus, not just for Paul.

For Christians, to die is gain because it means to depart this world with all its sorrows and struggles, and be with Christ, as Paul says in v. 23. It is far better than staying here. Paul refers to death as one way his imprisonment will turn out for his deliverance.

The other way Paul could be delivered is for him to live on and be released from prison. While to die is gain, to live is Christ. Paul explains this by saying that Christ will be magnified in his body, whether by life or by death (v. 20). Paul's sole focus was spreading the gospel – the good news of what Jesus had done for all mankind. He spent his life telling others about the Savior.

Again this first part depends on the last. Just as to die is not gain without Christ, there is no reason to live for Christ if there is no gain in death. Paul himself said in 1 Corinthians 15:19, "*If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men the most pitiable.*"

But Jesus was not just a man who died almost two thousand years ago. He was God-made-flesh. He did not remain in the grave, but God raised Him up. Therefore our faith is not futile. And because of Jesus' resurrection, you are no longer in your sins! (1 Corinthians 15:17-18) To die trusting in Jesus' sacrifice is truly gain.

So we do have good news to share. We have "*good tidings of great joy*" to bring to all people (Luke 2:10). It is important news as well, because Jesus is the only way. For there is salvation in no one else, "*for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved*" (Acts 4:12). Jesus Himself said, "*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me*" (John 14:6). Without Christ, to die is to be eternally lost and separated from God. "*But the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*" (Romans 6:23).

After his conversion, Paul spent his life spreading that message. He went all over the known world and faced many dangers. He was imprisoned several times and was eventually put to death because of his message. The difficulties that he faced did not stop him. It also did not stop God. As Paul writes here, "*the things that have happened to me have actually turned out for the furtherance of the gospel*" (v. 12). The whole palace guard came to know why Paul was in jail, and his witness in chains encouraged others to boldly share the word of God.

For us as well "*to live is Christ.*" God has called us to faith in Jesus, and He uses us to spread the word of salvation. This does not mean, however, that we all must drop everything and be a full-time missionary, as Paul was. Paul had a special, direct call from God to do just that. God calls you to be His witnesses where you are, in the life that He has given you (see 1 Corinthians 7:17-24).

God's instructions to us are found here in v. 27: "*only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ*". When you hear that, what do you think it means? How would you expect Paul to continue that thought? What comes to my mind are things like: "love your neighbor", "give to the poor", "live a moral, godly life". But that is not how Paul continues here!

Conduct worthy of the gospel of Christ is *“that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, and not in any way terrified by your adversaries, which is to them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God”* (v. 27-28). Conduct worthy of the gospel is a life that centers on the gospel and clings to Jesus, no matter what. It means to be united in one spirit and one mind – to be united in the teaching of God’s word – as Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *“Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment”* (1 Corinthians 1:10).

Our lives are to focus on the message, not try to be the message. We point people to the good works that Jesus did, not to any that we do. Our lives revolve around the good news that Christ paid for the sins of the world and freed everyone from sin and death.

But *“to live is Christ”* means even more than to focus on Christ in one’s life. It means that Jesus is source of life, not only of eternal life with Him after death, but also the source of our life here and now. The Spirit of Jesus Christ empowers us to live in a manner *“worthy of the gospel of Christ”*. In fact, it is only by the Spirit that we can even believe in Jesus. Verse 29 says, *“to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ...to believe in Him”* (v. 29). Our faith is not a result of our study, our will, or our mind, but it is a gift from God. It is been granted to you to believe. As Jesus said: *“no one can come to Me unless it has been granted to him by My father”* (John 6:65).

It isn’t just our faith and salvation that are from God. Verse. 28 says that our ability to stand in the face of our adversaries is from God as well. He supplies us through the Spirit of Jesus Christ, and gives us an earnest expectation and hope that we will be ashamed in nothing, but that we will magnify Christ, whether by life or death.

God may appoint you to suffer for His sake. But don’t forget that He is the one who first appointed you to believe in Christ. He will not leave you or forsake you. He will be with you and enable you to endure it. Paul’s words in chapter 4 of Philippians are quoted often: *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me”* (Philippians 4:13), but it is important to remember their context. Paul is talking about how he has learned to be content in whatever situation, whether it be abounding or suffering, being full or hungry (Philippians 4:12). It is the power of Christ that enables you to endure every situation.

*“To live is Christ, and to die is gain.”* May these words be more than just a motto or a verse written on a t-shirt. May they be a description of each of our lives, so that we boldly speak the word of God without fear, and magnify Christ with our bodies – whether by life or by death. And may God, who appointed you to believe in Christ, preserve you in that faith and fill you with the expectant hope that when you do depart, you will be forever with Christ.

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