

Living and Dying in Christ  
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Do you ever wonder what you will think or do as you get closer to your own death? Or do you ever struggle knowing what to think or feel when a dear brother or sister in Christ dies? Maybe it's just a hazard of my job (or a blessing of the job), but I think about death quite often. I replay in my mind what I've seen over the years. I remember the times I've been at the bedside of people in their last days. The memories of sitting with people as they grieve the unexpected passing of their loved one is hard to forget. I pay close attention to the questions the dying ask me; the fears and regrets they express to me. I also consider the manner in which people die; or maybe I should say the manner in which people die sticks with me. I remember many years ago a younger man in his 30s from FBC died. He woke in the middle of the night, got up to use the restroom and dropped dead of a brain aneurysm. Honestly, I can't get up at night and use the bathroom without wondering, "Am I going to have an aneurysm?" You might wonder, "You think about dying every night?" Sometimes twice a night!

Now, hearing all this you might think, "Oh man, pastor is one morbid dude! He must be depressed all the time." I don't think I am. I think there's a way we can live with an acute awareness of the reality of our death and the death of those we love without descending into darkness. Certainly, there is a way of thinking of death that would be unhealthy. If your thoughts about death cripple your ability to function or engage in life and relationships that would be a problem. Without any hope after the grave, to cope with the thoughts of their own death many people simply do not believe in their own mortality (that's what Sigmund Freud said). But for us who follow Christ, death is a toothless enemy. We stand behind our champion, Jesus, who said, "Death, where is your victory? Oh death, where is your sting?" with confidence. But that confidence and peace doesn't just happen; it's the result of believing and holding onto truth from God. That's what we're going to read now so turn with me to Phil. 1:19-26 if you'd like to know how to live and die in Christ (READ Phil. 1:19-26).

So, let me explain what's going on right now so you understand why Paul is talking about life and death in the first place. The Letter to the Philippians is an interesting letter in that Paul has a lot of joy in the Philippian church and their faithfulness to Christ, yet he has a lot of personal sorrow because of his struggles. Paul wrote this letter while he was in prison; that's a fairly discouraging place. Just jump back to vs. 12-13 to see that, "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ."

Look at the lens by which he sees, understands, and interprets his imprisonment. My imprisonment is for Christ. I understand and view this time being locked up in the context of my relationship to God through Christ. What if you looked at life like that? What if you saw and understood everything you experienced through the vision or perspective that it's for Christ, by Christ, in Christ? It would change everything. Difficulties in marriage and parenting? This is for Christ; he's up to something, he's working, this is a chance to honor him. Single longer than you

want to be? It's for Christ. He has work for me to do and sanctification to be experienced. Failing health or a chronic condition? Christ is deepening my trust in him more and more; he's wanting me to get my eyes off of today and on to eternity. Even my approaching death or the death of my loved one? I don't know how and I don't know why, but Christ is here; he is with me. He's got plans to honor and glorify his name even in this tragedy.

Life happens to us; it's a mixed bag of good surprises and terrible ones. And your experience of this life and your movement through this life isn't determined by what happens, but how you look and understand what is happening (REPEAT). And Paul is giving us a clue: look at living and dying through Christ. If you do that, friends, your life will be entirely different; you will be able to rise about the trouble that surrounds you.

Paul's imprisonment gave him a level of uncertainty about his future. What's going to happen to me? Will they kill me? Will I die here? Or will I get released? Will I be set free? He didn't know. He knew that just because you trust Christ that doesn't mean everything is going to work out just perfectly on this side of heaven. And so, he's trying to understand these things for himself and then pass them on to the concerned Philippian church. And his conclusion is found in vs. 21 when he says, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." So, here we have this comparison. He's sitting in his prison cell unsure about his future and he's doodling in the dirt trying to make heads or tails of things. Life on the one side; death on the other. What if I keep on living? What will that mean? But if I die, what does that mean? And his conclusion is this - Life = Christ; Death = gain.

Do you see how he wrestles between these two options? At the end of vs. 22 and the beginning of vs. 23 he says, "Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two." Now, let me let you in on something. I don't think Paul is actually saying he gets to pick whether he lives or dies; he's not trying to pick the best option and then fulfill the plan. God is the author of life; Paul is submissive to God's sovereignty. But what he is doing is he's wrestling with how he understands both living or dying in the case that he lives on after his imprisonment or if he dies in prison. Paul's conclusion is not obvious without God's help to see it; that equation is not a foregone conclusion. You'll only come to that conclusion that life=Christ and death=gain if your lens is "for Christ." So, let's talk both of these through starting with death.

Paul doesn't say as much about the "death is gain" part as he does "to live is Christ." When you tally up from this paragraph all that Paul explains, he addresses what it means to him to keep on living than to die in Christ. But that's probably good in that he's pretty clear in what he means. The two key phrases are in vs. 21 and 23. In vs. 21 he simply says, "to die is gain." Well, what does Paul think he will gain when he dies? I mean, don't you lose everything when you die? Isn't that's why so many are scared to die? When I die I lose the things I love. I don't get to see my family anymore. I can't eat chocolate cheesecake. I won't get to see who wins the playoffs. I won't get to see my grandchildren's wedding or graduation. What, in fact, do I gain? He answers that question in vs. 23 when he says, "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better."

To be with Christ. That's what you gain. In his presence. By his side. Jesus said I go to prepare a place for you. The place isn't the goal, though. Being with him in that new place is the goal. And what does Paul say about being with Christ? It's far better. *Far* better. Far better than staying on this earth with your grandchildren and chocolate cheesecake and watching your kids play sports and being at every important and cherished day of your family. Nothing compares to being in the presence of Jesus. And do you know why? God is our greatest treasure; he is of supreme worth. Later in Phil 3 Paul says, "I count everything as loss, as rubbish, as inferior to the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord." That's the best.

Now, it will be hard to count Christ as gain in death if you do not count Christ gain in life. Do you know what I mean? If you live your life in such a way that being with Christ, knowing him, sharing in his sufferings is not a greater worth for you than being with your grandkids, seeing your children become better musicians or athletes, making more money, enjoying trips and vacations to sunny destinations then you're not going to magically be on your deathbed proclaiming "Christ is gain!" If being with Christ isn't of greatest worth in living why do you think being with Christ will be your greatest worth in death?

You will have enormous difficulty with your own death being gain if you don't see Christ as gain right now in this life. And you will also have great difficulty understanding and coping with the passing of your friends in Christ if you don't believe Christ is gain for them in death. But it is; this is what God's word says is true. Death isn't loss; death is gain when Christ is your greatest treasure.

I get sad when I think about my own death. I get sad thinking of the pain and hurt and loneliness my wife will have. I'm said to think of my boys growing older and facing challenges without my love, my support, my encouragement, and my prayers. But ultimately, death is gain for me because of what Christ has done for me. And death is gain for you, too. So, be glad.

Let's now talk about "to live is Christ." While death is inevitable for all of us, I'm guessing most of us have got a whole lot more living to do. Let's figure out how to do that well. It's not as obvious what Paul means when he says, "to live is Christ." The only way to learn what Paul means is to keep reading and discover what he says. Let's take this piece by piece.

In vs. 24 Paul says, in contrast to dying, "to remain in the flesh," meaning, to keep on living in this body, is more necessary. So, it seems Paul thinks he will keep on living instead of dying in this particular predicament. But, why does Paul say him continuing on instead of dying is "more necessary?" Well, he answers that by saying, "on your account." So the necessity of his life isn't for him, but for the church. In what way?

Look at vs. 25;" Convinced of this, I know that I will remain (not die) and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith." So think of what Paul is saying: he's saying, "I think I'm going to keep on living in spite of the pickle I'm in. And I think that because I see your need and the need of the church to keep progressing and to have joy in your faith." Paul sees his ongoing life as an opportunity and calling to serve the good of the church. That's sounds a lot like what he mentions in

vs. 22 when he says, “If I am to live in the flesh that means fruitful labor for me.” Do you see how both of his statements, the one from vs. 25 and vs. 22, focus on helping others experience further maturity and joy in Christ? That’s what the fruitful labor is in vs. 22. So, here’s what he means by “to live is Christ”: it means he gets the opportunity to spend himself more for the work of Christ Jesus in the lives of other people. To live is Christ is to work so others grow in Christ.

Is that how you see your lives, my good friends? Most of us are not going to die in the next day or two, month or two, or even a decade or two. Most of us have many, many more years left on this earth. Do you see the time left God is giving you to do fruitful labor so more people progress and experience joy in Christ? Or do you look at the years ahead of you as an opportunity to finally build your dream vacation home? Do you see the years ahead of you as the opportunity to do more antiquing, more sports, more spectating of your kids playing sports, the chance to enjoy early retirement, to walk your daughter down the aisle? Is that why God is giving you more life? Now, none of those things are bad things. Those are good things. I’m looking forward to many of those things myself. But the craftiness of the Evil One and the darkness in your own selves is to get you to prioritize those things to a greater degree than fruitful labor for the good of others in Christ. Sin is working in us to see those good and desirable earthly activities as ends in themselves, as goals of life rather than what God wants us to see them as: as opportunities and ways to advance the cause of Christ for the good of more people. And he wants us to see that if those things do not contribute to the advancement of God’s kingdom to put them away so we can focus on kingdom work. It’s why we are alive.

My father-in-law is your typical SD farmer as you’ve heard me share before. Hard working. Man of few words. He doesn’t like the limelight or is wonderfully low maintenance. He’s also not the first person to be asked or to volunteer to fill in for the pastor and preach when the pastor’s gone. He’d probably defer to someone else teaching a Bible study. But when the church needed new chairs and nobody else was ready or willing to put up the money, he paid for it all. When other needs came up and the church didn’t know where the funds were coming from, Jerry has stepped up time and again. Why? So more people could hear about Jesus. You see, God didn’t equip him to teach or preach. But hayin’ has been good over the years; the Lord has given him more money than he needs. And my father-in-law rightly sees that God has put him on this earth for fruitful labor for the kingdom. And so that’s what he spends his money on. Do you see that as your reason for living?

Now, I may have hid the most important part for the end. Maybe you’re wondering, “Well, what does it take for me to approach living and dying this way? What do I need to believe? What do I need to be convicted by and embrace to both live and die for Christ?” Paul gives us the answer at the end of vs. 20; let’s read the whole verse (READ).

Paul had an orientation to both life and death like he did because he was determined and committed to honor Christ with his body, with his life, no matter what. It was the most important thing to Paul. He just wanted to lift up his Maker and Savior and honor him. He wanted Jesus to look good. That’s what it takes for you and me to labor for the progress and joy of others and to count Christ as gain in death. So, is that where you are, FBC?