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Plattsburgh, NY (video)
9/20/20

Philippians 1:18b-26

Intro

A. Glorify God and Enjoy Him Forever

Throughout time, Christians have often thought very hard about how to pass on the Christian faith to their children. One very common way that has been around for nearly *all* of church history is the method of using **catechisms**. A *catechism* is basically just a series of *questions* and *answers* about God, the Bible, Christian theology, and so forth. You ask your child a question, and then teach them to memorize the answer. So, for example, I ask my son Titus, **“Who made you?”**, and then he learns to say on his own, **“God made me.”** If you look at two of the most famous, most widely used Protestant catechisms - a Presbyterian one and a Baptist one - both begin, either in the first or second question, with the same question: **“What is the chief end of Man?”** Or to put it differently, **What is the purpose of every human being?** What is the meaning of life? What is our purpose in living? This is a very striking question, isn't it? A question many ask all the time. And just as striking is the answer: **“To glorify God and enjoy him forever.”**¹ A modern pastor and theologian, John Piper, slightly modifies it and puts it this way in his book *Desiring God*: our purpose in life is “to *glorify God by enjoying Him forever.*”² These are all roughly getting at the same point: **our purpose in life is to glorify God, not accidentally, but by intentionally living our entire lives as acts of joyfully worshipping and delighting in God.**

B. What do you live for?

Questions about life and death are universal across humanity. Questions about life and its meaning. Questions and uncertainty, even *fear*, about death strike at the very heart of what it means to be human. In our culture today, it is a very common cliché to ask about the

¹ *The Baptist Catechism (Keach's Catechism)*, Question 2.
<http://baptiststudiesonline.com/wp-content/uploads/2007/02/keachs-catechism-of-1677.pdf> ;
The Westminster's Shorter Catechism, Question 1.
https://www.shortercatechism.com/resources/wsc/wsc_001.html

² John Piper, *Desiring God* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah Books, 2011), pg. 18.

mysterious “*meaning of life.*” But if you asked most people today, “What is your meaning and purpose in life? What is your driving passion? What gets you out of bed in the morning? What do you live for?” - my guess is, most people would answer that they live for *anything but the glory of God.* People try to live for all kinds of other things: money, pleasure, entertainment, having lots of nice things, safety and stability, control, ambition and success, their own personal comfort, or the praise and glory of *their own* name. If we boiled it down, I think we would be safe to say that for most people, at least in culture, **live for their happiness.** Sometimes, people make the driving passion and focus of their life something that is explicitly *sin.* Other times, people live for things that are not “bad things” themselves but they do make **terrible gods.** After all, **what we live for** is what we worship. What we root our hope, joy, dreams, and desires in - this reveals the true god, or gods, that we worship!

So what about you? What do you live for? What is the great passion and purpose of your life?

C. Phil. 1:18b-26 - To live is Christ, to die is gain

In Philippians 1:18-26, Paul meditates on this question and answers it very profoundly. Faced with the possibility of life on the one hand and death on the other, Paul considers the meaning and purpose of life and death, and wonders aloud which is to be preferred. The profound answer he confidently gives is this: ***For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.*** These are simple, but profound, even poetic, words. These words hold together and sum up this passage beautifully. What is the meaning and purpose of life? **Christ.** Is there any hope in death? **Yes; Christ is our hope, so that we can joyfully, even eagerly, look forward to gaining eternal life with him, even beyond the grave!** Does this good news change our perspective on our purpose and life and the way we should live? **Absolutely; our purpose, indeed our great joy and passion, is to live our lives not for ourselves, but wholly for Christ and His glory.** A life that truly believes in the gospel of Jesus Christ and is transformed by it can be summed up with these words: **To live is Christ and to die is gain.** That is the main message for us in this passage.

[**Transition**]: So to unpack that statement, and walk through this passage, our first point is going to look at the *second half of that statement.*

I. For Those in Christ, to Die is Gain (vv. 18b-21, 23)

If we believe the gospel of Christ, and are trusting in Christ alone for salvation, then there is no fear for us in death; instead, we joyfully look forward to the day when we will be raised to live with Christ for eternity.

As we saw last week, Paul ended his last paragraph declaring that he rejoices in the gospel even in the midst of persecution and adversity. Here, in the end of verse 18 as he begins this new paragraph, he continues on, telling us that, he ***“will rejoice.”*** Even as he sits in chains, awaiting a trial before Caesar, the Roman Emperor, where it will be decided whether or he will be set free, or whether he will be executed for the crime of being a Christian missionary, he boldly and confidently asserts that he will *continue to rejoice*, to have genuine joy, even in the face of such dire circumstances. How can this be? He goes on to explain 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.”***

He rejoices because he knows with certainty that he will be “delivered.” But what is his “*deliverance*”? The word here translated as “*deliverance*” is the same Greek word for “**salvation**” - it *can* be used to refer to physical “saving” or being “delivered” from trouble in this life, but when it is used in the New Testament, especially by Paul, it usually refers to our *spiritual salvation*. Many translations go with the more ambiguous word, “*deliverance*,” here since the meaning is debatable. Is he speaking of deliverance from prison, meaning he knows with certainty he will be set free and spared death? Some scholars think so. However, I think this view is very *unlikely* from the context. Paul goes in verse 20 to explain what “*deliverance*” he is confidently and joyfully anticipating: ***“as it is my eager expectation 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.”*** In other words, Paul’s deliverance, his “eager expectation and hope,” will take place whether he *live or dies*, whether he is set free or whether he is *sentenced to death*. If he will be “delivered” whether he lives or dies, then it obviously *can’t* refer to being set free from prison and spared execution, can it? So I think it is best translated, ***“this will turn out for my salvation.”*** He is speaking of being brought into the fullness of **salvation** in Christ.

When the Bible speaks about our “salvation,” it can talk about it in terms of the “past,” (you *have* been saved), the “present” (we *are being* saved), and the “future” (we *will be* saved). Very often, when we talk about salvation today, we talk about in the “*past tense*” sense - “I was saved when....” Often what we are talking about is the moment in life where we responded to the gospel in repentance and faith, turning and trusting in Jesus Christ alone as Lord and Savior. We say “we *were saved*” because we believe we were and have been forgiven of all our sins and declared righteous in Christ since that moment; this is *true*, and is a perfectly legitimate and biblical way to talk about salvation! But it is not the *only way* the Bible speaks of our salvation. It can also point forward to the day when our salvation will be brought to its completed end; or as Paul put it earlier in verse 6 of this chapter: “***And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ***” (1:6). If we are in Christ, then we will enter into the fullness of *salvation* either when we die or when Christ returns, when we shed our body of sin and death are raised to eternal life with Jesus forever!

This is the “deliverance,” the “***salvation***” that Paul joyfully and confidently looks forward to! He has confidence and joy, *even when faced with the possibility of martyrdom, being executed!* His “*eager expectation and hope*” (v. 20) is ***not*** that he will be set free from prison, or even that he will be spared death; instead, his “*eager expectation and hope*” is that he will ***faithfully persevere to the end, “not at all being ashamed”*** by denouncing Christ, falling away, or giving into a spirit of sin and fear, but rather being *emboldened* to faithfully “*honor Christ*” with his life, even to the point of death. Why? *Because there is no more fear in death; death has lost its sting!*

Verse 21 sums it up beautifully: “***For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.***” In verses 23 and 24, Paul thinks out loud and weighs the outcomes of these possible alternatives before him: on the one hand, “***life,***” being set free to go on living, or on the other hand, “***death,***” being condemned to execution, to die as a martyr. He muses out loud: “Which would be better: life or death? If it were up to me, what would I choose?” Many people would think the question is rhetorically obvious: *life, of course!* But remarkably, that is not what Paul says! Instead he answers, “***My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better***” (v.23).

[**Illustration**]: So many people - across our nation, across the world, even throughout history - have been *haunted, even paralyzingly crippled*, by the fear of death. Fear of death has driven people to do insane, even terrible things. As Shakespeare so eloquently says, in the “*To Be or Not to Be*” speech of *Hamlet*:

...the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country, from whose bourn
No traveler returns, puzzles the will,
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of.
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all.³

Hamlet’s speech captures the unbeliever’s fear of death. Even though life can bring terrible pain and suffering, he fears the unknown pain and suffering death might bring. But this **powerfully contrasts with the confident, joyful hope Paul has, both in life and in death**. What is the difference? How can Paul say “to die is gain?”

Because he *firmly believes in the gospel of Jesus Christ!* We know that Hamlet, and any unbeliever, rightly **should** fear death, because it does indeed bring the agonizing, eternal pain and suffering of Hell, the wrath of God we *all deserve* against our evil, sinful nature and actions. Death came into the world as a *consequence* of the very first sin. We are all born into this world as sinners; we all sin, and therefore, we all die. Death is a constant reminder this world is not right, and that we all will die and face the wrath of God, being condemned not just to *physical death*, but *eternal spiritual death in Hell*.

But as we know this morning, there is hope! God, in His infinite mercy, sent Jesus Christ, the Son of God who became Man, into the World; he lived a perfect life and died on the cross in our place, bearing God’s wrath against our sin; and he was raised on the third day! In his death and resurrection, Jesus **crushed our Sin and the Death we deserve**, bring *eternal life* to all who trust and believe in Him for salvation by His glorious grace alone! **In His death, Jesus crushed death itself to death!** Death is the last enemy to be destroyed, but if you are trusting in Christ alone for salvation from your sin, then there is nothing for you to fear in death anymore! As Paul says in 1 Cor. 15: “**Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?**” (1 Cor. 15:54-55). All who repent and believe in the saving power of the

³ William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark*, act 3, scene 1, lines 78-83.

gospel of Jesus Christ are forgiven of all sins and have the sure hope of eternal life in Jesus Christ! If you are trusting in Christ this morning, death is not the end; it is only the beginning! The beginning of eternal life with Jesus Christ! If you are in Christ, ***“To Die is Gain”!***

Therefore, as Christians, we have no fear in death! And therefore, as Christians, we should not be afraid to live our lives for Christ! If we trust in God enough to die for him, then how could we not trust in Him enough to live for Him?

[**Transition**] The same gospel that transforms death into life also transforms our lives - *Now for us, “To Live is Christ.”*

II. For Those in Christ, To Live is Christ (vv. 20-22, 24-26)

“For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” These powerful, poetic words hold this passage together and sum it up perfectly. Paul is so confident that death is better because even now his life revolves around Christ. His confidence in reaching salvation is rooted not himself, but in the grace of God displayed in the gospel of Christ. And this wondrous grace has so captured and transformed his heart that he not only **believes in Jesus, but lives his entire life in Christ!** His life is built around the singular passion of loving Christ, being with Him, and doing all things for the glory of His name! And this is not something unique or special about Paul; all believers who put their trust in Christ are also **live for Christ! Our purpose in living is Christ; our passion in all things is the glory of Christ!**

A. Living for the glory of Christ

Look back at **verse 20**: Paul doesn't say his eager hope and expectation is to be set free and live; but neither does he say that it is to die, even though this would be “far better” for me; but what is it? It is that ***“Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.”*** Paul's great purpose and passion is to honor Christ- to see His name *exalted, magnified, and gloried* - in His own life, whether through living or dying! His aim to live not for himself, but wholly for Christ!

So when Paul is thinking through the question, “Would it hypothetically be better for me to live or die?” in verses 21-26, we see tension arise within Paul. As we have already said over

and over again now, Paul is confident that death would be better for him because it would mean that he gets to go and be with Christ! This is gain, because **for him to live is Christ!** Christ is his great passion! He loves Jesus far more than life itself! But therein lies the issue of tension: because Paul loves Christ and lives for him, he no longer lives for himself, or his own comfort or ambitions - ***He lives for Christ, to serve Christ and glorify Him in all of his life!*** So then, he doesn't simply ask, "What would be better for me?", but also asks, "**What would be more glorifying and pleasing to Jesus my Lord?** How can I most glorify Him with the alternatives set before me?" That's what Paul is doing in verses 21-26; he's allowing us, as his readers, to see the way he is thinking through these questions: whether thinking about death, or thinking about life, the thing matters most is His ***Christ and His glory!*** Christ is the meaning of life! His glory is our purpose and must be our passionate desire!

B. Living for the sake of others

So what does Paul decide would be the best way to live for and glorify Christ? To go on **Living for the sake of others.** Read verses 22-24: "*If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. **But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.***" If he goes on living, it means God still has "**fruitful labor**" left for him to do. After the last passage, we might expect Paul to say he has more evangelism among unbelievers to do. But strikingly, here he turns specifically to the fruitful ministry of **building up his fellow believers, his brothers and sisters in Christ!**

For Paul, and therefore us, missions and advancing the gospel does **not just** include evangelism but also **ongoing discipleship for believers.** So he is convinced it would be better, and more glorifying to Christ, for him to go on living **for their sake!** (v.25) Rather than simply choose the option that is best for him, he is "**convinced**" that it would be better to go on living and continue in **fruitful labor,** to increase other believers' "**progress and joy in the faith.**" And lest we fail to see how this is connected to his declaration, "**TO live is Christ,**" he makes it explicit in **verse 26: this is all to the glory of Christ!** This is striking: for Paul, to live is Christ, to live for Christ's glory. And he is convinced that to live for the sake of others, to see each other

grow as disciples of Christ and increase in “progress and joy in the faith” is a **vital part of what it means to live for Christ and glorify Him!**

Think about that for a moment; this is an amazing, beautiful truth. Jesus loves us, his church, *so much* that he considers *a service to Him, the Lord of all things*, when others faithfully labor for your sake, to see you progress further in the faith and find great joy in the gospel! Jesus *loves His people so much* that He is greatly pleased with you, His name magnified, exalted, and glorified *in you* when you live not for yourself, but for the sake others, especially for the sake of His people, your fellow believers and church members!

C. Points of Application

- 1. Don't live for yourself, or anything else, but live for Christ** - Christ demands all of you. He will not be second place in your life. He lived, died, and was raised for you, not just as your Savior, but also as your Lord. Christ died for you, that you can live with Him forever. Therefore, *live for Him!* Don't settle to live for any of the fake gods that offer you purpose and meaning - the idols of money, comfort, pleasure, fame, your own happiness - they will all let you down. They can't give ultimate meaning to your life. They definitely can't offer you anything in death. If you believe in the good news that you have assurance of salvation in Jesus, in life and in death, then live your life not for yourself or anything else, but live your life completely for Christ!
- 2. Do everything that you do for the glory of the Lord!** - If Christ is the great passion and purpose of our lives, then our aim must necessarily be to honor and glorify him in all that we do! See your *entire life* as an act of worship. When we are thinking through decisions and possibilities in our lives, we should think through them the way Paul does here; we should ask ourselves; **“How can I most glorify God? What would most clearly exalt Christ and His gospel? What please and honor Him? Does this action lead to the worship and praise of God, in my life and in others? Or does it dishonor and displease Christ? Does it bring *shame* to the name of Christ because I, a Christian, am doing it? *When to live is Christ, then our aim in all of life is worship.*”**

- 3. Glorify God by living for the sake of others** - Glorify God by seeking to put others before yourself, living not for what's best for you, but what is best for them. How does this glorify God? Because what is best for them is **to believe the Word of God, repent and turn away from a lifestyle of living for anything other than God, and to put all their trust in Christ alone, so that they do progress in the faith, finding all their joy in Jesus as they seek to worship and glorify Him in all things!** Do you want to glorify God? Do you want to live your life for Christ as His servant, firmly displaying belief in the gospel? Then eagerly pursue the **fruitful labor** of gospel ministry that the Lord has set before you. You don't have to go to seminary, or be a pastor, or be a missionary, or be work for a church, to live your life in the **fruitful labor of gospel ministry and glorify God.** *Every believer has this opportunity, especially as members of a local church! Be about the the advance of the gospel! Make it your life's mission to glorify Christ by helping other people continue to trusting in Jesus and living for Him! Aim to see others, especially your fellow church members, grow in their faith, find great joy in the gospel and Jesus Christ Himself, and glorify God in all that they do!*

To the unbeliever:

So what do you live for? Is Christ your life? Is your hope secure in Him, whether in life or death? Or do you live for something else? Do you worship other little "g" gods? Do you live for your own comfort, pleasure, flory, and happiness? Do you feel like you have a purpose in life? Do you live in fear of death?

If you're not a believer this morning, if you can't answer these questions: "What is the point of my life? What do I live for?" If you tremble at the thought of death - look to the hope held out for you in Christ! This hope and grace, this great joy, in both life and death, can be yours! Turn to Christ as the great hope and meaning of your life; believe that He is the God-man who lived a perfect life, who died on the cross in your place, bearing God's wrath against your sin, was buried, and was raised, so that if you repent and trust in Him, God will forgive you from your sins, declare you righteous in Christ, and bring you home to Himself in eternal life! Believe that Christ died for you so that you may live with Him forever!

Closing statement

Gospel faith transforms death into the gain of Christ and eternal life in Him! And we have assurance of this because now we live by faith in Christ - ***to live our lives now is Christ!*** To die and gain Christ means Christ must first be our life! True gospel faith clings to Christ in all of life, loving Him, believing in Him, and seeking to live our entire lives for His glory! *This is a life resting on the bedrock foundation of the gospel truth: we are not our own but belong to God in Christ Jesus!* We are freed from the tyranny of sin and death! So trust in Christ! Let us live for Christ, by His grace and for His glory! Amen.