

UNEDITED DRAFT

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Today's Scripture that we're looking to answer two of the most urgent questions Christians can ask. I'll tell you the questions, then we'll study Scripture for the answer:

- 1) It's the question a person asks when a loved one dies, or when faced with your own death. "Why? Where is God's love? Why would he allow this person to die?" Usually that question is inspired by the death of child, a tragic or untimely death, or a painful death.
- 2) Question 2: My older sister asked this one a few years back to her three brothers... we're all pastors. "If heaven is our real home, and it's a perfect, wonderful place, why does God leave us here on earth? Wouldn't it be more loving if he would take us straight to heaven?"

Isn't it interesting that both of these questions are asked by believers, but they come from opposite viewpoints. The first says, "God, why do you let Christians die? Why don't you extend their lives?" The second says, "God, why do you let Christians live? Why don't you just take us to heaven?" Both

Let's take a look at these verses from Philippians 1:18-26

What Paul is about to say will make more sense if you keep in mind that he is in prison. Sometimes he was under house arrest, but not this time. He's chained to guards in a real prison, complete with rats and every discomfort you can imagine. He is also unsure if he will be released, or if he will be executed. In other words, he may be on death row.

Under such circumstances, what kind of letter would you write? One that was depressing? Self-absorbed? Seeking pity? Paul wrote an amazing letter to a congregation he founded in an important Roman city called Philippi. Maybe you can read it this week... it's just a short 4 chapters long. As you read it, you'll notice a theme running through it: rejoice. We pick it up in 1:18:

Philippians 1:18-26

"I will continue to rejoice, 19 for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.

At first glance it appears Paul expects that he will be released from prison. He says "I know this will turn out for my deliverance." But that would contradict his other statements that he doesn't know if he is going to die or live. For that reason I like another translation better which says, "**For I know that these things will turn out victoriously for me.**" As we are about to see, Paul had but one desired outcome: *that Jesus be glorified*. So what Paul is saying here that however this imprisonment turns out, whether by his release or continued imprisonment or even by his death, he is confident that it will end victoriously. Either way he is confident that Christ will be glorified.

Two things make him confident of the victorious end. And we need that, don't we? The assurance that things will turn out well in the end. In fact, we need that assurance so much that people often give it even though they don't know that all will turn out well. Whether in the movies or in real life, when people come to an accident victim, they always say, "Don't worry! Everything is going to be all right! You're going to make it!" This assurance typically comes

when the outcome is anything but clear. In contrast, Paul here does know that his situation will turn out victoriously. Two things make him confident:

1) The prayers that the Philippians were offering for him, Paul knew these prayers were heard and would be answered by God. Do we always remember how powerful and effective our prayers are? God has promised that he will hear and answer every prayer. Jesus said, “You don’t have because you do not ask.” The Philippians were asking, so Paul knew the outcome would be to glory of Christ.

2) The second reason he knew the outcome was good was because of “the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ.” Jesus had promised he would send the Holy Spirit on his believers. That Spirit is also called the Comforter. And he was doing just that for Paul... comforting him and assuring him of a victorious outcome that would be for the glory of Jesus’ name. That same Spirit has been given to you, by the way.

Now, what follows is interesting. It shows that a victorious outcome may mean that Paul is put to death. If that sounds strange, listen as we read on:

20 I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

For Paul, the biggest concern was that he wouldn’t bring shame to the Kingdom of God by buckling under persecution. He simply wants Christ to be exalted in his body, whether by life or by death. So here Paul defines what a victorious outcome would be. What’s surprising is that he says his concern is not whether he lives or dies. I think most of us would define a victorious outcome as our release. Paul defines the victorious outcome as *Christ being glorified*. If Christ is glorified by Paul remaining alive, then that’s a victory. If Christ is glorified by Paul dying, then that is... *a victory!* Then comes the big verse. I used it as the sermon theme so it’s printed in the bulletin. If you forget everything else I say today, my prayer is that you would remember this and repeat it back to yourself all week long:

21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Repeat. What does he mean by this? Listen:

22 If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! [Now of course, he doesn’t have a choice, but if he did, he doesn’t know which way he would go.] **23 I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; 24 but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.** Personally, he would have far greater profit / gain if he were dead and with Christ. But he knew it would be better for others if he remained in the body a bit longer.

So having talked this out, he thinks he may know what God is up to: **25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.**

So one of the questions we started with was: If dying and going to live with God forever in heaven is such a great thing, then why has he left us here on earth yet? Why is living on this sinful, painful planet a good thing? Paul said it very simply: “*To live is Christ.*” For as long as God has given us on this earth, we have a very important meaning and purpose in life. *To glorify the Lord Jesus Christ.*

I want to challenge you to think about this seriously. Would you say the same thing? To live is Christ. To live is Christ. Be honest. Because this is a very hard thing to say. Not many

people would say that for me to live is Christ. The reality is that most see Christ as *a* reason to live. One of several reasons to live. What are other things that compete with Christ in our lives?

Maybe you would say, For me to live is...

- My spouse.
- My children.
- My career / business.
- My hobby.
- My riches.
- My authority
- My fame.
- Oh... and Christ too.

Christ often becomes one of many things for which we live, not *the* thing for which we live. How do you think Jesus feels when we say, “Jesus, my kids are my life... but you’re right up there with them.” “Jesus, my business / career is my life, but you’re important to me too.” “Jesus, the respect I get because of my position mean so much to me... oh, and so do you.” The truth is, then, Christ is one of many gods that you worship. If Christ is one of many things for you live... in other words, if you find ultimate meaning, purpose, satisfaction... if the end goal of your life has anything on it that is not Christ or is in addition to Christ... then you are worshiping false gods.

Christ must in our heart. He must reign supreme. He must reign alone. Because he alone has resolved the problem surpasses and permeates every other problem and need you may have. He is the only one who establishes between us and God a right relationship. Your failure to live a holy life that honors and pleases your Creator has to be fixed. And you can’t fix it. Your spouse can’t fix it. Your career can’t fix it. Your kids can’t fix it. Only Jesus can fix it.

And he did. He came from the Father, full of grace and truth. “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him will not perish, but have eternal life.” Because of Jesus and Jesus alone, you’re sin debt has been paid in full and you are declared not guilty by the Divine Judge. You are adopted into his family and enjoy the full rights of children of God.

This truth, friends, is what moves you to say, “For me to live is Christ!”

If you look at the life of Paul, you see that Christ was it for him. Paul had a life that was singularly focused on Jesus. In this short book of Philippians, the name Jesus comes up 51 times! 1 Corinthians 2:2 “**For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.**” He was a jukebox that only played on song: Jesus. ...a cable TV provider with only one channel: Jesus. A café line that had only one dish: Jesus.

Philippians 3:8-9 “**I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.**”

What does this look like: to live is Christ? I was trying to think of a good comparison. This isn’t perfect, but I think it will make the point. Think of the proud parents when their first baby is born. You’ve seen those parents. I was one of those parents. Suddenly their whole life revolves around that baby that they absolutely adore. They put pictures on Facebook so you can see the cutest thing that ever existed on planet earth. They are obnoxious about their love for

their little one. When the baby is with them, they show him off to everyone they meet. Their schedules revolve around the baby. Almost everything they think and say and do is to draw everyone attention to this most precious part of their lives.

Now what would it look like if you did the same thing with the Lord Jesus Christ? What if your whole life revolved around Jesus? What if your calendar, your checkbook, your conversations (including your Facebook posts) all reflected your fundamental belief: For me to live is Christ.

Why has God left us on the earth a while longer. To exalt and glorify the name of Jesus. So that you can make your career all about Jesus... your love for your spouse or kids all about Jesus... your finances all about Jesus... your position of authority all about Jesus. For me to live is Christ.

And to die is gain. It's hard to think about death that way, isn't it? For us, death is not a gain, it's a loss. It's exceedingly difficult for us when a loved one dies in the Lord to see that overall this was good. It's hard for us to truly believe that for us and for all believers, to die is better by far. But it is.

On bad days, you see this clearly: this world is a world of that is broken. It has hardships and pain. It is often not fair. Often things happen that make you say, "This just isn't right!" And God says, "You're right. This just isn't right. Sin has spoiled this world and it's just plain rotten. But there is more. I will bring you through. The best is yet to come."

Maybe you heard this story before. A pastor was visiting an elderly old woman and she had asked to plan out her funeral with him. She had a strange request: put a fork in my hand at the visitation and funeral. The pastor was willing to honor the request but was very curious. Why? She answered, "You know how when you are a guest at someone's house for dinner, after the meal they start clearing the plates, but they say, 'Keep your forks! We've got a delicious dessert coming. The best is yet to come!'" I want everyone who sees me in death to know that I believed in the resurrection. My body may be lying dead in a casket, but I know the best is yet to come.

To die is gain. To die for the believer is gain.

Friends, why has God left you on this earth for a while and not yet taken you to heaven? Because for me to live is Christ. Why do believers sometimes die... even in tragic ways or, as we would say, "before their time?" Simply because God is good, and "to die is gain."

This week would you keep on remembering this short passage. Keeping asking yourself what it would look like to put it into practice in your life. "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain." Amen.