



Philippians 1:20-30

“To die for” - something so good, I’d give anything to have it myself. There are plenty of causes on Earth that people will die for – e.g. people to die for: Romans 5:9

6 For when we were still helpless, Christ died for the wicked at the time that God chose. 7 It is a difficult thing for someone to die for a righteous person. It may even be that someone might dare to die for a good person. 8 But God has shown us how much he loves us — it was while we were still sinners that Christ died for us!

Last week we saw how Paul was prepared to follow Christ, whether he lived or died. And we start this week by developing that point with this famous verse:

20 My deep desire and hope is that I shall never fail in my duty, but that at all times, and especially just now, I shall be full of courage, so that with my whole being I shall bring honour to Christ, whether I live or die. 21 For what is life? To me, it is Christ. Death, then, will bring more.

Or better in the NIV: *21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*

NLT : *21 For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better.*

Message: *Alive, I'm Christ's messenger; dead, I'm his bounty. Life versus even more life! I can't lose.*

Paul had no fear of death, he was ready for it whatever happened. In fact, he looked so much forward to being with Christ that he actually was torn between wanting to be freed and continuing his ministry and death!

How ready are we for death. It's something that's easy to say when we're healthy, but I find for many believers, if they have a brush with death, either serious illness in themselves or the loss of a loved one; they start thinking of their own preparedness for death.

Why was Paul so ready for death: because he had found his mission and vocation in life – where God wanted him to be and therefore had that complete assurance that when that ministry finished, there was something better for him.

And he told the Philippians that because he realised that they were going to face opposition and suffering – they were already standing firm for the gospel (v2x) and he needed to reassure them. How assured are we of salvation? It's important because scripture was written so that we might know we have eternal life (1 John 5:13). We can know that in our heads, but we need to know that in our hearts and that can only become a reality when we walk with Him daily. So often we have crises of faith, not because we don't know scripture, because we do, but that when faced with death, we start to have a crisis of confidence.

For Paul, to live was Christ and he ever had that trust before him as he carried out the task of bringing the good news to every situation he found himself in, whatever the consequences. For many Christians, they find it have a difficulty in getting a real faith in eternal life because they lack a real faith and dependence on God in life now and so often that's because we like things our way and not Jesus' way. Let's pray that God will give us that real authentic understanding and appreciation of the presence of Christ in our lives. Here's something helpful from Baptist writer and minister FB Meyer:

Christ is "the essence of our life ... the model of our life ... the aim of our life ... the solace of our life ... the reward of our life." Think of the prepositions that express relationship. We live in Christ ... for

Christ ... by Christ ... through Christ ... and from Christ. He is the beginning, the middle and the end of life. He is truly the Alpha and Omega, the A and Z, and every letter in between.

For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

And on this occasion, here's Paul, expecting to be released from jail. I've said at least twice before that there is evidence for his being released on this first occasion before Caesar. The evidence is scriptural and from the letters to Timothy and Titus mostly. Acts doesn't help as it goes only to his arrival at Rome and nothing else. Why? It was probably circulated before the trial. Perhaps Luke died before he could finish it or write a new book. We don't know.

In 2 Timothy he's behind bars and it seems from chapter 4 it's again: ***16 At my first defence, no one came to my support, but everyone deserted me. May it not be held against them. 17 But the Lord stood at my side and gave me strength, so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. And I was delivered from the lion's mouth. 18 The Lord will rescue me from every evil attack and will bring me safely to his heavenly kingdom. To him be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (Message)***

So where had he been to in the interim? Well, we know he had been to Troas because he talks about his cloak which he left behind. He'd also been or was going to Nicopolis (Titus 3:12). He left Titus in Crete (Titus 1:5). I don't find Crete a surprise as Paul liked Cretan poets (Acts 18). Other plans he had was to go to Spain (Romans). Tradition places him in all these places after his first trial before Nero so between that and the evidence from scripture we can see in Philippians 1 that there was a realistic expectation of his release.

So that gives you the background, but the point Paul is trying to make here is that just as for him to live is Christ and to die is gain, so if he was to have kopped it at that point, he'd have got something even better. It was one of those win-win situations as far as he was concerned. Others often get the other win:

Mehdi Dibaj, for example, was imprisoned by the government of Iran in 1984 on charges of "apostasy," since he had converted from Islam to Christianity. The penalty for this crime according to Islamic law was death. Mehdi languished in prison for ten years before his case came to trial. When it did, his written statement of defence was a simple and straightforward affirmation of commitment to Jesus Christ. The last few lines of that defence contain this remarkable paragraph: [Jesus Christ] is our Saviour and he is the Son of God. To know him means to know eternal life. I, a useless sinner, have believed in him and all his words and miracles recorded in the gospel. I have committed my life into his hands.

Life for me is an opportunity to serve him, and death is a better opportunity to be with Christ. Therefore I am not only satisfied to be in prison for the honour of his holy name, but am ready to give my life for the sake of Jesus my Lord... On December 12, 1993, the court before whom this defence was made sentenced Mehdi to death. Then, under intense pressure from people in the West who knew of the case, including the U.S. State Department, the Iranians released him in January 1994. Seven months later, he was found dead "under suspicious circumstances" in a Tehran park. He was the third Christian murdered in Iran after his release from prison.

And that's the point Paul I think is trying to make to them in the latter verses of our reading tonight. Just as it was a situation for him which said ***"for to me to live is Christ and to die is gain"***, it was the same for them. So in verse 29 he says:

29 For you have been given the privilege of serving Christ, not only by believing in him, but also by suffering for him. 30 Now you can take part with me in the battle. It is the same battle you saw me fighting in the past, and as you hear, the one I am fighting still.

They were in the same battle and the stakes were the same if they were faithful to Christ. If we are serious about Christ, there will be those who oppose us. It may not be quite as dramatic as what Paul experienced but it is a battle to be faced. The story is told of an evangelist in the southern states of America called John R. Rice who preached in ***Waxahachie, Texas, just south of Dallas. As was his custom, Dr. Rice preached hard against sin, especially against the bootleggers bringing illegal liquor into that small Texas town during prohibition. Eventually the powers that be decided that this pesky evangelist must be silenced. They sent a message to stop preaching or they would kill him. "You can't threaten me with heaven," he replied.***

Let me state the principle this way: True believers annoy the world because they stand as a rebuke to everything the world stands for. When we say "Jesus is the only way," they call us arrogant. If we declare, "You must be born again," someone is sure to call us fanatics. If you say the Bible is the Word of God, someone else will think you're an ignorant hick. If you say, "I know I'm going to heaven," you'll be accused of thinking you're better than everyone else. Finally, if you dare to call adultery wrong and homosexuality sinful, someone is bound to call you a narrow-minded, judgemental bigot. And so it goes. We annoy the world precisely because we are citizens of heaven and live by different principles (Ray Pritchard, Keep Believing Ministries).

God calls us to be people who stand up for Him, who stand up for truth and who stand up for the good news and the worst that anyone can do to us is send us to heaven! And we read these great verses: *27 Now, the important thing is that your way of life should be as the gospel of Christ requires, so that, whether or not I am able to go and see you, I will hear that you are standing firm with one common purpose and that with only one desire you are fighting together for the faith of the gospel. 28 Don't be afraid of your enemies; always be courageous, and this will prove to them that they will lose and that you will win, because it is God who gives you the victory.*

We know the sentiment, we know that we should read and speak for ourselves the words "to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" but the concepts of suffering, opposition, confrontation trouble us. The thought that God may call us to give up something is even more of a problem. Yes, I did say last week that we have a God who turns minuses to pluses but it's so safe sometimes to follow Christ and affirm our own security in our properties, our incomes, our families, our friendships or our community.

As many of you will know, there are several anchorages for ships wanting to go into Harwich Haven and it's common to find them moored a mile or so off the sea front here in Felixstowe. We've noticed that Norfolk Line usually put a ferry there on a Sunday when the weather is good and it stays there about 24 hours and goes back into port to pick up a load to take to Holland on Monday. It's interesting because it often looks as though it is moving but then you realise it isn't going anywhere; it's just moving round it's anchor line – just a single line at the bow so that all but the bow moves around with the waves and currents.

Why do they let the ship do that? Quite simple, if they anchored from a few places on the ship and there was a severe storm, the waves would wash over it every way and damage the ship because very anchor tears the boat in a different direction. It could move around with the ups and downs of the waves and would be ripped apart by every anchor. That's why they secure it with one line and one anchor so then the ship would be able to move around with the waves, ride from side to side, and up and down, and still be anchored to one point. Life is a storm. And Jesus is the one permanent anchor we need. Tying ourselves down in this world will tear us apart in every direction.

We have a Saviour who wants to give us the victory in the battles of life and in the battle to win for Him men and women in this Community. But for that to happen we need to trust Him, become single-minded in our mission and understand that this is win-win in whatever directions things go.

In 1858 a young man named John G. Paton felt called of God to leave his ministry in Glasgow, Scotland, to go as a missionary to the New Hebrides islands in the South Pacific. In those days missionary ventures were greeted with disdain and opposition—in part because of the great danger attendant to preaching the gospel to people regarded as uncivilized. An elderly gentlemen warned John Paton: "You will be eaten by cannibals."

"Mr. Dickson," Paton replied, "You are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms; I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honouring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by cannibals or by worms; and in the Great Day my resurrection body will arise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer."

Let's Pray

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