

Untitled (16)

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[0:00] Amen. So a few years ago, I listened to a sermon from someone who was a fairly high-profile preacher at that time.

I won't name names here because my point in opening this way is not to call someone out, but to present us with a warning. Now, this particular preacher implied in his sermon that he would be willing to die for Jesus.

This particular preacher also, in fairly recent history, made a public announcement that he is no longer a Christian. Well, that's a jarring contrast, isn't it?

It should be. And we can sometimes fall into these almost romantic ideas of ourselves dying as martyrs for Jesus. You know, facing wild beasts in the Roman Colosseum, going to the stake bravely, that kind of thing.

And of course, sometimes those things happen. But that isn't what has happened to most people who have ever lived and professed the name of Jesus. We can easily convince ourselves that, of course, we're willing to be martyrs for Jesus, that we'll go out with our boots on for Christ, particularly if we think that it's not really likely to happen to us.

[1:51] We can find ourselves focused on that dramatic statement of dying for Christ, and yet not count the cost of what it means to live for Christ. Living for Christ will be costly.

We will face opposition of all kinds, all the while learning to die to ourselves. And there's a sense in which, even if we don't suffer literal martyrdom for the sake of Jesus, all of us are going to die for Jesus.

Every true Christian has a lifetime of dying to self in front of him or her. There is no other way to be a Christian, and we need to be ready for that.

So a little bit of context from our passage in Philippians. The Apostle Paul is writing from the perspective of someone who is weighing what it means to die for Christ, or to continue living for Christ.

He's writing to the Philippian church from prison. He's doing so aware that he might die for his witness to Jesus. But also from a place of knowing that his future might also be more years of costly discipleship.

[3:01] This is the man, after all, who describes his path of discipleship in this way. Get ready for this. He said, That's a lot of danger, isn't it?

In toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and in thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure, and apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

The German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said that when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. And the Apostle Paul lived in that reality.

History tells us that Paul did, in fact, die as a martyr in Rome. Opinion is split on whether that happened before or after the imprisonment that he mentions in this morning's passage.

But in any case, these are the words of a man who would model what it meant to die for Christ, and also the words of a man who modeled what it meant to live sacrificially for Christ in the face of opposition.

[4:38] I think the Apostle Paul might have something to tell us about living for Christ, doesn't he? I think he's qualified to speak on that topic. And that's what I want us to think about together this morning.

If you would, please look in your Bibles with me in Philippians chapter 1. So where our text for this morning picks up, Paul is talking about the possible paths that are in front of him.

Dying for Christ, or continuing to live for Christ. And he goes from there to instruct the Philippian Christians about the way they should continue to live for Christ.

Picking up in verse 21, Paul writes this, For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me.

Yet which I shall choose, I cannot tell. To die is gain, for the Christian, of course. Why is that? Well, because the Christian departs this life knowing that his or her sins have been put away forever through the cross of Christ.

[5 : 51] And that means that the Christian departs this life knowing that death simply ushers us into the nearer presence of our loving Father, where we will never suffer again. Departing from this life means that the battle is over.

On the other hand, Paul rightly points out that continuing in this life is also of value for the Christian. Why is that? Especially when we consider the trials and the tribulations that we have in this life.

Well, the reason Paul seems to give is that no matter what we are going through in this life, Jesus is with us. And not only that, as long as we are in this life, we have ministry to do.

We have fruitful labor in front of us as long as we are here. And that's true regardless of our circumstances. Paul, keep in mind, was in prison when he wrote this.

His contact with others was limited. He wasn't exactly going to be doing street ministry from jail. He wasn't actively planting new churches at that time. We need to remember that regardless of our circumstances, we have fruitful labor in front of us as long as we are in this life.

[7 : 09] A former rector of mine once had an elderly parishioner who was quickly declining physically. And she told him that she felt that she wasn't useful to anyone anymore.

That all that she could do, all she had the energy to do, was pray for people. And she wasn't useful, in her view. And he rightly told her that there is no more important ministry than that.

When times are tough, we can find ourselves overwhelmingly preoccupied with the thought that Christ will take us to be with him.

That's not a bad thing. Paul was thinking about that. But we should never forget that for as long as we are here, we are here for a reason. And that we are here still because our Christian witness in this world isn't finished yet.

Paul elaborates on that very thing. Picking up in verse 23. I am hard-pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.

[8 : 21] But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Paul, like all Christians, wanted to be with Christ, even if it meant dying for Christ.

But he also realized that he still had a period of living for Christ to undergo a further period of witness and ministry in this world. That's why Paul writes, convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus because of my coming to you again.

So Paul understandably regarded dying for Christ as the preferable option of the two. What better thing could there be for a Christian than seeing the Lord in his glory forever?

But then he comes down on the side of continuing to live for Christ in this world so that he can equip his brothers and sisters in the Philippian church to live for Christ in the face of opposition, both by his teaching and his example of costly discipleship.

So in light of all that, what does Paul have to teach the Philippian church about living for Christ in the face of opposition?

[9 : 47] What does this passage have to teach us about living for Christ in the face of opposition? Let's continue picking back up in verse 27.

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.

Paul is basically saying, if I'm going to continue living in this world for Jesus, please make sure that you're living for Jesus too. Now, he alludes to one of the obstacles to churches living for Christ in this verse.

And that obstacle could be summed up colloquially like this, we have met the enemy and he is us. One of the biggest threats to our living for Christ is the tendency for churches to fall into that classic error of circling the wagons and shooting into the middle.

For our manner of life to be worthy of the gospel, Paul is saying, we need to look at church unity. Standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel is a make-or-break-it thing when it comes to living in a manner worthy of the gospel, is it not?

[11:18] If we're not united with each other around the gospel, then it is a given that we will also not be living for Christ in a manner that is worthy of the gospel.

It is that foundational. Having dealt with that, assuming that believers are living for Christ in unity together, Paul turns next to the subject of opposition.

He instructs the church to be not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation and that from God.

Paul, in particular, has persecution in mind here. And his message is simple, don't be afraid in the face of opposition because Jesus Christ is Lord.

And if you are facing opposition, it is actually a sign of a couple of things. First of all, the opposition that Christians face for the sake of the gospel is actually a sign to opponents of the gospel that they are headed for judgment and destruction.

[12:33] A persecuted church by its very existence calls unbelievers to repentance by its life and witness. You might say that's counterintuitive, but things often are in the kingdom of God.

That's the way it goes. God will judge those who persecute the church, and the very fact of that persecution is a sign that judgment is coming. Also, if we face opposition for living for the truth, it is a sign to us that we really are living for the truth.

If we were living for the world, the world would commend us, would give us a big pat on the back, say, welcome to the club, you're one of us. Now, sometimes the opposition that Christians face is overt and violent.

That's happening today in many parts of the world. Now, it's less overt in our society, at least for now, but we are living in what has been called a post-Christian culture, and we certainly will face opposition.

Thinking about examples of that from my own life, I remember being a college student, having professors speak mockingly about my faith. Now, I have to admit, I was that one student who couldn't keep his mouth shut, so I was always speaking up in opposition to my professors in those situations.

[13:58] I remember all of the rolling eyes that I encountered when I did that. I've also been called a religious fanatic and a hater, and have had people get furious with me for speaking biblical truth in love.

Now, to be clear, it's possible to speak the truth like a jerk and draw anger because you've been a jerk, but you can speak the uncompromised truth gently and still draw people's wrath.

Have you ever been there? Yeah. And Paul says to us, don't be frightened. If you encounter opposition, it is a sign that you are walking in the truth, and it's a sign of God's judgment to all things opposed to the gospel.

It's hard not to be frightened. If that wasn't enough, our passage closes in this way.

For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ, you should not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

[15:16] So God has given us the great gift of not only believing in Christ and living for Christ, but also the gift of suffering for Christ. Whoa, we don't like the sound of that, do we?

We hear about suffering and we find ourselves hoping that as Christians, we have a get out of jail free card for that kind of thing, right? But we don't. Great evangelical Anglican Bishop J.C. Ryle once said this, If we are true Christians, we must not expect everything smooth in our journey to heaven.

We must count it no strange thing if we have to endure sicknesses, losses, bereavements, and disappointments just like other men. Free pardon and full forgiveness, grace along the way, and glory at the end, all this our Savior has promised to give.

But he has never promised that we shall have no afflictions. As I move to close, I do so with the sobering reminder, brothers and sisters, that we will have afflictions.

We will face opposition. That is part of what it means to live for Jesus Christ. You can count on it. We will suffer for Christ. But there is a big difference between the suffering of a Christian and the suffering of the world.

[16 : 53] Our suffering has been granted to us by God as a sign that we belong to Christ, and it is not meaningless. God will work it all for good, as he did in the life of the Apostle Paul.

Living for Christ is not for the faint of heart. It never has been, and it never will be.

But do not be discouraged, because it is always worth it. Always. Being a Christian. What does that mean?

Well, even with all of its challenges, it means fruitful labor for the gospel in this life, walking with Jesus in this life, and eternal life in the age to come.

And so we can say with the Apostle Paul, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.