

To Live is Christ, and to Die Is Gain

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[0:00] Amen. So we're back at our sermon series this morning, back in Philippians 1, so if you want to go ahead and turn there and get ready.

So in our passage for this morning, the Apostle Paul writes, For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. Now those are sobering and inspiring words, to live is Christ, to die is gain.

Now these are the words of a man who had complete trust in his sovereign, loving, glorious, all-sufficient Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. It should stand as an inspiration to all of us.

Now one of the biggest objections we will encounter to our Christian faith is the question of why God allows us to suffer. If God is sovereign and God is loving, why does bad stuff happen?

Well some preachers, the kind who fly on private jets and pack stadiums, will tell you that the answer to the question basically is that bad stuff happens to you because you don't have enough faith.

[1:42] If you have enough faith, you won't get sick, you'll have financial prosperity, anything you desire in faith will be yours, especially if you send a check to that preacher's ministry.

Now we only have to look at the example of Paul, the author of Philippians, to see that that is simply not true. Should we say that Paul didn't have enough faith since he found himself in prison and ultimately found himself beheaded by the Roman authorities?

No. That can't be the answer. So why is it that bad things happen? Especially why do bad things happen to believers who are God's beloved adopted children in Christ?

Well there are a number of ways that we could answer that question. Some trials come our way for the sake of our growth in Christ, for the sake of our sanctification, to draw us nearer to the Lord.

Some trials come by way of human sin. Either us reaping the consequences of our own sin or being victimized by the sin of others. Some challenges come simply because of the consequences of the presence of sin in the world.

[3:04] Things like illness, things like disease, things like death. But as important as that question might be, I think here is an even more important question.

Can and does God bring good things even out of the hard things? The answer to that, as I think we'll see in our text for this morning, is an absolute, unqualified, unambiguous yes.

Have you seen that in your own life? Certainly seen it in mine. Paul saw that in his life, in his sufferings, in his imprisonment.

We see the proof this morning in our passage from Philippians 1, verses 12 to 26. Let's look there together. Now Paul begins by talking about his imprisonment in verses 12 and 13 where he writes, Now look at how Paul is thinking about his imprisonment.

He isn't feeling sorry for himself. He's not being gloomy. He's not being pessimistic. Why is that?

Well, Paul had devoted his life in the time that he met Jesus on that road to Damascus and was converted.

[4:45] He had devoted his life to the ministry of the gospel. Especially taking the gospel to the nations, to the Gentiles. So what is first in Paul's mind here isn't the unfortunate aspect of being imprisoned.

It isn't even the knowledge that he might lose his life for his witness to Christ. No. He realizes that even his suffering, even his shame, even his weakness, can and will be used by God to advance the cause of the gospel.

And isn't that amazing? This, of course, is the same Paul who wrote in Romans 8, We know that all things work together for good for those that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose.

We see in Paul's imprisonment that these aren't just lofty feelings. Where the rubber meets the road, he actually believes this stuff.

All things work together for good in the lives of believers. Do we believe that? So his imprisonment was actually an opportunity.

[6:09] He's in Rome, the capital city of the Roman Empire. The imperial guard, the imperial household, know that his imprisonment is for the cause of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

He has opportunity, in word and by example, to bear witness to the hope that is in him. A sure and certain hope, an unstoppable and unbeatable hope.

A hope that cannot be stamped out by imprisonment or by the sword. A hope that we, across the world and across the centuries, share with him.

When trials come in our lives, and they will, will we, like Paul, take them as an opportunity to bear witness to the reality that the gospel is our joy, and that Jesus Christ is all that we need?

Paul's commitment to the gospel in a time of trial served as a witness to unbelievers, and as an example to believers. Other believers, as verse 14 tells us, have become much more confident and bold in preaching the gospel without fear.

[7:23] Now I know in my own life, in my own ministry, that looking at the example of other believers suffering for their faith emboldens me to preach the gospel without hesitation.

We look at the example of our brothers and sisters around the world, in our own days, suffering for their faith, enduring jail, execution, being forcibly removed from their homes, and it reminds us, doesn't it, reminds us that our only hope is the gospel, is God's grace and mercy to us in his son, Jesus Christ.

And that is something that is worth giving our lives for. So it's to be expected, though, as we look at our passage, that the ungodly authorities of the Roman emperor would be a source of trial and oppression for Paul.

But in the next verses, we see something that might be unexpected. Paul is being opposed by some within the church as well. And these are people who don't fit the bill for false teachers either. Look at what he says. Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from goodwill. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.

[8:55] With them. Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed. And in that I rejoice. So, it is to be expected that Paul is suffering at the hands of the ungodly secular authorities.

But here we see that he's also being targeted by some within the church. Now, have you ever had that experience of being hurt by those within the body?

Within the church? I think most of us have. And that is a kind of betrayal that is almost unmatched in terms of how painful it is.

Yet Paul sees God bringing good, advancing the gospel, even out of this painful envy and rivalry. Paul is under attack by the unbelieving world.

He's under attack from some within the church. But there is a common thread here. Despite the evil intentions of those who are on the attack, on the offensive, God is able to bring good out of it.

[10:10] The gospel still prevails and advances. And brothers and sisters, that is just as true today. The gospel is still advancing despite centuries upon centuries of its opponents trying to stamp it out.

And so it will continue to advance until the earth is filled with the glory of God. And we see further evidence of Paul's assurance in our next verses, verses 19 to 21, where he writes, Yes, and I will rejoice.

For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope 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. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Live is Christ, to die is gain. Again, that is where the rubber meets the road, right?

Paul is convinced that even his imprisonment, whatever happens, will turn out for his good, for his sanctification, for his glorification, for the advance of the gospel.

[11:33] He expects, he knows, that Christ will be honored in him whether he lives or dies. Whether he lives or dies, Christ will still be the exalted, sovereign Lord.

Whether he lives or dies, he has a certain hope of eternal life that cannot be taken away. So he has courage to bear witness to the gospel in life or in death, in release or in captivity, in prosperity or in

suffering.

Paul knows Jesus Christ as his Savior. And that changes everything. In life or in death, has the assurance of knowing that he belongs to the Lord who purchased him with his own blood.

Now, Paul's courage in the face of suffering for the truth reminds me of the account of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego that we see in Daniel 3. Daniel 3, we find that King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon has set up an idol and commanded everyone to worship it.

So Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, Jews who are living in Babylon during the captivity there, refuse to worship the idol. So they're summoned by the king to answer for their refusal.

[13:04] The king summons them, tells them, they will be thrown into a fiery furnace if they don't worship the idol. Notice what they say to him.

Daniel 3, starting in verse 16. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego answered and said to the king, O Nebuchadnezzar, we have no need to answer you in this matter.

If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace. And he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up.

Look at their boldness. They know that the true and living God is able to rescue them from the fiery furnace.

But, even if God chooses not to act in that way, they still won't worship the false gods and the idol.

[14:12] Because either in life or in death, the one and only true and living God is real, is sovereign, is worthy of all worship, and the king's gods are false, dumb idols.

The scriptures tell us, of course, that God did choose to rescue them from the fiery furnace. That they weren't going to worship false gods, even if it meant death for them.

Now, isn't this the same conviction that we see with Paul? He's certain that in his life or in his death, Christ will be glorified, God will still be sovereign, God's truth will abide forever, so he will not stop proclaiming the gospel, even knowing that it might lead to his death.

Looking throughout the history of the church, we see countless examples of men and women who took that same stand, had the same zeal for the gospel, so that nothing, not even the threat of death, could cause them to betray their Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Something fresh on my mind is that the church, on the church calendar, we recently commemorated the martyrs of Uganda. And their example comes to mind for me.

[15:32] So who were they? Well, they died in Africa, in what is now Uganda, in the 19th century. So a little bit of background. In 1885, the Anglican missionary Bishop James Hannington was traveling to what is now Uganda to work for the spread of the gospel there.

He and his companions were captured by agents of the king who reigned there, who was a king who hated the Christian faith. Now after a week of absolutely brutal treatment, Bishop Hannington and his companions were put to death.

But before he died by being speared, he reported to have said to his executioners, go tell your master that I have purchased the road to Uganda with my blood.

Now Bishop Hannington must have said that, must have been willing to purchase the road to Uganda with his blood because of his love for the people in Uganda that the Lord Jesus had purchased with his blood.

He must have been driven by the knowledge that there would be souls in Uganda who would hear the gospel of Jesus Christ and be saved. He was willing to give his life for that. The next year, 1886, 32 young men, most of them pages in the same king's court, all of them converts to Christ, refused their king's demand that they renounce their faith in the Lord Jesus.

[17:06] They were burned alive for their refusal. We have accounts that they went to the flames rejoicing in the Lord. The king, as much as he tried, could not stop the advance of the gospel in Uganda.

Today, something like 85% of the population in Uganda professes faith in Christ. The Anglican Church of Uganda alone represents something like a third of the population of the whole country. Indeed, the Anglican Church in Uganda is now one of the most faithful and orthodox provinces in the entirety of the Anglican Communion. They have stood firm for the truth of the gospel, the authority of the Bible, even as some Anglicans in the West have departed from the truth.

They were instrumental, of course, in supporting the movement that was to become our own Anglican Church in North America. Western missionaries, like Bishop Hannington, took the gospel

to Uganda and suffered for it.

But now, Christians in Uganda have become missionaries to the West. The gospel continues to advance.

[18:26] Looking at the example of Paul, looking at the example of these martyrs who followed in his footsteps, what do we see? We see this. The gospel cannot be restrained, it cannot be beaten, it cannot be stamped out.

God's truth is powerful and unstoppable. The gospel will prevail and souls will be saved. Christ is the victor Jesus Christ, his Lord, whether we live or whether we die.

Whatever happens in our lives, we know that God will have the final word. And God will be glorified even through our suffering, brothers and sisters.

Back in Philippians, Paul expands on this reality in verses 22 to 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.

[19:34] So Paul is in prison, knows that he might lose his life, and treats it as a win-win situation. What is up with that? Well, what are the options before him?

To continue to labor for the gospel, to spread the gospel and build up the church, which is the work of his life, or to depart and be with Christ. Now, either way, even if he's in prison, fear of death will not hold him in captivity, won't keep him from continuing to bear witness to the gospel.

It's clear that he is not afraid of death. As believers, we shouldn't be afraid of death. Why? Well, isn't it because we know that our Lord Jesus died for our sins, put away our sins forever by his one sacrifice of himself once offered, so that there is no condemnation and no guilt for those who are in Christ Jesus?

Isn't it because we know that the resurrection of Jesus Christ is real? That his resurrection guarantees that we will have eternal life with the Lord who loved us and gave himself for us, that hope, that promise, that Paul knew and described as far better, is so certain that nothing the world can do can take our joy from us.

You know, I am reminded, and this is true of every year, but I'm reminded of the awesome experience I had at Arcana East Synod last year. Our speaker then was the Nigerian Archbishop Benjamin Kwashi, and he made a really major impression on me.

[21:24] Now, if you don't know anything about Archbishop Kwashi, he is a faithful minister of the gospel and servant of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has been targeted aggressively by the forces of militant Islam for his witness.

He's survived multiple attempts on his life. He and his family have been attacked and beaten.

Having been through all that, do you know what he says?

And this is a direct quote. Until my time is up, and I know that I will die someday, until that day, I have a gospel to proclaim.

I have a gospel worth living for, and I have a gospel worth dying for. I think he was echoing what Paul has to tell us in our passage this morning.

The gospel is worth living for, and the gospel is worth dying for. Brothers and sisters, do you agree? Our passage for this morning ends with Paul's confirmation that the gospel, the work of the gospel, is indeed worth living for.

[22:37] Verses 25 and 26, where he 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.

A little bit of commentary here. If this passage was written, as is likely the case, during Paul's Roman imprisonment that preceded his martyrdom, it is likely that he never visited Philippi again in the flesh, although we don't know for sure.

But certainly, his gospel witness continued as long as he was living, and certainly must have remained an encouragement to the Philippian believers.

Certainly, they must have gloried in his faithfulness to Christ. And ultimately, Paul's life and death and gospel message glorified the Lord Jesus Christ, set an example to the Philippian believers, and had a major hand in the saving knowledge of the only true God extending to the nations of the world.

This morning, let's ask ourselves, do we believe what Paul believed? Do we believe that to live is Christ and to die is gain?

[24:02] Are we ready to live and die if necessary for the gospel? Are we ready to repent of those things that hinder our living for the Lord?

To repent of the sins that are hindering our growth in Christ? Our Lord Jesus has saved us with his own blood.

Salvation is ours. It is awesome. It is beyond anything that we deserve and anything that we can imagine. In life and in death, we belong to our Savior and we can do the work that he has called us to do in complete confidence, with boldness, knowing that to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Brothers and sisters, the gospel really is worth living for and it's really worth dying for. Are we ready to live for it and even die for it if necessary?

Pray with me for a moment in the words for a gradual hymn. Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to thee. Take my hands and let them move at the impulse of thy love.

[25:21] Take my love, my God, I pour at thy feet its treasure store. Take myself and I will be ever only all for thee. In life and in death, we belong to our Savior, Jesus Christ.

To live is Christ, to die is gain. It's true. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.