

Life & Death and the Gospel

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 19 September 2021

Preacher: Matt Coburn

[0 : 00] Well, good morning. I want to begin with a story. It was January of 1988, and me and some of my freshman friends, we were still called freshmen back then, first-year students were on a mid-year break, cross-country skiing in Vermont.

And we stood at the top of a hill. And if you have ever been cross-country skiing, you will know that this is not a happy place to be at the top of a hill, because it's hard to go downhill.

I had grown up cross-country skiing, so it wasn't as scary for me. But for my friends, they looked down this 100-yard hill. It was not a massive hill. This 100-yard slope, and thought, we're going to die.

And in my youthful exuberance and great spiritual immaturity, I said, to live is Christ and to die is gain. You know, when you're 18, it's really easy to say things like that flippantly, isn't it?

Now, past 50, it's a lot more weighty to say something like that, isn't it? The fear of death is something I've come to see as a very real power in our world and in our life.

[1 : 18] So I was studying about this this week. I actually came across a book, *The Worm at the Core*, on the role of death in life. And in this book, three researchers, psychologists and sociologists, studied the effect of death and the fear of death on people's lives.

Synopsis of this book described it this way. The fear of death and the desire to transcend it inspire us to buy expensive cars, crave fame, put our health at risk, and disguise our animal nature.

The fear of death can also prompt judges to dole out harsher punishments, make children react negatively to people different from themselves, and inflame intolerance and violence.

It's a fascinating story. If you want to go, you can search them up on NPR. I can give you the link later. It's fascinating what they found as they tried to study how, when people expressed a fear of death, how it actually affected the way that they lived.

It prompted reckless living, harshness towards others, prejudice, selfish ambition, as well as fear, isolation, and a desire for control.

[2 : 28] Death casts its shadow over all of life. It is the one certainty no one is exempt from. Maybe you've felt this recently in your own life.

Maybe you are mourning the loss of a loved one who's died. And maybe the fear of your own death, or of someone you love, has had a pull on your heart.

Maybe you have, or as I remember in the early days of the pandemic, where I found it hard not to walk around viewing my neighbors as these clouds of death.

Do you remember that at the beginning of the pandemic, when we viewed everyone around us as having this 10-foot radius of, like, deadly germs? And you're really annoyed at the person who went the wrong way in the grocery store aisle when the arrows pointed the other way.

I viewed them as things I needed to avoid, because I wanted to avoid death at all costs. And maybe some of you have studied so much to think, this pandemic is nothing.

[3 : 38] I have to cross a street. I have to get into a car. I have to eat food. There are so many things that could kill me every day. Fear of death is reasonable. Good heavens.

So wherever you're at in this spectrum, the reality of death and the fear of death is, I believe, something that's common to us all.

How do you think it shapes you? As we look at our passage this morning in the book of Philippians, we're going to look at how the Apostle Paul thinks about this.

We're going to think about how he viewed life and death through the lens of the gospel and how he lived it out. So if you want to turn with me in the book of Philippians, we're in Philippians chapter 1.

We're going to be looking at verses 18 through 26. Philippians 1, verse 18 through 26.

[4 : 38] We're going to read it, and then we're going to look at it together. So we'll start. If you're in the ESV, it has the break. We're just going to read the last sentence of verse 18.

Paul writes this. 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 at all be 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. If I'm to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which shall I 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.

And 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.

[5 : 54] Let's pray. Ask for God's help as we look into His Word together. Lord, we do ask you this morning that you would be with us as we look into your Word. Lord, help us to receive the truth of this Word.

We pray that your Spirit would apply it to our hearts and to our minds and to our wills. Lord, we pray that you would give us alertness this morning, and I pray that you would give me clarity of speech, that I might speak the words that you would have me speak.

Lord, so that we might together sit under your Word this morning. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. So remember the context of Philippians.

Paul is in prison. He has been in prison for his preaching of the Gospel. He is awaiting a trial, and he knows that the outcome might be his execution.

And he is in reflecting on these things, that he shares how the Gospel is shaping his view of life and death. And there are two things that as he thinks about himself as a Gospel citizen, living out his calling in this world, he says two things in this passage.

[7 : 07] Gospel citizens are not afraid to die, and Gospel citizens have lots to live for. So let's look at these things in this order. Gospel citizens are not afraid to die is the first point.

You see this hanging off of verse 21, which is kind of the center of this. For me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain, and we're going to take those in reverse order.

So Paul says, I am not afraid to die. When you start off in verses 18 and 19, Paul's in prison. He's facing maybe a death sentence.

And how does he start? I will rejoice, for I am confident. I have eager expectation and hope. His attitude is not one of dread in his circumstances, but one of confidence.

What is his confidence in? It's in God. It's that God is sovereign in the circumstance, and that God, his life is in God's hands. And so he starts with this perspective of confidence in God.

[8 : 08] How does he have that confidence? Well, because as verse 21 says, even death, which feels to most of us like the worst thing that could happen, even death would be gain.

He says, I know I'm going to this trial, and it could go either way. But you know what? How bad could it be? If I die, what happens? If I die, I gain something.

I get to go and be with Christ. Paul's entire perspective is shaped by the truth of the gospel that many of us here this morning know and profess to believe, that Jesus Christ came to rescue us from sin and death and judgment.

Jesus Christ came in through his life, and particularly in his death for us, he died a death for us, so that we might not die, but live when we have faith in him.

This is the passage we read earlier in John 11. And Jesus comes to Martha and says, why are you weeping for your brother? Because I am here.

[9 : 22] I am the resurrection and the life. And if you believe in me, even though you die, you will yet live. You will have this eternal life. For the hope of what God has done for us in Christ is that because of what Jesus has done, when we are connected to him by faith, we have both forgiveness of sins and the promise of eternal life.

So that even if we die, we will not die. But we will be living with God forever. This is the great hope of the Christian gospel.

And Paul applies it to his circumstance, and he says, what's the worst thing that can happen to me? It's gain. Because I'll go and be with Jesus.

He does not only say that it's gain, but he says it's actually better. Look with me at verse 23. 22 through 24 is fascinating because Paul lets us in on the internal ruminations.

Like, what do you think, guys? Should I go or should I stay? If I go, do you know what I get? I get something better than anything I could get on this earth.

[10 : 33] I get to be with Jesus. This is his greatest treasure. And the word depart here is this really cool word. It's used in some context to talk about a ship that's leaving its moorings and heading out into open water.

Think about a ship that's tied up to a dock. It's got anchors in the water and ropes that are connecting it to the dock so that it doesn't run away. But when it departs, it loses all of those things and it picks up the sail and the wind fills the sails as it heads out to the open water.

And Paul says, that's what I'm doing. My life is going to be like heading out into the open water of eternal life in the presence of Jesus. And that's all I want.

That's the best thing that could ever happen to me. So he says, no more anchors, no more ropes, no more chains, but to worship him.

Now there's an important theological point here that I want to spend just a minute on because Paul has an immediate hope. He says, if I die, I will be in the presence.

[11 : 45] I will be with Christ. Theologians have wrestled with the timeline of what happens when we die and what it really looks like. The question of the intermediate state between now when we are physically living and the eternal state when we will live forever in some context, in some shape related to God or not, under his judgment or in his presence.

There's this intermediary step that the Bible seems to picture. And Paul gives us a pretty strong clue here about what that looks like. We may make mistakes.

We might think that that in-between time might be just a soul sleep where we're unconscious. But Paul says, no, I'm going to go and be with Jesus. There's some of us who might think that in this in-between time that there might be opportunity for ongoing spiritual progress.

I'm becoming more sanctified or I'm getting rid of, I'm purging my life of the rest of my sin. This is part of the idea of what purgatory is. But again, Paul says, no, this is not what it looks like.

And finally, some might think, and this might be the greatest temptation for some of us, is to think that actually this is what the final state looks like. That when we die, we go and be with God in some spiritual form.

[13 : 09] And that's all there is. But instead, the hope of the gospel is that one day there will be a resurrection and our souls will be reunited with a resurrected body.

And that the picture at the end of history, the end of redemption, is that we will live in a physical world with God that He has made new and is without sin.

And what a glorious place that will be. So for Paul, this is a great hope. The great hope that if I die right now, I am going to be with Jesus and my soul will have fellowship with Him.

Now, this is not for Paul a death wish. He does not have a morbid fascination with the afterlife, nor is he an escapist that simply says, this suffering is too great.

I just wish it would end. He's not denying that death is an enemy and a great trial. He talks about, in chapter 2, verse 27, we'll see this as it relates to his co-worker Epaphras, that if he had died, it would have brought sorrow upon sorrow for him.

[14 : 20] So he's not saying death is nothing, but he is saying that death instead for a believer will be a gateway. It is not lost, but it is gain.

And when God brings it to our lives, it will be better than here. So one commentator says, when the Christian dies, all the uncertainties and dangers of life are behind, and all the certainties and safeties lie ahead in the presence of Jesus Christ.

to die is gain. Can you say that for yourself? I remember wrestling with this question as my first wife battled cancer.

We wrestled with these thoughts together because we wanted her to stay. We had hopes, we had dreams, we had kids, but we also knew that her life was in God's hands.

As we went ahead, we took every day to worship God and to serve, and I saw her increasingly say, for me to live is Christ.

[15 : 33] As long as I get to stay, that will be a glorious thing, but to die is gain, and I will go and be with Jesus. Jesus. Maybe this is a pertinent word for us today as we think about navigating the pandemic in our world today.

It's very easy for the fear of death to have taken a great root in our hearts. Now, there is place for reasonable precautions, and there's place for discussion about what reasonable precautions are.

But for a Christian, we must not navigate those discussions out of fear of dying. Have we allowed fear to take up residence in our heart?

Has it shaped our response to this pandemic in unhealthy ways? Mask or no mask? Vaccine or no vaccine? No vaccine?

Is fear controlling you? Paul would say, for a believer, we must allow the hope of the gospel and the truth that to die is gain to uproot that fear in our hearts.

[16 : 48] Now, here's a hard truth. If you have not trusted in Christ this morning for your salvation, then your fear of death is real.

You fear death because your soul knows that you are not right with God. Every human heart knows it. It is why as humanity we fear death so much and why it controls us so much.

But Jesus invites you into the world that Paul displays, the world of the gospel where death is not the last word, but death is a gateway to glory.

where death is an enemy but it is a defeated one and where there is a hope and a promise of eternal life with our creator and our God and our redeemer and our savior.

Jesus invites you. He has risen from the dead, trampling over death by his death. Because of his death and resurrection, death has lost its sting and he invites you today.

[18 : 02] Come believe in this gospel and be free of death and be free of the fear of death. Paul doesn't just say to die is gain.

He also says for me to live is Christ. There are lots of reasons to live for Paul and by that he means staying here on earth in the flesh.

one of the really interesting things about this passage is he thinks about his future is that it seems pretty sure that Paul's confident that God's going to release him. Verse 20, verse 26 and you can look at chapter 2, verse 27.

Paul is expecting to see the Philippians again. He is saying I expect to see you. Now he says this under God's sovereignty because he's already said I don't know what the outcome's going to be but he says I actually have this great hope and expectation that this is going to happen but my desire is not simply that I would escape from prison.

My desire is that this would turn out for my deliverance and that word could have a lot of different it might refer to his salvation like whatever happens this is going to turn out for my eternal salvation because I know the gospel but it also could mean vindication that what's going to happen the outcome of this trial is going to vindicate the hope of the gospel and if I die people will see me dying for Christ and they will know him more because of it but if I live it will be so that I can go and continue my gospel ministry that I will continue to honor Christ by letting other people know.

[19 : 41] This is what verse 22 says look at it with me verse 22 if I'm to live in the flesh that means fruitful labor for me. Paul's life has been all about ministry we saw that last week in verses 12 through 18 Paul wanted everyone to know Christ he didn't even care if other people were doing it for bad motives and ways that were trying to hurt Paul he said if Christ is being known that's my greatest desire in this life and so for Paul that's his whole his whole focus as long as I am here may more and more people come to know the Jesus that I know and the hope of the gospel that I have believed in and proclaimed that Christ would be glorified in others.

See for Paul as he says to live is Christ he's not talking about being freed so that he can retire you know put his feet up at the baths in Ephesus and you know drink juleps he's gonna he's gonna continue in this hard work of ministry and it's not so that he can thumb his nose at the rival at his rivals and say see God loves me more than he loves you Paul isn't concerned about those things at all Paul's greatest hope is that the Philippians would be growing in faith this is what it says in verse 25 look with me it says convinced of this I know that I will remain and continue for your 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 Paul says oh Lord if you let me stay and set me free may it be so that other people will give praise to you for the fruit of the gospel in my life and in the lives of those around me you know

I've had the privilege over the years of meeting lots of people who've served Christ in some of these ways one person who I think of in particular John Hinkson is a member of our of our congregation and his mother and father grew up as missionaries in Eastern Europe they went into Eastern Europe before the wall fell John tells great stories of that but his mother who is I don't know how old she is she's got to be close to 90 but and she is still going she is a picture of Paul for me to live is Christ and she has a condo in California and she has an apartment in London and she has an apartment in Russia where they serve for many many years and everywhere she goes she's finding people to open the word of God with to let Christ be known to encourage them in their faith the believers in Russia that she has invested in have become leaders in the church in those places and when she comes she's a great encouragement and I think of what Paul says here and I see her life as an example of someone who has said to live is Christ and to die is gain and that lived out this life of ministry to other people her perseverance is an example to many because of her faith in Jesus and friends we need to recognize that it is not without cost because to live as Christ means walking the path that Jesus walked and Jesus path was not one from greater and greater victory and glory it was one of suffering it was one that walked to the cross in humble service with the desire only to please the Father and to bless the world another commentator

Gordon Fee says this too often for us it is for me to live is Christ plus work and leisure and accumulating wealth and relationships and if the truth were known all too often the plus factor has become our primary passion for me to live is my work etc both our progress and our joy regarding the gospel are altogether contingent on whether or not Christ is our primary singular passion this is an infinitely greater option than the great than the self gratification which dominates our culture how do you finish that sentence for me to live is my job my studies my family my success my reputation my earthly comfort for Paul to live is Christ this is the greater option that is before us and as we're encouraged by fee is Christ our primary and our singular passion do we long above all things to know him more do we long above all things to make him known with the people around us are we pursuing this as a church in our fellowship with one another connecting with one another and spurring one another on in our faith are we thinking about how in our family lives that our primary goal is that we would know

Christ more and more as husbands and wives as parents as children as roommates are we thinking about how we can make Christ known to the people in our world the people that we rub shoulders with the people that we study with the people that we work with the people that we play with it all flows from beholding Christ as Paul did as we continue on in the book of Philippians Paul will lift up Christ in chapter 2 as the one who left the comforts of heaven to be our savior to lay down his life for us humbling himself even to death on a cross and now he is raised to this place of highest exaltation would we not consider him this is the one for in chapter 3 Paul says I count all things as loss for the sake of knowing Christ and being found in him when we see Christ this way then we can say to live is Christ to die his gain so we can sing what we just sang a few minutes ago with every breath I long to follow Jesus for he has said that he will bring me home and day by day

[26 : 35] I know he will renew me until I stand with joy before the throne to this I hold my hope is only Jesus all the glory evermore to him and when the race is complete still my lips shall repeat yet not I but through Christ in me friends when we have this when we see Christ like this the fear of death fades into the background we live with an assurance of hope that death is not our end and with a clear eyed vision that as long as we are here we have Christ to follow and to serve and to glorify so that others may know him as we have come to know him let's pray together oh lord who is sufficient for these things oh lord have mercy on us who are so easily distracted whose love so often grows cold towards you how often we esteem many other things as greater than you oh lord work in our hearts uproot in us a fear of death so that we might live for you for as long as you give us life and so that we might die with hope and eager expectation of glory with you we pray this in Jesus name amen for you see you