

Christ Honored In My Body  
Philippians 1:12-26  
Youth Sunday Sermon, May 10, 2009  
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Introduction: The top three most recognizable quotations from Shakespeare are probably: "Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou, Romeo" from Romeo & Juliet, "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ear" from Julius Caesar, and "To be or not to be" from Hamlet.

As you'll remember, this last one comes at a point in the play when Hamlet is full of despair about the murder of his father and his inability to act & take revenge; in fact, he's contemplating suicide. He is truly battling in his mind whether there is more honor in ending his life than in persevering through the heartaches and injuries that we suffer in this life. But then a thought troubles him- "*for in that sleep of death what dreams may come when we have shuffled off this mortal coil must give us pause.*" In other words- what if death is worse than life? It's one thing if death is just ceasing to exist and the end of our human troubles. But what if our experiences in death are harder and worse than the ones in life? Why rush to what might be a nightmare?

I'm not sure how steeped in the Bible Shakespeare was, but there is a parallel passage in Paul's writings that the Bard might have used as inspiration for this famous soliloquy. But he has, of course, placed the words in the mouth of a character who has no idea what comes after death and is making his choices out of ignorance and fear. Today we'll look at the original passage, and see how Paul tosses around that question- to be or not to be, as well as other questions related to his suffering and circumstances in life.

(Read Philippians 1:12-26)

Context: Philippians was most likely written near the end of Paul's life, probably when he was imprisoned in Rome in the early 60's AD. This is at least 25 years after his conversion, follows his three major missionary journeys and basically the whole book of Acts has happened. In these verses, Paul is addressing, and calming down, three fears that the Philippians' had: 1) that the gospel is stopped with his imprisonment, 2) that other Christians were harming Paul's reputation and hurting the church, and 3) that Paul's death would be a tragedy.

(v. 12-14) 1- Paul accepts, and God redeems, what looks like failure.

*12 I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, 13 so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. 14 And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.*

Paul's point of view is amazing- rather than being discouraged that he could have been out planting new churches, arguing in synagogues, winning new converts, discipling young leaders, or any number of things outside the walls of his jail, he sees his imprisonment as a blessing.

Acts & Paul's letters talk a lot about Paul's ambition to get to Rome, and he's finally here, but not the way he promised. If Paul had tried to go down to preach to the centurions and other government officials, he would have been turned away and denied access, but now he's most likely chained to a centurion guard 24 hours a day. That guard is going to hear the gospel whether he wants to or not. I'm reminded of a speaker I heard who loved taking plane rides and sitting in the middle seat because before that plane touched down the people in the window and aisle seats were going to hear the gospel.

Paul's chains have not only affected unbelievers, but believers as well. Christians who know he's in prison get great courage and boldness to speak the word without fear. Persecution is almost always meant to silence believers, but

almost always has the opposite effect. We see others who live and die and suffer for Jesus and we want to give our lives to something great.

Apparently Paul believes Romans 8:28 (which is good, since he wrote it)- *“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.”* It’s one thing to write that, it’s another thing to live it and cling to it. He knows that his circumstances are under the sovereign control of His heavenly Father, who has not fallen asleep at the wheel or failed to notice that one of his most sold-out missionaries had been imprisoned. I don’t think that Paul is just putting the best face on things, or giving it a positive spin- he really believes that God is guiding and directing all of life.

Many of you know that my father was in youth ministry in his 20’s before he got demoted to being a head pastor. He told me a story once that at camp his usual modus operandi was to run around with kids, play as many games and interact with them as possible, and that would be a successful trip. Anyways, one summer he had back surgery and couldn’t do anything during free time except sit around the pool. He said it was amazing that as he sat there, kid after kid sat down to talk to him about their lives, and he ended up having the best camp experience possible; God took him off his feet. I had a very similar experience this a couple weekends ago when I had to lay down in the middle of free time because I was feeling weak and sick; ended up having a fantastic conversation with one of the students who wandered in. Normally I’d be running trying to squeeze in basketball, rock climbing, pool, Frisbee golf, etc. Just as Paul made the most of his opportunities from prison, we’re to make the most of the ministry opportunities in the ways we’re placed.

Maybe you feel imprisoned somehow in your life. Perhaps you had plans that haven’t taken off for you yet. Maybe you got fired or turned down from the job/career you really wanted... People in your life have betrayed or abandoned you. How are you handling that? Are you bitter, intent on focusing on your pain and frustration that it didn’t work out how it was supposed to? Or can you take a step back and recognize God’s hand in where he’s got you. When the painful diagnosis comes for you or someone in your family, the very natural question is, “Why me, Lord?” But do you follow that with, “If you’re in control and good at all, you’ll heal me, or heal my loved one!” Will you come around to a thinking that says something like, “I guess this is where you’ve got me, Lord. How is Christ going to be exalted in this? I know I’m secure in Your love and my eternal, heavenly destination is unchangeable, so no matter what comes, blessed be Your name.”

(v. 15-18) 2- Paul rises above ministry-rivalry with a truly kingdom mindset.

*15 Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. 16 The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. 18 What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.*

Paul knows that there are evangelists/teachers who are somehow seeing his imprisonment as an opportunity for them to get ahead. There’s no indication that the integrity of the gospel is being compromised- when people were preaching a false gospel, Paul and the other NT writers were quick to point out that they were false teachers. But apparently they’re being faithful to Christ, even if they’re not being good brothers to Paul. There must be some implication that they are trashing Paul’s name, that somehow they see their congregations or Bible studies as competing. “Paul’s so great? Why’s he in prison? We’re the ones out here doing the work, our ministry is being blessed.”

But ultimately, Paul recognizes that people in ministry (NOT just professional ministers) have mixed motives, but that doesn’t necessarily invalidate their ministry and message. Ultimately, those people are going to have to stand before God for how they conducted themselves. But for Paul, if Christ is being preached, he will rejoice.

So I want to ask a question this morning: how do you feel when a church in this area suffers problems? Do you pray for them, or do you get excited that our church will look better and maybe pick up some of their people? Maybe you are way more godly than me, but sometimes when I hear about a pastor leaving and a church being real upset, or

maybe some scandal, outwardly I say, "Wow, that's too bad." And inwardly, a part of me thinks, "Cool, maybe people will realize how good our church is now!" And I think Paul would be so distressed to hear me say that! We should look around at other churches and ministries, if they preach the gospel, we should pray for them and rejoice with their success. And we should search our own hearts for jealousy and doing things, even spiritual things to be thought of as better than others. Can we sing the words of the wonderful song that we sign occasionally here: "It's all about you, Jesus, and all this is for you- for your glory and your fame"?

I recently read a story about George Whitefield and John Wesley- spiritual giants of the 1800s, contemporaries who disagreed on doctrinal matters:

"Do you expect to see John Wesley in heaven?"

"No, I do not."

"Then you do not think Wesley is a converted man?"

"Of course he is a converted man! But I do not expect to see him in heaven- because he will be so close to the throne of God and I so far away that I will not be able to see him!"

I love Whitefield's humility- even if they disagreed on a lot of things, to recognize that John Wesley was a strong believer.

### (v. 19-26) 3- Two great choices: living for Christ or dying and being with Christ

*Yes, and I will rejoice, 19 for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, 20 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. 21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. 23 I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. 24 But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. 25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.*

There's something a little deeper going on than just Paul's being released from jail or not. There's a real sense in these verses that Paul is concerned about the many things that he's written about in his other epistles: running the race of life striving for the prize, presenting his life as a living sacrifice, and presenting himself as a workman who does not need to be ashamed. Paul's greater concern than his safety is that Christ is honored. He says he's pretty sure that he'll be released, but no matter what happens- whether I live or die beyond this jail, I want to persevere with integrity and honor Christ in every circumstance.

I generally don't read or quote "The Message" much, but sometimes it puts things so well. V. 20-21 are summarized: *"Everything happening to me in this jail only serves to make Christ more accurately known, regardless of whether I live or die. They didn't shut me up; they gave me a pulpit! Alive, I'm Christ's messenger; dead, I'm his bounty. Life versus more life! I can't lose."*

And we're back to Hamlet's question- to be or not to be? Which is better- life or death? Whereas Hamlet felt that they were both losing propositions and each had their difficulties, Paul says they're both great and have their advantages; he says if I live I will continue to minister and have fruitful labor, but if I die, that would be even better because I would be with Jesus.

Perhaps you've seen the bumper sticker or heard the phrase: "Life Sucks, Then You Die." This is the nihilist's version of "To live is Christ and to die is gain."

But try putting any idol in the place of Christ and what do you have?

Warren Wiersbe:

"For me to live is *money* and to die is *to leave it all behind.*"

"For me to live is *fame/recognition/the praise of men* and to die is *to be forgotten.*"

"For me to live is *power* and to die is *to lose it all.*"

"For me to live is *sports*, and to die is *to leave a really fit body and a lifetime of watching ESPN.*"

“For me to live is to *check off my bucket list* and to die is to *put that final check down.*”

EVEN GOOD THINGS:

“For me to live is to *help other*, and to die is to *not be able to do that anymore.*”

If we put anything else in that sentence, we cannot have the second half-> to die is gain.

I think of when Christians have been taken at a young age- when Keith Green was killed in his 30s, Rich Mullins in his 40s, and Kyle Lake was a young pastor to a lot of people that I went to school with, who was killed in a freak accident holding a microphone during a baptism. I lament how many more great songs they could have produced for the Lord or how much more ministry they could have accomplished- but then I think about how their joy is so much greater; we weep more for the loved ones they left behind than for them. But here Paul declares that dying and being with Christ is FAR BETTER! It was amazing that Keith Green could sing, “*I can’t wait to get to heaven when you wipe away all my tears.*” I don’t think he had a death wish, but he had such a great picture of heaven that he knew death would not be a tragedy but a celebration of moving to our greater home.

Heidelberg Catechism #1

Question: What is your only comfort in life and death?

Answer: That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Savior Jesus Christ; who, with his precious blood, has fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all things must be subservient to my salvation, and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, He also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready, henceforth, to live unto him.

I realize that this sermon is bookended by two funerals of men whose children and grandchildren go to this church. I picked this text out months ago, and I did not foresee that. But there are a lot of people thinking about life and death here. How do funerals affect you? If you’re like me, you think about the people in your life who you’re not ready to have die. But I also think about my own life and death- what God has done, what He’s doing, what He still has to do in and through me. Do I have the amazing perspective that Paul had? That if God wants him to continue in ministry, he’ll be happy to do that and be used of the Lord. But if it’s the end, how great will that be!

Where, O death, is thy sting? Death is not a tragedy; for the Christian who knows his/her life belongs to Jesus who saved us and one day will call us home, death is the the very gateway to paradise and perfect eternal life with our loving God. When Jesus calls, will you be ready? Are you looking forward to it?

Works Cited

The Hamlet illustration was suggested by Dr. J. Ligon Duncan III in his sermon “To Be or Not to Be” on July 8, 2007 at First Presbyterian Church, Jackson, MS. Found at:  
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