

INTRODUCTION

Most of you know we are on a verse-by-verse journey through Philippians. The title of this series is "Seeing Stars Through Prison Bars," because Paul was in prison, yet he found joy in the midst of imprisonment. Today we're going to talk about "A Matter of Life and Death."

I suppose all of us at one time or another have flipped a coin. A man was playing golf one Sunday morning and he said to his golf partner, "I woke up this morning and thought I really ought to go to church, but I wanted to play golf, so I flipped a coin: Heads I'll go to church; tails I'll play golf. I had to flip that thing seven times before it came up tails." That's what we do sometimes. Even when we flip a coin, we already know while the coin is in the air, how we hope the outcome is in our favor.

Philippians 1:21 says, "For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain." A number of years ago, I heard Dr. Carl Bates give a title to a sermon on this text called, "Heads I Win; Tails I Win." For a Christian, we win in life—for me to live is Christ. And for a believer, we win in death—because to die is gain.

Philippians 1:20-26. "I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me."

Let's talk about a matter of life and death.

I. TO LIVE IS CHRIST

Paul says, "To live is Christ." If you've not memorized Philippians 1:21, I hope you will. My wife has directions for me that if I die before her, there is to be a large sign on my closed casket with Philippians 1:21 printed in large letters: FOR ME TO LIVE IS CHRIST, AND TO DIE IS GAIN. I want that to be the text preached at my funeral.

What does it mean to say, "To live is Christ"? I believe it means many things, but let me mention three things I think Paul meant and things that can help us.

A. Jesus is the source of life

Paul was saying Jesus is the source of life. That's why he said "to live is Christ," because Jesus is of life itself. Some people think death is separation of the soul from the body, but the Bible says death is really separation of the soul from God. The Bible says in 1 John 5:12, "He who has

the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life." In John 10:10, Jesus said, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly." (KJV)

I'm going to turn 40 in January and I've heard some people say, "Life begins at 40." But don't you believe it. Life begins with Jesus Christ! Paul says, "I was not even alive until I met Jesus Christ." He was physically alive and you may be physically alive, but if you don't know Jesus Christ, you don't know real life. You're not really living. Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus, "As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins... God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive." (Ephesians 2:1, 4-5) When you become a Christian, that's what God does. He infuses your personality with life. And if you don't know Jesus Christ, you don't know life.

That's what makes Christianity different than any other religion. In fact, I hesitate to compare Christianity to any other religion. It's incomparable. But other religions may stand without their founder. They may be based on a creed or code of conduct or a cause, but if you take Jesus Christ out of Christianity, you have nothing left. Christianity IS Jesus Christ. When you became a Christian, you didn't receive a religion, you didn't receive Christianity, you received Jesus Christ.

It's like when I got married. Eighteen years ago I stood at the altar, shaking, sweat running down the back of my legs. And the Pastor said, "Wilt thou?" and wilted right there in front of everybody. And he said, "Do you take her?"

I said, "Yes."

Do you take him?

"Yes."

We got married. I didn't receive a marriage; I received a bride, a wife. When you become a Christian, you don't receive Christian ethics; you don't receive religion—you receive Jesus Christ. And it's life. And if you don't know Jesus, you don't know life.

B. Jesus is the strength of life

The second thing I believe Paul is talking about is Jesus is the strength of life. Not only do you find life when you find Jesus, but you also find strength to live day by day with Jesus. That's why later in Philippians 4:13 Paul said, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." (NKJV)

I've talked to many people about becoming a Christian, and I have heard this answer many times: "Oh, Brother David, I would like to become a Christian, but I'm afraid I can't live up to all the demands of the Christian life." And that keeps them from becoming a Christian. You cannot live the Christian life—it's impossible for me and you to live the Christian life outside the power of Jesus Christ. Jesus said in John 15:5, "Apart from me, you can do nothing." The whole secret of the Christian life is Jesus Christ, living in me, empowering me, to live the Christian life.

A number of years ago, Stuart Briscoe made these four discoveries about the Christian life. He said the first stage is "This is easy. Pray a prayer. Invite Jesus into your heart. Have your sins forgiven, get your ticket to heaven." But then he began to read the Bible and saw the commands and demands and then he said the second stage of discovery is, "This is difficult! I've got to love

unlovely people, forgive unforgiveable people.” But then he said the third stage of discovery was, “This is impossible!” And it is. God never expected you to live the Christian life. There’s only one person who ever lived who could live the Christian life and his name is Jesus Christ and he wants to live it in you. Then Stuart Briscoe came to the fourth and final discovery: This is exciting! He learned the discovery of Christ living in him. What stage are you in? Easy? Hard? Exciting?

I brought a glove to try to illustrate these stages. I’m going to lay this glove next to my Bible. The glove represents us and our requirement is to pick up this Bible. I could say, “Glove, God wants you to pick up the Bible, so pick it up.” When nothing happens, I could chastise the glove, “Repent glove. You’re not picking up that Bible. You’d better repent!” I could try encouragement, “Come on glove, *please* pick up the Bible.” I could even demonstrate. I could say, “Watch me do it. See? Try to imitate me.” And the glove will just lay there. Many times, people have been preached at, hounded, given demonstrations, but the best way for the glove to pick up the Bible is for me to put my hand in the glove and say, “Glove, pick up that Bible.” And the glove picks it up, because there is another power inside that glove that’s doing it.

As we read earlier, that is the secret to understanding where our strength comes from. Paul said in Galatians 2:20, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” I can’t love unlovely people. I can’t forgive unforgiveable people. I couldn’t go to Russia and preach to all those people—but Jesus Christ in me could do it. And Jesus Christ in you can do it.

C. Jesus is the subject of life

The third thing I believe Paul is saying Jesus is the subject of life. There’s nothing more important than Jesus Christ. A cellist was auditioning for a symphony. For her audition, she sat there and played one note over and over again. The examiner said, “Why don’t you play more notes?” She said, “All the others are looking for the right note and I have found it.” That’s a picture of people today, out there searching for the answers, looking for the truth.

Paul said life can be condensed into one subject: Jesus Christ. That’s why he wrote to the church at Corinth, “For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.” (1 Corinthians 2:2) Paul was talented, highly educated, intelligent man. He had a pedigree as long as my arm and had many credentials. We’ll examine them later in Philippians chapter 3. Yet Paul said compared to knowing Jesus Christ, these things are worth less than nothing. And in that context the word he used for “nothing” was a word used for garbage. He said, “Jesus is the subject of my life. I want to talk about him and live for him.” Heads: Life is Christ.

How many of you can honestly say, “For me to live is Christ. I didn’t really know what life was until I met Jesus. He’s the strength of my life. I’m trying to be surrendered to him.”?

II. TO DIE IS GAIN

Let's go to the other side of the coin: Tails, I win. Paul said, "To die is gain." Let's face it: All of us are going to die if the Lord tarries.

I came across an interesting statistic about death: One out of one persons die. We already know that, but let's face it, in America, we are a death-denying culture. That's why we put flowers around graves, we try to make it look good. Death is why, regardless of age, we want to be younger, act younger, and look younger. We want to cheat death as long as we can. Women have makeovers, men go through "sports car menopause." It is the mindset of "I'm not getting old; I'm not going to die. I'm going to cheat the grave."

But Paul wasn't afraid to talk about death. He decided that to live or die, he wanted Jesus to be glorified in his life. Paul was facing a dilemma. It was as if God gave him the choice, "Paul, do you want to be with me now or do you want to stay." When Paul began to think about the choice between staying and going, he chose to stay, but he had a desire to depart and be with Christ, which was the best by far. That ought to tell us something about death for a Christian. It shouldn't be something we fear or deny. Paul said death for a Christian is so much better than living. Yet Paul was not suicidal, but he understood what was in heaven and what was on earth and to him, what was in heaven was better beyond the shadow of a doubt.

How different it is for a non-Christian. The French philosopher, Voltaire, was a highly intellectual man but he hated Christianity. Voltaire predicted that the time would come in France where there would be no Bibles. But God has a sense of humor, because today, the office of the International Bible Society is located in Voltaire's home, where they print and distribute Bibles around Europe. Before Voltaire died, he said, "I hate life and I hate to die." Compare that with "For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain." On his deathbed, Voltaire said to his physician, "Half of all that I own is yours, if you can give me six more months to live." His physician said, "There's nothing more I can do." Then Voltaire retorted, "Then I shall go to hell and you shall go with me." That's a completely different view than the apostle Paul.

Why is heaven gain to believers? Let me give you three reasons:

A. At death, a Christian gains the literal presence of Jesus

First, at death, a Christian gains the literal presence of Jesus. What's better about dying than living? Paul said, "I will be in the physical presence of my Lord, Jesus Christ. And I love him so much." Right now, we are looking at Jesus through a glass darkly (I Corinthians 13:12) and we can't get a good glimpse of Jesus, but when we are face to face, it will be so much better than right now.

Are you looking forward to seeing Jesus? There was a time in my life when I was backslidden and if someone had asked me that question, I would said, "No way!" And I'm certainly not perfect, but God knows my heart and I love Jesus so much, I'd like to see him right now, face to face. I want to ask him questions, don't you? I want to ask him what it was like being a teenager? What did you write in the sand when the woman was caught in adultery? Why did you choose Judas to begin with? I want to start the first 10 billion years of eternity at the feet of Jesus. I have a relationship with him now and at death, that relationship is going to be enhanced. That's the

only relationship that gets better with death and that's why you better make that relationship something important right now.

B. At death, a Christian gains fellowship with saints who have died

A second reason Paul could say death and heaven is better, is because at death, a Christian gains fellowship with saints who have died. Are you looking forward to meeting the giants of the Christian faith? After I spend the first 10 billion years at the feet of Jesus, I want to talk to some of the others there:

"David, why did you pick up five stones when you only needed one for Goliath?"

"Job, what was it like living with a woman who said, 'Curse God and die?'"

"Moses, what was it like leading a bunch of griping people for 40 years through the desert?"

"Joshua, what was it like when those walls came tumbling down?"

"Esther, what was it like to be the first beauty queen?"

"Paul, what was the thorn in your flesh?"

Both my parents are in heaven and many of you have loved ones in heaven and I look forward to renewing fellowship with them. I have found that the older a Christian gets, usually the sweeter heaven becomes, because more of our loved ones are there. When people reach a highly advanced age, most of their loved ones are there. A number of years ago, I spoke with a woman celebrating her 96th birthday and I asked her what was so special about being 96. She replied, "No peer pressure." If heaven gets any sweeter to me than it is now, I don't know how I'm going to stand it.

C. At death, a Christian gains freedom from pain and struggle

The third reason that I believe made heaven sweet to Paul was freedom from pain and struggle. We all face pain and problems and Paul was not immune. He had been beaten five times. Three times he had been beaten with rods. He had been stoned and left for dead. He was never more than a bush away from a beating. Everywhere he went; there was a group of people waiting to ambush him. He had a thorn in the flesh, we don't know what it was, but he said it was so terrible, a messenger from Satan, that he asked God to take it away three times. But God said, "No, I'm not going to take it away, I'm going to give you the grace to live with it." When Paul died, the thorn would be gone, the beatings would be gone, the pain would be over. Paul struggled with sin. "What I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do." (Romans 7:15) But he knew all those struggles would disappear after death. That's why he could add up all the assets in his life and all the assets of heaven and he could say, "Heaven is so much better." But as good as he knew heaven was, he was willing to postpone it so he could preach the gospel to help us.

Not only was Paul willing to postpone heaven, but amazingly, he even said, "For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers." (Romans 9:3) Wow! That convicts my heart. How many of us would be willing to miss heaven and be accursed forever from God so others around the world could be saved? Paul had that kind of a heart, because to live is Christ and to die is gain.

CONCLUSION

I want you to be Judgement Day/graveyard/gut level honest. Don't give an answer you think a preacher wants to hear. I want your answer to be between you and God. Right now, what would you put in this blank? Be honest, because God already knows—you can't fool Him.

For me, to live is _____

What is your response? Money? Success? Acceptance? Popularity? Pleasure? Some of you don't know what to put in the blank. Give it the "4 T" test. Time: What do you spend most of your time doing? Talk: What do you talk about? Think: What do you think about the most? Treasure: What are you willing to spend any amount of money on? Whatever your answer, that's what's in your blank. Paul spent his time on Jesus, talking about him, thinking about him, and he sacrificed everything for ministry.

If there is anything in your blank besides Jesus Christ, when you die, the result will be loss. Some of you, whether or not you want to write it down, you have to say, "For me to live is money," because you're concerned about making more of it. If you put money in that blank, then you must say, "To die is loss," because when you die, you will not take it with you. If you say, "For me to live is pleasure," then to die is loss, because you'll lose that too. "For me to live is my family," as noble as that is, then to die is loss if they're not Christians. Anything else you put in that blank besides Jesus Christ will be a loss upon death. But if you put Jesus first in your life, then to die will be gain.

My prayer is that today, you will say, "God, from this day forward, for the rest of my life, I want it to be 'for me to live is Christ and then to die is gain.'"

OUTLINE

I. TO LIVE IS CHRIST

A. Jesus is the source of life

Jesus said, "I am come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly."
John 10:10 KJV

B. Jesus is the strength of life

"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." *Philippians 4:13 NKJV*

II. TO DIE IS GAIN

At death, a Christian gains

A. the literal presence of Jesus

B. gains fellowship with saints who have died

C. gains freedom from pain and struggle

Your personal response:

For me, to live is _____ and to die is (Loss/Gain)

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes