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A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE ON DEATH

Philippians 1:19-26

By

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Philippians Lesson 8

A Christian Perspective On Death Philippians 1:19-26

In our last study, I covered these verses with the emphasis on the great truth of the theme verse, "For to me, to live is Christ." This week I want to deal with the second half of the verse, "to die is gain." If I were to ask what word you associate with the word "death," and if you were not familiar with Philippians 1:21, I venture to say that the word "gain" would not come to mind. We think of death as a terrible loss, not a gain. Sometimes, if the person was suffering a great deal, we say that death was merciful, since it released them from their pain. But normally, we view death as tragic and we go to great effort and expense to hang on to life for as long as possible.

Also, we tend to avoid thinking or talking about death unless it is absolutely necessary. When author William Saroyan was within days of his own death from cancer in 1981, he issued this statement to the Associated Press: "Everybody has got to die, but I have always believed an exception would be made in my case. *Now what?*" No doubt he was speaking with his tongue in cheek, but he brought out what we all tend to think, that "somehow an exception will be made in my case." Since it is unpleasant to contemplate, we put off thinking about it until it seems inescapable.

But, as has often been stated, a person is not ready to live unless he is ready to die. To live properly, we must live purposefully, and always in view of both the certainty of death and the uncertainty of when it will occur. Many of the great Christians of the past thought often about death. Martin Luther said, "Even in the best of health we should have death always before our eyes [so that] we will not expect to remain on this earth forever, but will have one foot in the air, so to speak" (source unknown). Jonathan Edwards, as a young man, wrote down 70 resolutions which he read weekly to help keep his life focused. Number 9 was, "Resolved, to think much, on all occasions, of my dying, and of the common circumstances which attend death" (*The Works of Jonathan Edwards* [Banner of Truth], vol. 1, "Memoirs," p. xx). The Puritan

preacher, Richard Baxter, who lived with chronic bodily illness, said, "I preach as though I ne'er should preach again, and as a dying man to dying men."

I submit that you cannot live the Christian life properly unless you understand the Christian perspective on death. Our views of death must be based on the truthfulness of God's revelation to us in His Word, not on the speculations of people devoid of God's Word.

As I developed last week, the apostle Paul was clear on his purpose: "For to me, to live is Christ." That is the only purpose that adequately takes into account the reality of death and the fact that it could occur at any moment. And, the person who can truly say, "For me, to live is Christ," can also confidently say, "to die is gain."

For the Christian, to die is gain.

But, what does this mean? We first must consider what ...

"TO DIE IS GAIN" DOES NOT MEAN:

1. "To die is gain" does not mean that a Christian should desire death because he hates life.

Paul did not hate life. To the contrary, he was filled with joy, even though his circumstances were difficult (1:18). He viewed life as sweet fellowship with Christ and the joy of serving Christ. So he was not viewing life as tough and death as escape or relief. Sometimes when life is difficult, or when a person suffers from a chronic, painful disease, he longs for relief and may be tempted even to take his own life. Sometimes even godly men get into such a state of depression that they would rather die than live. Moses (Num. 11:15), Elijah (1 Kings 19:4), Jeremiah (Jer. 20:14-18), and Jonah (Jon. 4:3, 8) all hit low points where they asked God to take their lives.

But suicide is never God's will for anyone. It does not exalt Christ, as Paul here wants his death to do. It is always a selfish act, done in disregard of those left behind to grieve. It usurps the sovereignty of God who has a fruitful purpose for every believer's life. Thus it would be grossly wrong to interpret Paul's words as a warrant for suicide.

Christians should love life and view it as an opportunity to serve the Lord thankfully. It is not wrong to seek to extend our lives through proper medical procedures when we face a life-threatening illness. Because of modern medicine, there are difficult decisions that we may have to face for ourselves or with loved ones. It's not always clear where to draw the line. As a general rule, if a medical procedure will not restore a person to life, but only prolongs the process of dying, then it probably should not be used. But as Christians, our motive for wanting to extend life should be so that we can further serve the Lord, not just so that we can enjoy ourselves.

But, the point is, God wants us to live life to the fullest, to serve Him joyfully as long as we have life. Paul was not suicidal or morbid. But he was expendable. He is saying here, that if God were to call him to heaven, that suited him just fine, because he knew he would be with the Lord.

2. "To die is gain" does not mean that a Christian should not grieve over the death of loved ones.

Until Christ returns, death is still our enemy that robs us of the presence of our loved ones. Scripture doesn't condemn grieving; in fact, it tells us to "weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15). Jesus wept with Mary and Martha at Lazarus' tomb, even though He knew He was about to raise him from the dead (John 11:35). As Christians, we do not grieve as those who have no hope (1 Thess. 4:13), but we still do grieve.

It is not unspiritual to grieve or weep at the death of a loved one. In two places in Scripture (that I know of) people were forbidden to grieve. When Aaron's sons disobediently offered "strange fire" on the altar, and the Lord struck them dead, Moses told Aaron and his surviving sons not to grieve for them, but to allow the rest of the people to grieve (Lev. 10:1-7). Apparently their grief would have given the impression that Aaron and his other sons were on the side of the sons who died, over against the Lord. The other occasion where grief was forbidden was when God suddenly took Ezekiel's wife. God told Ezekiel he could groan silently, but he was not to shed tears or grieve outwardly, as a sign of the impending judgment on Judah (Ezek. 24:15-24). But clearly, this

was an exceptional situation. The norm is for Christians to grieve, and it is not a sign of weakness.

Thus when Paul says that “to die is gain,” he does not mean that Christians should desire death because they hate life; nor, that we should not grieve over the death of loved ones.

“TO DIE IS GAIN” DOES MEAN:

1. “To die is gain” means that a Christian should view death as a means of exalting Christ.

Whether he lived or died, Paul’s aim was to exalt Christ (1:20). If, by his faithful witness in dying, Paul could bear witness to the hope of the gospel, then he was ready to go. The time of death, for the believer, should be a time of bearing witness to the saving grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. Christians should “die well.”

During the last four years of the reign of Bloody Mary in England (1555-1558), at least 288 people were burned at the stake because they refused to give up their Protestant beliefs and confess Mary’s Catholicism. These faithful martyrs viewed their deaths as a means of exalting Christ. The first to die was a godly pastor named John Rogers. He had not been allowed to see his family while he was held in prison. On the way to his execution, his wife and ten children stood by the road. He was hardly allowed to stop and say farewell. As he marched to the stake, he calmly repeated Psalm 51. The French ambassador who witnessed the execution wrote that Rogers went to death as if he was walking to his wedding (J. C. Ryle, *Light from Old Times* [Evangelical Press], p. 23). In a sense, he was!

The second martyr, Bishop John Hooper, was entreated with many tears by a friend whom he had led to Christ, to recant and thus spare his life. The friend urged him to remember that “life was sweet and death was bitter.” Hooper replied, “Eternal life is more sweet, and eternal death is more bitter” (p. 25).

The third Reformer to die, Rowland Taylor, was sent from London to the town where he had been pastor, to be burned in front of his former church members. When he got within two miles of the town, the sheriff asked him how he felt. He replied, “God be praised, Master Sheriff, never better. For now I am almost at home. I lack but just two stiles to go over, and I am even at

my Father's house." As his church members lined the streets and greeted him with tears and lamentations, he repeatedly said, "I have preached to you God's Word and truth, and am come this day to seal it with my blood" (p. 27).

The fourth martyr, Bishop Robert Farrar, told a friend before his execution that if he saw him once stir in the fire from the pain of his burning, he need not believe the doctrines he had taught. By God's strength, he stood in the flames holding out his hands until they were burned to stumps, until a bystander in mercy struck him on the head to put an end to his sufferings (p. 29).

The fifth to die was John Bradford, age 35. At the stake, after kissing it, he held his hands toward heaven and cried, "O England, England, repent thee of thy sins! Beware of idolatry; beware of false Antichrists! Take heed they do not deceive you!" Then he turned to a young man about to be executed with him and said, "Be of good comfort, brother; for we shall have a merry supper with the Lord this night."

I won't tell you of all 288, although I could tell of many others whose courage and witness exalted Christ in their deaths. But let me tell you of one other, the ninth, Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer. His story was different in that he stood firm through his trial and in prison for a long while. But, in the final month of his life, his courage failed. Under intense pressure, he signed a paper renouncing the doctrines of the Reformation and embracing Catholicism. But, his persecutors hated him so much that they made the mistake of resolving to burn him in spite of his recanting. But what they didn't know was that while he awaited execution, he repented of what he had done.

On March 21, 1556, he was brought to St. Mary's Church, like Samson before the Philistines, to make sport of him. I'm sorry to say that a man named Cole preached the sermon, and then Cranmer was invited to declare his Catholic faith. To the utter shock of his Catholic captors, he boldly renounced Catholicism, declared the Pope to be Antichrist, and rejected the doctrine of transubstantiation. In a frenzy, his enemies hurried him out of the church and to the stake. As the flames curled around him, he steadily held into the fire his right hand that had sinned by signing the recantation,

and said, "This unworthy right hand." He held his left hand up toward heaven as he died (pp. 35-38).

We may not have to die a painful martyr's death, but we should view our death as a time to exalt the Savior, both by our attitudes and our words. Then, to die will be gain.

2. "To die is gain" means that a Christian's death leads to the return on his investment.

"To die is *gain*." Paul had counted everything else as loss for the sake of Christ (3:7), and had invested his entire life in the goal of knowing and serving Christ. Death would usher him into the Lord's presence where he would hear, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter the joy of your Master." In light of the reality of Christ's victory over death through His resurrection, Paul wrote (1 Cor. 15:58), "Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord." Death brings you to eternal rewards!

Toil for the things of this earth which will perish is in vain, because you won't take any of it with you. An unbeliever's life, even the life of a powerful, wealthy unbeliever, is like the wake of an ocean liner--impressive for the moment, but quickly gone. As a wall plaque we had near our front door when I was a child said, "Only one life, 'twill soon be past; only what's done for Christ will last." Death opens the door for us to receive the promised, rich returns on all that we have invested for Christ.

3. "To die is gain" means that a Christian's death frees him from earthly labors, trials, and temptations.

Paul had worked hard and suffered much for the cause of Christ. His body had endured one stoning, numerous beatings, several imprisonments, three shipwrecks, frequent dangers, many sleepless nights, often in hunger and thirst, in cold and exposure, plus the many concerns he bore for the work (2 Cor. 11:23-29). I don't doubt but what he was tired and was ready for the Lord to say, "Come on home to your rest."

Paul calls death "to depart" (1:23). The word was used of soldiers taking down their tents to move on. Paul says that at death our tent (our body) is taken down, while our spirit goes to be with the Lord (2 Cor. 5:1-8). Sailors used the word to describe a ship

being loosed from its moorings to set sail. At death the believer sets sail from this world, but safely arrives at heaven's shore. It was also a political word, describing the freeing of a prisoner. This body holds us prisoner to various temptations and weaknesses, but death sets us free (Rom. 7 & 8). The word was also used by farmers, meaning to unyoke the oxen when their work was over. Death means laying down the burdens and concerns of our labors for Christ here, and to join Him in that place where there will be no death, no mourning, no crying, and no pain (Rev. 21:4). (The above word study adapted from Warren Wiersbe, *Be Joyful* [Victor Books], pp. 38, 39.)

Robert Moffatt, pioneer missionary to Africa in the last century, said, "We'll have all eternity to celebrate our victories, but only one short hour before sunset to win them." We should work hard for Christ now, but to die will be gain because our work will be over and we shall be like Jesus, because we shall see Him as He is (1 John 3:2).

4. "To die is gain" means that at death, a Christian goes immediately to be with Christ.

Paul says that when he departs, he will "be with Christ," which is "very much better" (1:23). In 2 Corinthians 5:8 Paul teaches that to be absent from the body is "to be at home with the Lord." This comforting truth shows that four commonly held ideas about death are in error because they contradict Scripture:

(1) *The doctrine of "soul sleep" is in error.* Some, notably the Seventh Day Adventists, teach that at death the soul sleeps while the body is in the grave until the future resurrection when Christ returns. They base this on the numerous places where the Bible refers to death as sleep. But Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus, plus Paul's clear statement that to be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord, show soul sleep to be wrong.

(2) *The doctrine of annihilation is in error.* Some believe that at death, we just cease to exist, like animals. This view is usually held by those who reject Scripture. But I have met professing Christians who think that we die and that's it; there's nothing after death. But Paul says, "If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied" (1 Cor. 15:19).

(3) *The doctrine of reincarnation is in error.* One out of four Americans believe in some form of reincarnation, that the soul keeps being recycled, either in a better form of life if you've been good, or in a worse form as punishment for evil. But, Scripture plainly teaches, "It is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment" (Heb. 9:27).

(4) *The doctrine of purgatory is in error.* The Roman Catholic Church teaches that purgatory is a place of "purifying fire" where "the souls of those who died in the charity of God and truly repentant but who had not made satisfaction with adequate penance for their sins and omissions are cleansed after death with punishments designed to purge away their debt" (from Vatican II, cited by Dave Hunt, *A Woman Rides the Beast* [Harvest House], pp. 475-476). The church never defines what "adequate penance" is. Further, the church pronounces anathema (eternal condemnation) on anyone who denies this doctrine (The Council of Trent, cited by Hunt, p. 474).

The only support for purgatory comes from the apocryphal 2 Maccabees 12:46. The doctrine was invented by Pope Gregory the Great in 593, but it was not accepted as official Catholic dogma for nearly 850 years, in 1439 (Hunt, p. 477). It clearly contradicts the Scriptural teaching on the finished work of Christ, on the sufficiency of His atonement for sins, and salvation by grace through faith alone. It makes salvation depend on our works (indulgences) or suffering. It renders any assurance of salvation impossible.

Paul says, "To depart and be with Christ" is "very much better." The only way he can say that is if his soul goes immediately into Christ's presence, where he will be accepted on the basis of Jesus' shed blood and righteousness. Remember, "very much better" does not mean "better than life at its worst," but, "better than life at its joyous best" (based on, H. C. G. Moule, *Philippian Studies* [CLC], p. 78). The great joy of heaven is to be with Christ.

Conclusion

During the Boxer Rebellion in China a century ago, a missionary came as near to death as anyone could and live to tell about it. He felt the sword of the Chinese executioner on his neck before it was lifted for the final blow, when the executioner changed his

mind and let him go. The missionary told a friend that his first emotion was disappointment that he would not see the Savior that day. Fanny Crosby, the prolific hymn writer, became blind as a young infant. She said later in life that she would choose blindness over sight, because the first face she would ever see would be that of her Savior.

For the Christian, "to die is gain." Can you say truthfully, "For *me*, to die is gain"? If not, you may need to go back one step and ask, "Is it true that for me, to live is Christ?"

Discussion Questions

1. How would you answer an advocate of euthanasia who appealed to Paul's seeming "death is better" perspective?
2. Is it possible for a Christian to grieve too much? How can we know if our grief is "normal" or if it goes too far?
3. If it's better to be with Christ in heaven, is it wrong to seek medical treatment for serious illnesses? Why/why not?
4. Which essential biblical truths are contradicted by the Catholic doctrine of purgatory?

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