

Life and Death

9/20/20

SJN

God's Word comes to us this morning from our Epistle reading where we hear these words once more from St. Paul: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 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" (Philippians 1:21-24) This is the Word of the Lord.

Friends... are you living... or are you dying? As Paul sits in a dark, dank, depressing prison cell, he gives us and the Philippians an answer to the question... "What is living"?

Isn't that what dorm roommates say when they see their peer sitting in their room studying all the time? "Get out! Stop studying, and go have some fun!" which, of course is their definition of living.

If that is living.. then what is dying? Well, that's what the other roommate was doing - and quite good at doing - that is, sitting in the room, studying and doing homework. Let's call him Henry. Flash forward a few months later and as Henry studies with his dorm room door open, his roommate just walks past.. looks in.. sees Henry with a book, and then shakes his head, "Henry, you're dying.. You're dying,".. and he walks away. Henry would hear this multiple times a day for months. While the roommate wanted Henry to get out of his room by playfully teasing him, the saying actually brings up a good point: what is living? As Paul sits in prison - chained to a royal guard - he gives us an answer. Paul tells us what it means to live.

We need to understand the context that Paul finds himself in. As he pens the letter to the Philippians, he is imprisoned, and has been for years. After he returned from his third missionary journey, Paul went to Jerusalem. While there, he was falsely accused - by the Jews - of preaching against the Laws of Moses and for defiling the temple by bringing a Gentile into a forbidden part of the building. And so, he was arrested. Paul has been brought before numerous governors and leaders to plead his case and innocence. And as he waits for these opportunities.. there he sits... in jail.

And just like today, the legal process can be quite slow. The apostle used his right as a Roman citizen to appeal his case before the Emperor himself. He wants to go to Rome to appeal and witness to the Emperor. But in the meantime, as Paul waits for this opportunity.. he is imprisoned and on house arrest in Rome... uncertain of what will happen to him.

As Paul begins his letter, then.. he gives the Philippians an update and some encouragement. He tells them that God is working through his imprisonment. He says that the Gospel is being advanced to people that would not have heard it without this circumstance.. which was the royal guard, and Caesar's household. These guards would have been shackled to Paul all day long. So.. what do you think would happen being shackled next to a pastor? You're gonna hear about Jesus... or.. he will at least talk your ear off.

The apostle also says that his imprisonment is a source of encouragement for others to witness and speak about Jesus. Since Paul is not discouraged by his status.. it has encouraged the faith and actions of others. It gave them the confidence and boldness that they needed to proclaim Jesus to a hostile world.

There was a young man who was finishing up his doctorate at the Sem. When asked what he was going to do now that his degree was almost finished.. he said he was going to go back to his home country in Africa.. and would most likely.. be martyred like his brother. He said he was still going to proclaim Jesus.. even though this would be his fate. His faith, determination, and bravery were quite amazing.. and encouraging. It is the same here with Paul.

It is in this context that Paul gives us his answer about life and death. He is chained to a guard.. not out in the world. He cannot enjoy the pleasures of this life.. he has no freedom. Is this really... living? Can Paul really speak about this as he is under arrest? Are you living.. or are you dying, Paul? The apostle says, "I am living!"

For the apostle, beloved... life and living... is Jesus. "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Jesus..... is the apostle's life! The Lord was the beginning of his faith life on that fateful Damascus road encounter where Jesus appeared to Saul. The Lord was also the continuing of his life. There was never a day in which Paul didn't live in the Lord's presence. There was never a day that the Lord wasn't with him. And the Lord.. will also be with him at the end of his life.. at his death.

With each passing second, Paul was one second - one step closer - to being with his Lord. Jesus was the inspiration of his life, and what dominated his thoughts and actions.

The Lord gave him a meaning for life... which was to preach and be an apostle. The Lord was also the strength for his life. Christ's all-sufficient grace was made perfect in Paul's weaknesses. For Paul, no Jesus.. equaled no life. Christ was nothing less than life itself. Paul's circumstances had no bearing on this at all. Paul is not dying.. but living.. and living to the fullest.

But this truth led to a dilemma for Paul. Since life is all about Jesus.. to depart from this world - and to be with Him - is far better. Paul wants to enjoy paradise with His Savior, and to be in His presence. Why wouldn't he want to be free from the stresses of ministry and from the problems of this life?

Yet, on the other hand.. while Paul wants to be with Jesus.. he is needed here. The Philippians need him. They weren't even ten years old as a congregation. Other churches needed him. Other people needed him, like the young pastor Timothy. What.. to do?

Paul has the confidence that he will remain in this life. He figures that if he has another day.. he will use that day in service to the Lord and to others. If the Lord doesn't grant him another day, well then... that means he will be with His Lord.. which is far better. For Paul, this is what to live looks like. To live is Christ. If he stays... great! If he dies and goes home.. even better!

What about you, brothers and sisters.. are you living.. or are you dying? As we hear about Paul's dilemma, we can't help but relate. At two and a half years old, young Kata caught pneumonia and was on a ventilator because her lungs gave out and collapsed. To get her out of bed, she would be set into a wagon, outside the room in front of the ICU doors. She liked to watch them open and close, and to see the people come in and out. She didn't talk much, if ever, because of the trach that she had. But when she did speak.. you would listen. One day, she turned to her brother and said but one word: "Home." The brother's heart sunk at hearing that. He knew all that that one word entailed. She was hurting.. she was suffering deeply. She wanted to be out of there and back at the house. To that.. the brother could only respond, "soon."

We can know what it's like to turn to Jesus and say, "Home." Maybe we are saying that right now.. as our bodies might be devastated and damaged by disease. Maybe it is uttered because of sad and seemingly insurmountable situations. Some say that the outcome of the upcoming election – regardless of the winner – will spell doom for our country.. our grandchildren and their children. Perhaps old age might just be overwhelming.

But regardless of all of this.. or COVID, protests, riots, hurricanes, wildfires, floods... we can also say "home".. out of comfort and joy and excitement too.. for we know – believers in Christ know - that one day.. we will be with our Savior. This doesn't have to be said just in times of trouble or pain. We know that being with Christ is far greater – far, far greater - than anything here. And because He lives.. we shall live, too!

But just like the apostle.. we might feel a pull.. feel a necessity to be here, too. Our family might need us. Maybe we have aging parents or relatives that need us. It could be a spouse.. children.. grandchildren. It might be the students in our school. It might be a neighbor or a friend. We might want to stay and serve our Lord and His people. We want to be with Jesus.. but we can surely have a pull, or tug, here.. like Paul.

It is in this same dilemma that Paul points us to Christ... our life. Jesus gave up His life for us so that we could have life, and... eternal life. We live through faith in His perfect life.. being forgiven, declared righteous, and as God's child. And just like the apostle.. Jesus.. is our life.

Not only did God begin our life at conception.. He began our spiritual life through baptism, where we were joined to Him in His death and resurrection.. to walk in the newness of life. We live our life in Him now.. living in His grace, love, protection, and care. He is with us with every step that we take in this life. And when we die.. we will end our life in Him.. where we will one day be with Him.. fully. Whether that happens by death or His Second Coming, friends... this will happen for us.

Jesus is the inspiration of our life and the motivation of our good works. He is the meaning of our life. The reason we get out of bed in the morning does not rest in us.. but it rests in Him. We live.. for Him. We live our lives in service to Him.. and.. to tell others about Him. Who do you come into contact in your life that you can spread this Word to?

Jesus is also the strength of our life. He gets us through life's storms, and pestilence and elections.. and sustains us. His grace is made perfect in our weaknesses, our flaws, and our inabilities.

Jesus is our life. To live is Christ. Our life is not defined by the cool gadgets and toys we have. Neither is it defined by the phones we use, the money we have, the home we own, or the things we've done. These things are not life. They only create problems, worries, and disappointments anyway.

Jesus is life. To live is Him. If we live another day.. great! We have another day to live in His grace and love, and to serve Him. If we don't have another day... even better.. we get to go be with Him.

Life and death are before each us, beloved. We all live and we all die. You might be frightened out of your wits with COVID and what is happening in our country right now. You might be anxious about death. These things point to us.. not to Christ.

But Jesus is our life.. and we have life in Him... always. So with Jesus as our earthly life.. and Jesus as our eternal life.. life and death.. in and with Jesus.. bring comfort, joy and excitement in any and all circumstances.. for we know. – just like Paul and Job and all Believers.. that our Redeemer.. lives.. and we shall see Him face.. to face. This is the Word of the Lord.