

# Written Copy: Philippians 1:21-27 "To Live is Christ-To Die is Gain

Proper 20-16<sup>th</sup> Sunday @ Pentecost

Sunday, September 19<sup>th</sup>, 2020

## Text: Philippians 1:21-27

<sup>21</sup> For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. <sup>22</sup> If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. <sup>23</sup> I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. <sup>24</sup> But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. <sup>25</sup> Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, <sup>26</sup> so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again. <sup>27</sup> Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,

## Exegetical Statement

Paul writes to the Christians at Philippi to give them an update on his imprisonment in Rome and the trial that most likely has just gotten underway. Paul tells them that no matter what the outcome this negative situation for him personally has served for the positive advancing of the Gospel in Rome. The natural barriers caused by the spiritual testimony of a Jewish man in pagan Rome are being broken down, His physical chains, through the powerful working of the Holy Spirit have had the opposite effect of the Gospel; it is being heard and proclaimed through the influence and hearing of the imperial guard who have been Paul's constant companions, and whose positions give their testimony added weight among the citizens of Rome. The Gospel is advancing because they are sharing what they hear Paul preach and teach. And this has resulted in the Church becoming more bold in its proclamation of the Word, seeing how mightily the Spirit is using this for the advancement of the Gospel. As far as Paul the prisoner goes, he sees his situation as a win-win not matter how Nero decides his case. This is in answer to their prayers and the powerful working of the Holy Spirit who is fulfilling Jesus promise to provide the strength and the words when his Apostles are made to stand before rulers. Either way the result will be Paul's deliverance. Paul may live or he may die, yet either way the Spirit can use his fate to proclaim Christ Jesus. If Paul lives, he will go on serving as an Apostle, continuing to share the faith and build up the faith. And his death would stand as a martyr, the ultimate testimony to the strength of his faith. To die would mean his cross-bearing for the Gospel is over and he goes to be with Jesus. This is personally preferable to Paul. If it was left up to Paul to choose, he could not. But the Spirit is deciding for him based of the needs of the Church, as it is far more necessary that he continue his ministry. If this is the case, he wants the Philippians to rejoice not in his win but in the Gospel's triumph in court, being declared a legal message to share. And he asks that the Church would in response continue to live the Christian witness of being exemplary citizens of both the realm of the Empire and the Kingdom of Christ. Whether he comes to visit or remains absent he wants them to work and live in the special fellowship of those who share the same Spirit. They should not be frightened by the possibility of opposition from authority or the type of punishment that they have seen Paul suffer. This will come and is part of what the Church suffers as it shares the suffering of Christ. Evil's persecution of the Church is actually the undeniable sign of the eternal suffering that will be their lot. But the fact that the Church is made to suffer what Christ suffered is the undeniable sign that we will share in His eternal glory on the Last Day.

## Focus Statement:

Paul saw his life in a different manner. His life had meaning only because he had been born again to a new life in Christ. So, living means living with Jesus as a repentant follower thought the presence and mighty work of the Spirit. Death means the final victory and eternal life lived in Christ's presence forever.

## Function Statement:

### Why it's important to know:

Because death is not natural but a scary thought, we often have a wrong perception on life. Our life is ours to live and to continue to live is victory. To die means we lost the battle to live, it means defeat. We don't mind serving the Gospel as part of our life, but faced with a choice to renounce our faith and live or die in faith we might be hard pressed to choose

### What the hearer should do as a result:

See our life lived out now not lived to self, but in service to proclaiming Jesus Christ. We live not to please ourselves but to joyfully serve our Savior through both the good times He allows and the bad times that must come, which testify to the best time yet to come: the Last Day.

## Subject Sentence: We live to serve Christ and die in His arms

## Introduction

In just a little bit I'm going to invite those who are joining our Congregation today, who have graduated from our Walking Together Class, to join me up here before the altar. I am going to ask them to make a public profession of their faith before you. I will lead them through a short exorcism: which is the public renunciation of the devil, all his works and ways, reminding them of that same renunciation that was made at their Baptism. I will ask them to give voice their faith in the Triune God, their faith in the Holy Scriptures as the inspired word of God, and their intention to live out that faith in word and deed. But perhaps the most striking thing that they will be asked to agree to are the following: ***“Do you intend to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death?”*** And following that ***“Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?”***

As I was proofreading the service these two statements struck me hard, and they made me pause for a moment. The other statements they will agree to are almost a given for anyone who is purposefully joining a Christian congregation. You are making a statement that you believe in what the congregation, and therefore the denomination that congregation belongs to believes in. But then being asked if you would be willing to choose death over renouncing or falling away from that faith; that's a whole different thing, especially here in this country and in this day and age. This is the same Rite that was used when most of you were welcomed into a congregation of the LCMS, whether it was by the Rite of Confirmation or by this Rite of Membership by Profession of Faith, either one of these would've required you to answer these two questions. In any other setting one might think these are the kinds of questions a religious cult would require their members to agree to.

So perhaps it's good, right, and salutary for every one of us to stop and ponder these questions that we were asked once upon a time or that we will be asked shortly. What if someone, or a group of someone's broke into this Sanctuary and gave you the choice of either renouncing your faith in Christ and living or dying for your faith. How would you answer?

Now perhaps you see this as a useless dramatic exercise. You are thinking “Nothing like that could ever happen here.” But it happens in many countries across the world where Christianity is outlawed, or Christians are targeted by armed men for termination. It has happened even here in this country. Five years ago, a young man named Chris Mercer tore into the classrooms of Umpqua Community College in Roseburg, Oregon and shot 17 people, murdering nine, including an Assistant Professor. According to one of the surviving witnesses he appeared to single out Christian students. He told the students in one classroom to stand up. He then asked who among them were Christians. To those who responded yes, He said, ‘Good, because you're a Christian, you're going to see God in just about one second,’ and he shot them in the head. Before that, there was the massacre at

Columbine High School, in Colorado in 1999 in which some of those who were shot first confessed faith in Christ.

Now my hope is that none of us would ever have to face such awful circumstances. But we do live in a world that is becoming more hostile to Christian morals and beliefs. We may not be faced with a choice to renounce our faith or die. But the chances are getting better and better that we could one day be faced with the choice of remaining vocal in our Christian faith, or suffering some other consequence, such as being branded as hateful and intolerant, of being ostracized by a society that is increasingly tolerant only to those who agree with their point of view. Perhaps Paul in our Epistle Lesson is giving us some very timely advice in this regard.

### **Paul On Trial Before Nero in Rome**

Paul writes this letter in captivity at Rome. He is being held prisoner on charges that he was fomenting rebellion and insurrection against Roman rule by his missionary work across the Roman Empire. It appears from the context of the letter that after two years his case is finally set to be heard before Emperor Nero. Paul is writing the Church at Philippi to encourage them to stand strong in their faith no matter what the outcome might be concerning his trial.

And as the Apostle to the Gentiles he has some very good news to share. **Philippians 1:12-14** <sup>12</sup> **I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel,** <sup>13</sup> **so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.** <sup>14</sup> **And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.** He is saying *'Brothers and Sisters in the faith; even though I'm imprisoned and on trial for bogus charges, the Lord is using this in a positive way. More and more people are hearing and believing the Gospel!'*

How could this be with Paul locked up? The imperial guard that was assigned to guard him was a very special and coveted position in the Roman Army. It came with many benefits including better pay and more privileges. These are the men who were stationed with Paul guarding him under house arrest. Day in and day out they were hearing him preach the word. And they were sharing his testimony with other guards. And they were sharing it among the civilian population of Rome who by and large looked up to these men. The members of the Church in Rome saw how God was using this for the good of the Church. They were emboldened to be more vocal and outspoken in their Gospel Testimony, even though Paul had not yet been acquitted and might yet be called to suffer the punishment of death.

Paul continues in **Philippians 1:18c-19** <sup>18c</sup> **Yes, and I will rejoice,** <sup>19</sup> **for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance,** Here Paul turns his attention to the outcome of the trial. He says there is reason for him to rejoice because in answer to their prayers and by the power to the Holy Spirit the result will be his “deliverance”. Notice that he doesn’t say his ‘acquittal’. That’s because he’s about to explain that no matter whether he is found innocent or guilty, no matter if he lives or dies, in the hands of the Holy Spirit, the results are a win-win situation.

**Philippians 1:20** **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.** Paul is less concerned about his living or dying, but only that his testimony leading up to that bears witness to His faith in Christ, that his life or death brings honor to Christ as his Lord and Savior. Jesus had warned his disciples in **Luke 21:12-15** <sup>12</sup> **But before all this they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons, and you will be brought before kings and governors for my name's sake.** <sup>13</sup> **This will be your opportunity to bear witness.** <sup>14</sup> **Settle it therefore in your minds not to meditate beforehand how to answer,** <sup>15</sup> **for I will give you a mouth and wisdom, which none of your adversaries will be able to withstand or contradict.** Paul realizes that his situation is the fulfillment of this prophecy by Jesus. But he knows that the same Lord and Savior who warned this would happen would also fulfill His promise to give him the presence of His Spirit who would given lead him in making his faithful defense and keeping him from dishonoring Jesus by renouncing his faith in the face of a death sentence.

### **To Live is Christ, to Die is Gain**

Paul then looks at what this means for him personally. **Philippians 1:21-23** <sup>21</sup> **For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.** <sup>22</sup> **If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell.** <sup>23</sup> **I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.** What might your reaction be if you were the one Paul was dictating this letter to? You might stop your writing and say, “Paul! What do you mean! Are you nuts? Of course, living is better than dying any day! Snap out of it Paul! Get out of this suicidal depression you’ve fallen into.” But Paul has a different view on his life than many people. A view that you and I were once given and might be worthwhile to contemplate again.

How can he say that to die is gain? Not because he is suicidal. Because he has been born again. When Jesus appeared to Paul on the road to Damascus, he not only blinded Paul, but he changed his heart and mind forever. Born again or born from above, Paul was given a new view on what his life means to him. He saw that he was headed toward eternal death. He saw that what his thoughts words and actions had earned for him, even though he always thought they were earning for him eternal life, was instead eternal death. He was shown that real salvation and eternal life are not earned but can only be obtained as the

free gift that comes from the same man whose followers he had been persecuting. Forgiveness of his sins, salvation and eternal life came to Paul as the free gift of faith from Christ himself. A gift that was confirmed to be his in his baptism.

And that was a life changer for Paul. Because Jesus was the One who had saved him from eternal death and had given him a life lived in God's presence now, and eternal life with His Lord and Savior to come, each and every day on this earth took on new meaning for Paul. He no longer had to live in fear of death. As he wrote in **1 Corinthians 15:55-57** <sup>55</sup> **"O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"** <sup>56</sup> **The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law.** <sup>57</sup> **But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.** For Him Jesus had cancelled the power that death held over him. His sin had been forgiven; his victory had been assured by the resurrection. He now saw death not as an end to be feared but a door that leads to the Eternal Life to come.

Being born again also give him a new outlook on his life lived out here on earth. He wasn't on a death trip. He was committed to living a life in service to His Lord who had given his life for Paul. He was committed to being a living sacrifice for the Gospel. Paul understood that being a Christian meant sharing in the suffering that Jesus faced against the forces of evil. But through the gift of the Spirit given in Baptism Paul could make this Psalm his statement of faith. **(Psalm 27:1) The LORD (Jesus) is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The LORD (Jesus) is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?** Paul had been left here to serve Christ in His kingdom. He was called to share the Gospel with the lost, to build up the faith, and encourage strengthening of faith and knowledge among the members of the Churches he had planted. He was prepared to continue serving Jesus in this manner for as long as God wanted him to, even if that meant suffering.

**Philippians 1:24-25** <sup>24</sup> **But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.** <sup>25</sup> **Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith,** The Holy Spirit was telling Paul that he had more work to do. It was more necessary for the Kingdom of Christ at this time that Paul remain. Paul would survive his trial and continue on in his ministry, not because he was too young to die, or because he had unfinished personal business, not even because his friends and family would grieve his passing. The Lord found it necessary, and so Paul did too, even though it would've been much better for him personally to go and be with Jesus. Life was no longer about what was best for Paul personally, but what was best for the Kingdom of Christ-His Church. But there would come a day not too far in the future when the needful thing for the Kingdom of Christ would be Paul's dying a martyr's death as his statement of faith. He would live out what he had written to the Philipppines **(Philippians 1:21) For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.**

## **How Should You Intend to Live Out Your Faith?**

How about you? As one who has been born again by the faith in Christ you received in your baptism, how should you view your life and your death? Is the life you live really your own? Or does the fact that you didn't choose to be born but it came as a gift from the Father mean that it He has a right to call it's end when He chooses? And if that's the case do you have any place specifying how long or how fruitful that life should be?

As one who has been given the new life in Christ what does this mean about the purpose of your life now? Is it to be as happy as possible with as little pain and trouble as possible? Or is it to serve your Savior who gave you this new life? Is it to serve Him out of love and devotion that comes from the gifts of forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life He has given you? These are hard things to live out since our sinful hearts will always move us to choose to live for ourselves at the expense of our faith relationship with Jesus. But that same Spirit that strengthened Paul in his time of need is here with you. He is here to move you to confess your sin of living for self, and to call you back to live as an obedient child of the Father. To live as Paul called the Philippians to live in response to the free gifts from Christ they had been given: **(Philippians 1:27) Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.** You and I can live a life worthy of the Gospel because of the faith we have received in the Gospel. You and I can stand firm in one spirit and strive against the suffering and opposition in the world because of the Spirit that we have received in our Baptism. It is Christ that commands us to live out our faith as the Church, and it is Christ who empowers us to do so.

### **Conclusion**

So, let me now ask each and every one of you: ***“Do you intend to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, even to death?” “Do you intend to continue steadfast in this confession and Church and to suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from it?”*** Stop and ponder these questions for a moment. Then truthfully respond that you, on your own, don't have it within you to do such a great thing. But you have been given the power to truthfully answer yes to these questions as the gift that comes from outside you. You have been given the power to say yes because you've been born again, just like Paul, to a new life in Christ. You've been given the Holy Spirit, who is at work in you to make Paul's motto on life your motto **(Philippians 1:21) For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.** May the same Lord and Savior who has begun this great work in you bring it to completion in the Day of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.