

Pastor Jonna Bohigian
To Live Is Christ and to Die Is Gain
Philippians 1

Dear friends in Christ, grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

In the last chapter of Acts, we were left in Rome with the Apostle Paul, awaiting trial before the Supreme Court. He waited in Rome for two years, with a guard perpetually chained to his wrist. Now, if I can stretch your memory from a couple of weeks ago...Do you remember what the last verse in Acts says? I'll give you a hint: Was Paul hindered by being in chains? Verse 31 says, "Boldly, he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ, unhindered!"

Most scholars believe that *this* (show map) is the situation in which Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians – in chains in Rome. As you may recall from our Acts series, Paul had quite the experience his first time in Philippi. He had received a vision of a man begging Paul and his companions to come to Macedonia. So, they sailed to Philippi in Macedonia, and encountered Lydia, who became a believer, along with her entire household. They encountered a slave girl, oppressed by a spirit, who made money for her owners by telling fortunes. When Paul couldn't stand her harassment any more, he cast the spirit out of her, and ended up in prison with Silas. As they were praising God, the gates of the prison were opened. In response, the jailer was about to kill himself, so Paul and Silas yelled that he had nothing to fear, because no one had escaped. The jailer and his entire household became believers.

Between this first visit to Philippi and Paul's letter, a church had been formed. This church loved Paul and supported his ministry. And this church was suffering.

Paul, in his fatherly love for the Philippians, wrote a letter. It is this letter that we will study these next few weeks.

Philippians is a letter that many of us know and love and might not even realize. I have this bookmark (show bookmark) that I received in 8th grade that says, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" Philippians 4:13. If you play sports, you've probably heard this verse. Another favorite for athletes is Philippians 3:14: "I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." If you are a musician, the hymn in Philippians 2 might be a favorite: "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Phil 2:5 – 7). Philippians is *chock full* of these beautiful and inspiring verses. My hope is that through this series, you will not only *hear* these verses, but you will gain an even greater appreciation for and understanding of them, learning the context in which they were written.

Now, Paul is rather impressed by this Philippian church. They are experiencing suffering because of their faith, and Paul sees this as evidence that they are following in the footsteps of Jesus. With joy, he prays for them and encourages them to keep it up. He wants them to know that suffering is *not* a hindrance to the gospel. Take Paul, for example. He is in chains for his faith, anticipating trial, and his

chains have in fact meant the *advance* of the gospel. His situation is a secret to no one; *everyone*, even Caesar, knows that he is in chains for Christ. Many Christians have been “encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly” *because* Paul is in chains (Phil 1:14).

What a testimony! Paul is not bitter or resentful. He doesn’t wish for a different life or that God would end his miserable existence. Frankly, it would have been *easy* to resent God for allowing him to be in chains, because he’s in chains for defending *Jesus!* But no, Paul sees the grace of God through his chains, and is *thankful!* The gospel is on the loose *because* of his chains, and Paul couldn’t be happier.

He then makes a superbly *profound* statement. “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” (Phil 1:20 – 21). *To live is Christ and to die is gain.*

How many of us can say this? If you were to list what the “good life” is to you, what would you say? You might include: family, friends, adventure, Christmas, good food, beauty, comfort... For many at St. Tim’s, Jesus would be on the list – absolutely. But for the majority of us, he wouldn’t be the *only* thing on the list.

For Paul, Jesus is the *only* item on the list. Jesus *is* life. To live *is* Christ. *Nothing else* takes priority, and *nothing else* makes the list.

To live is Christ *and to die is gain.* Paul has no disdain for life, but he recognizes that when he dies, he *will gain.* He will gain because death is *not* the end;

death is *life* in Christ, without sin, without pain, and without separation from God and others.

For the Christian, death is *not* the last word. As Paul challenges in his letter to the Corinthians, “Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?” (1 Cor 15:55).

A couple of years ago, my good friend Sarah died. She was *incredible*. And much too young, I concluded. I couldn’t understand *why* God would allow a thirty-year-old with a little boy and an infant to die. It seemed *utterly* tragic. I knew it wouldn’t help, but I asked why. One day, a thought crossed my mind like the shifting of the wind. *Why do you think you know what’s best for Sarah? Why can’t you imagine that Sarah’s new life is better than her former life? Sarah’s work must have been accomplished.* In all candor, I *continue* to ask why, though these thoughts have been important to me. The question that remains more important to me than any is, *Why is it so difficult to believe that for the Christian, to die is to gain?*

There is a man at St. Timothy’s that many of you know. I have a difficult time imagining, in fact, that you *don’t* know him. Under normal circumstances, he is in our choir, and you can often hear his distinct voice on the hymn recordings; he sits in the front row. He’s a jokester and someone who *loves* to talk. He was one of the first people I met at St. Timothy’s, and I am confident that if you’ve met him, you *haven’t* forgotten him.

This man is Jim Guise. (picture) October 2017, Jim and Brenda were shocked to hear that he had pancreatic cancer. Jim was given 6 months to live. He needed to get his affairs in order. He would almost indefinitely die from pancreatic cancer.

Even if he went into remission, the cancer would come back. He had a lot to process and prepare for; he hadn't been prepared to die.

Jim stated the facts and didn't ask for pity. He wanted everyone to know that what awaited him was something wonderful and glorious. Naturally, he joked that if he died, Brenda would finally be rid of him and she would have a better life too.

Jim has never been a shy person, but for many years, he had not been shy about sharing his faith either. It was like a muscle that had gotten really strong. He knew that now, he had an opportunity and a platform that he never *had* before. He could let the gospel loose in some of the most desperate places! During treatments and appointments, he would, and *still does*, ask about the doctors, nurses, and other patients' faith. He speaks about his own. He tells them that he has something incredible to look forward to. He tells them about the love of God in Jesus. At a time when many are fearful and are grasping onto this life, Jim is ready. For him, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Both Jim and Brenda's faith is *powerful* and inspiring. If all of us had such faith, such joy!

But of course, this sermon is not about Jim and Brenda, nor is it about the Apostle Paul. They are inspiring *witnesses* to the gospel in the face of suffering, but they would be the *first* to tell you that *they* are not the hope; *they* are not the good news.

Jesus, and Jesus *alone*, is the good news. Jesus is our role model and the One who is present to us. He knows our pain and suffering, because he humbled himself by taking on human flesh, *our flesh*. He was God and all-powerful, yet he did not use

his power to demand allegiance; he used his power to do the most humbling of work, a *servant's* work. He risked his reputation to ensure that *everyone* could hear of God's love for them, and he was called a "friend of sinners" because of it. He accepted the cheats, the liars, the prostitutes, the outcasts, and then commissioned them to go and sin no more and to share the good news that they had received. He was misunderstood and rejected, betrayed by one of his disciples for personal profit, and left by every *one* of his closest disciples. He was put to death by his own people and mocked, as he died the most embarrassing and gruesome death that anyone at the time could experience. He *knows* our suffering; he *knows* our grief, and he is present *in* them. To live *is* Christ.

And because of his death and resurrection, eternal life in the presence of God and the saints who have gone before us, is opened to you and to me. Beyond what you can now imagine or comprehend, will be your gain because of what Jesus has done for you out of his love for *you*. To die *is* gain.

"Whatever happens, conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ," "to the glory and praise of God" (Phil 1:27a, 11b). May he who began a good work in you carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus! Amen.