

REAL LIVING
PHILIPPIANS 1:19-26

INTRODUCTION AND REVIEW

Rabbi Jochanan ben Saccai lived during the time of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD. He was a contemporary of the Apostle Paul. For two years he served as president of the Sanhedrin, that high council of Judaism that convened in Jerusalem and that years earlier had brought charges against Jesus before the Roman governor Pontius Pilate. According to the Talmud when he was on his death bed, his disciples came to see this rabbi. He spoke to them about his fear of death and broke into tears. The rabbinical students were somewhat shocked by this. Rabbi Jochanan responded, **“If I were now to be brought before an earthly king, who lives today and dies tomorrow, whose wrath and whose hands are not everlasting, and whose sentence of death, even, is not that to everlasting death, who can be assuaged by arguments, or perhaps bought off by money--- I should tremble and weep; how much more reason have I for it, when about to be led before the King of kings, the Holy One... whose sentence of death kills forever... and not only so, but there are before me two ways, one to paradise and the other to hell, and I know not which of the two ways I shall have to go--- whether to paradise or to hell--- how, then, shall I not shed tears?”** (*Ber. 28.b*)

A couple of generations ago death was a more common reality for us Americans. Deaths happened more often at home than in a hospital or a nursing home. Infant mortality rates were higher. Life spans were shorter. Diseases were deadlier. Wars took a greater toll of American lives.

In recent decades medical advances and safety developments in modern transportation and institutional care for the elderly and fewer casualties among our military people--- the 2400 Americans killed in Afghanistan in the almost 20 year war there, though painful to those affected, pale in comparison to the losses in Vietnam, Korea, and WWII--- have pushed death away from the consciences of many of us. Theologian Frederick Buechner wrote several years ago, **“Intellectually we all know that we will die, but we do not really know it in the sense that the knowledge becomes a part of us. We do not really know it in the sense of living as though it were true. On the contrary, we tend to live as though our lives would go on forever.”** (*The Hungering Dark*, p. 72)

In the last couple of years the sudden onset of the covid pandemic, the rising crime wave, the uptick of suicides, and the aging of our population have brought the reality of death into our consciences.

The most stressful and difficult situation that many people face is the prospect of their own death. That is indeed understandable given the fact that many people have no idea

what will happen to them after death. What a tragic thing that even religious people like this rabbi have no certainty about their eternal destiny!

The understanding that we have about death has a tremendous impact on the way that we live life. If death is the end of conscious existence or if it is an uncertain leap in the dark, then people will choose one or more of several options in their approach to life. They may avoid death and thoughts about it. They may live for maximum pleasure in the here and now. Or they may do what they can to appease the gods, or a god, to improve their chances of faring well in whatever existence there is beyond the grave.

If there is some assurance that we can have this side of the grave about what lies on the other side and what our destiny will be, what relief there can be for us. The Jewish Christian rabbi Paul, who lived at the same time as Rabbi Jochanan, had this assurance. He describes his certainty in the passage that we are going to examine this morning. Just as that confidence helped him to endure the most difficult trials, so it can help us.

We have seen thus far from our study of Philippians that the Apostle Paul was faced with considerable trials. He was under house arrest in Rome for his preaching of the gospel. He was chained 24 hours a day to at least one Roman soldier. There were other Christians around who were seeking to discredit him. There was concern that he had for churches and Christians in other parts of the Roman Empire. His health was probably not the greatest. He had been beaten on three occasions, stoned almost to death, and shipwrecked three times.

In spite of all of this Paul had learned to live above his circumstances. He had learned to focus on the positive. He had learned to appreciate the fellowship that he had with others who were part of the same cause. He had also experienced joy in seeing the expansion of the gospel and the spiritual growth of fellow believers.

In vv. 12-18 of Philippians #1 Paul described how the gospel was faring. In our passage today Paul describes his own situation. He considers the possibility that he may be executed by the Romans. In the process he leaves us with valuable lessons about our own attitude toward life and death.

I.

First, in vv. 19 & 20 (p. 980 in the black Bibles) the apostle teaches that **REAL LIVING IN THE MIDST OF TRIALS REQUIRES DOING THE RIGHT THING**. (PROJECTOR ON--- REAL LIVING IN THE MIDST OF ...) Back in v. 18 Paul was referring to the fact that some people preach the gospel with less than pure motives. But he said that the mere preaching of the gospel from whatever motives would cause him to rejoice. He continues in vv. 19 & 20, **"...for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, 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."**

Now the word for “deliverance” is actually “salvation.” The word for “salvation” in Greek is used a number of ways in the New Testament. Sometimes it refers to physical salvation from death or injury. Sometimes it refers to eternal salvation of the soul. It would be inconsistent with what Paul teaches elsewhere about eternal salvation to think that prayers of others and preaching of the gospel would result in his own eternal salvation. Another possibility is that the apostle is referring to deliverance from imprisonment and/or death. But v. 20 speaks of a concern for not being put to shame and for having boldness. So it seems to me that Paul is talking about deliverance from discouragement and fear and joylessness that would cause him to be less bold and therefore to have a weaker defense of the gospel in his upcoming trial.

He does not want to be put to shame by having a poor defense of the gospel. From the Roman perspective conviction and execution of Paul would produce shame for him and his cause. That is what happened to Jesus. He was publicly humiliated by a painful death on a Roman cross. The Jewish leaders were also happy about this humiliation. But Jesus’ death was pleasing to God the Father. The end result was a glorification on Easter Sunday. So the focus of Paul here appears to be avoiding shame before God. He wants to have a bold defense of the gospel in his appearance before the Roman court.

The prayers of the Philippian Christians and the knowledge that other believers are spreading the gospel and the doctrinal truth that the Spirit of Jesus lives in him give Paul assurance that he will have strength and boldness. The inner strength that comes from these ingredients is according to Paul’s earnest expectation and hope that he will not be put to shame in anything. Whether Paul lives or dies is largely beyond his control. His primary concern is for right behavior. He has a unique opportunity to explain and defend the gospel before important Roman officials. He wants to do a good job of that. So his concern is to behave rightly before the Romans and also before the Lord.

When we look up at the skies on a clear night, the stars appear as tiny and sometimes fuzzy lights. When we look at those same stars through a telescope, they become clearer and appear a small amount closer to their real size. To the average unbeliever Jesus Christ appears as a fuzzy historical character. But we Christians can serve as telescopes. When people see our lives, especially in the midst of difficult circumstances, we serve as telescopes that magnify the person of Jesus Christ. That is why Paul’s joyfulness in the midst of difficult circumstances had such an impact on the Roman guards around him. That is why he had such an impact on the Philippian jailer.

In the cosmic battle between good and evil the question is always whether the good will cave in under the pressure of difficult circumstances. The story of Job is the classic case. Job had everything taken away from him--- prosperity, children, health, friends. Would he finally cave in and deny and curse God? He would not. The challenge to us who are Christians is not to cave in under pressure either. Real living in the midst of trials means doing the right thing.

II.

To help us not to succumb to the trials that confront us we need to consider the two ultimate alternatives that awaited Paul and that await us: life and death. First, from v. 21 and v. 23 we need to realize that REAL LIVING IN THE FACE OF DEATH MEANS RECOGNIZING THE PROMISE OF HEAVEN. (II. REAL LIVING IN THE FACE OF DEATH...) The apostle says in v. 21, **“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”**

Why would death be gain to Paul? Why would it be a gain to us? For one thing death for Christians means being with Christ. (2 CORINTHIANS 5:8) In 2 Corinthians #5 v. 8 Paul spoke of death and said, **“...we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord..”** Jesus told the thief on the cross who believed in Him that being at home with the Lord means being with Him in a state, or place, that He called “paradise.” If Jesus tells Christians that death for us means being in paradise, it can't be too bad a place. (PROJECTOR OFF)

We know from other Scriptures that death for Christians also means being rid of our sin natures. What a delight that will be to never have the urge anymore to sin. Death also means being rid of our earthly trials and tribulations. Just seeing Jesus will be a transforming experience. The Apostle John (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 JOHN 3:2) said, **“Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.”**

All of this Paul looked at as great gain. In v. 23 he said **“to depart and be with Christ ... is far better.”** More literally, Paul says that this is “very much better.” (PROJECTOR OFF) This is what the grammarians call a triple comparative. Death for the Christian is not just better. It is not just much better. It is very much better.

Death for a Christian means being in the presence of Christ in heaven. It means a wonderful existence in a realm that Jesus called paradise. Death for one who has truly trusted in Jesus does not mean soul sleep. It does not mean reincarnation. It does not mean purgatory. It means paradise. It is great gain. To be absent from the body is to present with the Lord.

When I was in Connecticut, I led monthly services at a nursing home. One of the regulars there was a fellow from India Although he was a follower of the Sikh religion, he usually came to hear what I had to say. He was an educated man who worked for the Indian air force for many years. His world came unglued when his daughter died after receiving a bone marrow transplant for cancer. I went to the funeral at his request-- the first and only Sikh funeral which I have attended.. He could not accept what had happened. He was angry and bitter toward the doctor who treated her. He was in despair.

I finished my conversation one day with him at the assisted living home about the tragedy of the death of his daughter, which he was still struggling with, when a woman approached me from the other side. She was a Christian resident there whom I had

come to know. She, too, had lost her daughter recently as the result of cancer. She also was upset. But she expressed a certainty that her daughter was with Jesus in heaven and that the Lord had a purpose in what had happened. The situation struck me as a vivid contrast between the confidence that we Christians can have in confronting death and the uncertainty and despair that confronts others. On my right hand was uncertainty and despair and anger. On my left hand was sadness but also quiet confidence in the Lord and certainty about the destiny of a Christian daughter.

That was the kind of certainty that Paul had. He knew where he was going. **“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”** We can have that same assurance. In 1 John #5 vv. 11-13 (PROJECTOR ON--- 1 JOHN 5:11-12) the Apostle John said, **“And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. (1 JOHN 5:13) I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.”**

The Bible says that we can know now where we will spend eternity. John says that everyone who has the Son--- i.e. Jesus--- has eternal life. Eternal life is not something that begins when we die, it is something that we acquire when we get the Son of God. How does this happen? The apostle indicates that it happens when we believe in the name of the Son of God. When we come to the point of trusting in Jesus, we receive eternal life. We simply must believe that He was God who became man, that He died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins, that He rose again from the dead, and that He ascended into heaven. If we will recognize our sinfulness and need for the Savior, and if we will place our trust in Him, then we will have eternal life. (PROJECTOR OFF)

After that is done, we can have confidence as we think about the end of our own earthly lives. When loved ones who are Christians die, we can have confidence about their eternal destiny as well. We grieve at our loss, but we do not weep as those who have no hope. When Christians are seriously ill or seriously injured, we pray for them. But as we pray, we keep in mind that death for them is gain.

III.

The other alternative for Paul--- and for us--- is life. Thus in vv. 21 & 22 and vv. 24-26 the apostle says that **REAL LIVING IN THE FACE OF CONTINUED LIFE MEANS SERVING JESUS.** (PROJECTOR ON--- III. REAL LIVING IN THE FACE OF...) In v. 21 he says, **“For to me to live is Christ...”**

In Romans #6 Paul said that everyone who has trusted Jesus as his Savior has in a spiritual sense been crucified, buried, and raised from the dead with Christ. In Galatians #2 v. 20 he wrote, **“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”** Paul’s life had become so focused on doing what Christ wanted him to do and on relying upon Him for the strength to do it that he could honestly say, **“For me to live is Christ...”** (PROJECTOR OFF)

The Bible says that Jesus Christ was involved in the creation of the world and the creation of us human beings. The Bible says that He died for us on the cross so that by faith in Him we might have eternal life. The Bible says that He will one day be the judge of every human being. This Jesus Himself once said, **“I came that they--- meaning us humans--- might have life, and have it more abundantly.”** (John 10:10)

The meaning of life is that we were created to worship and serve the God who created us and redeemed us. Real life comes from serving and glorifying Him. It means working for Jesus. Thus the apostle says in v. 22, **“If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me...”** It means the opportunity to serve Christ, and there is joy that comes from that. So Paul was faced with a win-win situation. To continue to live means the opportunity for fruitful labor. To die means to go to heaven with Jesus. But which was the better option for Paul?

He struggles with that in vv. 22-24. **“...Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. 23 I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. 24 But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.”** By continuing to live Paul may well have opportunities to visit the Philippians again and to strengthen and encourage their faith. He will be able to pray for them. He will be able to defend their faith before the Roman authorities and before skeptics who deny the claims of Christ. He will be able to give them advice and direction from afar as he was doing by means of this letter.

In one sense it may seem that the choice of life or death options was not really left in Paul's hands. It was a Roman court that would determine his fate. But Paul believed in the sovereignty of God. He knew that it was the Lord who was ultimately in charge. He was also intimately aware of the power of prayer. By looking at the situation and the options available to him Paul came to a conclusion about the course that it seemed that the Lord was going to have him take and toward which he was going to pray.

Thus he says in vv. 25 & 26, **“Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.”** Upon analyzing the situation Paul comes to the conclusion that the Lord is going to cause his trial to have a favorable outcome. He is going to be found not guilty and released. It means that he will again have a chance to visit the Philippian church, along with other churches, and be able to stimulate their continued **“progress and joy in the faith.”** Notice again the importance that Paul places on joy in the Christian life.

Did Paul win his case, and was he released from his imprisonment? First and Second Timothy and the Epistle to Titus are generally regarded as having been written by Paul after this first Roman imprisonment. It seems that he was arrested and jailed a second time. Early tradition indicates that this time he was executed by the governing officials in Rome. (PROJECTOR ON--- 2 TIMOTHY 4:16-17) In 2 Timothy 4:16 & 17 Paul says, **“At my first defense no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them! 17 But the Lord stood by me and strengthened me, so**

that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. So I was rescued from the lion's mouth.” This implies that he was released from his first imprisonment. Also in 1 Timothy # 1 the apostle makes reference to having departed for Macedonia, where Philippi was located. So it seems that Paul was released from prison and came again to Philippi. (PROJECTOR OFF)

What turns us on is what is life to us. For some people real living is participating in a sport. For some it is making a business deal. For some it is going fishing. For some it is a night out with the ladies. For some it is doing things with the family. For some real living is success on the job.

Rob once worked for a financial services company. He showed me a memo sent out to employees of the company from the husband of a woman who worked at the company and who recently died of cancer. This is what the husband said about his wife, whom I will call Jane, **“As most of you know, [Jane] was committed to only one thing, providing the most outstanding defined contribution recordkeeping services in the country, and being acknowledged as such. Each and every client we lost to the mutual funds, she took personally. She kept track of our progress with the Alliance, and was convinced that if we continued to provide the highest quality service, we would win them back, and more. She was convinced that TBA (an abbreviation for her branch of the company) offered a platform that could push us well into the turn of the century, and would set our competition back considerably.**

“Her final words to you, her fellow ... associates, were these. ‘We have come so far in the 15 years that I have been with the firm. Back when I started, we were nothing in terms of being a presence in this field and now we are one of the acknowledged leaders. But just being one of the leaders is not enough. We must strive to be so dominant in our field, that there is no number two. To do that, we need the best system, but I believe we will have it with TBA. We also need the best people, and I know we have them. It is through you that the highest quality of service will come. And it is each of you that will make us the dominant force in this industry.

“I am sorry I won’t be there to help you achieve this goal. I want you to know that I fought very hard, as hard as I could. And although the cancer won in the end, I never stopped fighting. And you must not stop either, for I will be there with you.”

Her husband concludes, “[Jane] is gone now, and she is no longer in pain. And while she is no longer with us, her fighting spirit that helped make [the company] what it is today lives on in each and every one of you. She loved the firm, ... and the people in it.”

Real living for this woman was clearly her job, her company. What eternal significance or benefit do you suppose that her commitment will have? It is good for Christians to be

committed to their jobs and to fellow employees. But is it a job, or a hobby, or a sport that really defines us, as it seemingly did with this woman?

If we want to figure out what really motivates us in life, what deep down really drives us, we might use v. 21 in our text as a test: “For me to live is _____, and to die is _____.” For Jane to live was to see her company dominate the field, to die was to have some other company gain that dominant position. For some of the athletes we may be watching on TV this week, to live is to win a gold medal, to die is to not make the medal stand. For some to live is to make money. To die is to leave it all behind. For some to live is to become well known. To die is to be forgotten. For some to live is to have power over people. To die is to lose control over others. For some to live is to enjoy pleasure. To die is to be unable to enjoy pleasure.

The Apostle Paul said, “For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” If life is the company, if life is money, if life is pleasure, if life is power, if life is fame, then death is the end of everything. But if life is Christ, then death is gain.

I submit to you that real life is Jesus Christ. If you want to have a great eternity, if you want to have an abundant life now, if you want to be connected with truth, if you want to know God as your Father, then make Jesus Christ the focus of your life. So order your life that it is consistent with what He has told us to do and be in His Word. That does not mean that you will have a problem-free life on this earth. The Apostle Paul had a fair set of problems. He was beaten, jailed, stoned, shipwrecked, and eventually executed because of his faith in Christ. But there is not the least hint of regret that he had about the course in life that he had followed. A little later in this book we will find him tell the Philippian Christians, **“I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ...”**

Mehdi Dibaj was imprisoned in 1984 in Iran for the crime of “apostasy,” since he had left Islam and become a Christian. The penalty was death. He was kept in prison for ten years before his case came to trial. At his trial he offered a written statement of defense. The last few lines of his statement went like this:

“[Jesus Christ] is our Saviour and He is the Son of God. To know Him means to know eternal life. I, a useless sinner, have believed in His beloved person and all His words and miracles recorded in the Gospel, and I have committed my life into His hands. Life for me is an opportunity to serve Him, and death is a better opportunity to be with Christ. Therefore I am not only satisfied to be in prison for the honour of His Holy Name, but am ready to give my life for the sake of Jesus my Lord...”

In December of 1993 Mehdi Dibaj was sentenced to death. Under intense diplomatic pressure from western countries, the Iranian government released him in January of 1994. Seven months later he was found dead under suspicious circumstances, the third

Christian murdered in Iran after his release from prison. (Thielman, *Philippians: The NIV Application Commentary*, p. 89)

Do you want a happy life--- a joyful life that is not dependent upon circumstances? Do you want a life that has some eternal significance? Do you want a life that is connected with reality? Do you want a life that will sustain you in the valley of the shadow of death? Make Jesus Christ the center of your life. Read your Bible and pray daily. Get involved at church. Volunteer in the community. Look for opportunities to tell others about Jesus. Live a life of integrity at work, at school, and at home. "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."