

THE CIRCUMSTANCES OF LIFE

The Book of Philippians #4

Over the last several weeks we have looked at the first eleven verses of Philippians, chapter one. We spoke of what it means to be a bond-servant of Christ, where grace and peace come from, the participation of the Philippian church in spreading the gospel of Christ and supplying the needs of the saints, the perfection of the good work God has begun in us, real knowledge and discernment in love, and the fruit of righteousness.

Today we are going to take a look at verses 12-26. In this portion of his letter to the Philippians Paul addresses the circumstances of his imprisonment in Rome. Roman imprisonment could be a very unhappy circumstance for any who experienced it. Even if not guilty, punishment was swift and complete (think of Jesus). Knowing this Paul will seek to alleviate their concerns. Paul will also respond to the attempts of others to bring him harm, and the possibility of either his death or his release from prison.

But before we begin with Paul's response, let's take a look at what led to Paul's imprisonment here in Rome from which he is writing this letter. The circumstances leading to Paul's arrest can be found in Acts 21:15 – 25:12. You can read these chapters on your own but for the sake of brevity I will summarize these events.

After his last visit to the Philippian church Paul made his way to Jerusalem in time for Passover. While there he reported to James and all the elders what God had done among the gentiles through his ministry. There were certain Jews there that had heard that Paul was saying to forsake Moses, telling them not to circumcise their children, nor to walk according to the customs. So the Jerusalem elders suggested that Paul take four men who were under a vow and purify himself along with them, even paying for their expenses, so that all would know that what they had heard about Paul had no validity.

Near the end of their purification Jews from Asia saw Paul with the other three men at the temple and, assuming Paul was defiling their holy place by bringing Gentiles into the temple, began stirring up the crowd, laying hands on Paul and dragging him out of the temple, seeking to kill him. The commander of the Roman cohort was told that all of Jerusalem was in confusion so he brought along some soldiers, took hold of Paul, bound him in chains and ordered him to be brought to the barracks. When he discovered that Paul was a Roman citizen he released him. The next day, in order to determine why he had been accused by the Jews, he ordered the chief priests and all the Council to assemble and brought Paul down and set him before them..

Paul gave his defense before the council, ultimately dividing the Sadducees and the Pharisees over the issue of resurrection. This caused another uproar so the commander, afraid Paul would be torn to pieces, took Paul and brought him into the barracks. That night the Lord stood at Paul's side and told him to take courage for he must witness in Rome as he had just done in Jerusalem.

The next day the Jews formed a conspiracy and bound themselves with an oath to kill Paul. Paul's nephew heard of this and told the commander who decided to take Paul, guarded by two hundred soldiers to Felix, the governor of Caesarea which was located northwest of Jerusalem, on the Mediterranean coast. After five days Felix listened to the charges brought against Paul by the high priest Ananias, some elders, and an attorney named Tertullus. After hearing their accusations and Paul's defense, Felix decided to wait until Lysias the commander came down before deciding Paul's case. But two years later Paul was still under house arrest and Felix was given another assignment. He was replaced by Porcius Festus and as a parting

gift to the Jews, Felix left Paul imprisoned.

When several days (at least 14 days) had elapsed after his arrival in the province, Porcius Festus called Paul and his accusers together to hear their case. During this hearing Paul appealed to Caesar. Felix granted his request but kept him in custody until King Agrippa and Bernice arrived to hear Paul speak in his defense. They all agreed that Paul could have been set free but since he had appealed to Caesar, to Caesar he must go.

So Felix delivered Paul and some other prisoners to a centurion named Julius who set sail for Italy. They eventually found themselves shipwrecked on the island of Malta with no loss of life, thanks to an angel's warning to Paul. The angel also told Paul not to be afraid, for he must stand before Caesar. After three months on the island, during which time Paul healed many of their diseases, Julius and his prisoners finally arrived at Rome.

This brings us up to date. Paul is now imprisoned in Rome and writing his letter to the Philippian church.

Undoubtedly the believers in Philippi were anxious about Paul, expecting the worst, perhaps becoming apprehensive and even disheartened to think that their beloved Apostle is in prison and unable to spread the gospel. Their concern was put into action when they sent Epaphroditus with a gift to help supply his needs while in prison. (We'll read more about this as we continue in Philippians.)

Paul wants to put their minds at ease concerning his present circumstances. So he starts out by saying in verse 12,

PHILIPPIANS 1:12

"Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel."

"I want you to know". Paul wants to convey something to the Philippian church about the circumstances of his imprisonment. It's like he is saying, "I know what you are thinking. And you are right to think that way. Being imprisoned is not the most comfortable, safe, or healthy place to be. Believe me, I know. I have 'been there, done that.' But it is really nothing like that here in Rome of all places. God has been good to me. I am being treated much better than I had expected or even become accustomed to as a prisoner of Christ. God has truly been working all things out for good here in Rome."

Paul says his circumstances have *"turned out for the greater progress of the gospel."* What Paul is saying is that his imprisonment, far from diminishing the spreading of the gospel, has actually served to advance it. Paul then explains what he means.

PHILIPPIANS 1:13

"My imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the entire Praetorian Guard and to everyone else."

What Paul is saying about his imprisonment becoming "well known" is better understood as translated by the New International Version when it says, *"It has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ."*

Remember, the charges against Paul that brought him to Rome came from the Jews. They accused him of being an apostate who taught others to disregard the Law of Moses and of being a defiler of the temple (Acts 21, 28). None of these had anything to do with Roman law.

Paul was arrested in Jerusalem as a result of a disturbance caused by the Jews. He was transferred to Caesarea after a plot against his life was discovered and imprisoned there for two years before being taken to Rome. We read about the conditions of his imprisonment in Acts 28:16.

ACTS 28:16

“When we (Paul and Luke) entered Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him.”

What a minute. After being held in a Caesarean prison for 2 years Paul is taken to Rome and placed under house arrest? Someone who was considered a threat to Rome would not have been allotted this privilege. The type of prison accommodations speaks volumes on how they viewed Paul and his threat to the empire.

So the first thing that Paul would want to communicate to the Philippian church is that he was not being held in some hole in the ground but rather by himself in a home with a soldier to guard him.

I believe this privilege came about because it soon became evident to those responsible for guarding him that Paul was not in prison because he was some kind of criminal intent on destroying Rome, but rather for preaching the message of Christ. This became obvious through his continued preaching, his praying, and his singing of hymns while in prison.

We are told in Acts 27:3 that even Julius, the centurion charged with taking Paul to Rome, treated Paul with consideration and allowed him to go to his friends and receive care. So it seems the imprisonment of Paul was more for his safety than it was for the safety of Rome. This house arrest seemed appropriate to the supposed crime.

There is no mention of conversions among the praetorian guard in these verses as some have suggested but it is interesting to note that the city of Philippi was colonized by a cohort of praetorians. So by saying that among these guards it has become well known why he is imprisoned, Paul may be seeking to bring some comfort to those in Philippi under the watchful eye of their own praetorian guards.

But the freedom that house arrest provided him was not the only freedom that Paul was granted. He was also allowed to have visitors and to continue proclaiming the gospel of Christ. We read about this in Acts 28:17-31

ACTS 28:17-31

“After three days Paul called together those who were the leading men of the Jews, and when they came together, he began saying to them, “Brethren, though I had done nothing against our people or the customs of our fathers, yet I was delivered as a prisoner from Jerusalem into the hands of the Romans. And when they had examined me, they were willing to release me because there was no ground for putting me to death. But when the Jews objected, I was forced to appeal to Caesar, not that I had any accusation against my nation.

For this reason, therefore, I requested to see you and to speak with you, for I am wearing this chain for the sake of the hope of Israel.” They said to him, “We have neither received letters from Judea concerning you, nor have any of the brethren come here and reported or spoken anything bad about you. But we desire to hear from you what your views are; for concerning this sect, it is known to us that it is spoken against everywhere.”

When they had set a day for Paul, they came to him at his lodging in large numbers; and he was explaining to them by solemnly testifying about the kingdom of God and trying to persuade them concerning Jesus, from both the Law of Moses and from the Prophets, from morning until evening. Some were being persuaded by the things spoken, but others would not believe.

And when they did not agree with one another, they began leaving after Paul had spoken one parting word, "The Holy Spirit rightly spoke through Isaiah the prophet to your fathers, saying, 'Go to this people and say, "You will keep on hearing, but will not understand; and you will keep on seeing, but will not perceive; for the heart of this people has become dull, and with their ears they scarcely hear, and they have closed their eyes; otherwise they might see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart and return, and I would heal them."'

"Therefore let it be known to you that this salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles; they will also listen." [When he had spoken these words, the Jews departed, having a great dispute among themselves.] And he stayed two full years in his own rented quarters and was welcoming all who came to him, preaching the kingdom of God and teaching concerning the Lord Jesus Christ with all openness, unhindered."

So Paul had plenty of reasons to alleviate the concerns of the Philippian believers about the state of his imprisonment. He was under house arrest, living in his own rented quarters, and was free to continue to preach the gospel to all who came to him.

The next thing Paul mentions is that he is not alone in spreading the gospel. Others are also preaching Christ.

PHILIPPIANS 1:14-18

"Most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear. Some, to be sure, are preaching Christ even from envy and strife, but some also from good will; the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel; the former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition rather than from pure motives, thinking to cause me distress in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice."

Certainly the boldness of those who are proclaiming Christ out of love for Paul, in spite of the threat of imprisonment, would be a cause of rejoicing. Paul is looked to as the example for others of joyfully suffering the consequences of preaching the gospel of Christ to a hostile world. For people to use his response to suffering as a means of giving them more courage to speak the word of God without fear must have been to Paul a very humbling and rewarding experience.

But Paul is not naive. He is fully aware of all those who are preaching the gospel. And not all have pure motives. Some are hoping to cause Paul harm by their preaching. The idea behind the words "envy and strife" as the motives for those who wish to do Paul harm is that Paul's adversaries are doing something that would be highly prejudicial to the outcome of his case when he came to trial.

We don't know who these preachers of the gospel were who sought to bring Paul harm. But we can pretty well assume they were not false preachers perverting the truth or preaching another gospel since Paul does not speak against the message, only the messengers.

In the Roman world chains signified shame and humiliation, and this shame may have caused them to distance themselves from Paul. In their minds Paul's imprisonment was the Roman assessment of his social worth and status, and it reflected negatively on not only his but their credibility as well. They had the mindset that it was disgraceful for any preacher of the gospel to be put in chains for any reason; that no representative of Christ should ever be accused of any indiscretion at any time. So they would have wanted to distance themselves from such dishonor seeking the maximum punishment for such a disgrace to the gospel of Christ in order to show the "true purity" of those who preach Christ.

All of this is pure conjecture, but it does have a ring of truth to it. Even when our modern day preachers have fallen into sin, the Christian world has been quick to condemn and disassociate. It is the few that have brought grace to bear and helped others to rise above their sin to continue to serve the Lord. These are the few that know there is no sin which God cannot forgive. They love out the forgiveness of God, knowing there is no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

And this position of being ashamed of Paul's chains is supported by Paul's own words to Timothy when he said, *"The Lord grant mercy to the house of Onesiphorus, for he often refreshed me and was not ashamed of my chains; but when he was in Rome, he eagerly searched for me and found me"* (1 Timothy 1:16-17) So shame would have prevented others from associating with Paul while in prison. The envy and strife which Paul speaks of may also have come from their fleshly desire to take advantage of Paul's imprisonment in order to exalt themselves in the eyes of others.

In any event, after pointing out that some preach the gospel out of love and others out of envy and strife, Paul says, in verse 18, *"What then?"* Paul is essentially saying, *"So what?"* or *"What does it matter?"* To him, his reputation and any prestige and honor that may go with it, as well as his personal feelings about the matter are trivial things and secondary to the preaching of the gospel. Neither his personal feelings, his standing before a Roman court, nor his vindication before competing preachers is of any importance to him. The proclamation of the gospel remains the highest priority in his life over and above any personal concerns he may have.

This is not to say that Paul agrees with the preaching of the gospel of peace without having that same peace as the motivating factor in the hearts of those who are proclaiming it. Nor is he condoning preaching by division with the purpose of bringing harm to another believer. Paul will address these same issues of division with the Philippians later in his letter. What he is disregarding is the personal harm these divisions might bring to him.

So whatever their reasons for seeking to make his imprisonment more difficult, the motives of these people do not concern Paul. What he is most interested in is the spreading of the gospel of Christ. So while the motivation of some to preach the gospel may be tainted by false assumptions, the fact that Christ is being proclaimed at all gives Paul reason to rejoice.

Paul goes on to say why he can be confident in this rejoicing.

PHILIPPIANS 1:19-21

"For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."

The word translated as “*deliverance*” in the New American Standard is translated as “*salvation*” in other versions. Paul is not using this term in the sense of eternal salvation, but rather his salvation or deliverance either from this life or from his imprisonment. He then lists six things which he believes are essential to this deliverance, no matter what form it takes.

- 1) Prayer. Paul understands he needs the prayers of his fellow believers if he is to experience any type of deliverance from his present circumstances.
- 2) The Holy Spirit. Paul knows that he is only able to endure by the power of the Spirit of Christ that dwells in him. He understands and believes that the Spirit Himself helps us in our weakness and that this same Spirit will give him the words to say when he stands before those in authority.
- 3) His earnest expectation and hope. Paul firmly believes that with the help of the Holy Spirit and the prayers of the saints he will not be put to shame in anything, that he will not disgrace his Lord nor his fellow believers no matter what the future may hold.
- 4) His boldness. Paul has endured persecution before and has stood before many magistrates and rulers without cowering before them, boldly proclaiming the gospel of Christ. He has experience in being emboldened by the power residing within him under intense circumstances.
- 5) That Christ will be exalted in his body. Paul has written that he carries in his body “the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may be manifested” in his body (2 Corinthians 4:10). He is prepared to present his body again, as a living and holy sacrifice acceptable to God (Romans 12:1).
- 6) To die is gain. He has no fear of death. In death he loses nothing but gains everything. As he will state later in his letter to the Philippians, he has already counted as lost the things of this world (Philippians 3:7-8). So whether he dies by the hand of Rome or goes to meet Christ in the air, death is no tragedy to him. On the contrary, he intends his death by whatever form it comes to be honoring to Christ.

Paul then goes on to weigh the pros and cons of continuing to live or of going to be with Christ, ending with what appears to be his conclusion of the matter.

PHILIPPIANS 1:22-26

“If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.”

Paul was well aware that the choice of life or death resided in the hands of God alone. It was not his to give or take away. So when he says, “*What shall I choose*” he is not stating that he has a choice in the matter, for God alone knows the number of a man’s days. Paul is not merely weighing the pros and cons of living or dying, he is attempting to make a greater point.

As he examines the two alternatives he makes it clear that for him death is by far the most preferable, as this would avoid the continual hardships and sufferings which come his way as a follower of Christ. But the obvious choice is not always the right choice. Paul has never shied away from persecution no matter

what circumstance he found himself in. He even told Timothy to suffer hardship with him, as a good soldier of Christ (2 Timothy 2:3).

So there is another point Paul is making and it is one he will continue to hammer home in his letter to the Philippians. That point is this: that we live not only to serve Christ but also to serve one another. Opting out of this service through the choice of “death” is not an option.

Paul says it is “more necessary” to remain in the flesh than it is to leave this body of flesh. Why? Because he believes he still serves a purpose in the lives of the Philippian church. He is so convinced of this that he says, *“I know that I will remain”* (that is live) *“and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith.”* Perhaps this conviction was given to him by the Holy Spirit, or perhaps it was a conviction he himself developed because of his great love for the church. No matter the source, the choice was made. Paul would stay and serve as long as he was able.

We know from history that Paul was indeed released from this time of imprisonment for several years before being rearrested and imprisoned in Rome again. It was not until this second prison term in Rome that God granted Paul the eternal gain which he so earnestly desired.

In the meantime Paul says his release and return to those whom he loves in Philippi will allow him to continue with them in their progress and joy in the faith. He also says that their proud confidence in him might abound in Christ Jesus through his coming to them again.

This “proud confidence” Paul speaks of is also translated as “boasting” or “joy”. So when Paul says that their “proud confidence” in him “may abound in Christ Jesus” he is saying that their joy will overflow at being reunited with him, and that they will boast of the deliverance God accomplished for Paul because God has allowed him to continue to do the work of an apostle without the restrictions of imprisonment. This is not boasting in the flesh, but rather boasting in the power and mercy of God for what He has accomplished in and for Paul, and for the blessing of having him freely work among them once again.

And for Paul there is joy as well. Paul will boast of God’s goodness, not only for his release, but for the privilege of seeing firsthand the fulfillment God’s promise – that the work which he had seen God begin in the Philippians, he would now see perfected and brought to completion as he continued to work among them.

So what are we to make of all this? What is there to learn from Paul’s rejoicing over the preaching of the gospel even by those with ulterior motives; Of Paul’s need for the prayers of the saints and the presence of the Holy Spirit; Of his hope and his boldness and his quandary of choosing life over death? How can we apply the truths we learned today to our own lives? While there are many things I believe we can learn from these passages, I have chosen to concentrate today on only one – the circumstances of life and our response to it.

Paul realized that his current circumstances weren’t as important as what he did with them. He looked at all things that happened to him as opportunities to fulfill the purpose of God for his life (see Luke 21:12-19; Acts 9:15-16). We are instructed to do the same (read Romans 5:3-5; 2 Corinthians 6:1-10; James 1:2-4; 1 Peter 4:12-19). So let’s deal with the principle that Paul chose to live for the sake of the Philippian church rather than to die and gain heaven. And let’s apply this lesson to our lives today.

There is much talk nowadays about assisted suicide. Some states have passed laws making it legal to kill yourself with the help of a physician. Those in favor of this have typically tried to redefine the words used to describe this process so it appears less like negative and more like a God-given right.

According to WIKIPEDIA, the word "suicide" has been replaced with the word "death" or ideally, "dying" taking away the taint of a self-induced killing. Others call it "physician-assisted dying", "physician-assisted death", "aid in dying", "death with dignity", "dying with dignity", "right to die" "compassionate death", "compassionate dying", "end-of-life choice", and "medical assistance at the end of life".

All of this is meant to portray that each of us has a right to kill ourselves. Just as the redefining of a baby as a "blob of tissue" led to the mother's right to choose death for her unborn infant, redefining suicide as the "right to die" or "death with dignity" allows people to be in control of their own death without suffering the stigma and indignity that comes with committing suicide.

Earlier this month a young woman decided to take the route of physician assisted suicide. This is her story as seen on a video which was posted on the web.

In January of 2014, after years of suffering from debilitating headaches, Brittany Maynard found out she had stage four brain cancer. She was given a prognosis of 6 months to live. She had recently turned 29.

She had the most aggressive and lethal form of brain cancer. It grows and spreads to other parts of the brain quickly. Studies show that few patients survive beyond three years, regardless of the treatment course they receive.

Faced with very few options in her home state of CA, Brittany and her family chose to move to Oregon so she could access its "death with dignity" law. She met the criteria and received a prescription for medication that would end her life peacefully and painlessly if and when she chose to ingest it.

Her husband said, *"Being able to decide when 'enough is enough' provides a lot of relief and comfort, knowing it's there when you need or decide to use it."*

Brittany said, *"It gives me a great deal of relief to know I do not have to die the way that it's been described to me how the brain tumor would take me on its own."*

Her husband said, *"Death with dignity allows for people who are in the predicament of facing a lot of suffering to decide when 'enough is enough'."*

Her mother said, *"Brittany has always been very, very precocious and bright. Anything she sets her mind to she did."*

Pressed with only months to live, Brittany prioritized spending time with the people she loved and traveling. She traveled to Yellowstone with her husband and to Alaska with her best friend before her mother joined her there.

"Setting little goals like this" she said "make every day worthwhile. I hope to enjoy however many days I have on this beautiful earth and spend as much of it outside as I can, surrounded by those I love. I hope to pass in peace." She went on to say, *"The reason to consider life and what's of value, is to make sure you're not missing out. Seize the day. What's important? What do you care about? What matters? Pursue that. Forget the rest."*

Brittany used the medication and ended her life on Saturday, November 1st. In her final statement, Maynard wrote on Facebook: *"Goodbye to all my dear friends and family that I love. Today is the day*

I have chosen to pass away with dignity in the face of my terminal illness, this terrible brain cancer that has taken so much from me ... but would have taken so much more. The world is a beautiful place, travel has been my greatest teacher, my close friends and folks are the greatest givers. I even have a ring of support around my bed as I type ... Goodbye world. Spread good energy. Pay it forward!"

Compassion & Choices, the advocacy group that worked closely with Brittany, said she died peacefully *"surrounded by close family and loved ones."*

"Brittany has died, but her love of life and nature, her passion and spirit endure," said the organization's president, Barbara Coombs Lee, on its website. *"We will work to carry on her legacy of bringing end-of-life choice to all Americans."*

Some parts of this story are beautiful and comforting; to find the joy in each day, to seize every opportunity to live; to be surrounded by friends and family; to do the things you love; to decide where and under what conditions we want to pass away. Who would not want these things? It is a reminder to all of us what is most important. But it is also a disturbing story of hopelessness.

We have an example in Scripture of someone who wished to die with dignity – King Saul. In 1 Samuel 31:1-5 we read that the Philistines were fighting against Israel. During this battle King Saul was badly wounded by the archers. Not wanting to face death at the hands of the Philistines and suffer the indignities of being made sport of as they killed him, Saul asked his armor bearer to pierce him through with his sword. When the armor bearer refused Saul himself took his sword and fell on it. He looked for whatever dignity he could find given his present circumstances and choose the most dignified method of dying he had available to him. He killed himself, refusing to give that option to the Philistines.

I am not telling you these stories to judge either the actions of Brittany Maynard or of King Saul. They both did what they felt was right at the time. And considering their impending death used the tools available to them to “die with dignity”.

I am telling you these stories so that you might see the contrast between the attitude and actions of Brittany, King Saul and Paul.

Paul had been subject to years of imprisonment. He had suffered beatings and floggings numerous times. His life was constantly in danger.

In 2 Corinthians 6:3-10 Paul described his and his companions experience as ministers of the gospel of Christ as people who were constantly

“Giving no cause for offense in anything, so that the ministry will not be discredited, but in everything commending ourselves as servants of God, in much endurance, in afflictions, in hardships, in distresses, in beatings, in imprisonments, in tumults, in labors, in sleeplessness, in hunger, in purity, in knowledge, in patience, in kindness, in the Holy Spirit, in genuine love,

...in the word of truth, in the power of God; by the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and the left, by glory and dishonor, by evil report and good report; regarded as deceivers and yet true; as unknown yet well-known, as dying yet behold, we live; as punished yet not put to death, as sorrowful yet always rejoicing, as poor yet making many rich, as having nothing yet possessing all things.”

Paul endured hardship and pain and suffering. He did not seek to avoid it. He knew what his suffering produced and did not lose heart because of it.

In 1 Corinthians 4:16-17 Paul says, *“Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.”*

James 1:2-4 tells us to: *“Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance. And let endurance have its perfect result, so that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing.”*

There is no endurance when we avoid that which would cause us to endure. Am I saying that we should never seek relief from pain through modern medications or techniques? No, absolutely not. I would no more say that than I would say to avoid doctors when you have a broken bone or avoid surgery if you have a malignant tumor. I believe doctors and medicine are God’s gift to us. But like all things they can be abused. Using a doctor who has sworn to give life, as a tool to end life is contrary to the purpose of this gift.

What I am saying is that God has a purpose in our endurance, in going through the difficult times of life. Paul understood this and was willing to live in order that he might be of service to others.

Wendy and I have been around people whose health has deteriorated due to cancer or lingering diseases. Their families have personally cared for them and they have brought in hospice for additional help. Some have died rapidly from their disease like Wendy’s mother – a few weeks after being diagnosed she left to be with the Lord. Others have lingered for years getting treatment after treatment. Some have longed for death to come sooner rather than later, wondering why the Lord had not taken them home already. But all who have endured have professed what a blessing it was to have their loved ones care for them and of the nearness of the Lord in their affliction. Would they want to repeat the affliction? No. But they were grateful for the Lord’s very real presence in the midst of it.

In some ways I have been very reluctant to make this application of suffering and endurance. Several of you here today know much more about this topic than I do. You have suffered in similar ways as Brittany Maynard and you have chosen to endure no matter what the consequences of endurance may bring. Some of you have passed this way before and now know that this may very well be the last time you pass this way again. You are far better equipped to speak on this issue than I. But out of respect for you and to encourage you through these difficult times I felt it necessary to speak publicly about suffering and the choices we make while enduring it. I also feel as Christians we need to bring a perspective that is different and in some ways diametrically opposed to the perspective of the world. So I will finish by speaking from my own perspective and let the choices you are making be their own witness.

The impending moment of death causes some to reach out in desperation and hope that life can continue beyond the moments of earth. Many people have chosen to accept the Lord in these last moments. My father was one of those, as was the father of one of my friends. But sadly, there is no mention in Brittany’s story of any relationship with the Lord. No expression that death would bring renewed life in another place where pain did not exist. The only hope expressed was that of “dying with dignity”.

I do not know what faith Brittany had, if any, or in whom her hope might have been placed. I can only look at the decisions she made and the words she and her loved ones left behind describing her decision to die by self-medication. So based solely on this I wonder, where is the dignity in ending a life that ends in eternal death? A moment of dignity traded for an eternity of separation is no dignity at all. I would call this death by

deception rather than death by dignity.

Jesus said, *“The thief comes to steal and destroy. But I have come that they might have life and have it more abundantly.”*(John 10:10)

God does not want anyone to perish. He waits patiently for all to turn to Him even if it is in the last few moments of their life. Suffering has a purpose. Endurance has a purpose. Choosing to cut this process short may cause you to cut yourself off from eternity. There is hope for an end to suffering and a dignified death. But it is not through suicide, no matter how many fancy words you use to redefine it. It is through trust and hope and endurance through the power of the Spirit residing within you.

The sun may set on this life earlier for some than for others. Even the good die young. But God even has a reason for this.

He says in Isaiah 57:1 that, *“Good people pass away; the godly often die before their time. But no one seems to care or wonder why. No one seems to understand that God is protecting them from the evil to come. For those who follow godly paths will rest in peace when they die.”*

But whether you have lived for 29 years like Brittany Maynard had, or for 109 years like the pianist and Holocaust survivor Alice-Herz Sommer has, God has created each and every one of us for a purpose and a destiny that is far beyond the reaches of this life.

The trials of this life may test us to the brink of our endurance. But when we are weak we can be strong if we rely on the power of the Lord for the strength to persevere. We can choose to face death in the strength of our own will with no expectation of an eternal existence, or we can choose to face death in the light of eternity with the power of God giving us the strength to persevere to the end.

I do not know what Brittany Maynard heard when she entered into eternity. But I do know what I want to hear. I want to hear, *“Well done, thou good and faithful servant. Come and enter into the joy of the Lord”* (Mathew 25:23). I want to know that I am one of those who are saved because I persevered to the end (Matthew 24:13). I want to know that in my weakness He was made strong (2 Corinthians 12:10).

May God grant to all of us the grace to accept all that life brings our way in the strength and power which the Lord supplies. And like Paul to choose life for the sake of continuing to minister to others. And even when our strength fades, may we say with Job, *“The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.”* (Job 1:21)

And may we, with hearts full of faith also say with Job, *“I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last He will take His stand on the earth. Even after my skin is destroyed, yet from my flesh I shall see God.”* (Job 19:25-26)

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