

**Sermon preached by Pastor Robert Barnett at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 25, 2008**

TO LIVE IS CHRIST

Philippians 1:18b-26

Pastor Kent Hughes tells the sad story of a member in his church named Andrew Chong. Mr. Chong suffered from heart disease and one evening had to be rushed to Northwestern Hospital in Chicago to have a stint cleared of a blockage. The procedure was invasive and after some time the surgeon came out and indicated that he could not go on. There was too much bleeding and there was nothing he could do. He said to Mr. Chong's wife: "You'd better get your family together. He may not make it through the night."

So all of the children rushed to their father's bedside where they gathered to say their goodbyes. Mr. Chong had just come out of the anesthetic and because of the intense pain had difficulty speaking. He motioned for a pen and a piece of paper and then wrote – in slow and deliberate fashion – twelve simple words: "For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain." And then ended the note with the word "Hallelujah."

The last word took a full minute for his shaking hands to write down. After he finished, he spoke: "Nothing has changed. Nothing has changed." Mr. Chong had lived his life in service to his Savior and this final difficulty did not alter his perspective on life. For Mr. Chong, nothing had changed!

Pastor Hughes writes that those words formed Mr. Chong's last will and testament. He took Paul's words from Philippians 1 and made them his own – "a careful signature of his soul's joyous confidence and submission to the will of God" (R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians: The Fellowship of the Gospel*). You see, Andrew Chong had joy even at life's most difficult moment. With honesty, he could repeat Paul's words, "For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain."

This morning, I'd like us to explore together how we can have that sense of joy when we suffer. If you are like me, those words probably come easy to say, but are really, really hard to live out. If we apply our passage this morning, we should find some help in making those words a part of our lives.

PAUL REJOICES IN HIS EXPERIENCE

We have been looking at Paul's letter to the Philippians for the past couple of weeks. We have learned that the apostle and the little church at Philippi were partners in the work of the kingdom. They had entered into cooperation with each other to work together for the gospel. The Philippians volunteered their financial support to care for Paul's physical needs, so that he could continue with his missionary work making disciples of all the nations.

We have also learned that Paul was in prison in Rome. About four years before the writing of this letter he had been arrested in Jerusalem for preaching about Jesus. He was carted off to the imperial city to stand trial before Caesar. The outcome of his trial was uncertain – he could be set

free or he could lose his life. That must have been quite troubling to the Philippians, his partners in the gospel.

But Paul writes that in the middle of this ordeal he can rejoice. Because he knows the gospel is being advanced through his circumstances, Paul is overflowing with delight and satisfaction. He has deep spiritual joy. He really means it! In verse 18 he says it twice just to make his point: *And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice.*

Now this is not a bit of false enthusiasm so the Philippians would feel better. It's not fake happiness. It is not like the pretend smile we put on when we get that Christmas gift we don't really like (the purple striped shirt or the moose-shaped coffee cup). Here, Paul is really joyful.

Why? Because in every way Christ is proclaimed, because the gospel is advancing throughout the imperial guard and all over Rome because of his chains. Because throughout the church in Rome, other believers are encouraged to boldly share their faith. The gospel is advancing. The good news is being spread and people are coming to faith in Jesus. This brings joy to Paul, and should to the Philippians.

But the advancement of the gospel came with a cost. It was not cheap. Paul had to suffer and he is not blind to his hardship. He faces his difficulty square in the face. Paul is not in some sort of make-believe world, denying that his pain is real or pretending that hard times are never supposed to cross the path of a faithful Christian.

No, he knows his Bible better than that. We live in a fallen and sinful world, and affliction is the lot of both Christians and non-Christians.

Indeed, Paul had faced some hard times. Listen to what he wrote to the Corinthian church:

Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches (2 Corinthians 11:24-28).

Paul suffered. And now, he was in prison, possibly about to lose his life for the sake of the gospel. Imagine what Philippians thought when they received this letter. Paul was in distress, but he rejoiced. He was in chains, but he was delighted with the outcome. How can anyone rejoice when so much pain and difficulty has unfolded? Sure the gospel has advanced, but is it worth it? How can anyone keep on overflowing with joy amidst such abundant pain and hardship?

PAUL REJOICES BECAUSE OF HIS EXPECTED DELIVERANCE

Paul keeps on rejoicing because he knows that his circumstances will result in his eternal salvation. He looks to the future. Look at verse 19: *for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.* He is not talking about a physical deliverance, but his final deliverance at last judgment. He is talking confidently about the salvation of his soul.

Though he is on trial in Rome, Paul knows he will be acquitted in heaven. His focus is on what is really important. His deliverance from the eternal wrath of God and the promise of eternity is far better than deliverance from the temporary anger of Caesar. Paul is much more excited about His position before Almighty God than his standing before not-so-almighty man. He knows that God is in control and that the redemption he has in Christ is secure.

Sometimes, when our trials are really bad, or when it seems that there is no end to our troubles, we may feel like there is no hope. We lose sight of the cross and our desire for comfort or the relief from pain and suffering – no matter how legitimate – outweighs the real hope that we have in the Lord. We prize what is trivial and less important – at least in the grand scheme of things – and forget what is of immense and great value, our salvation.

Paul would write a similar thought to the church in Rome, *I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us* (Rom. 8:18). The words to the hymn we just sang should be ever so true:

So I'll cherish the old rugged cross,
Till my trophies at last I lay down;
I will cling to the old rugged cross,
And exchange it some day for a crown.

There is a humorous story about a woman who was diagnosed with a terminal illness and had been given three months to live.

As she was getting her things in order, she contacted her pastor and asked him to come to her house to discuss some of her final wishes. She told him which songs she wanted sung at her funeral service, what Scriptures she would like read, and what outfit she wanted to be buried in. She requested to be buried with her favorite Bible.

As the pastor prepared to leave, the woman suddenly remembered something else. “There's one more thing,” she said excitedly.

“What's that?” said the pastor.

“This is important,” the woman said. “I want to be buried with a fork in my right hand.”

The pastor stood looking at the woman, not knowing quite what to say.

The woman explained. “In all my years of attending church socials and pot-providence dinners, when the dishes of the main course were being cleared, someone would inevitably lean over and say, ‘Keep your fork.’”

It was my favorite part of the meal because I knew something better was coming – like velvety chocolate cake, a yummy cheesecake, or deep-dish apple pie.

So, when people see me in that casket with a fork in my hand and they ask, ‘What’s with the fork?’ I want you to tell them: ‘Keep your fork. The best is yet to come!’”

Paul could rejoice because he was certain that suffering was temporary. The best was yet to come. He knew that a shift was going to take place in his circumstances; the tide was about to turn for his deliverance. He would enjoy freedom, either from prison or from this world. It was certain! Furthermore, he knew that God was being glorified and His kingdom was being advanced.

You see, Paul looked at the big picture, knowing that down the road, hard times would culminate in deliverance. All he had to do was go through a small lifetime of trouble in exchange for an eternity with Christ!

These days, perhaps like all days, several in our church family are in tough times. Some of you have financial difficulties or are having trouble finding a job. Some of you battle against cancer, heart disease, skin infections, depression, or some other problem. In the past months, a few of you have experienced the loss of a loved one and you are grieving. Indeed, every one of us will suffer in some way, big or small. We need to remember that the best is yet to come – that our difficulties will some day move aside for a glorious future. Our deliverance is certain!

PAUL REJOICES BECAUSE OF GOD’S WORK IN HIS LIFE

Not only did Paul wait expectantly for his salvation. He rejoiced because he saw the hand of the Lord in his circumstances. He knew that suffering had a divine purpose, that God was using his imprisonment to do something profound in his life. Through the prayers of churches like Philippi and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit during these difficult times, God was working out his plan of salvation in Paul. He was making the apostle a more effective instrument for His kingdom, a model of Christ-like trust and humility for the Philippians and for us.

Paul would write to the Philippians that he had learned contentment. He would urge them to lift up their prayers and experience the peace that surpasses all comprehension and would tell them that he could do all things through Christ who strengthened him. Paul didn’t learn this in a classroom, He learned this through the stuff of real life. That’s the way God works.

God doesn’t waste our suffering. Our difficulties are not grains of sand that slipped through His fingers when He wasn’t looking. Every circumstance, every day of pain or happiness, every bit of sunshine and rain, comes to us according to His sovereign purposes in order to make us more and more like Jesus.

God may not be the author of pain and suffering, but He is always the authorizer. And He does it for our good. Eugene Petersen wrote:

“Suffering is not evidence of God’s absence, but of God’s presence, and it is in our experience of being broken that God does His surest and most characteristic salvation work. There is a way to accept, embrace, and deal with suffering that

results in a better life, not a worse one, and more of the experience of God, not less. God is working out his salvation in our lives the way He has always worked it out – at the place of brokenness, at the cross of Jesus, and at the very place where we take up our cross” (Foreword to *Embracing Brokenness: How God Refines Us Through Life's Disappointments*)

Paul’s perspective on suffering was based on his knowledge of the gospel. Paul is certain of his deliverance. Not an amazing feeling, but an amazing truth.. A knowledge that will produce the fruit of real joy.

Verse 20 says *I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed*. Paul had an eager expectation (a deep desire) and a confident hope. Now Paul used the word hope a little differently than the way we use it. When we say “hope” we don’t always expect what we hope for – when clouds are in the sky, we’ll say “I hope that it won’t rain this weekend.” At the start of the baseball season, we say “I hope that our team wins the pennant.”

When Paul uses the word “hope,” he is much more confident. He is talking about faith. Hebrews 11:1 defines faith this way: *Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see*.

Of course, we know that Paul’s faith is in the Lord Jesus Christ. We can say that his faith produced knowledge . . . and that knowledge produced joy. So what does that knowledge include?

Anchored to the promise of Paul’s deliverance – either his release or his execution – is the promise that he will not be ashamed. No matter what will happen, Paul will never lose his position in Christ or His dignity as a child of God. He has eternal security. More importantly, Christ will be glorified.

In the long run, it doesn’t matter what happens to Paul, whether he is in prison or free to go about his ministry. God will receive glory. God is never dethroned in our circumstances, no matter what happens to us. Cancer, financial setbacks, school shootings, you name it. In these, Christ is ultimately glorified because His purpose is being carried out.

It is hard to understand from human perspective, but God’s purposes are met and He gets the glory. We will see that over and over again in this letter to the Philippians – when we are tied into God’s purposes, we can have real confidence in our future, even while our suffering continues.

It is really a ”win-win” situation: That’s what Paul says – to live is Christ, but to die is gain.

There are advantages of staying alive – it seems kind of silly to say this, but we all want to live. Paul did. If his life were spared, he could continue to share the gospel, he could minister to the Philippians and help them in their progress and joy in the faith. But there was also an advantage to dying. Paul’s relationship with Christ would intensify, he would be in the presence of the Lord he served. His ministry would reach fulfillment. Paul has a dilemma. He says he is torn between the two.

Notice that Paul does not mention that death would free him from his suffering. Of course it will, but that's not on his mind. Paul does not think about himself. Despite the advantage to himself, he desires to stay with the Philippians.

Paul has experienced a lot of suffering. To live would mean to continue to suffer. He would be fine with death. His preference is to be with Jesus. But he could not be selfish.

One preacher I heard had a medical condition like Mr. Chong. Though a young man, he faced the possibility of heart failure. He described his dilemma to his wife and said that in the event of a heart attack, he would just as soon go home to the Lord. He thought he was being spiritual – after all to die is gain! But his wife admonished him for his selfishness. Who would care for the family? Who would minister to the church? God had a purpose for his life.

You see, Paul's statement "to live is Christ and to die is gain," was not a premature desire to skip out and go to heaven. It was a quiet confidence that his future was in God's hands.

Paul's suffering was not about Paul. It was not about his contentment, not about his freedom from pain, not about how tough it was. Paul's suffering was about the advancement of the gospel. . . it was about the advantage for the people to whom he ministered . . . it was about the glory of Jesus Christ.

Paul was not into himself, but was into other people. He would write later in this letter: *Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.* (2:4). The apostle's deep longing for heaven, to be free of hardship and in the presence of Jesus, was subordinate to what was best for others. Commentator Frank Thielman wrote:

Every major feature of his life at the time he wrote this letter – his physical comfort, the opinions others had about him, his position with respect to secular authorities, and the question whether he lives or dies – are molded by his commitment to the advancement of the gospel" (*Philippians: NIV Application Commentary*).

CONCLUSION

The realization that remaining alive for the present was more important than his ultimate desire to be with Christ gave Paul confidence that he might actually avoid the executioner and continue with the Philippians. He did not have a divine word about staying alive, just a confidence that his future was secure, even while his suffering continued. He felt that more life lay ahead of him, and that through his ministry, the Philippians would glory not in him but in Christ Jesus.

That is what he meant when he said "to live is Christ." To place his future, his desires, his plans into the hands of Jesus Christ, knowing that his future was secure.

In 1956, missionary Jim Eliot was killed by the Acua (or Huaorani) Indians in Ecuador, along with four companions. His story is told by his widow Elisabeth in her book *Through the Gates of Splendor*. The Huaorani were the very people these missionaries were trying to reach with the gospel. They first made contact from an airplane using a loudspeaker and a basket to pass down gifts.

After several months, the men decided to build a base a short distance from the Indian village and were approached one time by a small group of Huaorani – they even gave an airplane ride to one curious native whom they called “George.” Encouraged by these friendly encounters, they began plans to visit the tribe, but their plans were preempted when Huaorani warriors came to their base and killed them all.

But the story does not end there. Elisabeth and other missionaries stayed in Ecuador and continued working among the Huaorani and helped bring many of them to Christ. There is a quote that Jim Eliot made famous: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” The apostle Paul would agree with Jim Eliot’s words. To live is Christ and to die is gain. Paul’s attitude informed everything he did.

That’s the key to having joy, both when times are good and when they are bad. Making Jesus your central, most important desire. Making His purposes become your purposes and subordinating your desires to His. You will then have real confidence in your future, even while your suffering continues.

You will be able to say with Paul no matter what, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” And confidently add the joyful refrain, Hallelujah!