

September 27, 2009

THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

To Live is Christ – to Die is Gain

Philippians 1: 19 – 30

The essence of the gospel is this: God the Father, sent His only Son, Jesus, to die for my sins, taking my place on the cross – a cross I should have died on, a hell I deserved to suffer – **in order that He might bring me to Himself.** The magnificent good news of the gospel is not just that my sins are forgiven and I am bound for heaven – **it is that I can know God and Jesus Christ whom He sent.** Everything that God gives to me in the gospel is bent toward this. Jesus Himself prayed to the Father: *'This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent'*. John 17:3 The was the great, straining desire of Paul as he shares with the Philippians his one, overwhelming passion in chapter 3: *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.* Philippians 3:8

This is why Paul could say to live is Christ and to die is gain. Christ is the end of the gospel and ultimately the end of the purpose of God. When, in the beginning of time, men rejected God – refused to worship Him and rebelled against His authority, they needed at that moment a Redeemer – a mediator. They could never save themselves and recover the possibility of worshipping God and glorifying and enjoying Him forever – they needed a remedy and Jesus is that remedy. **Jesus became a means to the end that a people could be saved and fulfill the ultimate end of seeing and savoring and displaying the glory of God which the universe was created to manifest.**

However in the moment in which Jesus appeared as the Savior, He became, particularly in His work on the cross, the supreme manifestation of the glory of God – that is, the glory of His grace. In the very act of becoming the means to the end of achieving the purpose of the universe, He became the end. Because He has enabled us to be redeemed, forgiven, justified, glorified, to see and savor and enjoy God forever – **in the very doing of that He becomes the focus where we direct all of our worship and praise and glory and honor as we behold the riches of the glory of God.** And all of our life is meant to display the glory of God by treasuring this Christ as our life and life supply.

It is a walk and attitude of running hard after God. John Wesley describes someone like that: *"[H]is heart is ever lifted up to God at all times and in all places. In this he is never hindered, much less interrupted, by any person or thing. In [solitude] or company, in leisure, business, or conversation, his heart is ever with the Lord. Whether he lie down or rise up, God is in all his thoughts; he walks with God continually, having the loving eye of his mind still fixed upon Him, and everywhere 'seeing him that is invisible.'"* John Wesley It is to say along with Paul: **To me to live is Christ and to die is gain.**

What I understand from this little sentence is two things. The first is that when we say **'To live is Christ'** it means that **Christ is the reference point for all of life.** Whatever in life that promotes our relationship with Christ is good – everything else can go. It means that Christ Himself is our supreme treasure and we pursue Him with the zeal of a treasure hunter. It means that we consider Christ so precious, so valuable, such a great treasure, that everything else pales in comparison. It means that whether we are in prison, like Paul was, or suffering under persecution or in affliction or in poverty – whether we are free and not persecuted or suffering or in want – **knowing Him and being with Him is our highest joy.** It means that in everything, absolutely everything we do, Christ is magnified, exalted, honored, and shown to be our treasure.

John Newton was a rough, dirty sailor with a foul mouth and an appetite for rotten living. He hated life and life hated him. He ran one of the foulest businesses of the day as the captain of a slave ship. Then God got ahold of John and saved him from his futile life. From that day till his death, John Newton lived Christ – preaching and giving his testimony all over England. Eventually though he got old, and well past his "retirement" age, he had to have an assistant stand in the pulpit with him on Sundays. He was nearly blind and spoke in whispers, but nothing could keep him from preaching while he still had breath. One Sunday, while delivering his message he repeated the sentence: **"Jesus Christ is precious."** His helper whispered to him: "But you have already said that twice." Newton turned to his helper and said loudly, "Yes, I've said it twice, and I'm going to say it again." The stones in the ancient sanctuary fairly shook as the grand old preacher said again: **"Jesus Christ is precious!"**

That is the big picture of what **'To live is Christ'** means. But in the next verse, Paul defines what it means in the moment for he and for the Philippians: *'If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me'*. Philippians 1:22a If God grants Paul to live for a few more years, that living Paul says, won't be wasted. Instead it will be filled with fruitful labor. **'To live is Christ' means that while we live we are engaged in the great purpose of God on the earth.** What is interesting is that Paul didn't say, *'If God grants that I live and not die here in prison, I think I'll retire. After all, look what I've done for the spread of the gospel in my life. Look at how much I've suffered for the faith. I think God will understand if I take the last few years of life remaining to me and retire to a little villa on the Mediterranean.'* Instead he says, **'If I am to live, that means I get to work more'**.

This is 180 degrees from the mindset of today. Today we work so that we can one day retire and live in a condo in Florida and catch a few rays, play golf and collect sea shells. I don't believe retirement is a biblical concept. Because Paul's highest ambition was to know Christ – he saw everything in terms of Christ – especially the work. And he was looking forward to fruit-filled work – if he lived.

But Paul's manifesto that **'To live is Christ'** was tempered by the thought that to die was somehow more to be desired – because he said, **'To die is gain'**. **'Gain'** here has the meaning of making a profit or winning. You could translate this sentence like this: **'To live is Christ and to die is to win'**. My good friend, John Petersohn, whom many of you know, has a wife that is very careful about all the food that goes into her family's mouths. It has to be organic because of all the bad preservatives and pesticides that permeate our food today. But John is rather careless at times about what he eats, and when others tell him that eating the preservatives and pesticides will kill you, he comes back with: **'The first one to heaven wins'**.

I believe his sentiment is sound even if his reasoning is a little sketchy. **The truth is, when believers die – they never lose, they always win.** How can you not win when you get to spend eternity with Christ – basking in His presence, fellowshiping with all the saints who have gone before, getting lost in the wonder and awesomeness of God Himself, discovering new delights, new senses, new experiences, every day and night forever? How can you lose when you trade this old broken-down body for a new one that never grows old? How can you lose in a place where there is no more sickness, no more sin, no more tears, no more heartache and no more sorrow? Where there is only the massive radiation of God's love and joy and peace to fill your soul? How can you lose?

So when we say along with Paul, **'To die is gain'**, we mean that **Christ Himself is the goal.** Paul clearly had this in mind as he writes in chapter 3: *But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, 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 and be found in Him...that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and may share His sufferings, becoming like Him in his death...But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.* Philippians 3:7-9a,10, 12b-14

The goal is not heaven, or good works here, or a transformed life, or anything that points to us. The goal is Christ. And whatever brings us to Him is good, whether in life or in death. **To live is Christ and to die is gain.** This is why Paul could say in verse 19: *for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance,* Philippians 1:19 Because he lived his life treasuring Christ – because his perspective on death was that it was gain and not loss – because he knew that the purpose of God will triumph over everything – Paul knew without a shadow of a doubt that the prayers the Philippians were engaged in on his behalf – prayers that centered on the spread of the gospel – and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ – the outlook was more than promising.

There are two things always working for God's people: prayer and the Holy Spirit. Our prayers to God on behalf of His people are powerful in the universe. God has ordained that our praying advances His kingdom – **because our prayers, inspired and moved along by the Holy Spirit really have only one main objective** – *'Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.'* Everything else is just to sustain us and preserve us for His purpose. I think the ESV has done a disservice here to us in the translation. Because the wording here implies that the Holy Spirit is just a kind of aide to us in our prayers – *and He certainly is that* – we might get the idea that we do all the heavy lifting. But the word translated **'help'** here is so much more than just help.

The word is composed of two Greek words: *epi* – meaning *over and above*, and *choregia* – which means *support to defray the cost of a public chorus*. So the root meaning of this word is *'over and above support, or bountiful support of provision for a choral dance troupe.'* Now that may not be immediately helpful to you so let me explain a little. To supply a choral dance troupe in ancient Greece was not a small undertaking. All the costumes, equipment, food, lodging, practice halls and performance theaters, and wages, all had to be paid for. Usually there was a rich patron that took care of this for the performing group – and it costs thousands. Nothing could be left undone if they were to have a successful season. So when Paul talks about the *'help'* of the Holy Spirit, he has this in mind. The Holy Spirit does not just help – **He bountifully supplies all that we ask in our prayers and all that we need to accomplish the purpose of God on the earth.**

But Paul says something else here that we should not miss. He says that through their prayers and the bountiful supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ **he knows that his present circumstances** – he being in prison and other believers talking badly about him, trying to cause him even more distress while he is in prison – **will turn out for his deliverance.** Now I am not sure why most translators prefer using deliverance instead of salvation, which is what the word is translated as in nearly every other place in the New Testament. Perhaps they want to make a distinction between salvation in the sense that we are saved from our sins, and this word means that as well – and salvation in the sense that we are delivered from ultimate destruction by our enemies.

But in any case, I believe Paul had salvation in mind when he wrote this. Salvation in the sense of full salvation – being transformed more and more into the image of Christ. I don't think, as other commentators speculate, that he wrote this with the view to his eventual release from prison, because that was not his primary consideration. What he was concerned with was working for Christ wherever he found himself – not trying to escape from his cell. He wasn't organizing concerts of prayer focusing on his release – he didn't beg the Philippians to pray that he would get out of prison. I think he was perfectly content to be surrounded by pagan guards who needed Christ, and he was pouring his life into the gospel.

What this should say to us is profound. I think it says that God ordains our circumstances for our good and His glory. I think it says that **In whatever circumstances we find ourselves, our greatest goal ought to be Christ.** I think it is better to pray in most cases, *'Lord change me'* not to pray, *'Lord change the circumstances'*. It is in those circumstances that God's purpose is fulfilled in and through us. It is in the heat of the furnace that gold is refined. You see, it is through prayer and the bountiful supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ that we are finally brought all the way to glory – and it is only when we understand that Christ is the reference point for all of life and that He Himself is our goal – that we can view all our trials as joy and say, **to live is Christ and to die is gain.**

You see Paul always had his eyes on the prize. Even though he was perfectly content to end his days if necessary for the purpose of God in the arena with wild beasts or evil men, he knew in his heart of hearts that his work on earth was not yet done: *Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.* Philippians 1:22b-26

Because Christ was the reference point for all his life, because Christ was Paul's goal – he knew that it would be better for the Philippians, and God knew it would be better for the millions of believers that came after them, for Paul to stay. After all, he still had some more of the New Testament to write. He knew that he would glorify Christ in His body whether he lived or died, and he was staying, not because he loved life here so much he didn't want to die, but for the sake of the gospel. He was staying so the Philippians would progress with joy in the faith. People who think about retirement don't think this way. But Paul was convinced that God's pleasure was that he would remain to work a while longer.

To live is Christ and to die is gain is the heart of the gospel message. When the Holy Spirit awakens our hearts to faith and we hear the voice of Jesus say *'Take up your cross and follow Me'* this is what is meant. **In living and dying Christ becomes our reference point for everything and He is the goal toward which we run.** Unfortunately, many people treat the gospel message as a kind of addition to the life they already have. They are under the impression that Christ is just another element to add to life to make things go even better. They just want a little bit of the gospel – not enough to change their lives – just enough to make them happy.

D.A. Carson puts it like this: *'I'd like to buy about three dollars worth of gospel, please. Not too much – just enough to make me happy, but not so much that I get addicted. I don't want so much gospel that I learn to really hate covetousness and lust. I certainly don't want so much that I start to love my enemies, cherish self-denial, and contemplate missionary service in some alien culture. I want ecstasy, not repentance; I want transcendence, not transformation. I would like to be cherished by some nice, forgiving, broad-minded people, but I myself don't want to love those from different races – especially if they smell. I would like enough gospel to make my family secure and my children well-behaved, but not so much that I find my ambitions redirected or my giving too greatly enlarged. I'd like about three dollars worth of gospel, please.'*

There is nothing and no one on earth or in heaven or indeed anywhere in the vast universe that can compare with Jesus. **'To live is Christ and to die is gain' is a call to radical, abandonment to Christ Himself.** In view of the glories of His grace, in view of the surpassing rewards He extends to those who believe, in view of the utter delight and joy of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, no trial is too great, no cost too dear, no service too hard, no loss too dear for any to bear. When a young John Paton's heart was stirred to carry the gospel to the South Sea Islands, and hearing of his plans, he was warned by an older and presumably wiser elder in the church who said: *'You will be eaten by cannibals!' - John replied: 'Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms; I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honoring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by cannibals or by worms; and in the Great Day my resurrection body will arise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer.'*

Our gracious God and loving Father,

Grant that our highest ambition and greatest joy would be to know You. In solitude or company, in leisure or business or conversation; in lying down or rising up, may our hearts ever be with You and our minds ever fixed on You. O Christ be our reference point for all of life and the goal toward which we run. Forgive us Lord for setting our sights too low and being content with less than You. Let us not be paupers in the gospel but rich in all the vast wealth that is in Christ. Expose all the glitter and seductive temptations of this world that lure us away from the precious treasure we find in You and grant us that radical abandonment to You to which the gospel calls us. May our anthem always be 'To live is Christ and to die is gain'; so that we would live to make ourselves glad in You and make the nations glad in You we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.