

Good Results From Bad Circumstances
Philippians 1:12-26
Part 9

I would like to read for you a recent news clipping. The article is entitled “Aid workers face death for spreading Christianity.” It reads, “Eight foreigners are facing the death penalty in Afghanistan after being accused of spreading Christianity. The Taliban has shut the offices of the charity Shelter Now International and jailed its workers until the charges can be investigated. The charity’s Kabul office has been sealed following a raid by the Taliban’s Ministry for Promotion of Virtue and Prevention of Vice. The officers reportedly seized a Bible, two computers, Christian literature translated into the local Dari language, as well as cassettes and musical instruments. ‘An investigation is being conducted and it will be decided according to Islamic law,’ said Salim Haqqani, of the ministry. The punishment for propagating any religion other than Islam or for converting from Islam is death in the 95% of Afghanistan ruled by the Taliban. There is no indication of how long the investigation would take. So far, the Taliban have refused to allow anyone to visit those being held, including the organization’s international staff, which include two American women, a German man and an Australian man. The organization is run by a Germany-based Christian relief agency called Vision for Asia. The organization was previously run by an American group of the same name but the Germans took it over several years ago after the Americans were threatened for allegedly trying to convert people in Afghan refugee camps.”

What kind of thoughts went through your mind as I read this article? Perhaps more importantly, what do you think is going through their minds? I don’t know what might be going through their minds, but we can know what would be going through the Apostle Paul’s mind if he were in their situation. How can we know what would be on his mind? Because of the passage of Scripture we are now studying.

The passage of Scripture that we have been examining is Phil. 1:12-26. This passage of Scripture briefly outlines for us various circumstances in Paul’s life. The underlying principle of this section of Scripture is that human circumstances lie in God’s hands and that God will use those circumstances to advance the gospel. The question we have been asking is, “How did God use Paul’s circumstances to in fact do this?”

In VV. 12-18a, Paul explains to us how God was using his present circumstances to accomplish this. The first of Paul’s present circumstances that God used to advance the gospel were his chains. We saw this in **VV. 12-14**. The second of Paul’s present circumstances that God used to advance the gospel were professing Christians who were preaching Christ from impure motives. We saw this in **VV. 15-18**. But in **VV. 18b-26**, Paul departs from how God was using his present circumstances to advance the gospel to consider his future and his future circumstances.

“(18) And I will rejoice. (19) For I know that this shall turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, (20) according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I shall not be put to shame in anything, but that with all

boldness, Christ shall even now as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. (21) For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. (22) But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. (23) But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; (24) yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. (25) And convinced of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, (26) so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again.”

As Paul turned his attention to the future and his future circumstances in VV. 18b-26, what do we see God using to advance the gospel? The third circumstance that God used to advance the gospel was his unfolding crisis.

Before detailing how God was going to use his unfolding crisis to advance the gospel, he initially looks at his distant future and his ultimate salvation. We saw this in **V. 18b “and I will rejoice (19) for I know that this** (my unfolding crisis) **shall turn out for my** (ultimate) **deliverance.”** This confident expectation of ultimate deliverance along with the explanation of that confidence at the end of **V. 19** through **V. 20** helps us to appreciate Paul’s statement at the end of **V. 18 “And I will rejoice.”**

But there is more for us to know if we are going to appreciate Paul’s statement at the end of **V. 18, “and I will rejoice.”** Paul’s statement concerning his future anticipated joy was not only tied to his ultimate deliverance but also to his confident expectation of continuing service to Christ after his release from prison (VV. 21-26). In other words Paul saw that his present unfolding crisis would result in the continuing furtherance of the gospel of Christ.

I believe that this will be clearly seen in Phil. 1:21-26. This weekend we will be looking simply at one verse. We will be looking at the very first verse of this very short section of Scripture. Let us read **V. 21, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”** This is a passage of Scripture that we are very familiar with. Hopefully this weekend God will use this verse to speak to your heart and life. Hopefully this weekend God will use this verse to shape your thoughts as you face not only the challenges of life but also the prospect of your death.

Paul has just spoken about his earnest expectation and hope that Christ would be exalted in his body whether by life or by death, and now he is making clear to his readers and to ourselves as well, that either alternative is a good thing (V. 21). If he lives, it is a good thing because to live is Christ. If he dies it is a good thing because to die is gain.

Let us consider these two options. First of all let us consider what Paul meant when he said, “to live is Christ”? “To live for Christ” meant to live a life devoted to the exaltation of Christ producing fruitful labor (V. 22). We have already seen Paul’s devotion to the exaltation of Christ in **V. 20** and we see the fruitful labor was the result of that devotion in **V. 22, “but if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me.”**

Fruitful labor is not an option for a Christian. Listen to **Eph. 2:8-10, “For by grace you have**

been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; (9) not as a result of works, that no one should boast. (10) For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” Why is fruitful labor for a Christian not optional? Having a life characterized by fruitful labor is simply the outworking of God’s saving work and demonstrates the presence of the living Christ in our lives.

Some people here this morning might think, “what an extraordinary statement by Paul” when he says, **“for to me to live is Christ,”** but this statement should not be viewed as extraordinary at all.

If I were, this weekend, to ask you to complete this statement “For to me to live is _____.” I would hope that for many of you, if not for most of you here this weekend, you would fill that blank in just the same way as Paul filled in that blank, “For to me to live is Christ.”

This is certainly not how the world is going to fill in this blank. They are going to fill in this blank, “for to me to live is making money and enjoying the things that money can buy.” “For to me to live is comfort and the pursuit of worldly pleasures.” “For to me to live is to be well thought of.” “For me to live is my family.” This is how the world would fill in this blank. The world will have no interest in making Christ the center and circumference of their lives so that their lives are characterized by fruitful labor done in the name of Christ. But for the Christian it should be expected that we should be able to say with Paul, “For me to live is Christ.”

Hopefully this is where your heart is this weekend. Hopefully you have committed your life to the exaltation of Christ, whether by life or by death, and this commitment is leading you into fruitful labor.

When we think of fruitful labor we are not talking about matching Paul imprisonment for imprisonment, beating for beating, hardship for hardship or good work for good work. If it were, then none of us would be able to make this statement. This is not just my opinion-that is Paul’s opinion. Listen to **1 Cor. 15:9-10, “For I am the least of the apostles, who am not fit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. (10) But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me did not prove vain; but I labored even more than all of them, yet not I, but the grace of God with me.”** Who is the “all of them” that he is referring to? He is speaking about the other apostles of Christ. And what did he say about them in relationship to himself? He labored more than all of them.

We may not have the abilities, the skills, the calling, the opportunity or the maturity of the Apostle Paul, but we can share his passion. And what was that passion? Christ! And if we share this same passion with Paul, then we can say with Paul, “For to me to live is Christ,” and if this is the true expression of our hearts, our lives will be characterized by fruitful service.

Now let me bring us back to the point at hand. Paul has just spoken about his earnest expectation and hope that Christ would be exalted in his body whether by life or by death in **V. 20** and now in **V. 21** he is making clear to his readers and to ourselves as well that either alternative is a good

thing. If he lives it is a good thing because for Paul to live is Christ. But Paul also considers death to be a good thing. What does he say, **“For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.”**

What does Paul mean when he says, **“to die is gain?”** Death being considered “gain” by Paul is not a matter of what he is leaving but where he is going. Death was gain for Paul because it was the doorway into Christ’s presence (VV. 23-24). Look at **V. 23-24, “But I am hard pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; (24) yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.”** There are people in this world who, when greatly afflicted, might consider death to be gain. Certainly this thought was very common in the Greek world. And certainly it is true that if Paul died he would be delivered from his present earthly troubles and being delivered from his present earthly troubles would have been a relief to Paul. But escaping his troubles was the last thing on his mind when he says “and to die is gain.”

Paul knew that the troubles of his earthly existence were part and parcel of his struggle for the gospel to which he and the Philippians alike were wholly committed. While the trials through which they both passed were often burdensome, he reassures his friends at Philippi that God had graciously given them the privilege not only to believe but also to suffer on behalf of Christ. Do you remember Phil. 1:27-30?

What did it say? **“Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ; so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; (28) in no way alarmed by your opponents - which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that too, from God. (29) For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him but also to suffer for His sake.”** Paul knew that the troubles of his earthly existence were part and parcel of his struggle for the gospel. And he did not begrudge it. Listen to **Phil. 3:7-10, “But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. (8) More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, (9) and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, (10) that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to the image of His death.”** Death being considered “gain” by Paul is not a matter of what he is leaving, or of being delivered from his earthly trials, but rather death being considered gain was about where he is going. Death was gain for Paul because it was the doorway into Christ’s presence (VV. 23-24).

We need to have this very same perspective. In 1984 Mehdi Dibaj was imprisoned by the government of Iran on the charge of “apostasy” since he had converted from Islam to Christianity. The penalty for this crime according to Islamic law that ruled Iran was death. Mehdi was held in prison for 10 years before his case came to trial. When it did, his written statement of defense was a simple and straightforward reaffirmation of commitment to Jesus Christ. The last few lines of that defense contain the following paragraph.

(Jesus Christ) is our Savior 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 honor of His Holy Name, but am ready to give my life for the sake of Jesus my Lord.

You might wonder how the story of this man turned out. On Dec. 12, 1993, the court before whom this defense was made sentenced Mehdi to execution. Then, under intense pressure from people in the West who knew the case, including the State Department, the Iranian government arranged Mehdi's release in January 1994. Though he was released it did not spare his life. Seven months later, he was found dead in a park in Tehran. He was the third Iranian Christian to be murdered after release from prison. This man's beliefs were the same as Paul's. They both believed that death was gain for those who made Christ the center and circumference of their lives.

If we fail to view death as the portal to better things, we will find it very difficult to live for Christ. Rather than living in light of our hope, we will be tempted to live our lives for the here and now.

CONCLUSION

Paul has just spoken about his earnest expectation and hope that Christ would be exalted in his body whether by life or by death in **V. 20** and now in **V. 21** he is making clear to his readers and to us as well that either alternative is a good thing. If he lives, it is a good thing because to live is Christ. And if he dies it is a good thing because to die is gain.

At the beginning of this message I spoke to you about Christian aid workers who have been arrested in Afghanistan and face the possibility of execution and I asked you what you thought was going through their minds? I don't know what is going through their minds but I know what would be going through the Apostle Paul's mind if he were in their circumstances and it is all spelled out in great detail in **VV. 21-26**.

I know that we have not yet considered each of these verses but whatever we discover from these verses about Paul's particular thoughts, we must first of all know that his thoughts were rooted in this very deep underlying conviction which is, "for to me to live is Christ and to die is gain."

Hopefully this weekend God has used this verse to speak to your heart and life. Hopefully as you leave here this weekend God will use this verse to help shape your thoughts as you face not only the challenges of life but also the prospect of death itself.