

There are as many visions for the church as there are churches. But there shouldn't be. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul was clear that he lived or he died for only one thing. This morning we're going to talk about that one thing and what it has to do with us and our walk with God and with one another.

## OPENING PRAYER

### PHILIPPIANS 1:18-26

**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, <sup>19</sup>for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, <sup>20</sup>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. <sup>21</sup>For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. <sup>22</sup>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. <sup>23</sup>But I am hard-pressed from both *directions*, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for *that* is very much better;<sup>24</sup> yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.<sup>25</sup> Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, <sup>26</sup>so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again.**

Paul began this section of his letter with the words, **“What then?” (v.18)**, which may also be translated “Well now!” or “What about it?!” He was reflecting on what he had just written in the last paragraph about the preachers who intended to cause him harm and took pleasure in his imprisonment. “So what about it?” he was saying. “These men don't know anything about the work of God, about the power of the Holy Spirit, about the work of Christ in me!” The spirit in Paul's heart was strong; I can imagine the praetorian guard sitting at his feet, clinging to his every word.

Paul continued, writing, **“Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice” (v.18)**. As we discussed a few weeks ago, Paul rejoiced in the success of his enemies—the preachers who were jealous

of him—for it was all about exalting Jesus. If **“Christ is proclaimed,”** all is well in the kingdom.

But it is worth pointing out that Paul never let the heretics off the hook. Those who preached a **“different Christ,”** a messiah who could not save, a gospel that was something other than salvation and renewal through the grace of God, he condemned outright. As one commentator put it, just as a bridge that reaches within a foot of the opposite bank is not a bridge, a little bit of Jesus is not better than no Jesus!

But Paul was okay with preachers who preached with wrong motives so long as they got the message right. Thus he continued his letter, **“Yes, and I will rejoice,<sup>19</sup> for I know that this [referring to his upcoming trial before the emperor] will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (vv.18-19).**

When a person’s in prison, and when they have a chance for parole or an appeal, they’re consumed with their attorney’s strategy, with his arguments and with his end game. Except Paul. His strategy was simply the prayers of the church and **“the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.”**

Paul said that with the prayers of God’s people, he would receive **“the provision [or supply] of the Spirit,”** that is, he would be filled up with the words, the courage, the heart he would need when he came to trial.

Jesus had promised the disciples that **“when they hand you over, do not worry about how or what you are to say; for it will be given you in that hour what you are to say.<sup>20</sup> For it is not you who speak, but *it is* the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you” (Matthew 10:19-20).**

Jesus promised that the **“Spirit of your Father”** will speak through believers, and Paul believed his Lord. He never claimed that it was his own internal fortitude that made this possible. Rather, the Spirit of the Father worked in him, and he gave himself up to that grace and Christ was glorified.

Paul wrote that he believed **“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” (v.20).** His agenda, his mission, his single objective for his ministry he made crystal clear, that he would exalt Christ with his whole person. There was nothing else but Jesus.

The single quality which is shared by people who make a difference in the world is that they are focused on doing one thing; they have a singleness of purpose; sense of life-purpose revolves around just one thing. Examples: Thomas Edison inventing the incandescent lightbulb and James Patterson writing the perfect thriller novel.

So too St. Paul: His whole life revolved this one thing, the exaltation of Jesus, **“whether by life or by death.”**

Brothers and sisters in Christ, everything we do and think about is centered on this one thing, this singleness of purpose, the exaltation of Jesus. Our worship revolves around our Lord who died for our sins and ushered us into eternal life with his resurrection. Our preschool centers on the glorification of Jesus as we teach the children Bible stories and Christian songs and look for ways to bring their parents into the Body of Christ. Our outreach efforts are laser focused on using social services to build relationships with our neighbors in order to introduce them to the saving Gospel of our Lord.

But it’s so easy for the church to become distracted by internal affairs, I think it’s helpful to keep two things in mind as we go about our Lord’s work. First, to ensure that we’re on task, we ask ourselves how this or that project we propose to undertake in the church will bring glory to Christ. And second, we ask ourselves the same about our homes. Which is to say, how are we bringing glory to the Lord in our workplace and in our families. If we can exalt the Lord in our homes, we can certainly do so in our church.

St. Paul was crazy for Jesus. He wrote, **“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (v.21).** The Holy Spirit can use death or life to magnify Jesus. That’s what he was saying. For him, it was a win-win: If I die, I’m relieved of the anguish of living life in this world with all its frustrations. But if I live, I get to serve Jesus. If I die, I will bask in the glory of the Lord. But if I live, I will push the ball forward for the

Gospel. If I die, I will glorify God with the angels. But if I live, I will continue to grow in discipleship, bearing fruit in my work to God's glory.

Can we think and believe and live like this? It's transformative, thinking, believing, and living as though the things of this world were only a foretaste of the feast to come. How do unbelievers do it, living with the uncertainty in this world, the fear of nuclear war, of natural disasters, of terrorism, of random violence?

As a youth I became convinced that the Scripture was the authoritative Word of God, and thus I believed everything it said about the Virgin Birth, the miracles, and the Crucifixion and Resurrection. But there's so much more. When I realized the Word was God's Word, I absorbed everything: Christ gave his followers a mission and the Holy Spirit, and he promised to walk with us all along our journey in this life between now and forever.

St. Paul lived in anticipation of how the Holy Spirit would work through him. He might preach in a public forum and former pagans would become Christians. How exciting to be a conduit of the Holy Spirit! He might be whipped and stoned, but what an honor to suffer for Christ. He might minister to a man, to a woman who feared for their life, and they would be filled with a new sense of hope through his testimony. How exciting to be a tool used by Christ for salvation!

Paul wrote, ***"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. <sup>23</sup> But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better;<sup>24</sup> yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.<sup>25</sup> Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, <sup>26</sup> so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again" (vv.22-26).***

Paul's deepest, heartfelt desire was that if he came again to the people, that everything they held in their hearts for him would **"abound in Christ,"** that is, the ministry was not "Paul's ministry," rather, it was all about Jesus. And that's the point: If what we're doing leads to anything or anyone besides Jesus, we're wasting our time. But if our ministry is centered on the glorification of our savior, we are in the same company as St. Paul.

Paul was released from prison, and he did return to the church in Philippi to minister to the people. Later, he would again be arrested, but this time he would be executed by the emperor, Nero. **“To live is Christ and to die is gain.”**

So too we live: Whatever we do, wherever we go, our heartfelt desire is that the people to whom we minister will rejoice in Jesus with us.

This week let us strive to embrace the whole Word of God: We give thanks for our salvation, but we also look for opportunities to make the Gospel real in our day-to-day lives.

This week let us call on the name of the Lord that he would show us how to do this ministry he’s given us, that we would have confidence in the Lord amidst the suffering and setbacks we experience, that we would be filled with joy and thanksgiving in our victories.

And this week let us share this Good News with another person who really needs to hear it, in the name of Jesus. Amen.