**TO LIVE IS CHRIST, TO DIE IS GAIN**

January 5, 2014

Philippians 1:15-30

Key Verse 1:21 “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

As a human being, we are severely limited by our situations and our talents. We want to do great things, but we are helpless due to our circumstances beyond our control. It is easy to get frustrated and blame others, ourselves and God. We learned in last week’s passage that Paul was in prison. He had every reason to get frustrated and fall into despair. But we see that his letter is full of joy. What is the secret? We learned last week his confidence that God who began a good work will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. Today we learn the other secret, Christ-centered life. He said, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

Paul was in prison not because he had committed some crime, but because he had obeyed God; he had ignored cultural traditions and preached the gospel to Gentiles. The Jew's pride was hurt because so many Gentiles believed. They were so angry that they put Paul in jail. Paul had worked hard for God—and look where it got him! He looked like a loser. If Paul had been a worldly man, he might have thought that his imprisonment was a great misfortune. Some people in his situation might doubt God's love. But Paul didn’t see it that way. He said in verse 12, “Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.” Paul learned that when we trust God and commit our lives to him, he changes adversity into fruitful victory.

First, God used his chains to bring him to Rome, the center for world evangelization. After having Paul arrested, the Jews in Jerusalem tried to kill him, so he appealed to Caesar. Because of his appeal, he was sent to Rome as a prisoner. In Rome, he was placed under house arrest to await trial. This became his opportunity to preach the gospel in Rome.

Second, God was using him to bring the gospel to the Palace Guard. Verse 13 says, “As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.” The Palace Guard or the Praetorian Guard were the elite troops housed in the Emperor’s palace. They were proud and ruthless. They were the least likely people to hear the gospel preached or to accept it. But Paul’s courage--his soldier spirit--his humble life and his joy made them listen to the gospel which he fearlessly preached. He testified to Jesus by his life and by his words, and God used his testimony to bring tough and cruel soldiers to faith in Christ.

Third, Paul’s imprisonment stirred people to preach the gospel. Some people worked hard because they loved Jesus and loved Paul; but there were others who were jealous of Paul. They thought that he was too aggressive and authoritarian. They saw his imprisonment as their opportunity to get the leadership, so they worked hard, too. If Paul had been self-centered or humanly ambitious, he would have been critical of the opportunists who took advantage of his imprisonment. But Paul loved Jesus and had only one point--Preach the gospel to the world. He didn’t try to analyze the motives of those who were preaching the gospel. He just thanked God and rejoiced that Christ was being preached.

Look at verse 20. “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.” An eager expectation and hope is a burning desire to have something. Everyone is eagerly expecting and hoping for something. To the unemployed, it may be for a proper job. To the unmarried, it may be for Mr. or Mrs. “Right” in God. To the childless, it may be for a child. To the ill, it may be for healing. It is good to have such an eager expectation and hope. When we do, we can work hard to improve ourselves instead of falling into depression. But we need a more substantial hope than these. Paul eagerly expected and hoped that Christ would be exalted in his body. It means that he wanted Christ to be honored more and more, either through his life or through his death. In order to exalt Christ in our body we need to be unashamed. This means keeping a clear conscience before God and man (Ac 24:16). Paul wanted to finish his life without dishonoring Christ in any way.

Dr. Billy Graham has said in the last few years that every day he wakes up with a great fear that he will do something that day which will dishonor the Lord and invalidate all of his service. This motivates him to pray that he may honor Christ fully to the end of his life. In order to exalt Christ in our body, we also need sufficient courage. Paul was facing an uncertain future. It was not clear if he would be released from prison or die as a martyr. Whether by life or by death, his main concern was to exalt Christ. This was the meaning and purpose of his life. In the past his life purpose was to exalt himself. For this, he memorized the books of Moses, studied hard under a renowned Rabbi, Gamaliel, and disciplined himself in many ways. He did all this to exalt himself. But when he met the Risen Jesus his life purpose was completely changed from exalting himself to exalting Christ.

In verse 21 Paul explains his inner motive to exalt Christ: “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” What does this mean? “To live is Christ” means that Paul had been united with Christ through his death and resurrection. Galatians 2:20 says, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me.” Romans 14:8 says, “If we live, we live for the Lord; and if we die, we die for the Lord. So, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord.” “To live is Christ” means to honor Christ highly in whatever we do, whether it is school study, housework, a job, sports, eating or drinking. What is the purpose of your life? Is it to magnify your name or enjoy your lives? We need to consider this very seriously. When we live for ourselves, we cannot rejoice. But when we live to honor Christ, we can rejoice.

Here we find Paul’s secret of joy. It is to live Christ-centered life. Paul was severely limited in the prison. He was a very passionate person and he wanted to go to the ends of the earth to preach the gospel. But he was confined in the prison. From time to time, he might have doubted, “What am I doing here?” But he lived Christ-centered life. He said, “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” He only prayed that Christ may be exalted in his life. He preached the gospel to the prison guards and he prayed for God’s flock. He wrote several beautiful letters from prison which became part of the Bible.

We too may feel that we are severely limited by our situation, and complain or get depressed. Last year, I got frustrated by my inability to help some people, and to increase our one to one Bible study numbers. Many people were limited by their jobs and families, and could not engage in one to one Bible study more actively. Furthermore, several students who came to our Sunday worship service through Clubs Day did not return. I complained to God to change the situations so that I may be in a better position to serve God. But God did not seem to answer my prayer. This passage tells me that my prayer was not a proper one. I should pray that Christ may be exalted in my life and my ministry in any circumstances.

When Paul thought about his future, there were two possible outcomes. If he lived, he wanted to work more for Christ (22). But his greater desire was to depart and be with Christ, because to him to die was gain (23). He thought this was better by far. But it was more necessary for the Philippians that Paul remain with them. So he was in a dilemma. It was hard for him to decide. But he was convinced that since God’s people needed him, he would remain with them for their progress and joy in the faith (24-25). He wanted to be a blessing to them (26). Here we can find another reason why he could rejoice. He loved others more than himself. As we know, “joy” is an acronym: “J” stands for Jesus; “o” stands for others; and “y” stands for yourself. When we love Jesus first, others second and ourselves last, we can have real joy. We have a strong tendency to think of ourselves too much because of our self-centeredness. We think, talk and behave as if we are the center of the universe. If we remain in that kind of lifestyle we cannot rejoice. We hurt others and are hurt by others. C.S. Lewis in his book, “The Great Divorce,” depicts hell as simply the continuation of a selfish life until one becomes totally isolated from everybody. The selfish end up all alone in great misery, blaming others. However, when we follow the principle of Jesus first, others second, ourselves last, we will surely rejoice.

In verses 27-30 Paul encouraged the Philippians to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ (27a). What is it to live “in a manner worthy of the gospel”? It is to stand firmly in one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel (27b). In team rowing, all members must be in rhythm and row together in the same direction. If they don’t have a sense of rhythm or if they row against each other, they will all lose. Likewise, we need to strive together in one Spirit for the faith of the gospel. We do not strive for building up our own ministry. We do strive for the faith of the gospel to build up God’s kingdom. For this great purpose we can be one. None of us should think of ourselves alone. We are members of the one body of Christ.

Another aspect of living in a manner worthy of the gospel is that we do not fear, but have assurance of salvation. Verse 28 says, “…without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God.” When we stand firm in one Spirit in the faith of the gospel, there is no fear (2 Ti 1:7). Rather, we have assurance of salvation and experience God’s presence.

Yet another aspect of living in a manner worthy of the gospel is to participate in the sufferings of Christ. Look at verses 29-30. “For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.” When we hear the word “sufferings,” most of us have an allergic reaction. We don’t like to think about suffering, even though we suffer in many ways. We should correct our view of suffering. There are two kinds of suffering. One kind is suffering for our sins. This makes us miserable and a source of grief to others. Furthermore, it displeases God and provokes his wrath. Another kind of suffering is for Christ. This suffering has great meaning. This suffering produces Christian character (Ro 5:3-4). Through this suffering we can be set free from earthbound hopes and have a pure hope for the kingdom of God. In this way we can grow in the image of Christ. When Paul knew the meaning of suffering he could rejoice in the prison cell. When the opportunity to participate in Christ’s sufferings comes, we should not avoid it, but embrace it. This will please God and our sufferings will turn to glory. When we have this attitude, we can rejoice in the midst of sufferings.

In the new year, no matter what the circumstances, our life purpose should be to exalt Christ. To me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Then we can have joy in any situation.