

EVEN SO JOY (part two - Series: Joy in the Journey)

Philippians 1:19-26 - June 28, 2020 - Immanuel - Senior Pastor: Dr. Kelly McClendon

This morning I want to continue talking about dealing with difficult times by looking at how Paul faced the most intimidating trial of life - **the prospect of death**. I hope you can see how this text is intensely relevant. Think about it. Have you ever spent so much time reading and thinking about the number of people getting sick or dying on any given day? On any given day there are more people dying of something other than Covid-19 - but those numbers are not usually pushed in the news cycle over and over again. Usually we only face issues of mortality when we, or someone we love, has a severe or terminal illness, or when we have a body that is getting more frail with each passing year, or when we're left behind after someone we love has died. In each of these situations we can no longer avoid the demon that dogs our lives. We can no longer pretend that the temporary nature of life does not apply to us.

One of the ways we typically deal with death is to ignore it. The 17th century philosopher, Pascal said: *"Since men could not do away with death, they decided to not think about it."* Others try to delay it or to cover up its approach. It's good to be as healthy as you can and to look as good as you can for as long as possible but you can only cheat death for so long.

Once it arrives, some choose to dress it up, spending a fortune on funerals to avoid the cold, stark reality of it. We read about men buried in Cadillacs, or with their golf clubs, all kinds of goofy things. Or we make jokes about it. Like this one:

A minister caught two little boys playing hooky from Bible school after they snuck out to the playground. I think this was an odd question - but he asked them, *"Don't you want to go to heaven?"* *"Not me,"* one boy said. The minister responded, *"You don't want to go to heaven when you die?"* The boy responded, *"Sure, when I die, but I thought you were getting up a group to go now."* I'm with that boy most days - we're not in any hurry - right?

Before we can understand Paul's joy in difficult times, we need to understand how Paul viewed death. How you view death is the key to how to view life. When we don't have a Christian view of death, we can end up living our lives in fear. Our life can become paralyzed at the thought that dark shadow which may be lurking just around the next corner. We must deal with the fear of the shadow of death if we are ever going to be free to live.

As Paul sat in his place of imprisonment, he knew that his physical life could be snatched from him at any moment. He knew he was innocent but he also knew that Nero was on the throne and he was well known for his arbitrary executions. Nero could command his death on just a whim at any instant. Still, Paul didn't have a sense of despair. We don't see him withdrawing or being filled with fear and apprehension. Paul seems unconcerned about death.

Paul understood the meaning of Hebrews 2:14-15 which says,

"[Christ] shared in our humanity, for this purpose, that by His death He might destroy him who holds the power of death [that is - the devil] and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death."

Paul was confident in life or in death. Although he did not know **the details of What** the future held for him, he knew **Who** held his future for him, and He trusted in the Lord.

Paul closed verse 18 by saying, “I will rejoice.” In verse 19 he tells us why:

*“For I know that as **you pray for me** and as the Spirit of Jesus Christ helps me, this will all turn out for my **deliverance**.”*

That word used for “deliverance” can be translated as “salvation” or “vindication.” It didn’t matter to Paul whether his deliverance was from his present suffering and imprisonment - or from his earthly existence through physical death. Because of Christ, he knew he would be delivered - **either here or hereafter...** so neither life nor death could shake Paul’s joy.

In Paul’s view of death he saw the potential of “gain” rather than loss. This is not the prevailing view. We talk about people “*losing the battle*” with disease. When someone we love dies, we often say we’ve “*lost them*.” When treatments are exhausted Doctors say “*there is nothing more we can do*” in an attitude of resignation. We often view death as the ultimate defeat - a bitter end. Of course, when people we love have died and are physically absent from us, the sense of loss we feel is real and painful. But Paul did not focus on that loss, he focused on the promises of Christ, and he did not see death as a defeat but as a victory in Jesus.

Paul wrote about his desire to “depart” to be with Christ. The Greek word translated as “depart” is instructive. That word is often used to describe “striking camp.” In other words, it describes taking your tent down and moving on to the next part of your journey or adventure.

In 2 Corinthians 5:1 we read these familiar words from Paul,

Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.

If you are “In Christ” this life is just the first stop in the journey of existence. It is the transfer point that leads us to home. Death is like a graduation day and the start of eternal life.

Paul tells us that he desires to “depart and be with Christ.” It is not that he didn’t want to be with his fellow believers on earth. He loved them. It is not that Paul didn’t want to be with family and friends. He loved them as well. But **IF HE HAD TO CHOOSE**, Paul looked forward to being with the One who had given His life for Him. He looked forward to being with the One who had changed his life and given him purpose, and hope, and joy.

If we’re going to hold onto joy in the face of death, we must expand our view of what this “life” really is. We need to remind ourselves that this world is not our home. We’re only passing through. Our time on earth is just the title page of the book called life. The real story is yet to come. What is 80, 90, 100+ years compared to eternity? This life is an often beautiful prelude - but it’s still just a prelude - the beauty of eternal life is yet to be fully enjoyed.

We need to deliberately focus on the promise of Heaven in the painful times of this life. If a high school student focused on the pain of leaving what is familiar, they would never go off to college. However, if they focus on what is to be gained, it makes the leaving easier. If a person going into surgery thinks only about the process of surgery they will be filled with anxiety. Instead they must focus on the problems surgery will correct. It is the same way in life. We need to think more about the “gain” of Heaven. We need to develop that appetite for the eternal that makes death a time of anticipation - even excitement - rather than fear.

Going on, in verse 20 we read this,

“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.”

The Greek words for eager and expect here literally mean “stretching the neck out” in order to see something. It is an intense looking and longing ahead. Too often we allow ourselves to be distracted by the problems we face in the moment. Difficult situations and people are more and more frightening when we take our eyes off the goal - or what is beyond the obstacles they represent. We lose our joy when we shift our focus off Christ.

Paul followed the advice God inspired him to write first for the Colossians in Chapter 3:1-3.

“Since you have been raised to new life with Christ, set your sights on the realities of heaven, where Christ sits at God’s right hand in the place of honor and power. Let heaven fill your thoughts. Do not think only about things down here on earth. For you died when Christ died, and your real life is hidden with Christ in God.”

When we understand that death is not the enemy, but a transition and doorway to gain, we can view the struggles of life differently. Tim Stafford gives a very helpful illustration, Pain and sorrow are transformed by the view from the end. If we walk through a hospital, we can encounter a practical example of this. There is one particular ward where moans are most likely to assault our ears. Young women writhe in severe and helpless pain. Their problem is obvious to the eye: their stomachs have swelled to the size of beach balls. The taut skin glistens. As the hours pass, the women’s faces grow increasingly worn with pain. If they were there with any other diagnosis, say cancer, the scene would [break] our hearts. Instead, we feel great joy in a maternity ward [when a healthy child is born]. The women there may be feeling as much pain as women with stomach cancer, but they look confidently toward a different end — a joyful end. Later, they will not even remember much of the process. The pain that seemed so terrible has faded away because it came to its proper end: she holds her baby [the miracle of new life]. [Stafford, The Face of God p. 215-216]

Taekwondo STORY

- **breaking boards, and cinder blocks - focus on a point beyond the impact.**

Life is sometimes painful but we can endure it because we focus on what is on the other side of the pain. Once we are born, it becomes inevitable that death is looming ahead of us. When the time for going into “labor” comes, or when the time for breaking through comes, we must keep our eyes on the goal of heaven. For children of God - heaven is our destiny.

The apostle Paul faced the future - whether life or death - with a calm confidence in his deliverance because he knew that here - or hereafter - we have something good ahead of us.

Several years ago, an older lady was traveling by boat on Lake Erie, heading for Cleveland. A terrible storm arose. The boat was battered by the winds and waves, and it looked like she might sink. Amidst the terrified passengers, this lady remained calm and peaceful. A fellow passenger asked her how she could be so calm, and she replied: *“I’ve been a Christian for many years -- and I have one daughter in Cleveland and another daughter in Heaven and I’ve just been thinking that, in a couple of hours, I’m going to see one or the other.”*

As Paul considered the alternatives, he made these conclusion in verses 21-25:

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith...”

Paul is facing a win-win situation. He’s caught between two attractive possibilities.

It is somewhat like my own attitude about the second coming of Christ - there are many days when I look at the sky and say to the Lord - *“Come Lord Jesus - Come and bring history to a close - establish your kingdom in its fullness - take your children home”* (or as I read on a T-shirt one time - I think... ***“Beam me up Jesus I’m ready to go!”***) But then I realize - there are people who are still lost and without hope in the world or the next. So out of love for others I ask instead that the Lord delay His return - so we might reach more with the Gospel - so that they might believe and be saved. So to stay here is good, there is important work to do. But to go and be with Christ and our loved ones in heaven forever - that is good too. So here or hereafter - it is all good - but when the Lord is ready for me - I will be ready to go

Romans 14:8-9 says, *“While we live, we live to please the Lord. And when we die we go to be with the Lord. So in life and in death, we belong to the Lord. (Or, whether we live or die - we are the Lords) Christ died and rose again for this very purpose, so that He might be Lord of those who are alive and of those who have died.”*

This is the truth that gives us joy and fearlessness, ***“Whether we live - or whether we die - we are the Lords.”*** I like to say it this way, *“Whether here or hereafter, in life or death, God is good and His plans for His children are good. So there is no reason to fear the future.”*

Listen again to Paul's options in verse 21: "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

"For me to live is Christ" - that first part is a great motto for life on this earth.

If you plug anything else into the end of that phrase, "For me to live is _____" you are bound to suffer disappointment. What would you really put into that phrase? "For me to live is . . ." what? Money, entertainment, comfort, recreation, friends, power, family, fun, sex, work, sports, fame? None of those temporary things are solid enough to be your foundation.

I like what Max Lucado wrote in his book, God Came Near . It's an old quote, and so he used masculine language to make his point, but this applies equally to women as well as men.

Should a man see only popularity, he becomes a mirror, reflecting whatever needs to be reflected to gain acceptance. He is everyone and no one.

Should a man see only power, he becomes a wolf – prowling, hunting and stalking the elusive game. His quest is endless . . . As a result, he who sees only power is degraded to an animal, an insatiable scavenger, controlled not by a will from within, but by luring from without.

Should a man see only pleasure, he becomes a carnival thrill-seeker, alive only in bright lights, wild rides, and titillating entertainment. With lustful fever he races from ride to ride, satisfying his insatiable passion for sensations only long enough to look for another . . .

Seeker of popularity, power, and pleasure. The end result is the same: painful un-fulfillment.

Only in seeking his Maker does a man truly become man. For in seeing his Creator man catches a glimpse of what he was intended to be. He who would see his God would then see the reason for death and the purpose of time. Destiny? Tomorrow? Truth? All are questions within the reach of the man who knows his [true purpose and] source . . .

Paul was also determined to be productive as long as He lived. In verses 22-24 we read,
If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

I admire Paul's attitude here. Paul was determined that if he was to go on living, he was going to live as productively as possible for Christ and His church. He believed if he was to be given more days on this earth, then it must mean that God still had a purpose for his life. I wish all Christians thought or acted that way. Too many stop living - and serving - before they die.

The Bible says nothing about retirement. Sure, we may retire from paid employment, or the stresses of certain careers or roles, but we must never retire from serving the Lord. Some people use retirement as an excuse to become self-absorbed and self-indulgent (and I get that temptation) but a self-centered life is a wasted life at any age. We need to be Christ-centered.

At some point in the next few years I hope to become a “*retired United Methodist pastor.*” I’ll be happy to serve in simpler, secondary, and less visible ways. But I’ll continue to serve Christ as a lay minister until the day I die. I assume I’ll even find new ways to serve the Lord in the next life too. If we want real joy - we must be able to say, “*For me to live is Christ.*”

STORY - nursing home woman who changed her forms of ministry as her health failed. Knitting, letters - then - reading and talking - then - smiling and praying - then praying.

Paul was sure of one thing - if he was going to live, he was going to serve the Lord. This was his attitude whether he was in jail or on the road, whether he was applauded or despised, whether he was healthy or sick, whether he had money or didn’t - **and since his joy was in Christ** - and since Christ was always with Him and working through him - he always had joy.

Our goal should be to honor Christ right up to the last breath of this life. I imagine the first breath of eternal life will be used to sing & shout out praise to Christ who has raised us up.

I hope you have seen this morning that Paul’s attitude toward life and death should be a model for our own attitudes. Those who see the future glory that awaits will be free from the fear of death and they will know an overcoming joy in this life no matter what comes their way.

To move us in that direction, let me suggest a couple of final things.

First, be sure of your own salvation. The hope of heaven is ONLY found in Christ. The One who died for our sins, and who rose from the dead for our salvation is the only One who can open the door into heaven for anyone. Christ graciously welcomes all to trust in Him and to follow Him away from sin and death and into discipleship and eternal life. Have you accepted Christ as your savior and Lord? Are you following Him from earth to heaven? If not, I invite you to pray right now, wherever you are, and give your life to Christ.

Second, if you are already a disciple of Christ, then devote more time and attention to growing in your love for the Lord - and to sharing your faith. Practice taking with God in prayer, learn to listen to God through His Word, learn to adore God in worship, find creative ways to continue serving the Lord by loving your neighbors. Remember the most loving thing you can do for your neighbor is to introduce them to Jesus Christ and invite them to trust in Christ so they can enjoy the same saving grace that we enjoy. If you do all that, you will get to know God better, and you will learn to love God more and God’s peace will replace our fears and God’s love will help you to look forward to being with Him forever. If we continue to grow in our relationship with Christ, we will discover that we too can face death unafraid. We can also learn to live life more joyfully, even in the difficult times of life, until we are able to say with Paul, “*for me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*” **So it is all joy - either way.**