

Philippians 1:19-30
"Ready to Live, Ready to Die"
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The song "Ole' Man River" contrasts the human predicament with the steady, unaffected flow of the Mississippi River. One verse of the song goes like this:

I get weary and sick of trying.
I'm tired of living and scared of dying.
But Ole' Man River, he just keeps rolling,
he just keeps rolling along.

Notice the words, "tired of living and scared of dying." I am sure this expresses well the attitude of many today. They regard living as a wearisome and meaningless ordeal, and they regard death as a fearful unknown. Interestingly this is the exact opposite of the attitude which the Apostle Paul expresses in today's passage. Instead of being "tired of living," the Apostle Paul is excited about life as a worthwhile opportunity that is full of significance. Instead of being "scared of dying," Paul is anticipating death and looking forward to it as a positive experience.

Paul proclaims, "To live is Christ, and to die is gain." This succinct statement is packed with significance. It summarizes Paul's philosophy of life and Paul's philosophy of death. Before looking at this statement in detail, I want first to set it in its context by examining our passage for today under three

headings: Paul's difficulty, Paul's deliverance, and Paul's dilemma.

We will begin by looking at Paul's difficulty. We are reminded of Paul's difficult predicament by one word in verse 19, the word "this." Paul says, "For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance ..." The word "this" in this context refers to Paul's basic situation there at Rome. As you might remember, when Paul visited the temple at Jerusalem, some Jews recognized him and started a riot. Paul was arrested and was imprisoned in Caesarea for two years. Paul as a Roman citizen then appealed his case to Caesar, and he was taken to Rome. The book of Acts ends with this description of Paul's situation:

Acts 28

- 16 Now when we came to Rome, the centurion delivered the prisoners to the captain of the guard; but Paul was permitted to dwell by himself with the soldier who guarded him.
- 30 Then Paul dwelt two whole years in his own rented house, and received all who came to him,
- 31 preaching the kingdom of God and teaching the things which concern the Lord Jesus Christ with all confidence, no one forbidding him.

When Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians, his case had already been tried, and he was waiting to hear the verdict. He was waiting to hear if he would be acquitted and released or if he would be condemned and executed.

That brings us to our second point, which is Paul's anticipated deliverance. In the midst of this difficult situation, Paul was able to rejoice because he was confident and assured that God was going to deliver him. Paul then explained this anticipated deliverance. Paul's confidence was that by the power of Christ which was his through faith, he would not do anything to bring shame upon himself and his cause. With a conviction confirmed by years of experience, Paul knew that Christ would empower him to speak with a righteous boldness and to conduct himself in a way that would bring glory to Christ. Paul was confident that God would give him the strength and the perseverance not to compromise or deny the gospel in order to save his own skin. For example, Paul could have offered a pinch of incense in worship of the Caesar and in honor of the genius of Rome in order to try to help his case. Such an act might have helped Paul's case, but it would also have resulted in shame upon Paul's name to this very day. Paul was confident that God would not allow him to be tempted beyond what he was able to bear and that God would protect him from any shameful course of action. Paul was confident that God would instead enable him to continue to witness for Christ with his characteristic boldness and that God would continue to magnify Christ through Paul's witness.

Our text says that deliverance in this sense was Paul's earnest expectation and hope. The Greek word translated "earnest expectation" literally refers to watching for something with one's head erect and outstretched. Think of a sailor scanning the distant horizon with his telescope in order to sight the land which he knows will soon appear. The sailor is watching with

eager anticipation for that first appearance of his destination. This eager expectation is a well founded hope and not hope in the sense of wishful thinking based on a blind leap of faith. Based on his maps and nautical readings, the sailor has every reason to believe that the land is out there not far over the horizon. Such was Paul's eager expectation and hope in regard to his coming deliverance.

Yet I want to make clear that Paul's confidence in his coming deliverance was not a presumptuous confidence. Paul's confidence was not in himself but in Christ. Paul knew that he could do shameful things because he had persecuted the church before coming to faith in Christ. Paul had once done shameful things, and he knew this. There was also the warning from Peter's denial of Christ. Peter had stumbled into shameful sin after coming to faith in Christ. Several hours before Peter denied Christ, he had boasted to Jesus, "Even if I have to die with You, I will not deny You" (Matthew 26:35). Peter's confidence that night had been in himself, and he stumbled into shameful sin before the dawning of the next day. Our confidence that we will not stumble into shameful conduct is presumptuous when our confidence is in ourselves. Paul's confidence in our passage for today was in Christ and not in himself. Paul was looking to Jesus to give Him the gifts of perseverance and boldness in the midst of a difficult situation.

We also need to look to Jesus to give us the strength to persevere, the strength to keep the faith in the midst of the difficulties of life. We want to keep covenant with Christ, and we want to keep on keeping covenant with Christ. The key to

doing this is not raw will power or iron determination or rigid self-discipline. The key to keeping covenant with Christ is keeping close to Christ because He is the source of our spiritual strength. He is the Vine, we are the branches and apart from Him, we can do nothing. We keep close to Christ by maintaining and strengthening our faith in Jesus. And one of the main ways we do this is by regularly assembling with God's people on the Lord's Day and joining them in worshipping Jesus from the heart. What is especially helpful in building up our faith is a worship service that majors in worship by spending most of the worship hour in worship and by basing that worship on the word, sacraments and prayer. We need to attend weekly worship that is saturated with these divine ordinances - the word, sacraments and prayer - and put our heart into the worship. That is what builds up our faith in Jesus and keeps us close to Jesus so that we will have the power to keep covenant with Jesus.

In our text for today, Paul specifically mentions the ordinance of prayer. He is confident not only in the fact of his coming deliverance but also in the means of his coming deliverance. We see in our text that Paul holds to a two-fold means of deliverance, the one human and the other divine. The human means is prayer, the earnest petitions of the Philippians on his behalf. No doubt Epaphroditus, the spiritual brother whom the Philippians had sent to minister to Paul's needs, assured Paul that the Philippian church was indeed praying for him. And Paul knew that the fervent prayers of the righteous avail much. Later in this letter, Paul reminds the Philippians that the proper response to difficult circumstances is not worry but prayer:

Philippians 4:6-7

- 6 Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God;
- 7 and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

The benefit of prayer is not limited to the inner peace it provides. The benefits of prayer go beyond the psychological and involve an actual effect upon the course of events as seen from the human perspective. God actually answers the prayers of His people.

The other means of deliverance Paul mentions is the abundant provision provided by the Holy Spirit. These human and divine means are intimately related to each other. First the Holy Spirit moves God's people to pray in faith, and then the Holy Spirit works to answer those prayers in the way which most glorifies God and which truly works to the good of all those who love God. Fervent prayer is our responsibility, and fervent prayer is one of God's chosen means for the advancement of His kingdom. Paul is confident of his coming deliverance because he knows that God has moved His people to pray for him. That should remind us of the emphasis that we should put on prayer in the life of our church, and also the confidence that we should have in our church's ministry if our people are indeed in prayer for that ministry. There is nothing that encourages the preachers and teachers and pastors and leaders of a church as does the knowledge that God's people are praying for God's blessings on their efforts.

That brings us to our last point, and that is Paul's dilemma. Paul is confident that God is going to deliver him in the sense of protecting him from shamefully compromising or denying the gospel and enabling him to use his circumstances for the glory of Christ. What Paul doesn't know for sure is if this deliverance will involve his being released from prison or his being executed. Paul's dilemma is that he can't decide which of these two possible outcomes he would choose if the choice were his to make. He says that he is hard pressed in weighing the various advantages of the two possibilities.

Paul does say in the text that he expects that God will release him from his imprisonment rather than allow him to be executed at this particular time in his life. I think that Paul is here expressing a qualified expectation and not an infallible certitude based on a divine revelation. Paul was confident that this is indeed what will happen if this is indeed what works for God's greatest glory and for the greatest good of God's people. And that is how the situation looked to Paul. Paul said that he desired to depart this life and be with Christ, but that the Philippians needed him to live on in the flesh in order for him to continue his ministry among them. Paul thought that the Philippians' objective need was more important than his subjective desire. Based on his confidence in that analysis of the situation, Paul thought that most probably God's sovereign plan was to release him from prison. Yet Paul stressed the advantages of both possibilities and his willingness to accept gladly both possibilities.

It was possible that the Roman Caesar would rule to release Paul. Paul was at peace with that. Paul said, "To live is Christ." Some people say, "To live is pleasure." But what do they do when they lose their health and lose their ability to enjoy the material pleasures of this life? Some say, "To live is work." But what do they do when they lose their job or their ability to work? Some say, "To live is money." But what do they do when they lose their wealth, when thieves break in and steal and when moth and rust corrupt? Some say, "To live is family." But what do they do when their loved ones die or move away or reject them? The only way we can have true and lasting satisfaction in life, satisfaction that nothing can take away, is to live out the saying, "To live is Christ."

"To live is Christ" means that we look to Christ's saving work for our salvation. We look to His finished sacrifice upon the cross as the payment for our sins, and his perfect life as the ground of our righteous standing before God. "To live is Christ" means that we have the mind of Christ, who came not to be served but to serve, who came not to do His own will but to do the will of His Father in heaven. "To live is Christ" means that we follow the example of Christ, who for the joy set before Him despised the shame and endured the cross. "To live is Christ" means that we live in Christ's power, because apart from Him, we can do nothing, and yet through Him, who strengthens us, we can do all things.

Here is the irony. If we try living life as an end in itself, life is not going to satisfy. If we live as if the pleasures of this life are the only pleasures that there are, if we live as if the rewards of

this life are the only rewards that there are, if we live as if the justice of this life is the only justice that there is, then we are not going to be satisfied with life.

Yet if we lose our life, we will find it. If we lose our life in living for Christ, we are going to experience that deep inner joy which truly does satisfy even in the midst of life's difficulties. We are going to sense that we are investing our life in something greater than ourselves, in something eternal that will never pass away. Every day becomes an opportunity to live for Christ, to live as Christ would have us live, to live in Christ's enabling power, to live with Christ by our side and on our side.

The other possibility for Paul was that he would be executed. Paul was also at peace with that. Paul said that to die is gain and that to depart this life is to be with the Lord. We must so believe that Jesus has turned death for us into a time of rest and reward that we are no longer in bondage to the fear of death. For the Christian, death means leaving the pains and miseries of this life for the joys of heaven. For the Christian, death means to be freed from even the presence of a tendency to sin and to be made perfect in holiness. For the Christian, death means to be in the physical presence of the resurrected Christ. For the Christian, death is not the end of life but the beginning of the next phase of life. The Christian knows that ultimately he will have a resurrected and glorified body and that he will live forever with Christ on a new earth purged of sin and the curse. Physical death is but the next step toward that glorious destiny.

In April 1988 the evening news reported on a photographer who was a skydiver. He had jumped from a plane along with numerous other skydivers and filmed the group as they fell and opened their parachutes. On the film shown on the telecast, as the final skydiver opened his chute, the picture went berserk. The announcer reported that the cameraman had fallen to his death, having jumped out of the plane without his parachute. He had remembered his camera, but he had forgotten his parachute. It wasn't until he reached for the absent rip cord that he realized he was free falling without a parachute.

I have never tried free falling. I would imagine it is an exciting and pleasurable experience with the panoramic view and the rush of wind. Yet I am sure you can't enjoy free falling unless you know that you have a parachute. You can't enjoy the fall unless you know you are prepared for the landing. In the free fall which we call life, our parachute is Christ. In fact, Jesus of Nazareth who died and rose from the grave is the one and only parachute. With Christ, the landing of physical death is a profitable experience as opposed to a disastrous experience.

Look to Jesus for your salvation. Rest upon Him and Him alone to make you right with God. Then you will be able to say with the apostle Paul, "To live is Christ, and to die is gain." You will have peace with God; your sins will be forgiven. You will have peace with living; you will have the power to live a life that both satisfies and counts for something. You will have peace with dying, for dying in Christ means rest and reward. You will have power for living, for Christ is our life and our strength.