

To Live is Christ, to Die is Gain

Philippians 1:15-30

Key Verse: 1:20b-21

“...so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

The Bible tells us that Christian life is characterized by joy, prayer and thanksgiving, saying, **“Rejoice always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus”** (1 Th 5: 16-18). But it is not easy to rejoice always. There are many things that hinder us, such as sour relationships with others, hard personal circumstances, the cold reality of death, and painful sufferings. When we find that other people are stirring up trouble by speaking ill of us, we can lose the joy of life and become very upset, inviting a vengeful spirit. When we face personal hardship and our lives seem to be a prison sentence, it is hard to rejoice. Rather, we easily become discouraged and even despair. How can we rejoice always, regardless of people's negative comments and a hostile environment? This passage teaches us the secret of maintaining joy no matter what happens. Let's learn Paul's secret of joy.

In this passage we learn Paul's joy in several aspects. First, in how he responded to trouble-makers (15-18a). Second, in how he overcame adverse circumstances, even death (19-21). Third, in how he considered others above himself (22-26). And finally, in how he fought against those who opposed the gospel faith (27-30). Through this we can learn his attitude toward suffering for Christ.

First, Paul rejoiced because Christ was preached (15-18). In the previous lesson we learned that Paul challenged a hard situation with the gospel, having confidence in the Lord who is the Sovereign Ruler of all. God used Paul to advance the gospel by evangelizing the whole palace guard. Most of the brothers and sisters in Christ heard about this and became confident in the Lord to proclaim the gospel. But there were two different motives. Look at verse 15. **“It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill.”** The latter did so out of love; they loved Paul and the gospel that he preached. They knew that Paul was in prison, not for his own sins, but for Christ, who was using him to defend the gospel. They accepted Paul's authority as an apostle. They trusted Paul, prayed for him, and supported him. To Paul, they were heroes of gospel ministry and a source of encouragement. On the other hand, another group of people preached the gospel out of selfish ambition, supposing that they could stir up trouble for Paul while he was in chains (17). They were jealous of Paul's success because it overshadowed

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their own work. They thought their own ministry would be more successful without Paul. Their motive was to cause Paul even more pain. They were like those who throw gasoline on a fire. Having to deal with such people while in prison is enough to drive anyone out of their minds.

How did Paul respond? Look at verse 18. **“But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.”** Paul did not condone selfish ambition as a motive in preaching the gospel. Nor did he minimize envy and rivalry, which break relationships in the Christian community. Paul clearly said in 2:3 to do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. The point is that Paul was not affected by the ill will of those with false motives. Rather, he could rejoice. It was because Christ was preached, whether from false motives or true. Paul was not concerned about his reputation or popularity. He was not a slave to his pride. He was only interested in Christ. He always talked about Christ. In this short four-chapter letter, the words “Jesus,” “Christ,” and “Lord” appear 72 times, not including all the personal pronouns that refer to Christ. His mind was full of Christ. When we analyze ourselves, what is it that makes us so upset when others criticize us? Is it not our pride? Then what is pride? Is it not to exalt oneself inordinately, considering oneself somebody? John the Baptist said about Jesus, **“He must become greater, I must become less.”** But many Christians think, “Jesus must become greater, and I too must become greater.” When I think of myself as somebody and feel that someone else does not respect me, my pride is hurt. But when we acknowledge that we are wretched sinners, our pride is not hurt by criticism. In fact, we realize that we are much worse than others say. So Paul always admitted that he was the worst sinner, and less than the least of all the Lord’s people (1 Ti 1:15; Eph 3:8). How can we know that we are the worst of sinners? When we look in a mirror, we can see what we really look like. Likewise, when we study the Bible and meet the holy God personally, we can see how sinful we are. When Peter met the holy God in Jesus, he confessed, **“Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!”** (Lk 5:8). When we know that we are sinners, we become truly humble. We can think of Christ and what he has done for us. Then, we do not get upset by people's criticism. Rather, we can rejoice because of Jesus.

Second, Paul rejoiced because he had a Christ-centered view of life and death (18b-21). Most prisoners make a list of complaints. But Paul was finding one reason after another to rejoice in the Lord. Verses 18b-19 say, **“Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.”** Here the words “what has happened to me” refer to the sufferings of

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his imprisonment. The word “deliverance” may refer to release from prison, or eternal salvation from death. In either case, Paul knew that the end of his imprisonment would not be anguish, but that it would turn out for his deliverance or salvation. He reminds us of Joseph, who said, **“You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives”** (Gen 50:20).

Paul continued to share his reasons to rejoice. 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.” 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 two things. One is 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 whether he would be released from prison or die as a martyr. Many people worry how they will respond if they are called to die as a martyr. D.L. Moody once worried about this. But he came to the conclusion that if God called him to be a martyr, God would give him sufficient grace to do so. Paul had this assurance. 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

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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, or whatever. So Paul said, **“So whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it all for the glory of God”** (1 Cor 10:31). What is the purpose for our living in this world? Is it to magnify our name or enjoy our 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. Ray Lewis is a pro football player. Usually such people live for their own glory and honor and enjoy wealth selfishly. When they win a championship game they exalt themselves greatly. But Ray Lewis is different. After his team won the championship game he got down on his knees and prayed to the Lord, giving honor and glory and thanks to his heavenly Father. At that moment, dozens of television cameras and microphones surrounded him. The whole world seemed to be watching him. But he did not boast about himself at all. He only gave glory to God. As he did so, he was overflowing with joy.

Then what does it mean “to die is gain”? Normally people don’t want to think about or talk about dying, because they think that when they die, they lose everything. It is true that death is powerful enough to take our loved ones, possessions, and achievements from us in a moment. Death has power to make people kneel down, no matter who they are. So people are afraid of death. Not only will they lose everything, but they also face God’s judgment. Yet Paul said, “to die is gain.” He knew that death was conquered by the Risen Christ. 2 Timothy 1:10 says, **“...but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”** Jesus declared, **“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?”** (Jn 11:25-26) Jesus defeated the power of death through his resurrection and gave us eternal life in the kingdom of God. Therefore, we Christians do not need to worry about death any more. To us, death is not the end of life, but the new start of a glorious life. Death is taking off the pain and anguish and labor of this world and entering eternal rest in the Lord. Revelation 14:13b says, **“Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on. ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, they will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them.”** When we have a Christ-centered view of death we can say, “to die is gain.” We need a Christ-centered view of life and a Christ-centered

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view of death. When we have these we can rejoice always in the Lord, regardless of circumstances - even death.

Third, Paul rejoiced when he was concerned for others more than himself (22-26). 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. He thought this was better by far (23). 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). Even though Paul was a prisoner of the Roman Empire, he was not bound by the hostile environment. He was free to desire to be with Christ and to serve the Lord's people. He had freedom in Christ. But he did not use this freedom for his own benefit. He used it to serve God's people.

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, blaming others, in great misery. However, when we follow the principle of Jesus first, others second, ourselves last we will surely rejoice.

Fourth, Paul rejoiced when he had a right view of sufferings (27-30). 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.

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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. Let's read 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. Peter was once a person who did not like suffering and wanted to avoid it by any means. He even rebuked Jesus when Jesus talked about suffering. But later he came to know the meaning of Jesus' suffering and death on the cross for the salvation of mankind. He realized that participating in Christ's suffering was a privilege. So he encouraged the early Christians to suffer for doing good (1 Pe 2:20). He wrote, “**To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps**” (1 Pe 2:21). He also wrote, “**But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed**” (1 Pe 4:13). 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.

We learn from Paul how to rejoice always. First, we can rejoice when Christ is honored, though we may be criticized. Second, we can rejoice when we have a Christ-centered view of life and death. Third, we can rejoice when we love others more than ourselves. Fourth, we can rejoice when we have a right view of sufferings. Let's pray to be Christ-centered and rejoice always.