Desiring Life and Death

Text: Philippians 1:21-23

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**Scriptures:** Job 19:23-29; Philippians 1:12-26

**Songs Chosen:** [SttL] 326, 533, 16b, 183, 302

Series: Heidelberg Catechism (LD22Q&A57)

Theme: The exaltation of Christ in life and in death

Proposition: Life and death are both desirable in Christ because they both exalt Him!

**Introduction**

Making decisions can be difficult. There are some decisions cannot be reversed once made and enacted. Like the decision to die. Last month the ‘end of life choice bill’ passed its second reading in the New Zealand parliament. 70 voted for the bill, 50 against it. If passed into law, this Bill would allow people over 18 to request a fatal dose of medication if they have less than six months to live or are suffering from a "grievous and irremediable medical condition".

Death has been around since the days of Adam, it is commonplace and universal, yet it is not natural. Death had no place in God’s ‘very good’ Creation. The Apostle Paul, well-versed in the Scriptures, born-again by the Spirit of God, would have known well that mankind is made in the image of God and that it is not our right to choose when we die. It is the Lord who gives and the Lord who takes away (Job 1:21).

When Paul, awaiting trial in Rome, writes to the Philippians he is not having difficulty **deciding** whether he will continue to live or take his own life, he is expression his desire both for life **and** for death. He writes: (v21) *“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain”.* Paul’s agitation of mind evident from the broken syntax of the Greek language in which he wrote. This is no glib mantra, but a deeply heartfelt reality for a man who loved Christ. Here is a deep intensity of feeling in a very personal statement of faith -the truth and reality of which backed up by all that we know of Paul. He did desire both life and death, as we’ll see in our two points this afternoon:

1. Living in Christ
2. Dying in Christ
3. **Living in Christ**

We know much about the personal history of the Apostle Paul from Scripture. He was a ‘Hebrew of Hebrews’, a pharisee, educated under Gamaliel; a Roman citizen; a man who suffered much as He served Christ. He was a prisoner when he wrote this letter to the Philippians. Fundamentally though he was not defined by his background or his circumstances, but by His own living relationship with Christ. (v21) *“For to me, to live is Christ”.* Paul’s life found its meaning in Christ Alone. Paul did not value his own life apart from Christ, for his life was entirely bound up in His Lord. That he why he wrote these words to the Galatians: *“I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me; and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave Himself up for me”* (Gal 2:20).

What is **your** life all about? If you wrote the words, “For to me, to live is ...(blank)” What would you fill in the blank with for yourself? Church Father Augustineof Hippo famously said, "*Because God has made us for Himself, our hearts are restless until they rest in Him*". The ‘blank’ in the phrase ‘For me to live is……’ tells us what or who we look to fill up the emptiness inside. For me to live is…?

1. Work – this can so easily define us if we let it.
2. Relationships – is the intimate bond between you and your wife/husband/children/friend stronger than that between you and Christ?
3. Money – are you serving your wealth rather than Christ?
4. Status – whose name do you value more, yours or His?
5. Church – careful with this one. Church is Body of Christ, but if we fill our lives with the workings of the church apart from Christ, then we are worshipping an idol.

How do you think about your life? What/who is your chief concern & interest? What or who do you most fear losing?

There was a man who once lived who had the material resources to fill his life full of all that this world could offer, his wise conclusion regarding filling the ‘blank’ with stuff was: "*Vanity of vanities," says the Preacher, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity*." (Eccl 1:2) This life is so short, so fragile, it evaporates in a moment. “*You are just a vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away*” (James 4:14b).

Nothing satisfies like Christ. Nothing actually satisfies the deep longing that all human beings have for God apart from the LORD Himself. Jim Elliot – martyred missionary to the Auca Indians of Ecuador helpfully said before he was taken home to glory: *"He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain that which he cannot lose."*

In light of all this, we might legitimately ask the question: Why live for Christ by faith in this world when we can really and actually live **with** Him in the next? Why stick around in this sin-cursed earth when there’s a far better place to be?

That’s the question Paul wrestles with in our text: **“***If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account*” (Phil 1:22-24). Notice the reason why Paul sees a necessity in continuing to live in this life. It was not so that he could enjoy a longer life. It was not so that he could achieve some long desired personal goals – like some kind of a Pauline ‘bucket list’! It was not even for his own personal godly joy at being with those for whom he had such yearning affection

The necessity, the urgent pressing reason for his remaining in his present body was not for himself, but for the sake of the Philippians in whom he has such joy. This was why he desired to live on this earth. Paul knows that, at this point in his life, the Lord still has work for him to complete. There are yet more fruitful labours in the service of others which the Lord has prepared so that he can do them (Eph 2:10)..so he writes: “*Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again”*.(v25-26).

Notice that there are three parts of this work in the church:

1. For the progress (advancement) of the Philippian believers in their faith in Christ. Their growth in godliness.
2. For their joy in their faith in Christ Jesus their Saviour.
3. For the increasing in their reason to glory in Christ through Paul’s hoped for visit to them again. This would be an occasion for an outburst of praise for the Lord’s mercy in his release from prison

There can be times in our lives, especially when we experience great grief, loss, frailty and advanced age when we can feel very low and ask the question “why carry on living”? How much longer Lord will you retain me on this earth? In ministering to others with this plea, we need to be pastorally sensitive, wise and gentle in what and how we speak and when we do so.

Ultimately the answer, whatever our circumstances is always that we live for Christ. We live for Christ until the number of days ordained for each one of us on this earth is completed (Psalm 139:16). We labour for the progress of one another in joy in the faith so that Christ may be glorified. This is fruitful, God-honouring labour in the Lord. It is worth living for whatever our situation or circumstance in life. Worth living for, that is until you die, which brings us to our second point.

1. **Dying in Christ**

Gain is not a word that most people associate with death. Death is a great forfeiture, a loss of relationship with family, friends, work, of all that has been accumulated in this life. We extend sympathy to those grieving “in their loss”. In verse 21 Paul writes *“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain”.* The word “gain” jars, grates, with our frail humanity. **v23** “*I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better*”. Paul desires death, but as we have already seen, part of him wants to leave this life. The Greek word translated ‘depart’ is used of a ship weighing anchor, or for people striking camp and moving on.

There is an ‘intermediate state’ between physical death and the coming general resurrection of all bodies. We do not know exactly how the passage of time until the resurrection will be experienced, however there is much evidence from Scripture the soul remains in a conscious state between death and resurrection:

1. The words in v23 “*depart and be with Christ*” imply an awareness of the soul after death which must be at least as great, a consciousness as in this life.
2. 2 Cor 5:1-10 describes the “intermediate state” between death and resurrection. The apostle Paul writes “knowing that while we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord” strongly implies a conscious personal communion with Christ after death and before the general resurrection.
3. Jesus said to one of the criminals at Calvary “Truly I say to you, today you will be with Me in Paradise” (Luke 23:43).
4. Scripture represents believers as enjoying a conscious life in communion with God and with Jesus Christ immediately after death (e.g. Luke 16:19-31; Acts 7:59; Rev 6:9-10)
5. The Bible does not speak of “souls” falling asleep, but of whole persons. The word “sleep” is a euphemism for death which serves as a reminder that death is not the end of things (e.g. 1 Cor 15:51) and not an indication of “soul sleep”.
6. Many of the Scripture passages put forward to suggest that the soul is unconscious after death show the difficulty OT saints had in understanding death in light of God’s promises (e.g. Ps 6:5; Eccl 9:10; Isa 38:18-20), rather than teaching that the soul sleeps between death and resurrection.

There are differences in viewpoint amongst Bible-believing Christians on the subject of whether the soul is conscious between death and resurrection of the body. It is beneficial to study the relevant Scriptures for yourself and strive to reach a settled position for yourself.

We can all be certain that death for the Christian is the beginning of being “*at home with the Lord*” (2 Cor 5:8,9). Paul uses strong words ‘far better’ to die and to be with Christ than to live this life.

Why is being with Christ so much better than this life?

By the grace of God there is much to be enjoyed here and now. I love the golden orb of the rising sun, the crisp air of a mountain peak, a plate of delicious food, time with my wife and family. But all of this is tempered, modified, affected, by the groaning creation of which we are all a part. At the present time in this life we experience distresses, disappointments, griefs, sadness and losses.

In the greatest of contrasts, to be at home with the Lord is to be in a state of complete rest, peace and joy in the very presence of Christ. It is to be in fellowship, the closest intimacy with the perfect man, Jesus. To be in perfect peace, at rest, with the person you love most, for whom you live. But more, the person who loves you perfectly and completely. To be at home with the Lord is to experience the fullness, the depth of union with Christ, the partial foretaste of which we, as believers, have now.

Paul describes it this way to Corinthian church… “*For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known*” (1 Cor 13:12). To see the face of God in the person of the Son is so much better than anything we can observe or experience in this life *“For to me…...to die is gain”.* The word ‘gain’ here has the idea of profit.

Perhaps you think that Paul is looking for an escape from the suffering of this life. Some may say that he is looking forward to his possible execution at the hands of the Romans as a form of personal euthanasia. But this is not so:

1. Life in prison under house arrest most likely in Rome would not have been easy, but was not as hard as his second imprisonment when he wrote to Timothy that. “*For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come*” (2 Tim 4:6).
2. The agonizing work of ministering to the praetorian guard and others who visited him was not easy, but he was encouraged by the spread of the gospel in the prison.
3. He did experience the pain of separation from those he yearned to be with. For example, the saints in Philippi who he longed for with the affection of Christ. Yet he is confident that he will come and see them again in Philippi. He doesn’t think that his execution will come soon.

It is easy to see that a longing to depart could come from a personal desire for the perfect pleasures of being with Christ. But no, the Lord in His Word has given us the reason for Paul’s longing for death that: v20b “*Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death*”. The reason for Paul’s “death wish” is the magnification of Christ. The word here carries the idea of enlargement, a raise in status, of honour, of dignity, of praise. It is used on the lips of John the Baptist "*He must increase, but I must decrease*” (John 3:30).

Notice Paul does not say “I will exalt Christ”. It is not his work that magnifies Christ, but the work of God in Him: “*Christ will be exalted*”. In Christ, death itself is transformed. It is no longer the curse for sin “*you will surely die*” (Gen 2:17). Rather, death has become an event which is valuable to the Lord, because it ushers home his children. **“***Precious in the sight of the LORD Is the death of His godly ones*” (Ps 116:15). The death of those loved by God is a testimony to the promises of the covenant God of Israel who said through His prophet Daniel: "*Many of those who sleep in the dust of the ground will awake, these to everlasting life, but the others to disgrace and everlasting contempt*” (Dan 12:2).

How would Christ be exalted by Paul’s death?

1. If martyred, there would be a proclamation of the gospel in his martyrdom. Think of Stephen as he was being stoned to death…*"Lord Jesus, receive my spirit!" Then falling on his knees, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them!" Having said this, he fell asleep”* (Acts 7:59b-60).
2. He would no longer continue to sin (cf. Rom 7:23-24).
3. His death would be the crowning service for His Lord- a testimony to the faithfulness of God in strengthening him so that he could complete the race (1 Cor 9:24).
4. Paul’s death would confirm in himself the promise of the gospel that “*death is swallowed up in victory*” (1 Cor 15:54).

In unpacking the part of the Apostles’ Creed which confesses “I believe in the resurrection of the body”, the Heidelberg Catechism (Q&A57) asks the question: ‘How does “the resurrection of the body” comfort you?’ With the answer: “Not only my soul will be taken immediately after this life to Christ its head, but even my very flesh, raised by the power of Christ, will be reunited with my soul and made like Christ’s glorious body”. Brothers and sisters, we can be comforted with the sure knowledge of our coming bodily resurrection, without knowing all the details of what our soul will experience between death and when Christ returns.

Job was comforted in his deep distress when He wrote with confidence of his own bodily resurrection long before Christ was incarnate in flesh, lived, died and rose again. Hear again his confession of faith, not in the words ‘I believe in the resurrection of the body’, but these: ***“****For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at the last he will stand upon the earth. And after my skin has been thus destroyed, yet in my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see for myself, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. My heart faints within me*!” (Job 19:25-27)

In Christ, we have confidence and comfort that whether we live or die He will never leave us. Thanks be to God that the decision as to when we die is not ours, but His to make. In Christ, we may look forward to departing this earth -for that is very much better than life here. Until the Lord calls us home, we can desire both life on this earth where living is Christ and we can also desire death which will lead to the resurrection of our bodies in preparation for the continuation of eternal life on the new earth.

Praise God, for in Christ, for us to live is Christ and to die is gain.

**AMEN.**