

October 22, 2017

LIFE AND DEATH
Philippians 1.21-30

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One of the most interesting books that I have read recently is *Being Mortal* by Atul Gawande, an American surgeon of Indian descent. The message of the book is that modern medicine is failing to deal helpfully with people who are dying; it knows how to heal but has trouble dealing with the reality of human mortality. And dealing well with human mortality is important, for we are indeed mortal beings; every human life ends in death.

Life and death are totally opposite, but yet are so intimately related. We know of no life that does not end in death, and yet we cannot be satisfied that death is the last word. And the gospel of Jesus Christ assures us that it isn't. That is the testimony of the apostle Paul in the words which we read this morning. Let me read them to you again:

"For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.
If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me;
and I do not know which I prefer.
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 for you."

When I was young, sermons on this text used to fill me with guilt. To my mind, the theme always seemed to be that death is better than life, and that I should prefer death.

Well, I didn't!

I was young and healthy and I wanted to live a long and a full life.
So I felt that I wasn't a good Christian.

I don't want to lay that kind of guilt trip on anyone this morning.

I want to point out clearly what was never pointed out to me:
the apostle Paul who wrote these words was an old man.

He had laboured long and hard to proclaim the gospel
and plant the church throughout the Mediterranean world.

He had been beaten, stoned, and shipwrecked,
and now he was in prison for the sake of the gospel.

He was not a young person poised on the brink of life's possibilities.

We need to recognize that; it affects the way we should see this passage.

We also need to recognize that any interpretation of the Bible
that brings it into conflict with undoubted human experience
ought to be seriously questioned.

And one undoubted fact of human experience is that we have an intense desire to live. When we are sick, our bodies fight to restore us to health.

When we are hurt, our bodies repair the damage as much as possible.

We are created for life.

So to interpret this passage to suggest that we should prefer death is wrong.

So what is Paul telling us in these words?

I think he is talking about death to give us a better grasp on life,
for death and life are inextricably linked.

In the first place, there is no life that does not end in death.

George Bernard Shaw put it succinctly:

death is the ultimate statistic; one out of everyone dies!

Whether we like it or not, death stands at the end of every human life.

You and I and all those we love are going to die.

But we try to evade that fact. We prefer to ignore it

When I worked in Hospice Calgary, our Medical Director, Dr. Bob Hatfield,
would occasionally come in and say,

"I read the obituaries in the Calgary Herald this morning,
and nobody in Calgary died."

What did he mean?

He meant that all kinds of euphemisms were used to speak of peoples' death,
but no one was willing to use the word "died."

Why not? Because death provokes a deep seated anxiety in people,
and our society tries to avoid talking about death.

Death puts an end to all that we can do or hope to do.

And so, for most human beings,

death is the basic and most pervasive cause of anxiety.

But Paul is telling us that death should not be a reason for anxiety, for death is gain

That's a tremendously important statement: death is gain!

If death is the end of everything, then death is certainly tragic.
But if death is really the doorway to real life, then it is not tragic.
Consider this analogy:

An embryo lives in water, yet is equipped to live in air.

The time of birth is a forceful expulsion
that ends the only life it has known thus far.

Does that mean birth is tragic? No, birth is joyful,
for birth is the beginning of real life.

And, like that embryo, we live in this world, but are equipped for more.

People throughout history have sensed that.

In one way or another, they have expected some kind of life after death.

And consider also the fact that none of us uses all the potential within us.

Have any of us really begun to develop all that we are? No!

Doesn't that say something important?

We are created for more than this life,

and Paul says that what lies ahead is not loss, but gain!

For Paul and for us, this conviction that death is gain
is grounded in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The death and resurrection of Jesus is our ultimate assurance
that God is for us, not against us.

The death and resurrection of Jesus tells us
that God loves us more than we can ever imagine,
that God wants us to return his love with our love,
and that God's plans for us are nothing but good.

The death and resurrection of Jesus is also our assurance
that life is stronger than death,
that death has been swallowed up in life.

Paul tells us elsewhere that Christ's resurrection guarantees our resurrection.

When we are united to Christ by faith,
we may be sure that the Spirit of God gives us eternal life,
which includes bodily life.

So death is not a tragic end. It is not a termination of existence.

It is like birth; it is the end of one existence
which ushers in the beginning of a better one.

If you believe that, it makes a difference in the way you live.
It really does, you know

One thing we must all do in life is choose a style of life.

There are many to choose from; here are a few possibilities:

a total rejection of life as something horrible, as expressed by the T-shirt slogan,

"Life is a bitch, and then you die";

Or, more commonly, a view that everything is judged by its market-place value;

or, a hedonism that says "eat, drink, and be merry, for tomorrow we die;"

Or, a view which says that every choice we make now has eternal significance.

How do you choose your life-style?

Well, your view of death has a lot to do with it.

If death is the final curtain, take your pick. One is as good as another.

But if this life is only Act 1, and Act 2 lies ahead, it's a different story.

That's why Paul's statement, "dying is gain"

is united to the statement, "For me living is Christ".

In any drama, what happens in Act 1 sets the stage for what happens in Act 2.

So if you believe that Act 2 is really coming,

and that Act 2 is what's really important,

then you want to live Act 1 as a preparation for Act 2.

In other words, the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ

sets the stage for the way we live.

Jesus told us, "In my Father's house are many rooms,

and I am going to prepare a place for you."

The life to come holds the promise of the warmth and joy and excitement

and splendour and love of the Father's house.

The prospect before us is the open arms of the Father

welcoming us as his dear children

and receiving us into a loving relationship

that makes anything we experience in this life seem shallow.

If we really look forward to that,

we will want to live now in ways that increase our fellowship with the Father

and that express our love for him.

If death is the doorway to life,

and if our actions in this life have significance for the life to come,

then we certainly ought to live each day seeking to please the Lord.

If dying is gain, then living for Christ is the only way to go.

When living is Christ, then dying is gain. Thanks be to God.