Is Dying Better Than Living?
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Philippians 1:20-30

20 It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be put to shame in any
way, but that by my speaking with all boldness, Christ will be exalted now
as always in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me, living is
Christ and dying is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor
for me; and I do not know which I prefer. 23 I am hard pressed between the
two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; 24 but to
remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. 25 Since I am convinced of this,
I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and
joy in faith, 26 so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus
when I come to you again. 27 Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the
gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and
hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving
side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, 28 and are in no way
intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their
destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. 29 For he has
graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of
suffering for him as well- 30 since you are having the same struggle that you
saw I had and now hear that I still have.

1. Death Happens

I have been thinking seriously about death for the past few weeks. The passing of David Klotzbach and Carl Wilson still makes me sad. And when I travelled in Guatemala, I was reminded that I could die. Before my trip to Guatemala, I was asked to buy travel insurance just in case something would have happened to me while overseas. When we arrived in Guatemala, I was shocked to see that every place we visited had armed guards. In restaurants and even in churches, every guard had a gun. I later found out that robbers are common in Guatemala City, and many lost their lives because of them. I learned why I should have had travel insurance. No one knows when death can happen to us all of a sudden. So, when beloved ones pass away, we become sad, disappointed and sometimes upset. However, this morning I would like to share Paul's perspective on death.

2. Is Dying Gain?

Many people say that they became Christians so that they could go to heaven after death. At a revival service in Korea, a speaker asked the people to raise their hands if they wanted to go to heaven. Most of the people raised their hands. Then the speaker asked people to raise their hands if they wanted to go immediately. No one raised their hands because no one wanted to die in the moment. Koreans have a saying, “Even in the worst circumstances, living in this world is better than death.” I think most people might agree with this statement, but Paul tells us that the opposite is true.

In Philippians 1:21, Paul says, “**For to me, living is Christ, and dying is gain**” (v. 21). In v. 23, he even surprises us by saying, “**I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better**.” How is death better than living? Is Paul talking about his situation in prison? Paul was awaiting the decision that would allow him to live or be killed. Does he say so because he was suffering so much in prison that he wished he could have died? Not at all. If we look closer to what Paul is saying, we notice that dying or living makes no difference to him. Then, what does Paul mean when he says, “**to me, living is Christ**” (1:21)? For Paul, the focus of both the physical and spiritual life was Christ. Paul’s life was filled and occupied with Christ. Every hope, trust, love, obedience, preaching and following was driven by Christ. Christ was the inspiration, direction and purpose for Paul’s existence. Paul tells us that his ultimate concern is that “**Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death**” (1:20).

How did the Philippians think about Paul? At the time, when Paul had written this letter to the Philippians, Paul would have been in prison for about two years. The Philippians were concerned for Paul. Paul would have been discouraged for being confined for so long, unable to spread the gospel. And yet, we know that Paul’s imprisonment allowed him to share the gospel with the soldiers who guarded him. All the soldiers would have known that Paul was in chains only because of his belief in Christ. The people in the prison saw the gospel through Paul’s example, his love for Christ, and everything that he did in the prison. The prison was not the life that Paul would have wanted. Yet, for Paul, as long as the gospel of Christ could be shared, he did not care about any suffering. So, in verse 29, he considers suffering for Christ as a privilege.

3. Crucified with Christ

When we compare Paul's perspective on death to our view, we notice his perspective is quite different. In Galatians 2:20 Paul says, "**I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me**." Paul uses the imagery of crucifixion to help us understand that even though we may still be physically alive, the Christ-centered life actually puts to death the self-centered, self-promoting way of life. For Paul, the self-centered, Pharisee, Christian-persecuting, strictly law-abiding nature before meeting Christ was now dead in Jesus. Paul had become a new creation (2 Corinthians 5:17) because Christ now lived in him. In the same way, Paul says that those who are in Christ have already passed through death into living a new and very different life.

Furthermore, in Ephesians 2:5-6, Paul sees himself and us as those who are already in heavenly places; "**even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ-by grace you have been saved- and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus**." Paul shares that God raised Christ from the dead and placed Jesus in the heavenly realms with him. In this, Paul emphasizes that we Christians are also risen from the dead, and ascended. Although Paul was in prison, he thought and acted like the one who already died and was with the Lord. He had no interest at all in his wellbeing on earth. He is only concerned about Christ and God's kingdom.

4. Callings of the Missionaries to Guatemala

I have found that Paul's view on death still brings a big impact on people's lives today. Let me share with you the case of Luke Rhyee, the missionary to Guatemala. He began going to church when he was a junior in high school. After 6 months of going to church, Luke began asking how he might be able to serve the Lord with his life. One day, he happened to visit a cemetery for missionaries and found Philippians 1:21 on one of the tombstones, "**for to me, living is Christ and dying is gain**." Luke was touched by the missionary's desire to serve and sacrifice for the Lord. He felt God calling him to become a missionary, and so he went to medical school to prepare to be a doctor on the mission field. He wants to live such a sacrificial life like the missionary, and put the same scripture passage on his tombstone when he dies.

We met another missionary in Guatemala City. His name is Rev. Sang Don Kim. Rev. Kim has been serving a Korean church in Guatemala City for 30 years. Before he came to Guatemala he had served as a chaplain in a missions high school in Korea. He enjoyed what he was doing at the high school but felt God was calling him to do something more. When he asked his wife what she would like to do, she said she wanted to go to the mission field. When he was praying about it, someone told him that there was a church in Guatemala that was looking for a pastor. Rev. Kim has been serving in that church ever since. His dream is to die in Guatemala while preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ.

5. Conclusion

When Paul says, "**dying is gain,**" he does not mean gain for himself, but gain for someone else. Someone says that we will gain a better home after we die. In John's gospel, Jesus says that he would prepare a place and come back and take them to be with the Lord. Revelation 21 says, there will be no more sorrow, tears, pain or death (Rev. 21:4). Because of these blessings, does Paul say that "**dying is gain**"? Absolutely not. Paul never expects anything better after his death. His biggest concern is the exaltation of Christ. So, when he says "dying is better than living," he means that through his death someone could come to Christ and experience God's love. Jesus says to his disciples in John 12:24, "**Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit**." This is why Paul says, "dying is better than living." Through many missionaries and faithful disciples of Jesus, the gospel of Jesus Christ still brings much fruit.

6. Application

Today is the second Sunday in Lent. Lent is a time when Christians prepare for Easter by observing a period of fasting, repentance, moderation and spiritual discipline. As many of us know, Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent. Ashes imposed on our foreheads remind us that we were created by God from the dust of the ground, God breathed into our nostrils the breath of life, and we are supposed to return to dust (Genesis 2:7 & 3:19). It means that our lives are completely in God's hands. Psalm 104:29 says, "**when you [God] take away their breath, they die and return to their dust**." If we are alive, it means that God still keeps helping us breathe. If we die, it means that God takes away our breath and makes us rest. Our life is not in our hands, but God is the owner of our lives.

We human beings are like puppets manipulated by a person called a puppeteer. God is our puppeteer. God has created us to use us according to His purpose. Thanks be to God for using us for His Kingdom. Amen.