

Philippians 1:19-26 (1984 NIV) ***A Winner's Philosophy of Life***

Introduction

Let's begin by doing a little exercise. How would you complete the following sentence? "For to me, to live is _____." What word or phrase would you put in the blank?

If you are Lionel Messi, the word might be "soccer". If you are Tom Cruise, the word might be "Hollywood". If you are Steve Jobs, the word might be "Apple".

The point is that no one leaves that sentence blank. Everyone finishes it with something. In your case, what do you put there?

Philippians 1:19-26 contains a remarkable philosophy of life. It is remarkable because it was written by a man in a Roman jail chained to a soldier 24 hours a day. He was on trial and with no certainty that he would ever be set free. Indeed, what Paul specifically wrote in our passage today can be considered as his purpose in life, and it reveals the driving force that kept him going even in jail.

In fact, the secret of his purpose-driven life can be summed up in one sentence in Phi. 1:21—"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." This verse reveals why Paul did what he did, why he said what he said, and how he found the strength to endure incredible hardship.

As we go through this passage together, I challenge you to compare your philosophy of life with Paul's.

Though Paul's life is marked by hardship, it carries a winning philosophy.

I. It is a life that magnifies Christ and not circumstances (vv. 19-21).

¹⁹for 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. ²⁰I 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. ²¹For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

When we read these words, one puzzling thought comes to mind. How could Paul be so joyful and hopeful in his mood and tone? After all, he's in jail in Rome awaiting trial before Caesar. He didn't even know what would happen next.

Perhaps the phrase “my deliverance” means that he expected to be released. But that’s not what he meant. He’s not thinking about getting out of jail, but about God vindicating him—whether in chains or as a free man. The Living Bible offers this helpful paraphrase—“This is all going to turn out for my good.”

In v. 20, we learn the very heart of Paul’s prayer:

- That he might never do anything that would bring shame.
- That he might never lose his courage.
- That he might always magnify Christ (“... now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death”).

Note the last phrase in v. 20—“whether by life or by death”. He wasn’t even afraid to die. Could you say the same thing? Many worry about what might happen to them in some accident or dreaded sickness. Of all the fears that grip the heart of man, none is greater than the fear of death.

Yet somehow Paul had been completely delivered from this fear of what might happen tomorrow, whether in life or death. He had come to the place where he could say, “The only thing that matters is that Christ be magnified in my life. And it doesn’t matter whether I live or die as long as Christ is magnified.”

Do these names ring a bell to you?

- Nate Saint
- Roger Youderian
- Ed McCully
- Peter Fleming
- Jim Elliot

In 1955, these five men (all under the age of 35 then) gathered in Ecuador with a vision of reaching a tribe of Indians called the Aucas who lived deep in the rain forest. No one had ever presented the gospel to them. These five missionaries—all deeply devoted to God—began praying about ways to make contact these tribal people. In September, they began flying over an Auca village, lowering a pot containing gifts for these Indians. Eventually the Aucas took the gifts and replaced them with simple gifts of their own.

In January 1956, the five men decided that the time had come to make contact in person. After much prayer they established a base camp on a sandy beach of the Curaray River. On 8 January 8 1956 at about 3.30pm, they were speared to death by these Indians who mistakenly thought that these white men had come to harm them.

The news shocked the world. Many people wondered how young men with so much promise could waste their lives that way. When the journals of Jim Elliot were published several years later, they were

©2020-2022 John Yuen Ministry

You are permitted to use this sermon or article for free. If you choose to publish excerpts from it, please provide link or attribution back to the version on johnyuen.org.

found to contain this sentence—“He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

The Apostle Paul would agree. Once you decide that your life won't last forever, you are free to invest it in a cause greater than yourself. You give up what you can't keep so that in the end you gain what you can never lose. This is what Paul meant when he said in v. 21—“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain”—this is Paul's personal mission statement. You get this and you'll understand why Paul could turn his world upside down for Christ, and not let his life be turned upside down by adverse circumstances.

Consider the phrase “to live is Christ”. What does it mean? F. B. Meyer (well-known Baptist pastor and evangelist in England in the 1800s) offered some answers:

- It means Christ is the essence of our life.
- It means Christ is the model of our life.
- It means Christ is the aim of our life.
- It means Christ is the solace of our life.
- It means Christ is the reward of our life.
- It means we live in Christ.
- It means we live for Christ.
- It means we live by Christ.
- It means we live through Christ.
- It means we live from Christ.
- It means we regard Christ as the beginning, the middle, and the end of life.
- It means Christ is truly the Alpha and Omega, the A and Z, and every letter in between.

Can you get to be more Christ-centred than this? It is this Christ-centred and not circumstance-centred philosophy that enabled Paul to survive and thrive in a Roman jail. You could even hear him say with chains in hands, “Life is wonderful. And it's going to get better.”

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” The word “gain” is a monetary term, meaning to make a profit on an investment. Instead of complaining about being in jail, he rejoiced that even in chains, he had experienced the power of Jesus Christ in his life. And if he should die, his present wonderful life would get even better because he expected to profit from his spiritual investment while he was still alive on earth.

How could Paul say such things? It's because for Paul, death didn't mean being buried in a Christ-forsaken cemetery. Rather, death to him meant being ushered into a Christ-filled sanctuary (i.e. heaven). He knew that he would enter into the presence of Christ and that would truly be "gain" for him.

Many have wondered how death can be a "gain" for anyone. In his sermon on this text, Alexander MacLaren, a renowned Scottish preacher and expositor in the 1800s, shared these thoughts:

- We lose everything we don't need. We lose the world, the flesh, and the devil. We lose our trials, our troubles, our tears, our fears, and our weaknesses.
- We keep everything that matters. We keep our personality, our identity, and our knowledge of all that is good.
- We gain what we never had before. We gain heaven, the saints, the angels, the presence of God, and Christ Himself.

In that sense, death is the ultimate deliverance and not ultimate destruction for the Christian. Someone said it aptly, "A Christian is immortal until his work on earth is done." Think about that for a moment. Death cannot touch you until God is through with you. You cannot die, and you will not die, until the appointed time ordained by God comes. If God is God, you will live as long as the Lord intends, and then you will go home to heaven at His appointed time for you.

When a young person dies in the Christian faith, it is because that young person has completed God's time for him here on earth. So, what may seem to be a tragedy to us is no tragedy in God's divine plan.

Many years ago, the great American evangelist John Rice preached in Texas. As was his custom, he preached hard against sin, especially against those who brought illegal liquor into Texas towns. Eventually the powers that be decided that this troublesome evangelist must be silenced. They sent a message to order him to stop preaching or they would kill him. Rice replied, "You can't threaten me with heaven."

Indeed, to be in heaven with the Lord after one's earthly life is no threat for the believer because it is not ultimate destruction, but really, ultimate deliverance into the presence of the Lord.

Though Paul's life is marked by hardship, it always magnifies Christ and not circumstances. In Paul's life, the Almighty Christ is always bigger than his adverse circumstances. And you can never be a loser with such a posture of courage and confidence in Jesus Christ.

Though Paul's life is marked by hardship, it carries a winning philosophy.

II. It is a life that leaves behind lasting marks in others (vv. 22-26).

²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

If I may paraphrase vv. 22-26, Paul is saying something like this—"I have chosen to do what is necessary for you by deciding to remain with you rather than to do what I personally desired. I am convinced that God wants me to continue to help you progress spiritually. And when it's time for me to leave this life, I know I have not laboured among you in vain because of the lasting marks of faith and faithfulness you carry in your lives."

Some people want to die because they hate this life. Paul was ready and willing to die because he looked forward to life with Christ in heaven. For him death would be like a ship pulling up anchor and sailing out of the harbour towards a new destination. Paul understood that death for the Christian is nothing more than a change of address.

However, he was willing to remain if he could make a difference in the lives of other people. Indeed, the best use for your earthly life is to invest it in something that will outlast it.

Paul told the Philippians (vv. 22, 24, 25)—"If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me ... it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body ... I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith ..."

In essence, he was saying—"My life is worth nothing unless I use it for doing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus—i.e. the work of sowing the seed of faith in people and helping them to progress in their spiritual journey. When I am done and gone, I want to leave behind lasting marks in people's lives, and not just loving memories of my life."

What are these lasting marks? Well, many can be identified. But I want to point you to what Paul exhorted the Philippians in 2:3—"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves ..." He exhorted them to be humble enough to consider others better than themselves. Now we have to be careful when we consider what this means for us. Does it mean that we are to go around being a doormat and letting people walk all over us?

I see Paul expressing humility in a more healthy way when he went on to say in 2:4, "Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the

interests of others.” In other words, when you are humble, you desire to do the greater good. And the greater good for Paul as he struggled with to live or to die is not “I will do what is good for you and sacrifice what is good for me”. It is also not “I will do what is good for me at the expense of what is good for you”. Rather, it is “I will do what is more necessary for you by postponing what is desired by me, and in so doing, I can have fruitful labour among you by helping you to progress in your faith journey so that I can leave lasting marks in your lives”.

This is doing the greater good—not “I lose, you lose”, or “I win, you lose”, or “I lose, you win”. But really, “I win, you win”. You not only look out for your own interests, but also for the interests of others. It’s the mark that fleshes out the “love your neighbour as you love yourself” attitude. It is an attitude that desires for others the same blessings that you enjoy or want for yourself.

Thus, as the Lord would protect him, Paul would so take care to defend himself against false charges so that he could “postpone” his own death. Paul knew he couldn’t lose either way—in life and or in death. He said to the Philippians, “If I die, gain for me and you have my legacy to continue. If I live, gain for you and fruitful labour for me.”

In a sense, Paul’s imprisonment was a hidden blessing. It forced him to face the fact that he wouldn’t always be around to guide the churches forever. He didn’t want people to merely have loving memories of him after he passed on. More importantly, he wanted to imprint marks of Christ-likeness in the lives of people before he passed on.

Imagine my name is not John Yuen, but John something else. And your pastor stands before you this morning to introduce me. He says, “Dear church, today we are so glad to have a descendant of a well-known person among us. Please help me welcome Mr. John Einstein!”

What kind of welcome do you think I will receive? I can imagine myself being overwhelmed by requests for pictures and autographs.

Now, imagine your pastor says this, “Dear church, today we are so glad to have a descendant of a well-known person among us. Please help me to welcome Mr. John Hitler!”

What kind of welcome do you think I will receive? I can imagine myself coming in as one part, but going out as part one and part two!

My point is this—What we do in people’s lives will invariably be remembered. If we leave behind lasting scars in the lives of people, we will be remembered for the wrong reasons. If we leave behind lasting marks of Christ-likeness, we will be remembered for the right reasons.

We are often asked, “What do you want to be remembered for by people?” If we are remembered by people for the right reasons, that’s all well and good. But if we are remembered by people for all the wrong reasons, then it is better to be forgotten soonest possible than to be remembered for life.

As he struggled to make a choice, Paul eventually concluded that the Lord would not let him die just yet so that he could still minister to the Philippians. Even though he desired to die so that he could be with Christ, he put aside his own desire for it was more necessary for him to live so that he could continue to help the Philippians in their spiritual progress. Paul knew that if he took care to leave behind lasting marks of Christ-likeness in these believers, the memories of him and his work among them would take care of themselves.

Paul understood that what he personally desired most to have at a point in time might not necessarily be the best in God’s scheme of things.

A group of healthcare interns were visiting a mental institution. As they were walking past, a man cried out pitifully from one of the rooms: “Mimi! Mimi!”

One intern asked the guide: “Why is he crying for Mimi?”

The reply: “Mimi jilted him.”

As they walked further down, a second man cried out from another room: “Mimi! Mimi!”

The same intern asked again: “Why is this man also crying for Mimi?”

The reply: “Mimi jilted him too.”

Then the group entered the innermost part of the mental institution where the most seriously ill of patients were housed. A man there screamed and waved excitedly as he saw them: “Mimi, no! Mimi, no!”

The intern asked: “Is he also jilted by Mimi?”

The reply: “Mimi married him ... and he becomes like this.”

What we desire most to have may not necessarily be the best in God’s scheme of things. And Paul understood that.

You really can’t stop a man like that. Go ahead and kill him. He’ll die with a smile on his face. Chain him up. He’ll preach to the guards. Put him in jail at midnight. He’ll start singing. Chase him out. He’ll go start a church in the next town. Stone him. He’ll pile up the stones to build an altar for God.

What has God blessed us with in this life? Do we use them to leave behind lasting marks of Christ-likeness in other people's lives? If we do, then you and I can say triumphantly like Paul when time on earth runs out for us—"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, and I have kept the faith. My legacy of faith is outlasting my earthly life because of the lasting marks of Christ-likeness that I have imprinted in those who live on after me."

And that brings me back to the five young men who gave their lives reaching the Auca Indians in 1956. At the time it seemed to be a tragedy with no redeeming purpose. What has happened as a result?

- Within a few years, over 1,000 new missionaries went to the field as a result of martyrdom of these five men.
- Soon the Bible schools in Ecuador were filled to overflowing with native believers desiring to learn God's Word.
- Rachel Saint and Elizabeth Elliot (widows of Nate Saint and Jim Elliot) moved into an Auca village to begin the work of Bible translation.
- Nine years later, two of the Aucas who helped kill the five missionaries had come to Christ and baptized Kathy and Steve Saint—daughter and son of Nate Saint.
- A flourishing church was established among the Aucas and other neighbouring tribes.
- In 1995 Steve Saint (son of the martyred Nate Saint) moved back to live among the Aucas—at their request.

Truly the "blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church". Those five men had no idea of the thousands of lives they would touch by their deaths on a sandy beach in a remote jungle. They only knew that God had called them to the Aucas, and they must obey. Thankfully, God rarely calls His people to die like these five young men.

Let us suppose that those five men could speak to us today. What do you think each would say? I think it would be the same words of conviction as that of Paul—"My only desire is to magnify Christ, and leave behind lasting marks of Christ-likeness in others, by life or by death."

(<https://bethanygu.edu/blog/stories/jim-and-elisabeth-elliott>)

Conclusion

You can never say "to die is gain" unless you can also say "for to me to live is Christ". If you cannot say "to live is Christ", how can you be sure that "to die is gain"? We always come back to Christ, don't we? If you are afraid to die, perhaps it is because you don't know Christ. If you are not yet a believer in Jesus Christ and you wish to know more about Him, I invite you to talk with

the Christians in this church. I am sure they will be most happy to share with you.

Life in this world will end one day for every one of us. When our time on earth runs out, we can say with the Apostle Paul triumphantly, “For to me, to live is Christ and (oh, yes) to die is gain!” Or we can say with the world sorely, “For to me, to live is self and (oh, no) to die is loss!”

Which will it be for you?

C. T. Studd was a British Anglican Christian missionary to China who later was responsible for setting up the Heart of Africa Mission which became the Worldwide Evangelization Crusade (now WEC International). Let me close with a well-known quote by him—“Only one life and it will soon be past. Only what’s done for Christ will last.”

Will your one life and my one life on earth be passing history or lasting legacy?

I pray that the Lord will help us answer this question personally as a Christian and collectively as a church in a triumphant manner as befitting of winners and overcomers in Jesus Christ. Amen!