

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance. 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. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.

If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor 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. 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, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

In a world filled with turmoil and uncertainty; with crises unfolding right and left, seemingly every day: war, famine, earthquake & floods, with national conversations ongoing about foreign policy, immigration and infrastructure funding, the Apostle Paul lived in a time surprisingly similar to our own (short of nuclear weapons, of course.)

The first century world of the Roman Empire experienced its own share of crises. Mt. Vesuvius, perhaps the most destructive volcano in European history, erupted, killing upwards of 20,000 people, destroying the towns of Pompeii and Herculaneum.

The Emperors Claudius and Nero (neither known for their wisdom or restraint) exacted burdensome taxes and mercilessly persecuted minorities, particularly Jews.

Political corruption, rivalry and intrigue was a given.

In the midst of this, in the ‘eye of the storm’, you could say, emerges one who embodies calm and surety, a sense of deliberate purpose, anchored in a resource stronger than all the distress and chaos around him.

The apostle Paul, likely shackled in his prison cell, still emanates enough hope, confidence and peace about him to attract new believers; even the prison guards of the Roman imperial guard. Amazing.

That he decided to remain a prisoner while being given enough bribe money to leave his cell scot free speaks of his profound sense of purpose and resolve. In his letter to his dear friends in Philippi, Paul reveals some of the inner conversation going on inside him- a wrestling going on over an issue that he has already resolved internally, but needs to express in writing to those who still looked to him for leadership and guidance. His choice, not between life and death, but between freedom and imprisonment, is expressed in the most ‘quotable quote’ of our reading for today... This is what he writes

to them, and is the crux of the mind of Paul, pointing to the source of his strength and the anchor of his faith: “*Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.*” Now, that’s a statement of faith for the ages. And it is also a great question for all of us to answer, to take a measure of our own faith; of its nature, it’s durability and resiliency.

So let me give this a try with a fill-in-the blank exercise for you. How would you answer this? For, to me, living is _____. And dying is _____. Think about it for a moment.... (Here are some possible ‘fill-ins’ for you...

Living is – hard, and dying is – release

Living is- trying, and dying is - rest.

Living is – community, and dying is reunion.

Living is _____ and dying is _____.

What words sum up your understanding of life & death in Christ?

Since I have been working on this all week, and you haven’t, perhaps you can keep at it for a while until you are happy with your answer. And since I have been working on this all week, allow me to share a little insight with you about what I think this means for Apostle Paul.

For him, Jesus Christ was the new beginning of his life. Remember that Paul, born Jewish, spent the early part of his adult life persecuting Christians. It was on the road to Damascus that Jesus appeared to him, calling him to follow, reordering Paul’s life from the ground up. You could say that Paul was born again (many have), and for Paul, Christ was truly the beginning of life, all over again.

For Paul, Christ was the inspiration of life: Jesus was the dynamic, motivating power of life, calling him to love more than he otherwise would have, to care more, to listen more, to understand more- much more than he otherwise would of his own accord. Christ gave Paul his task in life, to embody the loving spirit of Jesus, never giving up, never giving in, never forgetting the totally unearned and undeserved grace that Christ gave him, out of the blue. If Christ were taken out of Paul’s life, there would be nothing left. To him, Christ was nothing less than life itself.

And, for Paul, “death is gain.” Death meant an entrance into Christ’s nearer presence. There are some passages from Paul when he writes of death as ‘falling asleep.’ But at this moment, ever closer than before, he sees his own death as a closer entry into the presence of Our Lord, not to be feared, but embraced; a union and reunion with Christ and those we have loved and lost.

So Paul is in jail, but not discouraged. He may be facing execution, but he is not without hope. A summation of his letter goes like this: “It is not about me, I am not the center of the church. If you’re worried about me, I’m doing fine. I am prepared. I am prepared to live. I am prepared to die. Death is not a threat, but I think that God has more work for me to do, so I will probably return to work with you some day. Until that time comes, though, quit thinking so much about me. The church is built around Jesus Christ, so follow him. Stand together, side by side. Do what you do in his name, following his Spirit, with his caring joy and abundant love.”

There are two things absolutely essential to the church: Jesus Christ and human need. In the place where the church exists, from Baltimore City to Mexico City to Puerto Rico, in troubled relationships and trying lives; where people struggle for hope amidst chaos and uncertainty, Jesus is present. The church exists for the rich and the poor, the haves and the have-nots, the powerful and the powerless, the illiterate and the well-educated, the doubters and the Bible-thumpers, the high and mighty and those who no one knows. In between is the church of Jesus Christ. The church is to be the gospel for all, proclaiming love, hope, charity and real, lasting meaning in caring for others.

What the apostle Paul was pointing to with his words; the proof of his ministry, if you will, was how the church would continue to work to by proclaiming Christ through serving others in his own absence.

The preacher Fred Craddock once told a story about his taking part in a conference in a major U.S. university in the South. He shared the speakers platform with a Catholic priest. Before he began his talk, a young woman began the program with a devotional. In her early-twenties, she may have been a class officer. She had a soft, clear voice.

When she got up to speak, she had a yellow legal pad with her, which may have meant that they were in for a long one.

Her voice was quiet, but everybody was listening.

She was speaking in another language. And then, in another language, and yet another and another. He wasn't able to keep count how many. But what she was doing was saying **one thing** in the major languages of the world. When she got to German, and then French he became more sure of what it was she was saying. She had perhaps said this single phrase sixty or seventy times, in different languages. It was one simple sentence, and the last time she said it, it was in English. She said, "Mommy, I'm hungry."

He thought about what she said all the way back to the airport, and then on the highway back to his home. The first highway billboard he saw, going north from the Atlanta highway, said this: "Denny's- All You Can Eat \$5.99." But all he could think it said was "Mommy, I'm hungry."

The Apostle Paul said, "You have Christ, and you have all these human needs. Get your mind off me." You have other work to do.

With Jesus' love, we have more love, power and resources than we ever thought possible then by ourselves alone. Jesus makes all the difference in the world. That's what I think.

What about you?