

Philippians 1:21-30(ESV) ²¹For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²²If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. ²³I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. ²⁴But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. ²⁵Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again. ²⁷Only let your manner of life be worthy[£] of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. ²⁹For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, ³⁰engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Jesus is risen. He is risen indeed. Alleluia. Friends, since Jesus is risen from the dead we can always live in hope, in the hope of Jesus' resurrection power lifting us up every day to live fully for Jesus. The resurrection power of Jesus Christ is given to us so we can overcome the difficulties that come our way. When you read the book of Revelation and the series of God's judgements upon this earth, John calls us "the overcomers." The Bible predicts times of great upheaval with extreme weather patterns, physical illnesses and plagues impacting entire populations, Christian truth being maligned, and we as Christians being hated by those who do not belong to Jesus. The Prince of Darkness sends a delusion where seemingly smart people are so easily deceived. God's truth and light is rejected and falsely interpreted as lies and darkness. The non-Christian, the unregenerate, live their lives suppressing the truth for a lie and denying the existence of God. How any thinking person can look at the creation and deny that there is a Creator is beyond me, but this too was predicted long ago. Jesus says that as the world hated Him so will the world hate us who belong to Jesus Christ. Nothing is happening today that God Himself did not see coming. God is not in the least bit surprised at the decadence all around us. Yes, it grieves God; God will not put up with sin forever. One day God will say, "No more." The last trumpet sounds and Jesus returns as King of Kings and Lord of Lords victorious over everything and everyone forever and ever.

My heart goes out to you who are more mature age-wise. You never thought in your lifetime that you would see such decadence. Your spirit cries out to God because it pains you to see such behaviors. When a person's conscience becomes more hardened or seared to sin, he or she can look at the same thing you do and not hardly be affected by it. Still, we have the resurrection power of Christ, namely the Holy Spirit living inside of us, giving us hope not to lose heart and to be an overcomer. No matter the darkness, the Light of Jesus will never be overcome. To put it bluntly, and I truly believe this, living by faith in Jesus Christ has never been more vital and crucial.

The Christian faith inside of you, activated, made active by the Holy Spirit, assures you that God's Holy Presence is with you and in you. The Christian faith gives solid assurance that God will have His way with you even when you think you have lost your way. The Christian faith, activated by the Holy Spirit, energizes you with an undying confidence that God really is who He says He is, and that God's word is truth. We can be more confident than ever because God is by far greater than anything that is happening to us or around us. Despair comes when all we see is the darkness and close our eyes of faith that were placed on Jesus. One look away from Christ and do we ever sink. Trying to succeed without the blessing of God is the sure road to disaster and despair. God is showing us how necessary He is for us in every way and for everything. Jesus is the only way; there is no other way. To have such confidence in God gives to you an inner assurance and calmness that God is having His way in your life. This is what the life of faith in Christ is all about. Our best days in Christ are always ahead of us even in this life; the best is yet to be.

I have recently been visiting a person whose time is drawing near. I can honestly say this is a holy time for her and her husband. They have both accepted the fact that her time is short. They both love Jesus and each other. Her smile is literally out of this world for she knows exactly where she is going, and she is sooo looking forward to it. She is filled with hope

knowing that God is always true to His promises. She expects to see Jesus, soon, very soon. She is living with great eager expectation. The Bible calls it Christian hope. Soon Jesus will come for her. I can almost hear her say out loud, "It is well with my soul." Living by faith in Jesus Christ makes all the difference in the world and lifts us out of this world in God's perfect timing. Oh, to know Christ and the power of His resurrection.

Friends, in order to know the power of the resurrection, God tests us and puts us at times through the grinder. God prunes things out of our lives. God humbles us. God disciplines us out of perfect love. After the time of testing is over and our faith is proven, the resurrection power is right there to lift us up. Living in Christ becomes our everything. This is the life of the cross. Suffering is not foreign to us Christians. The life of the cross is death leads to new life. Christ puts specific things inside of us to death and raises us anew in the likeness of Christ. It is Jesus' death and resurrection played out in our lives. It is no longer we who live but Christ lives in and through us.

At the time of his writing, Paul was in prison and he did not know if he had long to live. As a matter of fact, it was possible that his life could be taken from him at any moment if he received the death sentence. Things were not going easy for Paul. Being in prison severely limited his freedom and movement. The Philippians were some of his greatest supporters financially and prayerfully. About 10 years earlier, God had used Paul to birth the church in Philippi.

Paul was the spiritual father of the church in Philippi. How he longed to visit. He decided to send them a letter and that is what we find in our Bible, the letter to the Philippians. There were specific dangers that Paul knew could harm the church. He wanted to warn them through his gentle instruction out of a heart of love and concern for the church. The Holy Spirit inspired him to write each word that was written.

Paul's focus was always the cross and resurrection of Christ. He saw the cross of Christ behind everything that occurred in his life, proof of God's love. Do you know that the major theme in this letter is joy. Talk about the power of God's Holy Spirit. Friends, you too can know the joy of the Lord in the worst of circumstances. Paul sure did. Joy is that wonderful inner confidence knowing that whatever happens to you happens for you good and for God's greater glory.

Paul writes, "Yes, I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always, Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death." Friends, Paul did not know whether he was going to be killed or allowed to live. Either way, he did not in any way want to embarrass the cause of Christ, the church, or his fellow believers. He wanted to remain a strong witness to them of Jesus until his dying breath. He wanted to fight the good fight and finish the course faithfully serving Christ. He did not want to fail Christ in any way.

Please here me on this. Paul had no fear of death at all. When you are so convinced of the love of Christ, death is nothing to fear at all. Death becomes our friend that ushers us into the fullness of Christ's Presence. As a matter of fact, the more your experience the Lord Jesus in this life, something inside of us longs to be with him on the other side, a deep longing that is not always easy to put into words. It is not a death wish, but a yearning of what is to come.

Paul felt pulled in two directions. Having no fear of death, and knowing his life could be taken, he longed to be with the Lord Jesus fully. On the other hand, Paul felt a great love for the Christians in Philippi and longed to help them and minister to them as well as a lot of other churches. He knew that if God preserved his life, he had a lot more ministry to do that would help the churches grow. He could personally visit the people he longed to see. Paul puts it this way, *"For me to live is Christ and to die is gain."* Paul meant that to continue on in this life is to

experience the power of the Gospel of Christ, to teach and preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ, doing Christ-centered ministry, experience Christ-centered friendships, experiencing Christ. Paul adds, "*For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.*" Friends, when a Christian dies, immediately he or she is in the Lord's Presence, looking at Jesus face to face, seeing the wonders of his grace. To live is Christ and to die is gain. In death we experience more of Christ, all of Christ. To die is gain but as long as we have breath, God has purpose for us here and Paul knew that purpose well. He did not quit. He did not give into discouragement. Having said that, Paul suffered more in his lifetime than any of us ever will and he did struggle with discouragement, especially as you read 2 Corinthians. Paul warns the Christians in Philippi that they will probably suffer for the cause of Christ; Paul could see it coming.

That being said, with great joy, the joy of the Lord, Paul served the Lord and the church wanting his personal witness of Christ never to be an embarrassment to Christ or the church as he writes the Philippian letter. Paul was encouraged because of their growth in Jesus Christ.

Friends, one of the reasons why it is so important to worship our Lord together week after week is to hear the Gospel message and be encouraged by Jesus Christ, His Word, Holy Communion, and to enjoy the fellowship of being together in Jesus Christ. It is so good that you are here. How great it is to experience the Lord Jesus as we worship him. Please remember that the cross and resurrection is God's proof to you, God's sign to you that God loves you absolutely, without end, forever and ever. Amen and Amen.