

Rev Calum Iain Macleod: Philippians 1:21

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Date: 23 September 2016

Preacher: Guest Preacher

[0 : 00] Well, turn with me if you will this evening to the letter of Paul to the Philippians and chapter 1.

Our text is verse 21. Philippians 1 verse 21.

For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Paul reminds us that the best is yet to come for everyone who is in Christ Jesus.

We know that because he says, for to me to live is Christ and to die is gain. We often quote these words for me to live as Christ and sometimes we almost bypass what Paul says next.

[1 : 10] Well tonight we are going to focus in particular on these words under two headings.

Death a reality and death a blessing for to me to die is gain.

Paul can say that because in verse 23 he says to be with Christ is far better.

Paul doesn't shy away from the somewhat prickly sensitive delicate subject of death and neither should you and I.

After all a communion weekend revolves around the death of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

[2 : 07] Death is a reality. Some of you know that very well this evening. You have experienced that from your own personal perspective.

Well in almost well in excess of six years of ministry at back I have led in excess of 80 funerals and that reminds me that death is very real.

You can walk into any of our cemeteries on the island and you will discover that death shows no prejudice to age or circumstances.

There are but two key markers in your life tonight and my life. There is a starting point and there is an end point.

The Bible teaches us very clearly in Ecclesiastus 1 that there is a time to be born and there is a time to die.

[3 : 19] You will notice that there is no midpoint in Solomon's equation. In his formula he doesn't say there is a time to live.

It's not there. Why? Because life is incredibly short. There is but a stepping stone between the cradle and the grave.

A brief journey, a tale, a short story that is told and it passes so quickly.

How often have you said perhaps in recent weeks where has this year gone? Where have the years gone? Why does time pass so quickly?

Paul knows that he is but a whisker away from death as he writes to the church at Philippi. His time to die is on the horizon.

[4 : 20] It's about to happen. It's imminent. Sometimes if you're listening to the weather forecast, if you're watching it on television, the weatherman will say rain imminent.

In all likelihood it's going to happen sooner rather than later. It's forthcoming. It will happen.

Pending.

And Paul speaks of his death in that vein. Do you remember the words of David to Jonathan back in the Old Testament?

In 1 Samuel 20 verse 3, David said to Jonathan, there is but a step between me and death. He says that in the context of Saul who is doing his utmost to take his life.

David appreciates that he's walking on thin ice. Saul's sword is a constant threat. The next step could be his last and bring him into eternity as self.

[5 : 26] He is sensitive that he is living in close proximity to the end point. Are you and I this evening? What is your take on death?

Paul knows that Nero's sword is looming. Paul knows that his next step so to speak could be his last.

What if this is your last communion? It might be. Thomas doesn't have the authority to stand here and say I'll see you in six months time.

How will you spend this communion? What is going to be your focal point over this communion weekend? What if it is your last communion on earth?

What if the curtain should fall? This is the final scene. How will you spend it?

[6 : 33] You see for most of us the reality of death is difficult to accept. Intriguing sometimes when you're standing at a cemetery.

And the remains of the person, of the individual being laid to rest.

And the conversations that take place around you, should you eavesdrop for a moment or two, just tap into the conversation.

Very often you will discover that the conversation is a world removed from what is happening in the here and now.

We fail to see the brevity of time and the nearness of eternity. You know, if you walk into the city of London, I can't tell you where it is.

[7 : 45] But there is a cemetery. And there is one particular stone and it stands out from all of the rest.

Why is that? Because of the words inscribed upon it. Passer by, stop and think, I'm in eternity, you are on the brink.

And Paul knows that from his own personal experience. Death for the apostle Paul is very, very real. Paul knows that he will die.

And he doesn't, as I said at the outset, shy away from the subject. There is no wide berth here. He doesn't skirt around the edges.

He's talking about it openly. To die, Paul says, highlighting his realistic perspective on life.

[8 : 49] How different to the Woody Allen philosophy. I'm not afraid to die, I just don't want to be there when it happens. That's not the theology of Paul.

Do you think about death as a believer? Perhaps you're not a believer tonight. You don't know the Lord Jesus Christ as your savior.

Do you think about death? Am I touching a raw nerve by even daring to go into this sensitive area?

Are you a die another day person? Paul isn't. Shakespeare said to be or not to be.

That is the question. To die or not to die is no question. It's irrelevant.

[9 : 50] For to die, you and I must. And Paul knows that he is sailing close to the wind.

He's very real. This is a reality check, isn't it, when we speak of death. But for Paul, he addresses it. He speaks of it. He shares his take on death with others. For example, when he writes to Timothy 2 Timothy 4 6, Paul says, you know what, Timothy, the time of my departure is at hand.

Let's talk about death, Timothy. Let's talk about my departure. When he uses the word departure in 2 Timothy 4 6, he speaks of a process of letting go.

That's what departure means in the Greek tongue. This sense of unloosing, it means literally to pull up the anchor and to set sail.

[11 : 06] So Paul is ready to depart and he is making preparation here for the final voyage.

I believe the American evangelist Billy Graham is 97. And he, in the recent past, he said, and I quote, we now have, the advantage of a few years of life.

But death is still standing at the end of the road. And this is Paul's vantage point as well.

Paul is in his latter years. Paul is approaching the end of his journey. He's in the process of letting go, of unloosing all of the ties.

What about you tonight? What's on your mind over this communion weekend? Are there issues other than our atoning sacrifice, Jesus Christ?

[12 : 25] What if this is your final communion? You know, when you and I go on a journey, we pack our bags.

Do you pack your bag well in advance? Or do you tend to just pack your bag as you're running out the door? Are you organized?

Do you have a checklist in terms of preparing for the journey? Or are you a last minute grabber and packer? Well, when it comes to Paul's death, Paul's bag, if you like, it's packed, it's zipped up, he's ready, he's prepared, he's equipped for the journey.

What about you tonight? What if this is your last communion in Carlisle Way?

I want to secondly, to see that death is a blessing for the apostle Paul. Paul has said that life is about living for Christ, death is about dying in Christ.

[13:48] The valley of the shadow of death for the apostle Paul is just around the corner, imminent as we said, but Paul knows that the same Christ who was with him in life will not forsake him in death's dark veil.

The separation of body and soul at death has no bearing on Paul's union with Christ. What are the terms of his union with Jesus Christ?

Well, let me go back to verse six of the same chapter. Paul says, I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you, in me, will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Paul, as he speaks of the blessings that are His in Christ, he knows he is assured that he is safe and sound for eternity.

Paul is confident that in Christ he is destined for a better place. He is assured that to be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord, to quote his message to the church at Corinth, 2 Corinthians 5.8.

[15:15] Death is gain. Wonderful. What a testimony to have for to me to live as Christ. That's one thing, but to say for me to die is gain.

The day of his death will be better than the day of his birth, you see. How? Because he knows that in Christ when he dies, his soul will be made perfect in holiness and will immediately pass into glory to paraphrase the shorter catechism.

His body will be left behind, yes, but not abandoned. Not discarded or just left to decompose. Dust to dust, yes, but still united to Christ, resting in the grave until the resurrection morning dawns.

That's what gives Paul the boldness to say when he writes to the church at Rome, who or what can separate us from the love of Christ.

Nothing says Paul in this life or in death can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[16:38] So as he shares this word of testimony with the church at Philippi, he can also say we who are in Christ are more than conquerors in life and in death through him who loved us, through him who gave himself for us.

Many marriages have taken place at this altar. And it's a very pungent moment at the marriage altar when the bride and the groom say to one another, till death do us part.

Well, isn't it wonderful that such a phrase is not applicable to our marriage union with Christ tonight? John Wesley, as he was about to die, uttered these words as he began to drift into his heavenly haven.

As he left to this world, he could say, the best of all is that God is with us.

[18:18] God is with us. Press intense. He knows that God in Christ remains the same today.

Yesterday, forever with us. God is with us. Farewell, he said, as he parted with his loved ones, farewell.

Another believer, Dr. Preston, said, blessed be God, though I change my place, I shall not change my company, for I have walked with God while living, and now in death I go to rest with God.

Can you say that tonight? Do you think about heaven? Or are you too busy to stop and contemplate that your life is incredibly brief?

And very soon it will cease to be. Do you remember when these pews were filled with people?

Some of you can remember who sat there, and who sat there, and who sat up there.

[19:43] Where are they? They are no longer with us. They have all passed on.

All we have are memories. Because life is incredibly brief.

The shortest of stories is your life and my life. Are you prepared for eternity?

Do you think about heaven as the Apostle Paul did? When you think of those who are no longer with us, who are in a better place this evening, perhaps your parents, your grandparents, loved ones, those who were once in fellowship with you, they won't be sitting at the Lord's table with us this Lord's day, no, because they are in a place where no benediction will be pronounced, no parting blessing.

They are with Christ which is better by far. Do you long to be where they are? Do you long to rekindle the fellowship you once had with them?

[21 : 19] Do you think about glory? Someone has said, if you're too busy to pray, the reality is that you're just too busy. I wonder if in our chaotic, secular world, if we're just too busy to think of why we live and what we're living for.

Are we living for Christ tonight? A communion weekend allows us the opportunity to contemplate these things, to mull over these things.

A communion weekend allows us to review our own lives and to undertake any necessary revisions. We take stock over a communion weekend.

We examine ourselves. And of course, we ask whether I am living for Christ.

And I say as I come to the Lord's Supper, for to me, I don't know about you, but for me to live is Christ.

[22 : 33] And to die, well, the communion table, the Lord's Supper, the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, reminds me that the best really is yet to come.

And I know that it will be to my advantage. Why? Because there will be an endless communion.

No more tears, no more mourning or crying or pain or anguish. No more night.

The sun has set out there. And we find ourselves over this weekend at the point of Equinox, where the night begins to show its hand.

Less daylight, more of the darkness of night to come. The darkness will be no more.

[23 : 40] The former things have passed away. The storm that roared has been changed into a calm, the saints and glory are saved.

That His command and will, so that the waves which raged before in my life, now quiet are and still peace, shalom prevails without end.

And how important it is that these words in Revelation 22.6 are highlighted. 66 books later, the revelation of Jesus Christ to John, one of the key reference points in your Bible, Revelation 22.6.

These words are trustworthy and true. Death is a reality, yes of course it is. But heaven too is an eternity, an eternal reality that awaits all of us who are in Christ.

That is Paul's testimony for our encouragement, so that we too can adopt these words by grace and say that for to me to die is gain.

[25 : 05] You know when Napoleon was about to pass away, the French military leader, he said, he uttered these words, I die before my time and my body will be given back to the earth to become the food of worms.

Such is the fate which soon awaits the great Napoleon. How different to Paul's perspective on death, a perspective characterised not by fate, but by faith.

Napoleon believed the journey ends with an aburreal chamber.

Paul believes that the journey that you and I are on is ongoing. His last breath is not the last stop, it marks the beginning of a journey into eternity of blessing and bliss as it does for all of us who are in Christ Jesus tonight.

You know we often speak of a person passing away. Paul is saying, my passing from this life into the next, when I cease to be, when I breathe my last, when the blood stops flowing through my veins, it will be my gain.

[26 : 53] When I desiece, you know the word desiece we're so familiar with it. You know informal in certain contexts we speak of the deceased.

It sounds a little clinical, but is it at one level because the word desiece literally means exodus or going out.

So think of the great exodus of the Bible in the Old Testament. It revolves around the children of Israel going out from Egypt's bondage, slavery and suffering and making for a better place, the promised land.

So death, Paul reminds us, is an exodus from bondage to bliss.

No more chains for the apostle Paul. What is your exit strategy for death tonight if you don't have one?

[28 : 16] Because if you don't know Jesus Christ as your savior, the reality is that you are without one. Remember the word departure, we spoke of it earlier, it means to pull up anchor and to set sail again I want to ask if you are prepared for your last voyage.

Should the anchor be lifted and the sail hoisted tonight, are you ready to go? Are you afraid?

Paul is innocent because he knows that the captain of his salvation is at the helm. So who is at the helm of your life tonight?

Who is on the bridge? Where will you berth on eternity's shore? Should that journey be this evening?

Well there are only two places. There is Heaven's Haven and there is Hell's Harbour.

[29 : 29] Death is gain for every Christian in here tonight. Let's embrace what Paul is saying.

Paul goes on to say elsewhere, so we do not lose heart. It says goodness and mercy all my life shall surely follow me.

Paul says for this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison.

Are you afflicted tonight? Perhaps some of us don't have our problems to seek, but the best is yet to come.

Paul says as he writes to the Church of Corinth, for we know that of the tent, that is our physical bodies, our earthly home is destroyed.

[30 : 26] We have a building from God, a house, not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. Amen, David says, and in God's house forevermore my dwelling place shall be.

Paul speaks a lot about death. Death is swallowed up in victory, 1 Corinthians 15. Thanks be to God, Paul says, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

And he says, doesn't he therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, be immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.

It is not in vain. We come to the Lord's table. Perhaps some of us aren't as steadfast as we would like to be.

Perhaps some of us are feeling insecure and inadequate. We're not abounding in the work of the Lord as much as we would like.

[31 : 48] But nonetheless, we persist and we come knowing that the Lord's table is a wonderful snapshot of a heavenly table that has been prepared for the mythiboshiths of this world, each one being ushered into the nearer presence of the King.

Do we need tonight to have our Christian lives realigned? Have we lost our focus?

Are we so preoccupied with the things of this world that it's been some time since we stopped to take stock of why I live and for whom I live and where I'm going and what it'll be like when I get there?

God's word encourages us to live for Christ and all who do so will die in Christ, will fall asleep in Jesus and will open their eyes in Emmanuel's land to be forever with the Lord.

Well, again, thanks be to God, the God who encourages us, who exhorts us, indeed, who commands us to come to His table so that we can be strengthened for the journey, so that we can go from strength to strength, so that we can, again, look to Jesus, so that we too can adopt the spirit of the sacramentum as the Roman soldier would salute his commanding officer.

[34 : 22] So we are encouraged to come to the table and salute the Christ of Philipians one, he for whom I live, the one who loved me and gave himself for me.

I will come. I will come by grace. I will come humbly, recognizing that nothing in my hands I bring simply to the cross I will cling to His finished work and I will glory in that finished work.

And I will press on knowing that when I fall asleep in Jesus, it will be my gain.

It will be advantageous. It will be better by far. Amen.

We bow our heads in prayer.