

THE MEANING OF LIFE...AND DEATH

I emailed a friend recently who is an adventurer. I told him that I look back on his exploits with awe and sometimes I live vicariously through his ventures. He emailed back and said, “Don’t live through me... early in July I started tearing my dad’s old barn down (to try and salvage the lumber), and I fell off a ladder. I was about twelve feet up when I lost my balance (from pulling a wire out of the wall, the wire came way too quick), and as I was going over I saw that dad had an old plow parked right below my ladder.

In the flash of a second, I knew I’d be taking the dirt nap if I hit it. So with what remained of my fast depreciating balance, I side kicked off the barn in an attempt to clear the plow, which accelerated me well past twelve feet.

I missed most of the plow.

After getting up off the ground, I realized I was in trouble, and that if I didn’t keep working, I’d seize right up. So I worked my (tail) off for another four hours before my Mom figured I should be in the emergency room. In the end, nothing was broken. However, my ankles looked like tomatoes, I had a small but deep gash in my leg, my left shoulder was messed up bad, all the tendons in my right arm are stretched “from here to China” (that’s what my doctor said, and he’s from Taiwan), a bunch of ribs in my back had popped out, and I bit my tongue. That was the worst part - my tongue got seriously infected, and I couldn’t eat or talk for two weeks.”

To truly live is an adventure. Those who guard their lives and live safely will not see the adventure in life. They fear the unknown and avoid risks. Either you are a white water rafter or a calm water canoeist. Myself, I am probably more of a calm water canoeist – I don’t need a lot of risks, but I admire those who are adventurers.

What are you living for? How would you complete the phrase: To live is _____? To complete that sentence is to reveal your purpose for being.

Og Mandino wrote that all successful people have a clear purpose in life. They have a reason to get out of bed in the morning and a driving purpose that keeps them on track throughout the day. Without a clear purpose no one can be considered successful.

Paul’s creed for living was very clear: To live is Christ, to die is gain. This creed reveals Paul’s secret for facing trial with joy, for living life to the full. Let’s explore the meaning of this creed together in Philippians 1:18-26.

1. Making your life count

Funerals are very revealing when it comes to the personality and accomplishments of the dearly departed. What will they say about me? What will they say I did of note? How will they capture the essence of who I was in one hour? What kind of legacy will I leave behind?

How will your life count when the bell tolls? I have often thought that those who write books are best remembered. Augustine lived 1800 years ago and people still read his Confessions. Martin Luther continues to influence theology with his writings. But books can be critiqued and criticized and one’s reputation over the centuries can have its ups and downs. What really counts?

Paul’s concern in this regard was expressed in these verses: **“Yes and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance”**(18b-19).

What does Paul mean by “deliverance”? Does he expect that he will be acquitted of the charges against him? Will he be released from prison? Or does he mean that he will be saved through his death?

The word “deliverance” can mean “salvation” but it can also mean “vindication.” And the phrase “will turn out for my deliverance is a direct quote from the OT figure, Job. Paul deliberately quotes Job to draw a parallel between Job’s situation and his own. This is what Job says, **“Though he slay me, yet**

will I hope in him; I will surely defend my ways to his face. Indeed, this might turn out for my deliverance, for no godless man would dare come before him!”(Job 13:16).

Think of Job’s situation: Job was a righteous man, whose suffering was not due to sin but his piety. God was using Job to show Satan that the righteous worship him, not because of the blessings they receive but because of who God is. Job’s friends come along and accuse him of sinning and tell him that his suffering is the result of that sin. All he needs to do is confess. Only Job was not guilty of anything.

Paul used Job’s words as his own defense. He has done nothing wrong despite what other Christians are saying about him. Like Job, Paul was ready to stand before God and make his defense. Like Job, Paul knew God would take these circumstances and bring deliverance. Paul believed that God would vindicate him and make his life count through the suffering Paul was enduring.

Paul knows this because of the power he received through the prayers of his friends and the Holy Spirit who comes from Jesus. And his own prayer has a threefold aim: “I 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”(v. 20).

Paul’s vindication, the evaluation of whether his life counted or not, rests not on public opinion, or what people thought of his books, but upon his standing before God. The only way his life will count for Christ is to do nothing that will bring shame upon the gospel of Christ, to maintain his courage in the face of the worst men will do to him, and to exalt Christ in his body. Each rests upon the other. Paul’s ultimate goal was to exalt Christ with his life or death.

How do we make our life count? For the Christian there is only one answer: to live a life that reflects the very character of Jesus Christ to others.

2. Our Loss is our Gain

This brings us to that powerful creed of Paul’s: To live is Christ, to die is gain. As I struggled with some personal issues and thought life, I would repeat this creed in my head. But as I studied it I found a slightly different meaning in it.

A) To Live is Christ– Some of us misunderstand this verse. We take it to mean “To live is wonderful, and to die is even better.” Life is good, even the Christian life is good, and we expect heaven will be good too.

We need to redirect our focus in this creed from life to Christ. For what Paul was referring to was the life lived in Christ. To live is to live out the life of Christ, not just to enjoy the benefits of life as a Christian. This is two very different things. Paul explained this view to the Galatians, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”(Gal 2:20).

Living out the life of Christ in our own persons means that we continue to express the life Jesus began when he was with us. Everything that he did, we do. To live as Jesus did is to walk in his footsteps. To live as Jesus did is to be committed to spreading the good news of his life to everyone. To live as Jesus did is to groan over the fallenness of humankind and to yearn for people to turn from sin. To live as Jesus did is to give our lives, even to death, for the sake of others salvation.

Jesus said to his disciples, “All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God. They will do such things because they have not known the Father or me...In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world”(John 16:1-3, 33).

To live like Jesus we can expect this kind of reaction from our world. But this is what it means, “To live is Christ”.

B) To Die is Gain– There is something remarkable about the word “gain” in this creed. Paul is saying that “to die is better by far.” It is a financial term that means to make to a profit on an investment. How does Paul see dying as profitable?

This can only be described as beautiful, this view of death. Paul told the Corinthians that death is the end of camp life. **“Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked”**(2 Cor 5:1-3). Death is the end of camp life and the beginning of home life. You know how it is to come home from Bible Camp or from a long trip and there is nothing better than that feeling of your own bed and your own stuff. This is what life after death will be like, only magnified a million times. Dying will be like going home and being where you belong.

C. S. Lewis described this beautifully in the last book of the Narnia series, *The Last Battle*. Aslan, the lion in the story, represented God: **“Then Aslan turned to them and said: ‘You do not yet look so happy as I mean you to be.’ Lucy said, ‘We’re so afraid of being sent away, Aslan. And you have sent us back into our own world so often.’ ‘No fear of that,’ said Aslan. ‘Have you not guessed?’ Their hearts leapt and a wild hope rose within them. ‘There was a real railway accident,’ said Aslan softly. ‘Your father and mother and all of you are – as you used to call it in the Shadowlands – dead. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning.’”**

Let’s put it another way: If you have a long day of work and activity and you are so tired you can hardly think straight, you long for your bed. After a good 8 hours sleep you feel refreshed, restored and renewed to your old self. Death is the last sleep. When we awake in eternity we will be sharper than we ever were before. You will see clearly and think rightly.

This is what Paul meant by “gain.” Alec Motyer took the phrase “to live is Christ, to die is gain” and said it this way... **“Life means Christ to me, as I more fully know and love and serve him day by day; death means Christ to me, when I shall finally possess and eternally enjoy him.”**

By losing we gain and by gaining we lose what is inconsequential. Alexander MacLaren had three answers to the question, **“How can we see death as gain?”**:

1 – We lose everything we don’t need – we lose the world, the flesh and the devil. We lose our trials, our troubles, our fears and our weakness.

2 – We keep everything that matters – we keep our personality, our identity, and our knowledge of all that is good.

3 – We gain what we never had before – we gain heaven, the saints, the angels, the presence of God, and Jesus himself.

With this in mind it is easy to see why Paul struggled so much with the life and death question. **“If I go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body”**(22-24).

Our loss is our gain.

3. Our other purpose for living

Can you imagine loving Jesus that much? Paul had no trouble letting go of this life if circumstances went that way. He could easily face the executioner and see beyond into another world with Jesus. But...this life has its purposes.

Our primary purpose for living, to make our lives count for Christ, is tied in with our other purpose for living: others. Someone might ask that if life is better in eternity with Jesus, why doesn’t he whisk us up upon our conversion? The answer is simple: we live to pass our faith in Christ to the next generation and them to the next generation and so on. We live in this life to perpetuate and proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That’s what Paul said, **“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, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me”**(25-26).

It's not that there isn't joy to be found in the present life. Remember that Paul said "to live is Christ." That's not a life of drudgery or being stuck in the celestial waiting room. It is an adventure of following Jesus and seeing people grow and know Jesus and become through him what they were always meant to be.

Our purpose for living is others. What is the hardest part about dying? Leaving loved ones behind. What is even harder is leaving behind those who still have not believed in Jesus. We want to live to see them come to faith. We want to be able to die knowing that we have done all we can to encourage others in their faith.

The truth is, that's how we want to die. But then we must live every day as if it were the last, to coin an old, old phrase. It is still true. If you were to die today, what have you done to leave others with a taste of the gospel? Because if you are a believer, that is your creed – to live is Christ, to die is gain.

Conclusion

Carl Lundquist, was the former president of Bethel College and Seminary. In 1988, doctors told him he had a rare form of cancer called mycosis fungoides, which invaded the skin over his entire body and ended his life three years later. He wrote this letter the day after he heard the news of his cancer: "That day in the hospital room, I picked up my Bible when the doctor had left. I turned to the joy verses of Philippians, thinking one might stand out. But what leaped from the pages was Paul's testimony in chapter one, "I 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 death. For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain." And I discovered that a verse I had lived by in good health also was a verse that I could live by in ill health. To live - Christ, to die - gain. But by life or by death, it's all right either way ... So I simply trust that [God] in His own way will carry out for me His will which I know alone is good and acceptable and perfect. By life or by death. Hallelujah!"{SOURCE: John Piper. Future Grace: The Purifying Power of Living by Faith in. Multnomah Publishers Inc.; ISBN: 1576733378; (March 1998)}

Philippians 1:21 is commonly used as a funeral passage. I offer it to you today as a life passage. It frees you to live life no matter the threat to your present life. It is a creed which gives us purpose for living. And whether you are young or old or in between, these are words to live by.

To live is Christ, to die is gain.

AMEN