

“Joy for the Future”
Philippians 1:18-26
December 12, 2021

INTRODUCTION:

Have you ever started a vacation that was enthusiastically anticipated, only to find yourself from the very beginning of the vacation feeling just a little sadness at the thought that it would end too soon? Anxiety about the future will always rob us of joy. Imagine, on the other hand, that there would be the possibility of a vacation that would never end. Imagine too that it begins in a very satisfying manner and only gets better with time.

In the previous passage of Philippians, Paul wrote about how past difficulties of his imprisonment turned out to advance the gospel. That gave him great joy. In today’s passage, he turns from the past to the future. The previous paragraph ended with Paul’s declaration, “in that I rejoice.” It’s a present tense verb. Paul was rejoicing in the present because of something that had happened in the past and God’s use of that. Today’s passage begins with a future tense verb about joy, “Yes, and I will rejoice.” What did Paul expect to happen in the future and how did that produce joy for him? How can our view of the future produce joy in us instead of anxiety?

I. Assurance of Salvation – v. 18-20

If we are to grasp Paul’s meaning in these verses, we must understand what he means when he speaks of things turning out for his “deliverance.” Is he speaking of his deliverance from prison, or is he speaking of his ultimate deliverance in salvation? The next verse makes it clear in two ways that he cannot be speaking merely of his release from prison. First, note that Paul speaks in verse 20 of the two possibilities of life or death. That would be a contradiction if he is referring in the previous verse of his confidence of being released from prison rather than dying there. More significantly, he says, **“It is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed”** (v. 20). The phrase “eager expectation” is used only one other time in the New Testament, when it is used of creation’s eager longing to be released from the curse put upon it with the fall of the human race in the sin of Adam and Eve (Rom. 8:19). It is then confirmed that Paul is speaking of bigger things than release from prison when he says that as a result of this deliverance he will not be ashamed. Why would he be ashamed if he is not released from prison?

Paul is talking about his assurance of salvation. He is confident that he won’t be ashamed on the day of judgment. When all things are revealed, it will be evident that Paul has built his life on the rock of Jesus rather than on

shifting sands. A life built on satisfying self will result in shame on that day. A life built on acquiring power, money, knowledge, or upon building a career, or upon anything or anyone other than Jesus will be like the house built on sand. The tide will come in and wash it all away as if it had never been there. Paul is confident that his life has been built on the rock of Jesus.

Assurance of salvation is the foundation of our ability to view the future without anxiety. Note how Paul said that this assurance gives him “full courage.” When we lose our fear of death and judgment, it infuses into our souls great confidence. He lived his life without fear because he had been released from the mother of all fears, the fear of death and judgment.

Where does this assurance of salvation come from? It is not just for the super-Christians like Paul. Rather, assurance is based on putting all our confidence in Jesus rather than in ourselves. We become confident in our forgiveness and salvation when we become confident in Jesus and his promise. We have no Plan B because Plan A is completely sufficient. We forsake trust in self and replace it with trust in Jesus. Assurance comes to the degree that Jesus becomes big to us and our own efforts become small.

How does this happen? Paul said that it happens through the Holy Spirit, and that the Holy Spirit comes to him in fullness through the prayers of God’s people. Christians can sometimes get confused about this, because the Bible says that all Christians have the Spirit all the time (Rom. 8:9). But Jesus also tells us to pray for the Spirit (Luke 11:13), and Paul commands us to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18). Even the most mature among us, like the apostle Paul, needed the Holy Spirit that he might enjoy an assurance of his salvation.

II. The Only Two Future Possibilities – v. 21-24

When Paul considered the future, he saw only two possibilities. **“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain”** (v. 21). What a powerful influence for anxiety-free life this is! If Paul lived, it would be a life lived for Jesus. If he died, it would be gain. We can face the future without anxiety to the degree that we reduce our lives to only these two possibilities. Imagine the freedom that would come if you could face every day with this realization. As this day unfolds, one of two things will happen. First, I can live for Jesus and his glory today. Second, I may not make it to the end of the day, in which case I will be with Jesus, which is far better.

These two possibilities are illustrated in the emblem of the American Baptist Foreign Missionary Society. It shows an ox standing between a plough and an altar, with the motto, “Ready for either.” Paul was ready to spend and be spent in labor for the Lord, or to be a sacrifice, whichever the Lord was pleased to do with him.

Let's explore in more depth these two options, beginning with Paul's statement, "To me to live is Christ." We saw in the previous section what that meant for Paul. It meant that he rejoiced in the progress of the gospel even if it came at the price of his imprisonment. It meant that he rejoiced in the preaching of the gospel by those in the church who hated him even when their preaching of it was done to hurt Paul. It meant that Paul didn't give in to living out of the little story of his own reputation and advantage, but saw himself as part of the bigger story of the advancement of God's kingdom.

When we can say "to me to live is Christ," it changes the fundamental question we ask every day. Instead of asking, "What will bring fulfillment to me today?" we ask, "What opportunities has God put before me today to further build his eternal kingdom?" It may be taking care of a sick baby all day, or it may be doing your least favorite duty at your job. Remember that Paul wrote these words from prison, showing us that there is opportunity to serve Christ and his kingdom in even the most challenging of circumstances or the smallest of duties. This doesn't mean that God calls everyone to become pastors or missionaries. It does mean that God calls us all to see the big picture of his kingdom at work through us. It means that each day we get to ask, "God, further your kingdom through me this day. Strengthen me to be faithful in the little things and open my heart to see opportunities you may give me and to receive interruptions as from you."

One more thought about living for Christ is to remember that we are following Jesus when we live for his kingdom. My Bible reading this week had me in John 2, where I read of Jesus' cleansing of the temple. After witnessing this event, John records that his disciples later remembered this as a fulfillment of Psalm 69:9, "**Zeal for your house will consume me**" (John 2:17). The house of God is the temple, the place where God lives with his people. Jesus is so zealous to see this place restored that he is consumed by it. Literally, his life was consumed in order to restore the whole earth as a temple where God would live with his people. So to say that to live is Christ means that we join Jesus in such a desire to see the paradise of Eden restored. If you are still drawing breath, you have a role to play in this.

When the role God has for you to play in this big story of restoring his home with his people is concluded, he will take you from this life through your death. The second half of this verse describes that as "gain." "To live is Christ, and to die is gain." In the next verse, he describes it as "far better." "**My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better**" (v. 23). Paul was a very mature Christian, filled with the joy of the Lord. But far better than any significant spiritual experience available to the most mature Christian is to be present with Christ. It would be gain for Paul because it would be the end of being beaten with rods, of being in prison, of shipwrecks, of stonings, and of myriads of other trials he constantly experienced.

This verse is a great encouragement to those of us who have lost loved ones who followed Jesus. They are living in the reality of this “gain” and this “far better” situation. Spurgeon wrote of this verse, “Concerning our beloved friends gone from us... If we happen to sorrow, it is for ourselves, that we have lost their present company, but as for them it is far better with them. If the lifting of our little finger could bring them back again, dear as they are to us, we would not be so cruel as to subject them again to the troubles of this stormy sea of life.”

III. Decisions about the Future – v. 25-26

There is one final important lesson we learn from Paul about dealing with the future without anxiety and filled with peace. It concerns our decisions. One of the puzzling things about this passage is that Paul refers to his situation as having a choice about living or dying. He says at the end of verse 22, **“Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two.”** The two options he is contemplating are being released from his imprisonment and continuing to live and serve God, or being condemned at his hearing before Caesar and being executed. How could Paul speak of this as if it was his choice when it was clearly Caesar’s choice?

Something we all struggle with is adopting a victim mentality when things aren’t going as we would like them to. The victim views him or herself as powerless before the actions of others. Here was Paul in prison, seemingly the victim of his enemies and the Roman justice system. But he refused to embrace the role of victim. We always have a choice, and Paul’s wording here is strong testimony to that fact. Even in prison where almost everything was decided for him, he still made choices. No matter how bleak your situation may seem to you right now, you should always ask the question, “What choices would God have me make right now?” There is always a path forward. Part of being an image-bearer of God is the dignity of exercising our will and making choices. Maybe you have been victimized, but you need to know that your victimization does not remove your ability to make choices about the path forward. Maybe you are suffering from your own sins and mistakes. Still, you can move forward today. If you are still drawing breath, God is not done with you and has important work for you to do. Remember the illustration from last week of Bishop Stanway, an amazingly fruitful missionary in Tanzania who was afflicted with Parkinson’s disease late in life. Unable to speak and barely able to print legibly, he could still insist, “There is no future in frustration.”

This text gives us a window into Paul’s thought process as he makes a decision about his future. He knows that his future will be decided by the emperor, but he also knows that the one who is Caesar’s Lord is Paul’s friend. And Paul knows that his friend answers prayer. So perhaps he is mulling over

what he should be asking for in prayer. He ends up “deciding” that he should go on living in order to continue serving the church.

Paul’s values can be seen in his decision. He makes it clear that the thing in his best interests would be to depart and be with Christ. He says that would be gain to him and far better. That’s an amazing statement about the power of God over death. But Paul then goes on to “choose” against what he states is in his best interests. **“But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith”** (v. 24-25). In the next chapter, Paul will say to the Philippians that each one should **“look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others”** (2:4). Paul is simply doing here what he commands there.

As we make decisions about our future, we would be well-served by doing the same thing Paul does and the thing he advises. If you are deciding on a college major or a potential career path, don’t ask what will make the most money for you. Instead, ask yourself what people-need resonates in your heart that God has gifted you to provide. I was talking with someone this week who told me that she once turned down a marriage proposal. She did so not because she didn’t love the man proposing to her, but because in her view it would not be in his best interests to be married to her.

CONCLUSION:

One of the many helpful features of this passage is that it teaches us to consider anxiety about the future not as normal but as something like a dashboard warning light. It’s like that new feature that some cars have called a lane departure warning. You’ve drifted from the lane you ought to be traveling in. The right lane for us all as we look out on the future is to say with Paul, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

God doesn’t promise us a suffering-free life. On the contrary, he says that we will suffer in this life. But he does promise us that he will use our sufferings for good purposes, and he promises one day to deliver us from all suffering. So be encouraged, and be released from all anxiety about the future.