

Sermon Given by

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### Philippians 1:18b-30 - "United we stand"

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Philippians 1:21 Paul writes: *"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."* For many of us, those words, if we're honest, will feel a long way from expressing the sentiment of our hearts. Perhaps these words are a bit nearer the mark for some of us? "I want Christianity but not too much; just enough to make me happy but not enough that I get too devoted to Christ. I don't want so much gospel that I begin to hate covetousness and lust. I certainly don't want so much that I learn to love my enemies and cherish self-denial and contemplate missionary service in an alien culture. I want enough gospel to make my children well-behaved but not so much that I feel my ambitions re-directed or my giving too enlarged." Those were the opening words of Don Carson when he was speaking on Philippians 1 a few years back. The point is powerful. I want a safe Christianity. I certainly don't want to overdose on Jesus Christ – not so that I lose my life for him. We're unlikely to state it that boldly but all of us will know the temptation to opt for a cosy, domesticated version of the gospel – one that gives us as many blessings as possible but that doesn't demand too much.

If you were with us last week you'll remember how Paul, in the face of hostility from without and from rivalry from within, he praised God because the gospel was proclaimed! In our passage tonight Paul's thoughts turn from his present circumstances to the various possible future circumstances he might soon face. In particular his thoughts turn towards his future trial – the outcome of which was uncertain which is why Paul speaks so openly about the possibility of his death. What is certain to Paul though is that Christ will be honoured or exalted whether Paul lives or dies. Can you see that confidence in v20: *"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."* And he is sure that Christ will be exalted, because he is preparing to defend and confirm the gospel at his trial. The word translated "sufficient courage" in v20 could equally read, "with full outspokenness." Even in his trial, with his life on the line, Paul is going to make sure that the gospel is proclaimed. As we see Paul's confidence though it's important to notice v19 because without v19 we might think that Paul's confidence came from self-sufficiency and that would be a huge mistake. I'll read from the end of v18, *"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."* It is not through his own strength but the prayers of the Philippians and the help of the Holy Spirit that Paul is expecting to speak out openly in front of the Roman Emperor and thus honour Christ and find vindication on the day of Christ. Praying was a key aspect of their gospel partnership with Paul. And what an incentive for us to pray for those Christians around the world today who are standing trial for Christ. And of course nearer to home to pray for Tim Keller, Bob White, Lee Gatiss, Tim Glauert and all those round the country who will be speaking at Passion for Life events – hopefully their lives aren't under threat(!) but it can be hard to preach the gospel so they need our prayers and

the help given by the Holy Spirit that they too would have sufficient courage to proclaim the truth.

So Paul is confident that whatever the outcome Christ will be exalted in his body and that brings us to these amazing verses and the dilemma that Paul faces. It also brings us to our first heading:

### **Paul's attitude to death**

V21 *"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour 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..."* We need to hear these words of Paul and meditate on them and pray them in for ourselves because we live in a world that clings on to life because in the world's eyes this life is all there is. Wonderfully that is not the case for the believer. C.S. Lewis put it beautifully, in his book "The Last Battle" at the very end of the Chronicles of Narnia: '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." For the believer death isn't so much the end as the beginning and what a wonderful beginning it ushers in. The term is over: the holidays have begun. The dream is ended: this is the morning. This isn't wishful thinking by Paul – it's not him being stoical. No, his sure hope is based on the fact of Christ's own resurrection which guarantees ours and it is also based on Christ's words.

At every funeral I've led I've spoken on those words of Christ at the beginning of John 14: *"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."* Christ promises us resurrection life with him beyond the grave and his resurrection guarantees it. Some people here though will understandably be concerned and scared about the actual process of dying. But however we die we can know that Christ is not going to leave us or forsake us. Richard Baxter put it well when he said: "Christ leads me through no darker rooms than he went through before; he who into God's kingdom comes, must enter by this door; my knowledge of that life is small, the eye of faith is dim but tis enough that Christ knows all and I shall be with him." We go to be with Christ – to live by sight and no longer by faith and we can know that Christ will help us through the actual process of death – he will show himself adequate. I was greatly moved and encouraged when I heard the story about 4 months ago of how the great Methodist minister W.E. Sangster faced his death. In his late 50s he contracted a muscular illness and he knew he wouldn't recover – he was 2 years in dying. His son Paul Sangster wrote his biography and in it he says: "You know I grew up as a lad and I heard my father preach the most wonderful sermons but I never heard my father preach a better sermon than the one he preached when he could no longer speak." In the end the illness robbed him of his speech and he was just able to hold a pen. And Paul Sangster said: "Oh to see my father go through

this experience of dying and his certainty about Jesus being with him.” One of the last things he did - he took almost a day to write a little letter to Billy Graham. He wrote as follows: “Billy, all my life I’ve preached that Christ is adequate for every crisis. I have but a few days to live and I want you to know Billy that Jesus Christ is adequate in the hour of death – tell everyone it is true – tell them from me that God is wonderfully near his children when they come to the end of life’s road.” Paul, like W.E. Sangster, knew Christ would be with him – that nothing, not even death could separate him from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord. V21 again: *“for to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”* V23: *“I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far...”* If you’re here tonight as an inquirer; you haven’t yet put your trust in Christ then I hope that this sure confidence in the face of death – this joyful longing to be with Christ will attract you to find out more. We run a course called Christianity Explored to help people investigate the Christian faith – please let us know if that’s something that you’d be interested in.

W.E. Sangster wrote another letter shortly before he died; it was to his daughter Margaret who was a missionary out in India. He wrote: “Oh Margaret, what an awful thing to wake on Easter morning and have no voice with which to shout ‘He is risen!’ But how much more awful to have a voice and yet not want to shout it.” Well, may that not be true of any of us! Take hold of Christ and He, the Risen One, will take hold of you and take you through death to the glorious resurrection life that lies beyond these Shadowlands in which we now live.

So we’ve seen Paul’s attitude to death. Secondly, we see...

### **Paul’s attitude towards life**

We’ve already heard a fair bit about this. *“For to me to live is...Christ.”* That’s what Paul’s life is about. Christ is everything to him. Last Monday night Helen and I were reading about John Lambert, a man for whom, like the apostle Paul, Christ was everything. John Lambert was one of our early Protestant martyrs. He had become convinced of the error of the Roman Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation – the belief that the bread and wine become the actual physical body and blood of Christ. So convinced was he from Scripture of the danger and error of this teaching that he challenged his priest about it. This saw him being brought to trial. He argued his case from Scripture and explained the original Greek in the key texts. Henry VIII and the assembly of bishops, lawyers, justices and peers would have none of it though and convicted of heresy, Lambert was burned at the stake. In his slow, torturous death he was unbowed. He lifted up his hands in worship, declaring, “None but Christ! None but Christ!” John Lambert was devoted to the Saviour and for the believer when life’s big questions come to us, we have only one answer to give, one message to proclaim to the world: “None but Christ!” Is there another way to heaven? None but Christ – he is the Way. Is there another priority in life that deserves one’s full devotion? None but Christ – He is supreme. Can someone else satisfy the longing of the human heart? None but Christ can satisfy. John Lambert was a man after the Apostle Paul’s heart – he knew what Paul was on about when he says: *“For to me to live is Christ.”*

And what does that look like in practise – that life devoted to the saviour? We saw last week that it meant preaching Christ at every opportunity to those who don’t know him and we see here that it also means strengthening those who have come to faith. So he says to the

Philippians v24 *“...but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. 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.”* For Paul to live is Christ and that’ll mean putting the needs of his fellow-believers before his own. That is the secret of a joyful life not just for Paul but for all of us. So we need to think in our lives what would most benefit others? In our homes putting the needs of my spouse or my parents or my siblings or my housemate before my own and not doing things for them for what I can get in return but to bless them. Or think of that person in our homegroup who for whatever reason is finding life tough at the moment – how can I serve them? It might be just a short encouraging email or a card or the suggestion of meeting up for a beer after work. Or practical help may be what they need most – so it might mean that we take some of our day off to make them a meal – or to offer to babysit or to have them round for a meal and a movie. Or are we thinking of others as we walk into church. It’s good and right to pray beforehand: “Lord teach me more of yourself, help me to grow in my love of you.” But it’s also good to pray: “Help me Lord to encourage other people at church today – show me someone who I can strengthen in the faith.” And I reckon that it is as we seek to glorify Christ by telling others about him and by giving ourselves to our Christian brothers and sisters and putting their needs first that we will grow in our heart love for Christ and in our longing to be with him. The Christians I know who are most in love with the Lord are those who are the most servant-hearted, those who are striving to live out their faith. Or to put it another way the more that we can say “to live is Christ”, the more we will be able to join with Paul in also saying “to die is gain.”

Paul’s attitude towards death, his attitude towards life and that brings us to our third heading:

### **The heart of Paul’s message**

Some of the verses we’ve already looked at tonight may be more striking and memorable but v27 gets to the heart of Paul’s message. V27: *“Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.”* Remember the context – the church at Philippi was going well; they were giving their money generously to support gospel work. They were prayerful but as we saw last week from 1:28-30 they were facing hostility from without. And the danger for them and any church under attack from without is that factions open up within. So in v27 he tells them how they are to survive. It’s in the way that they relate to one another that will enable them to stand firm as a church. V27 sums it up: *“Whatever happens”* says Paul, *“conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.”* The great thing is that it’s so simple. He says whatever happens, whatever happens to you as a congregation, whatever pressure you face, whatever opposition may arise or whatever setbacks may come your way, whatever happens – do this one thing. There’s one thing we are to do and we must remember to do it.

I love playing golf but I don’t play much these days – perhaps about 7 or 8 times a year. When I do play, there are so many things I could think of to try to hit the ball straight and far. All manner of advice I could take on board: keep your head still, knees slightly bent, rotate the shoulders evenly, keep the right arm in, don’t lift the club too high, make sure your back

swing isn't too long, don't swing too fast, follow through evenly. If I remember all that I'm very likely to forget the most important thing – **watch the ball**, which dribbles about 10 yards off the tee. In contrast to such a mountain of advice Paul says one thing, whatever happens, if times are good at ASLS or if there's opposition – others seem to be against us, opposing the gospel, well remember this, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

And if you want a summary of how they are to do that in the rest of v27 it is by being united. Paul longs to see them or hear of them standing firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel. What will that look like in practice and how will they be able to do that? Well that's what the rest of the letter is all about so please do come back next week and the following weeks but for now...

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(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)