

The Reason We Live
The Reason We Live, Part 2
Philippians 1:18b-26

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This morning, we continue our study in the book of Philippians. We began early November to look at this great epistle, and we find ourselves in the middle of one of the greatest sections of the letter. And that is, beginning in the middle of verse 18 through verse 26. As we began to see last week, in this paragraph, Paul opens up his heart, and he allows us to see his greatest life's ambitions, his dreams, his aspirations. And as we see his heart, we see that the apostle Paul is all about one thing, and that is Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ. You follow along as I read beginning in the middle of verse 18. Paul writes:

Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance [or vindication] through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and to be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again.

That one paragraph shows us Paul's *raison d'être*. His reason to be. His reason for living.

And as we look at that paragraph, as I reminded you last week, in that paragraph we find that his reason for living consists of three great ambitions. Remember that the purpose of this letter is to teach us to think like Christians. It's basic Christianity—Christianity 101. If you're in Christ, this is how you should think about all of these issues of life and death. And Paul wants us to know that these three great priorities contained in this paragraph are at the core of how a Christian thinks, and what a Christian lives for. These three great priorities of the apostle are encapsulated within the three separate sections of the paragraph I just read to you. As we saw last week, the first section of the paragraph from about the middle of verse 18 through verse 20 explains his first great reason for living, and it is simply this. Paul says I live—my reason for

living—is to exalt Christ. To exalt Christ. There’s his first and most obvious reason for living. Notice the middle of verse 18 again. He says, yes, and I will rejoice for I know that I will literally ultimately be vindicated when I stand before God. And this will happen through your prayers and Christ’s provision of the Spirit, and this is in accordance with my own earnest expectation and hope that I will not be ashamed in anything when I stand before the Lord, but that with all boldness, Christ will be exalted in my body, as always even now, whether by life or by death. You see, the heart of what Paul wants us to see in that section is that his anxious longing—his great desire, or as he puts it: his earnest expectation and hope—is that Christ will be magnified through him as long as he has breath. And that should be our goal in life as well. As I reminded us last week, our goal as Christians is to be like telescopes. Not that we make Christ look larger and more impressive than He is, but that we are simply a conduit through which others get just a small grasp of the true grandeur and greatness and glory of Jesus Christ.

This morning, I want us to look at the second section of this paragraph. This second section contains the second great purpose of Paul’s life. And that is, not only to exalt Christ, but in this section, to be with Christ. To be with Christ. Let me read again for you verses 21 through 24, which we’ll begin to look at this morning. Paul writes “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.” The theme of this second section is found in the phrase “having the strong desire to depart and be with Christ.” This entire section that I just read for you is like a sort of mental tug-of-war. You’ll notice that at the end of verse 20 Paul had mentioned that the outcome of his imprisonment would either be life—he’d be set free and released—or death—he would be executed. And that comment at the end of verse 20 sends the apostle into a kind of internal argument, in which he contemplates the alternatives of living and dying. And his example is a powerful lesson for us, because Paul shows us how to think about life and death as believers in Jesus Christ. And in so doing, he reveals this second great ambition of life, not only to exalt Christ, but to be with Christ.

Here is the powerful lesson behind those four verses. We should long to be with Jesus Christ. Every believer should long to be with Jesus Christ. But how can we gain that kind of mindset? I mean, let’s be honest. That kind of thinking is absolutely foreign to where most Christians live. Ask the average Christian if he’s ready to go to heaven, and he’ll tell you yes, but not right away. I mean, there’re some things I’d like to see done first. There are some things I’d like to enjoy first. It reminds me of the man who drove up behind a slow-moving truck on a two lane road. And it didn’t take him long to realize that it was a truck transporting caskets. Well, AAA doesn’t recommend that for your trip, and so he decided that he was going to try to pass this vehicle, and he did try unsuccessfully several times to pass it. And then, to his wife’s amazement, he slowed down and patiently drove a safe distance behind this truck. And of course his wife was shocked,

as all of our wives would be, and said, you know honey, why did you stop trying to pass? And he pointed her to a small sign just above the license plate that read “drive safely—yours might be on this load.” That man’s attitude is like the attitude of many Christians. Ultimately, they want to end up with Christ, but they just don’t want to be on the next load. Not Paul. Paul longed to depart and to be with Christ. And as he discusses his own thinking, he provides us with three practical steps so that we can begin to think like he thinks. Three practical steps that will enable us, like Paul, to have as one of our great ambitions in life to be with Christ.

The first step that he gives to us—and I’ll be honest with you, this is probably as far as we’ll get today—is this first step to thinking like Paul. It’s simply this: develop a biblical perspective about life and death. Develop a biblical perspective about life and death. Notice verse 21—one of the most famous verses in all the Scripture, one that you undoubtedly memorized early in your Christian life. “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” Now remember as Paul writes this, his destiny—his future—is not in his own hands. He’s not in control of whether he lives or whether he dies. He’s not trying to decide whether to take his life, which is something that for Paul would be unthinkable, or whether to continue living. Instead, he’s simply recording his own thinking, his own attitudes for the Philippians to see and to understand. He wants them to grasp how he thinks about life and death. And he wants them, and he wants us, to emulate his own attitudes. What Paul is doing in this verse is laying out a biblical perspective about life and death. In fact, although this section, this verse, lies in the context of the larger paragraph and sort of fits into the flow of the argument of this whole paragraph, we could agree with one commentator, Gordon Fee, who said that “essentially this sentence is the key to everything, both to this letter and to Paul’s life as a whole, even though it’s a bit of an aside. Paul’s saying, ‘for me to live is Christ and to die is gain’ puts everything into focus for us as far as our understanding the apostle is concerned.” What he’s saying is, this was Paul’s motto for living and how he faced death. And we can learn a lot about the apostle and about us and about what God wants from us from what he records.

Now I want you to notice, verse 21 begins with the word “for.” That links verse 21 to what he’s just said. Paul expected to be released. He didn’t know that he would be released, but he expected that. You can see it in verse 25; he says, “convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all”; verse 26, “I know that I’m going to come to you again”; chapter 2 verse 24, he says, “I trust in the Lord that I myself also will be coming shortly.” So he expected to be released. But at the end of verse 20 of chapter 1, he had raised the fact that while that was his expectation, there were, in fact, two possibilities. One of them meant that he would be released and he would have life. The other meant that he would be executed—be put to death. And so, with that in mind—with the reality that both of those are possible—he sets out to explain why he is content regardless of the verdict. Regardless of which way the verdict goes, be it life or death, Paul says I’m comfortable with that. I’m content in that. As far as he is concerned, it is immaterial whether he’s put to death or whether he goes on living. How can Paul be equally

content with that outcome? I mean, let's be honest. For most of us, we could not say that. We could not say that we would be content if we were sitting in prison with whether we die or whether we live. How can he rejoice and be equally happy with the outcome where ever it goes? It's because Paul has a biblical perspective about life and death.

In the original of verse 21, it's as remarkable as it is in the English text. There are no verbs. It simply says this. "For to me to live Christ, to die gain." There's also a sort of word play that goes on in the original. It says, "to live Christos, to die kerdos." Each of these two phrases are rich in meaning, and direct application. Together, they build a biblical perspective of life and death. They teach us how to think—how to think about life and how to face death in the way a Christian should face it. Let's look at the first phrase. "To live, is Christ." The word "to live" is in the present tense in the Greek text, so it speaks of the process of living. We could translate it this way: living is Christ. He's saying that for me, life means Christ. This is what I live for. It's interesting how, in that short simple phrase, Paul identifies one of humanity's greatest philosophical questions. And that is, what is the purpose of life? Why should we live? What does it mean? Why are we here? Sadly, many people never stop to consider the question at all. They enjoy this amazing gift of life, but they never stop to think about it. They're too busy eating and drinking and working to stop and contemplate it's meaning. But there are some thinking people in our world who step back and consider the meaning of life. And as they look at that question, "What is the purpose for living?", because they're driven under their own steam and human wisdom, they arrive at the wrong conclusions.

Let me list for you some of the wrong reasons for living that people in our world have. I borrow these from Lloyd-Jones, and I think he's absolutely right. You see these in the people that you rub shoulders with. Oh, they may not be able to articulate it like I'm about to articulate it, but it's the reason they live. First of all, there's the average man. If you were to ask the average man or woman, even the average church attender, —what is life all about? What really constitutes living for you? You know what their answer would be? Family, their home, their work, their occupation, their activities in life, the joys that they enjoy in life. And those are wonderful things, and those are great gifts of God to us, aren't they? But those are not the purpose for living. Those are benefits that come along with this great life God has given to us. And sadly, when people make those the purpose for living, when one or more of them are stripped away through tragedy, through death, they become bitter. They become angry at God because their whole world collapses. Their whole reason for living goes away. The foundation of their lives is gone. That's the average man.

There's another wrong reason for living that's very common in our world, and it's the epicurean view. This approach to life centers on living and enjoying the living, rather than focusing on the purpose of life at all. These people live for pleasure. Whether it's simply the next thrill and experience. Whether it's the pleasure they find at the bottom of the bottle or the end of a needle,

or whether it's the pleasure they find in illicit sex and roving the internet, they live for pleasure of one kind or another. That's the real reason they live.

There's a third wrong view for living that's common in our culture. We'll call it the stoic's view. To the stoic, life is something that has to be endured. The stoic doesn't live in a make-believe world where everything is wonderful. No, he sees the pain and the trouble and suffering in the world, but his response and his attitude is simply a resolute determination to hold on—just to endure, to stand up to what Shakespeare called the slings and arrows of outrageous fortunes. For him, life is simply an endless struggle. You've met people like this who because of personal tragedy have shut out all the joys of life, and they simply endure. They simply hang on. For them, that's the purpose of life.

A fourth wrong view for living is the cynic. By the way, this is quickly becoming the predominant view of our culture, because it's the view of postmodernism. It's the natural conclusion of evolution. And it's this: nothing has meaning at all. Don't even ask about meaning. Life has no meaning. There is no purpose. There is no meaning. Just live for whatever you choose to live for. I think this view can best be captured in the lines from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, "Out, out brief candle. Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage, and then is heard no more. It is a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury signifying nothing." That's how the cynic regards life. And you see it captured profoundly in our culture's literature, in our culture's music, in our culture's films—this view of the cynic, life has no meaning. It has no purpose so do whatever you choose to do. Enjoy the fleeting time you have.

Then there's the mystic's view. When I say "mystic," I'm not speaking about the Christian mystic, the person who's driven too much by their feelings and subjectivism. I'm talking about the secular mystic. To the mystic, life and all of its problems are because of the physical universe and the body. You find salvation, or deliverance, in trying to distance yourself from the material, and the body. And the mystic is often into Eastern religions. These have made a serious onslaught into our culture in recent years under the name New Age, and other tags. The mystic buys into transcendental meditation, asceticism, or some other means to distance himself, divorce himself from all things physical. Because it's this physical world and this body that's the problem, so I just want to get away, and that's what I live for. To separate myself somehow from the world.

Then there's the humanist view, wrong perspective on living. The humanist buys into the theory of evolution. That everything is getting better and evolving upward. And so, life to him is seizing every opportunity to make the world a better place. These people are well-motivated. They mean well, but these are the people who are living for all kinds of humanitarian and

environmental causes. Because, for him, life is about improving the state of society. About being a part of that process of improving the world.

And then, coming closer to home, there's what Lloyd-Jones calls the religious view. For the religious man or woman, life is about being busy in religious activity. It means performing religious duties. Unfortunately for many who call themselves Christians, this is their purpose for living—simply being busy about the activities of their church.

The Christian, on the other hand, should not live for any of those things. That should not be the purpose of our lives. In fact, Lloyd-Jones goes further when he says this. Listen carefully to what he says; it's shocking, really:

Shall I go further and put it like this? Living, to the Christian does not even mean living for God. Is that irreverent or extreme? Is that going too far? I suggest it is not. A Jew or a Muslim can say quite honestly that life to him means God, and there are many in the world who can say that God is the center of their lives. So that in this statement of Paul's it is the specific Christ language that is the distinguishing mark of a Christian. To me, to live is what? Christ.

So for us, we shouldn't be entangled in any of those wrong reasons for living. Instead, for us, the meaning of life should be Christ. We should live for Christ. But, I'm sure you're asking, as I did—what does that mean? When Paul says that, to him, living is Christ, he means that all of life for him is summed up in Christ. That his life is filled with and occupied with Jesus Christ. Everything he does is focused on Christ. Christ alone inspires him to live. Christ gives him direction. Christ gives meaning and purpose to his existence. Paul's life is totally determined and controlled by his love for and his commitment to Jesus Christ. There is no area of his life that isn't controlled and dominated by Christ. And what is true of Paul should be true of us as well. He intends that the Philippians and that we follow his example. That everyone imitate him and be able to say "for to me is live is Christ." Living is Christ. Like Count Zinzendorf, who wrote a number of the hymns in our hymnbook; the Moravian leader who helped John Wesley had this as his motto: "I have one passion. It is He and He alone," Let me give you a little test. You want to know if you live for Christ—if life to you is Christ? In those times when your mind isn't forced to think about other things, where does your mind go? Does it ever go to Christ? What do you talk about when you're not forced to speak about your job or some other activity, and when you can talk about what you really enjoy—delight in and enjoy? Is it ever Christ? Do you ever make decisions based on your commitment to Jesus Christ? If we're going to be able to develop a biblical perspective about life, we must be able to say with Paul, "to me, living is Christ."

Now how can you develop this? How can you develop a life that can rightly be called Christ, living is Christ? How can you get there? If we're honest with ourselves, we have to admit that we're not exactly where Paul is. We can't say it with the same energy and fervency and enthusiasm he says. So how do we get from where we are to where he is? Let me give you a couple of practical ideas to consider. Begin to immerse yourself in Christ. Commit to read the gospels, to examine Christ, to look at Him in all of His beauty and all of His glory. Read books about Christ. I just completed one that I would highly recommend to you called "Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ" by John Piper. Look at Christ. Read books about Him. Get your mind and thoughts focused on Christ. I want you to turn to 2 Corinthians chapter 3, because it explains the process of how we get to a life consumed with Christ. Second Corinthians 3:18, "But we all [all of us who are in Christ] with unveiled face [unlike Moses who came down from the mountain with a veiled face—not seeing clearly—we see clearly, and we behold] as in a mirror the glory of Christ..." What's he talking about? He's saying, when we look at Christ as He's recorded on the pages of Scripture, when we examine Him, when we look at who He is and we see His glory revealed there, something amazing happens. We are being transformed into the same image from one level of glory to another by the work of the Holy Spirit. You see, if you will commit yourself to look at Christ—to focus your life, your study, your energy on the person of Jesus Christ. As you look at Him, and as you see Him for—in His glory, as you see Him in His beauty, then not only will He become the passion of your life, not only will He be your reason for living, but you'll even be changed into the same image.

There's also a test in this phrase, "to live is Christ." There's a test for you to take—for each person here to take who claims to be in Christ. Do you desire that? Do you desire, however imperfectly that may be true of you today, is it really the ambition of your heart to have a life that's known as Christ? That, for you, living would be Christ? If that's your desire, then that's a wonderful indication that you are in Christ. But if, this morning as I speak about this, as you hear Paul lay out this principle of living is Christ—if you think to yourself, you know that's really not what I want. I really just want to live and enjoy life and yeah, I want to tack Christ on, but that's not what I want. Then you need to take a very careful and serious look at the reality of your faith. Because, as Lloyd-Jones says, "it is a powerful indicator of the reality of your faith whether this desire appears in your heart." Oh, not the perfection of it, but the desire to be there. The desire to have a life that is Christ. If it isn't true—if you don't desire that, then it may very well be an indication that you don't know Jesus Christ, and that you still remain His enemy, at odds with God, still under His wrath.

So if we're going to develop a biblical perspective about life, we must be able to say with Paul, living is Christ. That brings us to the second half of Paul's magnificent statement—"to die is gain." Again, with two simple Greek words, Paul raises the second greatest philosophical question that humanity has. Not only what's the purpose of life, but the second question is, what follows death? The word "to die" speaks not of the process of dying. Paul is not a masochist.

He's not looking forward to his body decaying. He's not looking forward to the progress that disease might have, or to, in his case, the fact of an axe descending upon his neck. He's not looking forward to the actual process of dying. Instead, the word speaks to the event and its results. Paul's saying, the end result of death, to me, is gain. The word "gain" is a very interesting Greek word. It occurs only three places in the New Testament. It occurs here in Philippians 1:21. Look at Philippians 3:7, "But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ." Gain—there's our word again. Look at Titus 1:11. Speaking about false teachers, he says they must be silenced because they're upsetting whole families, teaching things they should not teach for the sake of sordid gain. There's our word. When I was in seminary, I had a class that, at the time, seemed a bit tedious. It was six months translating the Greek papyri. Now, many of you don't even know what papyri is. Let me give you a brief history. In the ancient world, they didn't have paper made from wood as we have. Instead, they would take reeds that grew by the banks of the rivers, called papyrus reeds, and they had a process for stripping them to thin strips, laying them across each other, and pressing them, leaving them until they dried, and that became a common writing surface. Well, the common people would often use those for documents of various kinds. Everything from the simplest letter home, to some sort of detailed legal document. Because of the arid climate of the Middle East, about 100 to 150 years ago, they discovered piles of papyri—that is, these documents on which things had been written, crowded in what really were garbage dumps. But they hadn't been destroyed because of the dryness of the atmosphere. And so to most people those would be worthless trash, but to a grammarian, and someone trying to understand the Koine Greek in which the Bible was written, it was an amazing find. Because now, you could look in those everyday documents, find words that are used in the Scripture, and see how they were used in a totally secular context. And it really opens up the Scripture. The word "gain" is one of those words. It was used in the papyri, in the documents that had been discovered, to describe any gain or profit on money, particularly of interest made on money. It's a financial word. Here's what Paul is saying. He's saying, for me, death is like making interest on the investment I made with my life. Think about that. For me, death is like collecting the interest from the investment of my life in Jesus Christ. It's gain. It's to my gain. Paul's mindset about death is completely foreign to our culture. People just don't want to talk about death. In fact, if you want to kill a conversation or a party, just start by saying, let's talk about death. In fact, our culture—we do everything we can to insulate people from the realities of death. The average person rarely, if ever, has to deal personally, first hand, with death. We put the dying in the sterile environment of a hospital, and then after death, they're whisked away by a professional mortician who makes every pain and every attempt to make that body look as it did in life. We also take heroic measures to postpone death. Even so that now, we have to have legal documents to ask them not to take those steps. Because mankind's greatest fear is not public speaking—it's death.

Listen to what the writer of Hebrews says in Hebrews 2:14:

Therefore, since the children share in flesh and blood, [that's us, since we have flesh and blood] He Himself likewise also partook of the same, so that through His death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil... (In other words, for a short time, God allowed Satan to wield some power over death. There's a sense in which death was in God's control, but He allowed Satan to use it for the harm of man. But listen to what he says.) ...through His death, [that is Christ's death] He might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.

Listen to that language. All men are slaves, not only to their sin, but to their fear of death. Oh, individuals try to deal with the reality of death in a variety of different ways. Some just ignore it. Others stoically accept it. It's also become popular in our day to sort of act defiantly toward death. I won't be bullied by death, and so I'm going to face death with cheerfulness. The reason man tries so desperately to postpone death, and then when it happens he isolates himself from it, is because, in spite of all of his—his bravado, in his deep heart of hearts, he still fears death.

There's a sense in which death is a natural part of life. It's as natural a part of life as birth. Men are born and they die. But there's another sense in which death is an enemy. Listen to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15:25, "He [Christ] must reign until He has put all His enemies under His feet. The last enemy [verse 26 says, the last enemy] that will be abolished is death." Now, how do you reconcile these two. Paul says death is gain for the Christian, but in 1 Corinthians 15, he says death is an enemy. Well, death is an enemy in this sense; it does what God never designed us to have happen. And that is, it rips apart the two parts of man. Man was made to be a two part being through all eternity. Sinners will be reunited with their bodies and be forever in separation from God in the place the Bible calls Hell. Believers will be reunited with glorious bodies in the likeness of Christ, and they, too, in bodies, will spend eternity with God. We were made to be soul and body, united. And death does what is unnatural, and that is, it rips the two apart. We don't want to be that way.

Let me show you how Paul addresses this issue. Turn to 2 Corinthians chapter 5. Second Corinthians chapter 5. He deals with this struggle. Verse 1 of 2 Corinthians 5, "For we know that if the earthly tent which is our house [he's talking about our body now, refers to it as a temporary dwelling. If our earthly tent which is our house] is torn down, [that is, we die—our bodies die] we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." I love that contrast. Here we have a tent. There we have a house—a permanent structure that's ours, speaking of our glorified bodies, eternal in the heavens. Verse 2, "For indeed in this tent we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling from heaven..." We understand the temporal and perishable nature of our bodies. We see it all around us. We see it in the mirror every day, as the hairline creeps back and the decay sets in. But notice what he says in verse 3, "inasmuch

as we, having put it on [this new body, this glorified body] will not be found naked.” You see, Paul was saying, look, we don’t want to be a disembodied spirit. That’s not how we were made. Verse 4, “For indeed while we are in this tent, we groan, being burdened,” because we do not want to be unclothed, but to be clothed, so we want that which is mortal to be swallowed up by life.” In other words, we want the mortal flesh, this tent we live in, to be swallowed up with life, and that life will mean for us a glorious permanent house—a body that will be ours forever. And notice verse 5, “Now He who prepared us for this very purpose is God, who gave to us His Spirit as a pledge.” You see, while death is still an enemy for the Christian, the sting of death has been removed and we no longer have to fear it. You remember that great passage in 2 Corinthians 15: 25, “O death, where is your victory, O death, where is your sting.” You see, we can face death with joy and confidence because Christ has removed the stinger.

Let me preface what I am about to share by saying, boys and girls—don’t do this. But I remember as a boy, I would go out in my backyard, and I would search through the clover for bees. And I would find a bee that was all alone, and I would step on it just enough to stun it. And then I would pick it up by the wings, and I would take the back of my leather belt and I’d lift the tip and stick the stinger into that leather tip, and when you pulled the bee away, the stinger was left in the belt, and then you could take the bee and you could play with it without any fear of being stung. As I said, don’t try that at home. That’s exactly what Christ has done with death. Because He suffered death on our behalf, He’s removed the stinger. It’s still an enemy, but we don’t have to fear it. The fear is gone. And now we can say with Paul, for me, to die is gain. That’s the attitude Paul wants us to have. Some of you have had probably have the opportunity, as I have, to visit Rome, and to go beneath the city into the catacombs. A fascinating journey into the underworld, literally. They have traced, I believe, about 600 miles of these caverns through the city of Rome, underneath the city of Rome and through the outlying areas. They average about 8 feet high and about 3 to 5 feet in width. And along each side of these caverns are these low horizontal recesses, one on top of another. And in those recesses were placed the dead bodies of both pagans and Christians. And then they would take a marble slab, or in some cases tiles, great tiles, and put them in there with mortar to cover the body, as it was essentially buried in this small recess in the catacombs. And then they would write on the surface of those tiles or marble slabs epitaphs. It’s fascinating to read them. When you look at the graves, particularly the Christian graves, some have, as they have crumbled and the tiles have broken—some have been able to look behind and examine the bodies that are behind these slabs of marble or these tiles, and as they’ve examined the bodies of the ones that are marked as Christian graves, they’ve discovered a terrible tale of persecution. The skeleton reveals that the head was severed from the body. Many of the bones of the body are crushed. And in some cases there is just a pile of burned bones representing the product of one of the Romans’ persecutions of Christians. But even though the skeletons tell a terrible tale, the inscriptions that are out on the marble slab tell stories of peace and joy and triumph. “Foxy’s Book of Martyrs” records some of those. Here are some examples of the Christian epitaphs that are in the catacombs.

“Here lies Marsha, put to rest in a dream of peace”; “Lawrence, to his sweetest son, borne away of angels”; “Victorious in peace and in Christ”; and one of the tombs that had held the body that had obviously been disfigured from persecution said “being called away he went in peace.” But to get the full force of those epitaphs, you have to look at the pagan ones in contrast. Here are some of the pagan epitaphs that are in the catacombs. “Live for the present hour, since we are sure of nothing else”; “I lift my hands against the gods who took me away at the age of 20 though I had done no harm”; “Once I was not, now I am not. I know nothing about it and it’s no concern of mine”; “Traveler, curse me not as you pass, for I am in darkness and cannot answer.” You see, for the unbeliever, death is the grim reaper, but for the Christian, death is gain.

Last week, we talked about magnifying Christ whether by life or by death. Paul gives us, here, two practical ways to do it. Notice that verse 21 is connected to verse 20 with the word ‘for.’ This is how Paul knows that Christ will be exalted whether he lives or whether he dies. Here’s what he’s saying. He’s saying, if I live—if I’m released, then it will be for Christ and I will live for Christ—I will live my life for His glory, and that will bring Him praise. That will magnify Him. That will lift Him up. But if I die, and if I die with the attitude that dying is gain, because I get to be with Christ, then that, too, will magnify Christ. You want to magnify Christ? You want to exalt Him? You want to lift Him up? Then live like it. Live so you can say with Paul, for to me to live is Christ. If you want to magnify Christ, then when it comes time for you to face death, do it so everyone around knows that you think that death is better than living because it allows you to be with Christ. And if you die like that, then you will exalt Christ and His beauty and His glory, even in death. Living is Christ, and that is incredible joy and blessing. And Paul says, dying is even better.

We’re going to look, next week, at the incredible words of Philippians 1:23. He says “I desire to depart and to be with Christ, for that is very much better.” That’s shocking. That is very much better than living. That’s a biblical perspective on life—to live is Christ. And a biblical perspective on death, to die is gain. And if you really come to embrace that—if you come to embrace this biblical perspective on living and dying, then you too, like Paul, will have it as your ambition not only to exalt Christ, but to be with Him. In the 1800s, a man by the name of John G. Paton decided to go as a missionary to the South Sea Islands. At that time, these islands were still inhabited by cannibals. And a well-meaning older Christian cautioned him and said, if you go there, you’ll be eaten by cannibals. To which Paton replied, “Mr. Dixon, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms. I confess to you that if I can but live and die serving and honoring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by cannibals or by worms. And in the great day, my resurrection body will arise as fair as yours, in the likeness of our risen Redeemer.” Think about life and death like a Christian. To me to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Let's pray together. Father, we confess that our hearts are greatly convicted as we study this text. If we're honest, Lord, life for us doesn't always mean Christ. But those of us who know You have that as our great desire. Lord, forgive us for living for other things. Forgive us for buying into the philosophies of the world as to the purpose of life. Forgive us for putting all of our energies into Your good gifts, like family and our occupation—the joyful activities of life and not being consumed with Christ. Lord, help us to think about Him. Help us to speak of Him. Help us to delight in Him—to live for His sake. To make decisions that will honor Him, and to do it on purpose. Lord help us to be like Paul. And Lord, help us to face death as Paul faced death, truly believing that death is better than life because it allows us to be with the one we love. And Lord, I pray, this morning, for someone who might be here, who perhaps professes to know Christ, but, as they've looked at this text with us this morning, they have to admit they really have no desire to have a life that is Christ. Instead they want to live their own life. They want to pursue their own interests. Lord, I pray this morning, that they would bow the knee before Your Son and confess that Jesus Christ is their Lord to the glory of Your Son, in whose name we pray. Amen.