

The Purpose of Life

Philippians 1:19-26

Listen to these words with which a pastor explained his feelings when he was asked to return to a church that had previously asked him to leave. He writes to a friend, “Rather would I submit to death a hundred times than to that cross, on which one had to perish daily a thousand times over. This piece of information I have wished incidentally to communicate to you, that to the utmost of your power you may set yourself to oppose the measures of those who shall endeavor to draw me back there.”

That pastor wrote to another friend, “I read that passage of your letter, certainly not without a smile, where you show so much concern about my health, and recommend [that I return] on that ground! Why could you not have said at the cross? for it would have been far preferable to perish once for all than to be tormented again in that place of torture.”

Then, finally, in accepting the advice and counsel of his friends and deciding to go back, he writes, “This is my present feeling; had I the choice at my own disposal, nothing would be less agreeable to me than to follow your advice. But when I remember that I am not my own, I offer up my heart, presented as a sacrifice to the Lord...And for myself, I protest that I have no other desire than that, setting aside all consideration of me, they may look only to what is most for the glory of God and the advantage of the Church...Therefore I submit my will and my affections, subdued and held fast, to the obedience of God.”

That correspondence took place 479 years ago. The troublesome church was in Geneva, Switzerland. And the pastor’s name was John Calvin. His return to Geneva that year

began a great advancement in the kingdom of Jesus Christ, and the work Calvin did in Geneva during the remaining years of his life has benefitted Christ’s church throughout the world even to this day. And it came about, in God’s providence, because Calvin understood and lived out what Paul writes in Philippians 1, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

Calvin is known for his theological writings, and for his biblical commentaries, but he is also known as a pastor. And above all those things, he should be known as a man who loved God, a man whose life was devoted to God. Again, his words, “When I remember that I am not my own, I offer up my heart, presented as a sacrifice to the Lord...Therefore I submit my will and my affections, subdued and held fast, to the obedience of God.”

In our text tonight, exemplified in the life of Calvin, the Apostle Paul defines what we could call a Christian philosophy of life. In one simple verse, we have a comprehensive life-view, that is, guiding instructions for us which ought to determine the course of our whole lives.

v.21

Let’s begin with life. First a goal of life. And then even more broadly, a definition of life. What does it mean to live? If you think about it, isn’t that the most important question you could ever ask? What is the meaning of life? What is the purpose of life? What is your focus in life?

Many people today live in great distress because of an inability to answer and resolve those very questions. I grieve to think that there are people who have tragically ended their own lives because of their seemingly hopeless inability to answer those questions. What is the meaning of life? What is a sufficient goal in life? I have an answer.

I. A PERSONAL GOAL.

v.20

So Paul's focus is not upon his own circumstances.

Remember, he is imprisoned as he writes this letter. And even in that imprisonment, his hardship is compounded by those who preach the gospel by do so from envy and rivalry, according to verse 15. He is the victim of their selfish ambition, according to verse 16. And he notes that they are "supposing to add affliction to my chains." They are seeking his harm, so great is their selfish ambition.

If you remember from last week, Paul's response is rather extraordinary in his graciousness. Rather than retaliate, or even to rightly and justly condemn their evil motives, he writes,

v.18 "What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached, and in this I rejoice."

So what matters to Paul is the proclamation of the gospel. What matters is the advance of the gospel, not his own well-being. And specifically, his goal is,

A. The goal of keeping the faith.

As Paul puts it in,

v.20a

His goal is to remain faithful, rather than being ashamed, rather than being dishonored by not keeping the faith. His goal, his "earnest expectation and hope," is that he will keep the faith.

He knows, of course, that God is the one who will keep him! Paul writes in,

2 Tim. 1:10. "[Jesus Christ] has abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel, 11 to which I was

appointed a preacher, an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles. 12 For this reason I also suffer these things; nevertheless I am not ashamed, for I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day."

In other words, Paul's faith. He has believed in Jesus, and Jesus will guard and protect that faith until "that Day," the day of judgment at the end of the age. So Paul's goal is not at all a proud and self-reliant boast, but rather an earnest expression of trust in God. That is such a good balance to maintain, isn't it? The goal of keeping the faith and the trust that God will, in fact, keep you and preserve you. That is his "earnest expectation." Therefore Paul expresses,

B. The goal of bold courage.

Not just survival. Not simply perseverance. But courage.

v.20 "...with all boldness..."

And, "as always." Persecution makes no difference. Imprisonment makes no difference. Except to stimulate and stir on his boldness. So that there is no boldness lacking. He would experience "all courage." Even an increase in courage. That's his hope, his goal. That's his anticipation. He will not be ashamed. He will not lose heart. He will not fail in the work of advancing the gospel, but rather will grow in his own courage. And, with that courage and boldness, to fulfill,

C. The goal of bringing honor to Jesus.

Notice, verse 20, that means whether he lives or dies.

v.20b

The gospel calls us to just such a duty, glorifying God in our bodies, in the flesh, in the physical, human existence that is

common to us all. In terms of morality, Paul emphasizes this to the Corinthians,

1 Cor. 6:19 “Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, 20 for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.”

Simple enough concept, but it always needs emphasis. Some people err on the side of thinking that all that God cares about is the soul. The spiritual world matters to God, but not the physical world. So it really doesn't matter what you do with your body. In fact, with this line of thinking, the great goal of life is to escape the body, as if the body itself were evil, and the height of spiritual maturity is to live without reference to the needs of the physical body. So take a vow of poverty and chastity, and enter a monastery as a monk. That would be the height of spiritual maturity.

But no, says Paul. Honor God with your body. Honor God in the flesh, with your flesh. Honor God by how you live in the flesh.

Others err on something of the opposite side, by thinking that since the body doesn't matter, you can do whatever you want with it. You can indulge the body and all its desires, without restraint, even in the realm of clearly defined biblical morality. The body doesn't matter, so essentially the worldview becomes, “Eat, drink and be merry.” What is done in the body does not matter.

Paul says something very different here. His desire is that “Christ will be honored in my body.” And that is why his imprisonment is not a burden nor a hindrance, because he can honor Christ whether he lives or dies! He can honor Christ by dying, by dying in faith. He can honor Christ by dying by entrusting himself to Jesus' care even as he faces death.

Actually, nearer to his death, he would write to Timothy, 2 Tim. 4:6 “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure has come. 7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 8 Henceforth there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will award to me on that Day, and not only to me but also to all who have loved his appearing.”

That is what it means to glorify God in the body. Facing death, declaring those words, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” And with that faith, looking forward to Jesus' appearing, longing for Jesus' return in triumph and judgment at the end of the age. And such a worthwhile example for us. Such a worthy goal for ourselves, as well. “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.” I have honored Jesus Christ in my body!

That goal, of course, does not simply refer to death at the end of our lives, but to the whole of our lives as well. So you honor Jesus by living your life for him, as a sacrifice to him. As Paul puts it, a living sacrifice.

Rom. 12:1 “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.”

In the New Covenant, there are no more dead sacrifices. No more animals slain upon an altar of blood. But there still are sacrifices! Our worship is still defined by the concept of sacrifice. And the whole of our lives is to be represented by the image of the burnt offering, “present your bodies as a living sacrifice.”

That certainly includes righteousness, or law-keeping. Christ is honored by your life in your body when you practice righteousness and holiness.

Rom. 6:19 “I speak in human terms because of the weakness of your flesh. For just as you presented your members as slaves of uncleanness, and of lawlessness leading to more lawlessness, so now present your members as slaves of righteousness for holiness.”

Christ is also honored by your life in your body by all the matters of discipline and self-control referred to in,

1 Cor. 9:24 “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may obtain it. 25 And everyone who competes for the prize is temperate in all things. Now they do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable crown. 26 Therefore I run thus: not with uncertainty. Thus I fight: not as one who beats the air. 27 But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified.”

Therefore, people of God, let these goals become your own, bold courage to keep the faith. And faithfulness to bring honor to Jesus, whether in life or in death. And that goal must certainly include the right and proper definition of life.

II. THE DEFINITION OF LIFE.

In other words, you should understand what life is all about. You should understand what is important. And what isn't important! The right priorities. Paul is able to cut through everything here and give us that definition. It should be familiar to you. We will deal with the first half of it today and the second half next week. The definition of life, then, is this,

A. To live is Christ.

The whole verse,
v.21

So what does that mean? Let me begin to answer that by reading,

Gal. 2:20 “I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”

To live is Christ. That's what it means. “The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God.”

In terms of your relationship with God, the Bible talks about dying to yourself. Dying to your own pleasures and desires. Dying to your own glory and to the promotion of your own agenda.

To live is Christ is the positive expression of that very same thing. It means that you trust in Christ for your life, for the hope of life. It means that you boast in Christ, trusting in what he has done for you rather than in what you have accomplished for yourself.

Gal. 6:14 “But far be it from me to boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world.”

To live is Christ means even more than that, though. For we have many other ways to complete that sentence, “to live is...” The spirit of our age says, to live is self! And under that great modern god of self, there are many sub-categories. For me, to live is money. For me, to live is my work or career. For me to live is pleasure. For me, to live is my family. For me, to live is power. For me, to live is comfort. For me to live is success. For me, to live is good health. For me, to live is happiness. For me to live is football, or baseball, or golf, or whatever.

So how do you complete that sentence? Ask yourself honestly. Search your own heart, and try to complete that thought as you are now living your life. For me, to live is “what.”

I could ask the question this way. If you lost everything, what would you miss the most? If you lost everything, would you, could you, then able to say, “To live is Christ?”

A good illustration of how that works is found in the experiences of the prophet Habakkuk, my favorite of the Old Testament prophets. The basic content of that short book involves a series of questions, or complaints, addressed to the Lord, dealing with the presence of wickedness and injustice in Israel. And God responds to the prophet by predicting the Babylonian conquest. Habakkuk understood the increased horror that would bring to Israel, though he was willing to receive the Lord’s words this way,

Hab. 3:16 “I hear, and my body trembles; my lips quiver at the sound; rottenness enters into my bones; my legs tremble beneath me. Yet I will quietly wait for the day of trouble to come upon people who invade us.”

And then he demonstrates a faith as great and as strong as you will find anywhere in the Bible.

Hab. 3:17 “Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, 18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. 19 God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places.”

If you translate those words into the context of the New Covenant, you get Paul’s words here in Philippians 1. “To live is Christ!” Even if I lose everything, “I will take joy in the God of my

salvation.”

Habakkuk is willing to endure the loss of even those things needed for the sustenance of life, the figs, the fruit, the produce and the flocks. Even then, he declares, “God, the Lord, is my strength; he makes my feet like the deer’s; he makes me tread on my high places.” In other words, to live is Christ.

Can you say that? Does your life now reflect that commitment? Deep questions, aren’t they, and I don’t want to skip over them with you. The challenge is unfathomable to many people, and for all of you, it is the greatest challenge the Lord could lay before you. To define your life and the purpose of your life simply as Christ.

We like to define quality of life as a necessary benchmark, and we often think that life loses its value when there is not a satisfactory quality of life, as WE DEFINE IT!

But that isn’t what Paul has to say here. In prison, under the very possible sentence of death, he declares that to him, life means Christ. It doesn’t mean freedom, though he obviously wishes for the freedom to visit the Philippians again. It doesn’t mean visiting the churches again, or preaching the gospel in local churches again. It doesn’t mean being freed from whatever that thorn in the flesh might have been. For him, to live is Christ.

He gets a bit more specific in these verses, with this perspective that,

B. To live is fruitful labor.

In other words, to live is to honor Jesus by laboring and working on his behalf. So he is confident of his deliverance, in order that he might continue to labor for the sake of the gospel.

v.18b-19

And then,
v.22

He writes those words as he considers the reality that “to die is gain,” which are his very next words. But here is what keeps him alive. Here is what motivates his life. Here is what defines his life. To live is Christ. To live in the flesh “means fruitful labor for me.” “For to me to live is Christ” means to labor for Christ. He is, after all, a bondservant of Jesus Christ.

That fruitful labor has a very specific and obvious focus on the needs of others. Thus Paul’s definition of life would include the commitment that,

C. To live is ministry to others.

To live is to serve others. To live is to benefit others. So as Paul would consider the very real advantages of dying, he declares,
v.24

In a real sense, he wants to die. That is gain. That is better. Better for him, anyway. And better for any believer, whose death is but their entrance into glory. But better, even far better, to remain alive in order to finish the work God would have you to do. And in that case, then when it is time to die, in God’s good providence, then you can rightly declare, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race.”

Paul hasn’t finished yet, not here in Philippians. There is still work to be done, still some distance to cover in that race. Thus we read,
v.25-26

Such a goal of ministry. Such a goal for a servant of Jesus. “I

know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith.” It’s not about his own advancement at all. It’s not about his honor, or his glory. It’s not about his prestige, or his reputation or success. Instead, it is all about God’s people in Philippi, who would be able to rejoice again because of Paul’s continued ministry to them. And actually, it is all about Christ Jesus, in whom they would be able to glory.

For to me to live is Christ.

People of God, let me hold before you that perspective on life, that worldview. Let me hold before you that goal. And ask you, what do you live for?

The answer must be Jesus. And your desire must be this, that “Christ will be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.” “For to me to live is Christ.”