

Rejoice – No Matter the Outcome

There are more than a few of you here today who at some point in your life you were faced with the possibility of death. A bad diagnosis, a long stay in the hospital, a surgery where you have to sign that paper that reminds you that there is a slight chance of you dying. If you haven't had to think about that yet, the day will come when you will come to the realization that death is almost here. How do you come to terms with dying? Especially if you feel like you still have a purpose in this world, you have things that you want to check off on your bucket list. You want to see your kids or grandkids grow up. You don't want to leave your spouse alone. Fear of death continues to be one of the top fears that all people have.

But for many of us it's not just the fear of death, but the fear of living that is scary. Over the past few months the suicide hotline has received a record number of phone calls. In general suicides are up. Drug overdoses are up. People are not only afraid of death, they are afraid of living. They struggle to deal with the problems going on in their life. They struggle to deal with all the changes that our society is going through. There are probably more than a few people in this room who have had suicidal thoughts. But even if you don't have suicidal thoughts, life can be full of challenges. And some of you may be faced with some serious challenges right now. Today in our sermon series entitled "Rejoice", we are going to look at what the apostle Paul says about finding joy and purpose in both living and dying.

Pastor Krause set the stage for this book of Philippians last week. Paul wrote this letter from prison, but it seems that somehow he knew that he was not going to be executed. But rather he would get out of prison. Vs. 19 says, "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." The Apostle Paul isn't talking about his own salvation here, but simply his deliverance from prison. He says, the reason for that is two things, your prayers and the help of the Lord. Those are the two things in life that changes things. God's will and your prayers. We obviously don't have any control over God's Will and what God decides he is going to do, but we can pray. And prayer changes things. A great example from the bible when a person was faced with dying soon of a disease is Hezekiah, the king of Judah. The Lord told him that he was going to die from the disease that he had. But Hezekiah prayed that the Lord would spare his life and the Lord told him that he would now live for 15 more years. But there have been others who were faced with death, and when they prayed to be spared, the Lord said, no, and he called them home to heaven. So while prayer is powerful and changes things, sometimes the Lord says, "No, it would be best for you to come home to heaven now."

This is what was swirling around in Paul's mind for a couple of years now. When he got arrested, was he going to get out of this prison, or was he going to be executed? He didn't know. We don't know how long he was dealing with the stress of that thought. But eventually it got to the point of what we see here in the book of Philippians that the Lord told him that he wasn't going to die, but he was going to be set free and live. It's under those circumstances that brings about this paragraph in the bible where we see Paul as an example of where we want to be: whether we live or whether we die, we rejoice.

Vs 20 says it this way. ²⁰ "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." His prayer has been and is for courage. Whether you are going through a tough time in life, or if you are faced with death, this is the prayer we take to the Lord, we ask for courage, for strength. But notice what Paul says, he isn't just asking for courage and strength to get through it, but he is asking that he has the courage so that Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. He is saying that he wants Christ to be magnified or seen through his life or his death. That's a pretty great prayer, isn't it? Too often we stop at asking the Lord for strength and courage to get through this. But Paul takes it a step further, that Christ is emphasized, magnified and seen whether in my life or in my death.

Some of you have seen real life examples of Christians in the process of dying, who didn't simply have the courage to die, but they were witnesses of their faith to the nurses, doctors, family members, friends of their faith in Jesus. That is a beautiful thing to see – Christ is preached even in a person's death. Or after their death. I love funerals here at St. Paul's (obviously I'm a bit biased), because funerals are some of the only occasions that some people come to church. And yet in the message of a funeral we get to review the whole purpose of our lives, the object of our faith, and what Christ did so that this person who died, I can confidently say, is alive and well. We get to show them the foundation of Christianity, that because Christ lived, died and rose we will be in heaven. We get to tell the people that regardless of how great you think this person was, they needed a Savior and they got one. Because of Christ, we get to rejoice even at, especially at, a funeral. We get to exalt Christ, even in our death. Let that be our prayer, that when we are faced with death, we have the courage and the strength, not just to die, but to be a witness to Christ.

Paul actually talks about the joy, and his own desire for death. He says it this way. (Vs. 21) "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." He sees death as gaining something. He goes on to explain. "If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean

fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body." (vs. 22-23)

We understand what the Apostle Paul is talking about. We are looking forward to heaven. The silver lining to all the craziness that's been going on in our world and our country over the last few months is that these difficulties cause us to look forward to our heavenly home even more. Paul admits, heaven is "better by far". It will be. But Paul says, "Yet what shall I choose?" The point is, it's not up to Paul to choose. It's up to the Lord to choose. It's up to the Lord to decide if we will live or die. The Lord told Paul what his purpose for living was. The Lord must have told Paul that the reason for him not dying was that these Philippian Christians and other Christians needed him yet. The fact that all of you are here with your heart beating means that the Lord wants you here for now. The fact that you are alive means that you have a purpose in this world for now. I was talking to someone not too long ago who several months ago they thought they were on their death bed and for whatever reason the Lord decided, not yet. And the person's response was, "I guess the Lord still has something for me to do in this world." Yes, he does.

What is that purpose? Paul said it earlier, "Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death." Our purpose is to exalt Christ, not only when dying, but also when living. In some ways I think it's easier to be a witness for Christ in death than in life. When a person's on their death bed, for some, that's a more natural place to talk about spiritual things and the hope that they have in Christ to their family or friends, when before they didn't talk about things like that. When a person is on their death bed, they can finally get the courage to encourage someone to get their spiritual life in order, when before they were afraid to talk about it. But friends, we aren't on our death bed. God has a purpose for us now: to live for Christ. There are a lot of things in life that distract us from that purpose. Maybe there is a fear of talking about your faith with others. Fear of an uncomfortable conversation, fear of how they will react. That's true for me and I'm a pastor! But it's also the busyness of life. We are busy with many things and we can easily forget or at least not focus our time and energy on our main purpose in life. Then there are the distractions of life – a pandemic, political turmoil, problems in our society. They can also keep us from focusing on our main purpose in life.

You see, it's not just that we want to be with the Lord, but the Lord wants us to be with him to. He would love to pluck us out of this horrible world with all the things going on in it. In fact that's why he sent his Son Jesus, 2000 years ago, to get you out of this sinful world. He wanted you out of this world so much that he sacrificed his Son for you. But what an encouraging thought to know that as much as the Lord wants you in heaven with him, the Lord has decided that you are vital and important for the work of God's kingdom. What an honor to know that the use of your gifts and your talents in the church, at home or at work are a vital part of advancing God's kingdom. What an honor to know that your encouragement and your example at church, at home and at work is affecting people so much so that the Lord still wants you to be here. And so in life, rejoice. Rejoice because you know that heaven is yours. Rejoice that as much as he wants to take you home has decided that you are so valuable to kingdom work, that you are remaining here.

Now I want to look at the very last couple of verses with you here which helps us understand how we move forward with this purpose. (Vs. 25-26) "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, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me." The Apostle Paul talks about how his job is to help this congregation in Philippi in their "progress and joy in the faith." There are two things there. 1) progress in the faith and 2) joy in the faith. Progress in the faith is usually referred to as strengthening of faith. We know how our faith is strengthened - in both receiving the sacrament for strengthening of faith and growing in your understanding of God's Word. Coming to church like you are doing is one way. Reading your bibles at home. Going to one of our bible studies. Those are important ways to progress in the faith. And see that your mission in life is not just to grow yourself, but to help the progression of faith of those who God has placed around you - your kids by putting them into catechism class, Sunday School, reading God's Word at home, teen group, praying with your kids at home; your friends and family members by encouraging them in their faith by the things you say or the things you do.

What follows progress in the faith is joy. You can see their joy as they live for Christ, when people put in volunteer hours at church. You can see the joy of people living for Christ when our Starting Point class fills up not because of my work, but because of your invitations. You can see the joy of people living for Christ when our school is busting at the seams, when my biggest fear becomes too many people showing up for church (which is a fear I had even before Covid). You can see the joy of people living for Christ, at home, at church, at school, at work, or somewhere in between.

God takes fear and replaces it with joy. The fear of death was solved for us when Christ died and rose. He promises us that heaven is ours, not because of what we have done, but because of what he has done for us. The fear of living with all the problems that we face was solved for us when Christ decided to keep us here in this world as his foot soldiers with an important purpose and mission. Like Paul we have every reason to rejoice in life or in death. Amen.