

## ‘LIFE AND DEATH BENEFITS’

### Philippians 1:19-26

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A few years ago I read about the work of an ornithologist who had been studying a particular species of seagulls for many years. He tagged them and monitored their movements from hatchlings till death. He made an intriguing discovery: those particular gulls didn't show any signs of aging. The prime of life for them was practically their whole life. A 17-year-old gull had as much stamina and mobility as a juvenile gull. There didn't appear to be any difference.

There was no perceptible deterioration—no hardening of the arteries, no arthritis in their wings, no dimming vision. They lived life to the full and then just died. There was no dying per se, just death.

If we were like those gulls, a 98-year-old athlete could run a sub-four-minute mile at an international track meet, then die the next day of old age.

Naturally, this discovery grabbed the attention of the medical and scientific community. Was there something in the genetic structure of these gulls that could be spliced into our human genes?

Imagine the benefits for life—and death! All the vigor of living, without the ordeal of dying.

There would be no need for retirement planning.

A radically different set of principles would govern our lives.

- Those ageless seagulls are a fine illustration of Christian life, as the Apostle Paul describes it in our text today.

I'm not suggesting that becoming a Christian means having our genetic structure tweaked, or that Christians are spiritual mutants.

No. Christians are people who have been transformed spiritually through the power of God by accepting the good news of Jesus Christ.

We are new creations in our essential spiritual nature.

Christians are saved from a degenerating existence that has no hope. We live life to the full, and then we have eternal life, not death.

The Christian life has both life and death benefits.

**1:19** *For I know that through your prayer and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.*

**1:20** *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.*

**1:21** *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*

**1:22** *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!*

**1:23** *I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;*

**1:24** *but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.*

**1:25** *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,*

**1:26** *so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.*

The Apostle Paul's description of the authentic Christian life points out some personal principles to live by for every sincere Christian in any situation

### **I. WE NEED ONE ANOTHER. Philippians 1:19-20**

Jesus said he came so that people could have life to the max. (John 10:10)

This life in Christ is not a solitary, independent life. It's an inter-dependent life.

**1:19** *For I know that through your prayer and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.*

Paul's life revolved around the gospel, the good news of forgiveness of sins and new life by faith in Jesus Christ. That's what made his life joyful: *I will continue to rejoice*, (18)

He saw people come alive with new life. They had joy!

Studies of various age and population groups in the US and abroad have shown that the number one source of joy is relationships—close relationships, not things, not experiences, not profound insights.

How much joy do you think a person has who is not close to anyone because he takes care of all his own needs?

That kind of life is sterile. It doesn't have much joy.

So much of our joy springs from others reaching out to us, and our reaching out to others. Isn't that true?

Joy is one of the finest benefits of the Christian life.

- Paul was in a prison when he wrote this letter

There was nothing he could do to change his circumstances.

But Paul believed that something was going to happen that would result in his release from prison.

The term *sótéria* in verse 19 can be understood in the sense of *deliverance* from impending death. It's also the word for *salvation*.

Paul believed he would be released because of the prayer of the Christians and the power of the Holy Spirit. (19)

- Prayer works. God does great things and brings about changes through the prayers of believers.

As Christians we often ask for prayer and we promise to pray for others, but I'm not convinced we always expect prayer to make much difference.

An anthropologist in the Southwest once said this about the traditional Indian rain dance: *'The dance didn't bring rain, but it made the tribe feel a lot better.'*

Prayer is like that for some Christians. They don't expect it to work, but they feel a lot better for praying.

Here in verse 19 Paul said: 'prayer works.'

Have you ever heard prayer referred to as *positive energy*? I've heard it from some who are not Christians who had been in some kind of a crisis. When told that people had been praying for them, they were polite and expressed gratitude for *'all that positive energy'* directed toward them.

Their idea of *positive energy* is something that originates inside the person praying.

There is actually immense *positive energy* in Christian prayer. But it's not your energy; it's the energy of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ

The *'help given by the Spirit'* is literally *'through the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.'* (19)

The only part we have in effective prayer is the asking. It works because of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

- Paul goes on to explain that the future is very good for those who have life in Christ, whether by life or death:

**1:20** *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.*

The word in the text translated *'eager expectation'* is a rare term in Scripture.

It suggests someone who is so focused that nothing can distract.

Do you know what I picture? A Cy Young Award winning pitcher on the mound in a major league baseball game. No one is on first base, so there is no threat of a base runner stealing. His attention is riveted on the strike zone and where and how fast and with how much movement he wants his pitch to cross the strike zone.

Paul had acknowledged that his extended imprisonment had served to advance the gospel (12), and even though he expected to be delivered from prison, Paul was intensely focused on not being ashamed (20).

- What does that mean?

If Paul was released, he would first have to stand trial.

Instead of being embarrassed before the court, he would have courage to proclaim the gospel of Christ. He would magnify Christ Jesus. (20)

Whether he was released or sentenced to die, what mattered to Paul was that Christ would be magnified/exalted in his body.

Paul's body—his life in the flesh—served one controlling purpose: to glorify, or exalt Christ. That's what his physical life meant.

People pump and pamper their bodies to exalt, magnify, glorify themselves. Go to a gym, a health club, and you'll find some people there for their health; others are clearly there make their bodies look good.

- Paul didn't have the kind of body anyone would be proud of. No one would have called the Apostle Paul a hunk. (We know this from allusions he makes in his letters and from 2<sup>nd</sup>. Century sources). He was a little bald fellow with poor eyesight and bow-legs, probably from the beatings he suffered for the cause of Christ. His broken limbs hadn't mended cleanly and he probably walked with a limp. (2 Corinthians 11:23-29)

Paul was willing to endure anything in life—or death itself—as long as he drew attention to Jesus Christ the Savior.

- This is why every Christian must live an authentic Christian life before the watching world.

Each of us should ask, *Do I help people to understand how awesome Jesus Christ is?*

- In doing this, the Apostle Paul admitted his dependence on others. He needed their prayers and the help of the Holy Spirit for his life to make a difference.

We need one another

## **II. WE CANNOT LOSE. Philippians 1:21-24**

If, as a Christian, your life really is organized around the good news of Jesus Christ, you're in a no-lose situation. Even though Paul expected to be released, the possibility of a death sentence because of his faith was also quite acceptable to him.

**1:21** *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*

**1:22** *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!*

**1:23** *I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;*

**1:24** *but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.*

Most of us would prefer to amend Paul's statement in verse 21 to read, *'For to me, to die is Christ and to live is gain.'*

As Christians, we know that to die means to be with Christ. But we'd prefer to live here as long as we can—that's gain.; that's better.

When I was just a young pastor I was given some copies of the messages delivered at the Keswick Christian Conferences in England, dating back to the 1920's. In the 1927 volume I came across a missionary report given to the conference. Listen:

*Bishop Mowll, of Western China, said that as the representative of missionaries from China he must thank all Christian friends for "praying them through." The past five years in China had been lived in the midst of confusion and disaster. In 1923 Mr. Seaward died of typhus, contracted amongst wounded soldiers during a siege; a few months later Mr. Watt and Mr. Whitehead were murdered by brigands; in 1924 Mr. Alibone and Miss Tucker had their compound invaded by wild men in uniform; they were stood against a blank wall and fired at, escaping death by a miracle; . . . In 1925 nine of us were in the hands of brigands for 24 days; a few months later Bishop and Mrs. Cassels died of a strange Oriental fever; in 1926 Mrs. Sibley, walking through the streets of the capital of the province at the noon hour, was murdered, and her head cut off in the sight of many people; a few weeks later Mr. Robinson gave his life, contracting typhus while ministering to famine-stricken people."*

*Continuing, the bishop pointed out that men of like mind were needed to take the place of those who had laid down their lives . . .*

Having just told them about these who had become martyrs for the gospel of Christ, the Bishop said, *'We're looking for more people just like them to go and take their place.'*

- That would have made perfect sense to the apostle Paul.

Today, I'm not so sure. We in the West, no matter how devoted we are to Christ, wouldn't get in line to go and be martyred.

- Paul looked forward to his own death benefits.

This is nonsense to the secular mind.

You don't look forward to your death benefits. Others look forward to your death benefits. Your survivors gain from your departure.

There is no gain for you—you are out of the picture.

Not so in the Christian life. When you die, you are in the picture—prominently—more than ever before. You are the beneficiary!

The death benefits are awesome, as the Apostle Peter said: *'Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil, or fade—kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.'* (1 Peter 1:3-5)

For every believer physical death is an improvement—something far better. It's not the worst that could happen in life. It's the best that will happen.

I used to have a prayer partner who met with me every Friday at noon. He always ended his prayer with the expression of a passionate longing for eternity and to be with our Lord forever. It's not that he was sick and tired of life here. He is one of the most joyful Christians I've ever met.

- As Christians we are supposed to look at physical death the way God's word presents it. Whether in life or death—we can't lose.

### III. WE SERVE OTHERS. Philippians 1:24-26

We put the interests of others first.

**1:24** *but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.*

In verse 23 Paul said to die and go to be with Christ was better by far for him. But it wasn't best for others.

Paul was physically weary. But his work wasn't done.

So many people still had not heard the good news of God's love and of salvation in Jesus Christ..

The churches he had established still needed his instruction.

- It seems, from Paul's Pastoral Letters in the New Testament and from early historical testimony, that Paul was released. He visited Macedonia again (this would obviously mean a return visit to the church in Philippi).

Some time later Paul was arrested again, re-imprisoned and then martyred.

**1:25** *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,*

**1:26** *so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.*

In both these verses we see that Paul expects the Christian life to be joyful.

Paul didn't indulge Christians who had no joy.

Joyless Christianity is a contradiction in terms. Unfortunately, it is common.

Some people cause joy wherever they go; others, whenever they go.

There is something fundamentally wrong with Christians who are perpetually morose and who live life in the minor key. They make Christ and the Christian life quite unattractive.

The words translated *joy* in verses 25 and 26 are not the same. The word in verse 26 is actually a word for boasting in a good sense. Paul used it to mean the joy of glorifying Christ Jesus.

Paul wanted the Christians to be proud of Jesus Christ.

- The church through the ages has tended to glorify people—a pastor or evangelist. Some churches are even named after a person. It's not uncommon, yet in my opinion it's unfortunate.

Paul wanted to be sure that the name attached to the church at Philippi was Christ Jesus.

To the Philippian Christians Paul was like a hero. They boasted in him as their founder.

In a kindly manner Paul said, in effect, *'When I come to you, I'll straighten things out. You'll see that the real hero is Jesus Christ. Boast in him, not in me.'*

- Paul served others. His ministry brought joy. He exalted Christ and he lifted the spirits of the Christians. He lived to serve others.

Through Christ we live to serve others

- Do you depend on your own resources?

Are you a struggling, unmotivated Christian? Is it perhaps because you are too independent—too private? You don't let others know if you have a need or if life is hard. Paul let his Christian friends know.

- Is there something you dread?

Are you afraid of what lies beyond this life? Paul knew that for him it was gain.

If he lived, he lived for Christ. If he died, he would go to be with Christ (23).

Do you know that you would be with Christ? The way to know for sure is to receive Christ here, as Lord.

Death without Christ means eternity in hell. God doesn't want that to happen to you. That's why Christ came to save you.

- Does your presence bring joy to others?

Do you make the Christian life attractive to others?

Paul knew how to get people to be joyful in Christ and to get excited about life with Christ.