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Sermon Series: *Good News in Strange Places*, No. 3

Death

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Philippians 1:19-26 [NIV]

(I will continue to rejoice.)¹⁹ For I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. 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. ²¹ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 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! 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. 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, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

We're in the Apostle Paul's letter to the Philippian church this morning: Chapter 1, if you'd care to turn back there with me. The book of Philippians – the first chapter.

For most of the years that our boys were of elementary age, I served on the Wilmore Elementary School site-based counsel, which, if you're not familiar with the workings of Kentucky public schools, is like a miniature school board for each individual school.

I remember well the first meeting I attended.

The principal, who, from my perspective, is a great person and a great principal, opened the meeting with greetings and introductions and all that, and then made a statement. I may not get the words exactly right, but it was very close to this: "Let's remember that our goal is to ensure that 100% of Wilmore Elementary students achieve mastery of their subjects."

Listen to that again, "Our goal is to ensure that 100% of Wilmore Elementary students achieve mastery of their subjects."

She repeated that sentence, or words very close to it, at the beginning of every meeting, and all of us around the table nodded in agreement and then went on with our meeting.

But, at about our fourth of fifth meeting, just after she said those words again, I tentatively raised my hand and said, "I have a question. I don't mean to cause trouble here, but do we really believe that that's an achievable goal? I mean, we all know that there are some kids in this school who are just not going to be able to master certain subjects. So why do we keep saying that we can reach 100% when we know that's not realistically possible?"

You know, you can stop a meeting cold saying something like that, and I think the reason is that most people would rather talk about cozy, nice-sounding ideas, even if they're not realistic, than to confront and deal with what is, in fact, the harsher reality.

It's easier to wish for something that, deep down, we know won't come true, than it is to face and deal with the reality of our own human limitations.

There's another example of this in November's issue of *First Things* magazine. The editor, R. R. Reno, wrote a piece titled "Safetyism," in which he talks about New York City's new policy called "Vision Zero," which is their goal of zero fatalities on their city streets. The claim is that fatalities are not "due to inevitable accidents but to preventable factors that can be ended through engineering, enforcement and education."

Now, Reno realizes this is very likely just a slogan to focus people on traffic safety, but he rightly points out how this sort of thinking has a way of actually convincing people that the impossible is really possible. People start believing it's possible to so control all factors involved, including fallible, imperfect individuals, that accidents might really no longer happen, and so that fatalities might really no longer occur.

Which is, in the end, the real motivator of initiatives like Vision Zero: our culture wants to eliminate death – because our culture has come to fear death intensely.

Reno writes – and the sentiment of his recollections here rings familiar, I'll bet, to many of us:

In my youth, there wasn't a hint of Vision Zero. My mother smoked two packs a day for fifty years. Lung cancer killed her at sixty-nine, and she was not unusual. In the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, people like her smoked and drank and ate what they liked: some to excess and few with any concern about their health. Parents drove home from weekends at the beach sipping cocktails while their kids bounced around in the back of the station wagon. Nobody wore a helmet except on the football field. Nobody had a gym membership unless he was a bodybuilder.

My mother did not want to die or get sick, any more than she wanted to be poor and destitute. But those fears were moderate, not strong. Maybe the experience of economic depression and a world war had taught my mother's generation that bad things happen, no matter what – so why not keep your worries in check and enjoy some of the good things in life?

In her final days, I asked my mother whether she regretted smoking. She gave me a bemused look, and replied, "No. It's not as though the alternative was to live forever." We can look back on those attitudes and judge them careless. But I find myself sympathetic to my mother's position, in as much as we need to be realistic about life and not let our worries dictate our actions. Fears of disease, injury, and death are natural. But as Thomas Aquinas notes, we are responsible to discipline our fear so that it is properly ordered by reason. This requires the virtue of *fortitude*, which allows us to endure certain evils for the sake of greater goods.

Now, certainly, neither Reno nor I would advocate rashness or foolishness or any sort of arrogant courting of danger. Those things, in and of themselves, are sinful

because they prove us to be poor stewards of God's blessings.

This is not a call, on my part, to behave in ways that harm us or others.

But this is a call to that sort of fortitude that Aquinas talks about.

Followers of Christ need not and should not be timid, living in mortal fear of some potential, arbitrary fall to misfortune. Bad things happen in life. Accidents happen. Mistakes happen. Errors in judgment happen.

Death happens in this world.

But it is facing those realities with fortitude that helps us to keep living lives that are worth living.

All of this is important for Christians to consider because, more and more, we find ourselves surrounded by a culture that is immensely fearful of death.

Now, in the non-Christian world, that does have one good aspect, because the non-Christian world is also increasingly spiritually unprepared for death.

But what is not good is how unwilling that culture is to face death's inevitability in any realistic way, and this has sent it on a march to stop at nothing to try to prevent death, even, ironically, to the point of giving up living.

That is the level of fear that's out there regarding death.

More and more people will give up nearly everything, if doing so will keep them from dying – if doing so will keep them *safe*.

Their religion is the worship of safety. *Safetyism*. It is not the exaltation of life. It's the exaltation of avoiding death.

It's why we saw in Russia a few years ago a t-shirt with Putin's picture on it and the sentence beneath, "I will keep you safe."

Look at what Russians have given up for the sake of safety.

Now, slogans like "Vision Zero" do have a tone of godliness about them. I mean, no one – especially no Christian – wishes death on other people.

But, to fear death such that we might come to believe that all accidents are preventable is not right theology.

To fear death has never been the Christian way.

Toward supporting that assertion, I offer you the Apostle Paul and what he writes in this passage.

Paul was imprisoned as he wrote this, and he knew that he would not stay in prison forever; he knew that one day he would either walk out, or he'd be carried out. And that sort of understanding is a powerful motivator for facing mortality – for evaluating life and death.

So, Paul draws up something of a balance sheet where he weighs life and death, and he comes to these conclusions:

1) Life is good. To live is good because, as he writes there in verse 21, literally, "*To live...Christ,*" and we translate, "*To live is Christ*" or "*To live equals Christ.*"

Paul understood that life:

- originates in Christ,
- belongs to Christ,
- is sustained by Christ,
- and is expressed for Christ.

Whatever life was about for Paul, it was ultimately about Christ.

If Jesus were removed, there would be nothing left of life.

So, life – being alive – is always a great thing, a holy thing, and a thing worth pursuing.

Therefore, Paul concludes, to live – to be alive – is a good option.

However...

2) Here's where Paul perhaps surprises us. In that same verse there, verse 21, right after he writes, "*To live equals Christ,*" Paul then writes, "*to die...gain,*" or, "*to die equals gain.*"

Paul did not count death in any sense as a loss. In fact, to him, death was *better*. Death brought *gain*.

How on earth could he say that?

This is one of those statements in Scripture that our culture thinks ludicrous. Our culture would never agree with this.

Which is precisely why I'm talking about it here today. The body of Christ cannot buy into our culture's un-Christian view of death.

This is a place for fortitude, you see? This is a place where our sentiments and feelings have to submit to Christian truth.

To Paul, death is gain. Death is good – good news, for two reasons.

First of all, because death, for the Christian, releases a person from the burdens and pains of this earthly life.

Maybe this is hard for us to grasp, because we 21st century Americans have had relatively easy lives.

But it is true nonetheless.

For most peoples of most times and places of history – and that certainly includes Paul – life has been hard, way harder than it's been for most of us. And so for Christ-followers like Paul – and on down through the ages – death brings a welcome end to this world's hardship and suffering.

It is no mystery why the songs of American slaves and other oppressed Christians around the world focus on heaven.

For the follower of Jesus, death is *relief*. Death is *release*. Death brings *peace* from life's difficulties.

That's one reason Paul saw death as gain.

But even more than that, Paul saw death as gain because it is through death that every Christ-follower is ushered into the immediate presence of Jesus, just as He said to the repentant thief on the cross, "*Today you will be with me – in paradise.*"

Death is not just escape from the bad. Death is deliverance to the great!

Our world is scared spitless of death because, to the unbeliever, death is an unknown frontier.

But the Christian knows what lies on the other side of that experience, you see?

What exactly do we know?

Well, we know that life does not cease at death. That is the Judeo-Christian position.

Life never truly ends, and so upon death if someone rejects Jesus, bound up in that rejection is that person's

choice to suffer eternal separation from God and all that is good. And that life of suffering goes on forever.

But, for those who've said "yes" to Jesus, earthly death is the path to immediate and eternal access to God and to all things good and right and just and whole.

So, Christians look at the experience of their own earthly death as only an instant in an eternal lifetime, and, once you go through it,

- you never have to suffer,
- you never have to grieve,
- and you never have to die again.

That, all of that, is why Paul could write that life is good, certainly – but that death is even better.

Death is better than earthly life.

That is good news found in a strange place.

And we see here that Paul struggled between these two good things of life and death and how to think about them in light of his circumstances.

The truth is that this is one of the most intimate glimpses we get of the inner feelings and workings of Paul and how he thought about one of the most important topics a person can consider.

In verse 23 there, he writes, "*I am torn between the two.*"

The image here is one of a person trying to slide through an opening with rock on both sides. If you've ever been through "Fat Man's Misery" at Mammoth Cave, that's the image.

Paul is actually caught between wanting to live and wanting to die, because both are good.

The good in dying is, as I've already said, the suffering of life ends and Paul would go to be with Christ forever. In fact, he says it even more emphatically there in verse 23, when he admits, "*I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.*"

Death was not just as good as life to Paul, you see? To him, dying was, by far, the better option.

That is so *not* the understanding of death in our culture.

But this is the Christian understanding of death, friends. So, it's no real surprise that Paul would say that.

What is maybe surprising, if you don't know Paul well, is precisely what good he sees in living.

Paul says to continue to live would be good, because the work he's doing for the sake of the Lord could continue.

His work for the sake of the church could continue.

The preaching of the gospel would continue.

The training of church leaders would continue.

The building up of the believers, like those in Philippi, would continue.

Paul wanted to live, not just to avoid death or because he was confused by death or because he feared death.

Paul wanted to live because his living would spiritually benefit other people.

Paul wanted to live, not for his *own* comfort or sake or benefit, but for the comfort, sake and benefit of *other people*.

He wanted to live, not just so he could go on having fun and doing as he pleased, but so that he could keep doing the hard work God called him to do for others.

You see, Paul wanted to live because he knew that his life mattered.

He knew that the work he was doing was making an eternal difference in the world.

He knew he was fulfilling God's purpose for his life, and that people were depending on him for the maturing of their faith.

Paul wanted to live, not for his own sake, but for God's sake and for God's peoples' sake.

That's a God-centric person with a God-centered heart, and that leads to an others-centered life.

"I want to go on so others will benefit." That's the spirit of Jesus in Paul. It's a self-giving willingness to suffer for the sake of the good of others.

That's the right conception of humanity: of life, of death, of purpose.

Someone wrote that Paul's choice here was like that of a woman from, say, Haiti or Burundi or Afghanistan who had to decide between going to Europe or the U.S. or some other beautiful and comfortable place to live with her beloved husband or staying in the hard place she is to live with her beloved children.

What do you do in that situation?

If you're Paul, you stay where you're needed, even if it's hard.

That alone was good news for the world in Paul's day, but even more is the good news that all this communicates to the follower of Jesus – about death.

Our world is convinced that death is the worst possible thing that can happen to you – so much so that most people banish death's reality to the very edge of their consciousness.

We'll stop at nothing, and we'll pay any cost to avoid even *talking* or *thinking* about death.

"You want me to pre-plan my funeral? Are you out of your mind? Just talking about that might make it come sooner."

What an utterly ridiculous notion, but it is one many people live by, driven by tremendous fear.

"Do anything you can to avoid death." That's the message of our world.

Don't take any risks.

Don't drive.

Don't ride.

Don't fly.

Don't jog.

Don't play outside.

Don't sit in the sun.

Don't watch TV.

Don't eat meat or sugar or carbs or chemicals or fatty foods or whatever it is they tell you, this week, that you shouldn't eat.

Don't interact with strangers.

Don't take any risks.

Do whatever's necessary: stop living even, if you have to. Just don't die.

As if it's even possible.

Our culture wants to believe it is, and it takes fortitude for the Christian to live in a culture like that.

Again, I don't mean fortitude to be stupid or selfish or senseless.

I mean fortitude to live with confidence, embracing the fact that death really is good news to the follower of Jesus.

Do you believe that?

Will you believe that?

Follower of Christ, will you tune out our cultural fear, and will you join Paul in taking hold of death for the blessing that it is?

Will you live, not in a perpetual search for safety, but in recognition of reality?

Will you live responsibly but also freely?

Will you live, not in fear, but in the confidence that Jesus has redeemed even death?

And – you who are, even now, rejecting Jesus, will you find in Him relief for your fear of death?

You can find that relief nowhere else.

Jesus is the only way and truth – and life.

Even today, He invites you to Himself, both now and for all eternity.

Receive Him, would you, and fear death no longer.

Closing Prayer:

Jesus, help us to see and to think like Paul here – to find the good news even in death – so that we are no longer bound by fear. So that we can be free, not to just exist, but to really live.

Closing Song: *Be Still My Soul*

Benediction:

Someone said, just this week, "It's amazing how much effort, time and money Christians spend to stay out of Heaven."

Paul did not have a death wish such that he would ever consider taking his life or living recklessly or abusively. He knew his life was sacred and was to be sacredly used.

But he could also stare death in the face and be untroubled, because to Paul just as to live was Christ, so was to die.

As we follow Christ before our confused world, let us see life and also death in the way that offers hope and good news – from a strange place – for the glory of Jesus.