

Sermon Notes of Rev.Dr.I.J.W.Oakley (24-3-1991 Cleland Baptist Church)

Philippians 1:21-24
Additional Bible Reading: Luke 23:33-49

Introduction

Last time we considered what it means for the Christian to say “For me to live is Christ”. Now going to look at the second part of Paul’s great statement. After life comes death, as sure as day is followed by night.

Paul has a dilemma when he considers death. He is torn between two possibilities. Really, he longs to depart, into an existence which is a gain and better by far than life here on earth. But at the same time he considers his readers, and he knows it might be better for them if he stays. He will have more opportunities to serve the Lord, and he will be able to be a means of strengthening and helping the churches with their struggles, problems and growing pains. But deep down, his real wish is to depart. This is an amazing thing to be able to say, something you do not hear every day.

People generally do not like to hear about death, for they find it morbid, and they know it will come soon enough, so they’d rather change the subject for now. So it is rarely spoken about, and rarely preached on. Everything is concentrated on this life. Eternity, and eternal destiny, is avoided.

Yet this is very inconsistent of us. In other matters, we are proud of how forward-looking we are, how we have made provision for our future –house, life insurance, wise investments, adequate cover for self and family. Yet when it comes to death – the one thing that is very certain, inescapable and sure, we are not so wise in facing up to that, and making provision for it. We are strangely silent, like **those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death** (Hebrews 2:15).

Paul had faced it, and so he could look at it in an entirely different light, as a Christian. This is one of the blessings of the Gospel. Everything becomes new, even the way we face our last and final enemy. Even those in the Old Testament only had half-light about death. But we have no excuse. **Christ has brought life and immortality to light through the Gospel** (2 Timothy 1:10). His conquest of death through His resurrection has made all the difference.

The meaning of death for the Christian

Interesting picture here of death as a departure. ἀναχυσσα suggests a ship at moorings, then the last farewells are said, the cable holding the ship to shore is loosed, the anchor raised, and the ship gradually goes out to sea. There are waves from the ship, until the faces are finally lost to view. It very speedily crosses the ocean to a better and happier land.

When a Christian dies, we may weep, because we cannot bring back a friend. But at that last farewell the Christian departs over that quiet sea to a better land. He is not going into nothingness. He is not just “finished” and “all over”. He is not merely in a soul sleep, a state of unconsciousness, till the Second Coming. He is not in the

refining fires of Purgatory to cleanse his soul over hundreds of years to prepare him for heaven. He has gone to a better land. We weep – but then we rejoice. He closed his eyes on earth, but he has opened them again in heaven. Absent from the body, but at home with the Lord. This means a conscious state, a place of real happiness and intense joy, far greater than here.

But he does not immediately enjoy everything that the after life involves. Disembodied spirits, not yet enjoying all the fullness of blessedness of life beyond the grave. Awaiting his resurrection body, to be given at the Lord's return. But even at this first stage, he is in a blessedness far more wonderful than the present life. It is glorious existence, with Christ, in Paradise, at home with the Lord, far better than this life – therefore, as Paul puts it, a gain.

Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world (John 17:24). That is what Christ wants for us, and that is what the Christian who has died is enjoying – being with Christ, and seeing His glory.

Reason why death can be described as a gain

It seems strange to describe death as gain, and something better by far. Death is such a terrible thing. The dead one leaves behind loved ones, his position in life, possessions, sights, places and experiences, homes, friends, all of which have given so much pleasure. He loses it all. It appears to be an utter disaster.

And so it is, until we note God's revelation in Scripture. We will gain far more than we will lose. Death is not the end, but the beginning of something new and glorious. The end of troubles, trials, temptations and sin itself. While on earth, sin vexes, discourages and upsets the Christian. But this will be gone in heaven. **He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away** (Revelation 21:4). Bodily aches and pains, defects, funerals, upsets and sin will all be over.

Then there is the great reunion with all those who belonged to the Lord. Men and women who died before us, great men and women of God from down the ages, Bible characters, men from church history, who bequeathed the teaching, example and heritage which we now enjoy and rarely value. Also those near and dear to us who have died in Christ. The mother who taught us to pray. The father who pointed us to Christ. The Sunday School teacher who first told us the stories of Jesus. It will be good to meet them again and show the appreciation that we ought to have done while they were still alive.

Then we will be joined by those who follow us through death – our children, and our children's children. We will await their arrival. **A great multitude that no one could count** (Revelation 7:9). Not one of the redeemed will be missing. And we will all be in perfect harmony and unity. There will be no more partings. The barriers of language, sin and misunderstanding which divided us will be removed forever.

Mysteries will be cleared up. So many things about the Christian faith which we did not fully understand, e.g. the Trinity, the person of Christ, predestination and human

responsibility, difficult verses in the Bible, points which we debate and dispute now, will all be solved then. Also the solution to God's mysterious dealings with us. Experiences of life, sudden bereavements, unexpected tragedies, and strange providences – the answers we have sought will be given, and we shall be satisfied.

*“I'll bless the hand that guided,
I'll bless the heart that planned,
When throned where glory dwelleth,
In Immanuel's land.”*

Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known (1 Corinthians 13:12). And we shall all agree that He has done things well.

But above all else, the supreme gain is that we will be with Christ. So far we have heard of Him, prayed to Him, read His word, felt His power, and enjoyed His promises. But then, in a very special sense, we will be with Him, in His nearer presence. We will see Him. We will see the hands that were nailed to the Cross for us, and the head that was crowned with thorns.

We will have communion with Him. He will tell us of His love for us, He will show us the many things He has done for us that we were blind to, and how He has brought us safely to glory. We will be able to express our love and gratitude as never before. We will see His glory and share in His glory. We will be like Him. We will rest in His presence. That will be heaven to us. That is what heaven is all about – Christ. We will be wholly and fully satisfied. Heaven without Christ would be like a day without the daylight, a feast without food, the sea without water.

We will enjoy unbroken fellowship, for no sin can come between us and spoil our enjoyment of Him. It will be one eternal Sabbath. No more Monday mornings to bring us down to earth. No more doubts or backslidings. We will hold Him and never let Him go.

Paul had extraordinary experiences of Christ. He triumphed in Christ. The extent of His service showed how much he knew of the Holy Spirit's power. He probably had the highest experience of God of any man this side of heaven. Yet he clearly speaks of the future, with Christ, as being “far more better” (this triple comparative is in the Greek πολλῶ μάλλον κρείσσον). While he was still alive, he was in the wilderness, provided with manna, but when he died he would be in the land of milk and honey.

The longing of our hearts should not be to be younger, richer, healthier, stronger, greater, better in character, in better company, or in higher employments in the Lord's service. No, our longing should be to be with Christ, just as Paul's was. This is where the emphasis should be laid.

Attitude to coming death

We are challenged about how we shall face death. Some have fear or hatred of death. It is the last enemy, an evil power coming ever nearer and nearer. Some feel the horror of it. But others have cause to look forward to it – an end of suffering, relief, a

way of escape, because they are sick of life and sick of fellow men with their follies and problems. Others meet it with resignation, as something which has got to come, that has to be faced, so there's no use worrying, it can't be avoided. Others face it defiantly, determined to show courage, to stand up to it and refuse to be frightened.

Or there is Paul's attitude – the Christian attitude in approaching death. He was not frightened. It was not something he wanted to escape or run away from. It was not something he faced with bitter resignation or with defiance. Death was God's appointed way for his life. He accepted it. He looked forward to being with Christ. His Saviour had promised **In my Father's house are many rooms. I am going there to prepare a place for you. I will come back and take you to be with me** (John 14:2,3). He knew that would be a far better life – a gain.

Saints down the ages have had the same reassurance. Luther: "I know assuredly I shall be with thee forever." The Marion martyr, Rowland Taylor: "I have never felt better. I am almost at home. I lack not past two stiles and I shall be at my Father's house." John Wesley: "Best of all, God is with us." Brownlow North: "I used to have great terror of death. That has quite gone now. I have no fear. I am resting on Christ now. I have perfect peace." D.L.Moody: "Some day you will read in the papers that D.L.Moody is dead. Don't believe a word of it. At that moment I shall be more alive than I am now. I was born of the flesh in 1837, born of the Spirit in 1856. That which is born of flesh may die. That which is born of the Spirit will live forever." [It is unclear in Dr Oakley's note whether some of these statements are direct quotes, or paraphrases.]

Conclusion

For the Christian, death is a gain, better by far. It is a paradox which only the Christian can believe, and which is true only of the Christian. The only one who can say, "To die is gain" is the one who can say first of all "For me to live is Christ." If life means Christ, death means gain.

If you belong to Christ now, and you live in Him, when you die in Him you will live with Him forever. If you are without Him now, you will die without Him, and you will spend eternity without Him. To lose Christ means losing all – world, souls, heaven, hope. This is total and eternal loss. You will hear His voice saying that He never knew you. What you are now, you shall be then. Your relationship with Christ now will determine your relationship with Him then, and your eternal destination.

To the saved, anticipate the coming day by having a close walk with Christ now. Death is certain – and for you it will be gain and glory.

To the unsaved, death is certain – and for you it will be loss and misery. **Turn from your evil ways. Why will you die?** (Ezekiel 33:11).