

“Christ is Honored in Life and in Death”

As the Apostle Paul writes his letter to the Christians in Philippi – he is in prison. Unlike in our day, in his day – that more often meant death, than release.

We, as a society – and we as Christians – also find ourselves in a type of prison, one brought about by this pandemic. We have been forced into isolation – face restrictions in what we can do, where we can go – and have had limits put on our ability to associate with others.

Let me borrow Paul’s opening words in our text – and adapt them for our situation. “I want you to know, brother, that what has happened to [us] has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known [to those around us] ... And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by [our imprisonment], are much more bold to speak the word without fear ...”

I don’t know about you, but this pandemic has made me more confident in the Lord – and whether I am more bold to speak the Word of God, or not – I know that it has driven me to the very basics of that Word. Some of you might be getting tired of hearing me say that we are to – “Fear, love, and trust in God above all things.”

Paul’s confidence is very apparent. He writes: “For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance ...” There is no doubt about it – Paul believes he will be delivered. However, he doesn’t know if that means he will be set free from his prison cell – or be delivered from his present sufferings by death, being delivered by being taken to heaven.

“It is my eager expectation and hope,” he says, “that I will not be ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.” If he continues to live here on earth – even if that means he is imprisoned – Christ will be honored in his body. And if he dies, Christ will be honored in his body when it is resurrected to life everlasting. Either way – Christ will be honored in his body.

Paul doesn't seem to be overwhelmed by the prospect of death, does he? He seems almost cavalier about it. Whether he lives or dies is not terribly important. In fact, he is hard pressed to choose which one he would prefer. "For to me to live is Christ," he says, "and to die is gain."

Speaking about death in such a casual way is rare today. Even before this past spring, death was a reality of life in this world – but with the pandemic, to talk about death like the Apostle Paul does is seen as being unloving, and unsympathetic.

Even though the death rate is very small for those who contract the virus – one who talks about the pandemic feels compelled to always mention the potential for death. It reminds me of the surgeon who comes in and explains the risks for surgery – and although the risk is very low, legally it has to be mentioned that death could occur.

That is the prison in which we live. The walls have been built all around us. The bars and locks are fortified daily. And the message comes across loud and clear – death is to be feared above all things.

The reality is that all of us will die one day – unless Jesus returns in glory before that day. The psalmist has taught us well – that we daily "walk through the valley of the shadow of death." Reminders are all around – whether by fatal wildfires and hurricanes – or the death of loved ones – or the aches and pains we endure that remind us of what is to come.

So, what is one to do? One can ignore, or even deny death, but that doesn't change the truth. One can live in the constant fear of death – trying to overcome it at all costs – but that is a prison-cell no one wants to inhabit. Or, one could live a life of fruitful labor as a free man – like St. Paul.

"For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." That's the life of faith in Jesus Christ. Rather than living in fear of death – he fears, loves, and trusts in God above all things. He trusts that death has been conquered by Christ's own suffering and death – he confidently believes that his own body will be raised from death to life on the Last Day, because Christ has been raised from death to life.

With death taken care of for him, by Christ, he is now free to live.

The end is already known, taken care of – “to die is gain.” Deliverance from sin is already his through the blood of Christ Jesus. Salvation from death is certain and sure. With death no longer consuming one’s life – now one is free to live!

You, like St. Paul, are free to live in such a way that Christ is honored in your body. The Lord has created your body, and redeemed your body – so that you might have fruitful labor in His vineyard. Rather than spend your time and money and effort trying to ward off death – you are free to spend it on your neighbor.

Even though there is a risk in giving birth to a child – that is fruitful labor for a mother. Even though there is a risk of putting yourself in harm’s way – serving and protecting fellow citizens is fruitful labor for police officers and soldiers. Even though there is a risk of rejection – speaking God’s Word to your fellow man is fruitful labor.

Dearly beloved, Christ is honored in YOUR body when you live by faith in God, and serve your fellow man – when you “fear, love, and trust in God above all things” and “love your neighbor as yourself.”

Christ is honored in YOUR body when you live by faith in the forgiveness, life and salvation that He has secured for you. Christ is honored in YOUR body when you confess your sins, pray that the Lord would have mercy on you, and boldly speak your Amen to the Gospel preached into your ears. Christ is honored in YOUR body when you “lift up the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord.”

Christ is honored in YOUR body when – in spite of the whirlwind of death that swirls around you each day – you trust in Him to give you a blessed end. He is honored when you die, trusting in His deliverance. He is honored when YOUR body is raised to life again – showing once and for all, that death has been conquered, and you need not fear.

Dearly beloved – for you to live is Christ, and to die is gain. Christ is honored in your body – in your life, and in your death – as you fear, love, and trust in Him above all things.” Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding, guards your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.