

Dying is Gain

Philippians 1: 20-30 (September 24, 2017)

Philippians 1: 21-26

21For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. 22If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. 23I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; 24but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. 25Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, 26so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

Historical Context

The Apostle Paul wrote these lines during his imprisonment in Rome, probably some time between 61 and 63 C.E. Most likely, Paul's imprisonment was rather a situation of house arrest under military custody that would have allowed him certain privileges, for instance visits of Timothy with whom he penned this letter. But, it is clear that Paul's theological reflections are a response to the imminence of death, which was a potential outcome of this predicament.

Theme: Dying is Gain

Most of our modern culture is dominated by countless efforts of making life more gratifying and fulfilling while eliminating the threat and experience of death. We tend to admire people who succeed in life. There are not many role models for the idea that "dying is gain."

But Paul is absolutely certain that death is not a transition into a state of non-existence; hence, he is not afraid of it. Paul does not doubt at all that death can only be the moment when he will be united with Christ. The test of such faith comes in a situation of impending death, be it in the first century C.E. or more recently. In the spring of 1945, the last message written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer before his execution in a concentration camp in Nazi-Germany demonstrates a similar kind of confidence: "... for me this is the end but also the beginning."

For our perspectives on death, the centeredness on the resurrected Christ can make a big difference. It turns typical human perspectives on life upside down. Attitudes of 'living life to the fullest' suddenly become questionable. The quest for more material possessions suddenly becomes vain.

Gospel Story as a Case Study (Matthew 20:1-16)

The parable also focuses on turning our perspectives upside down. A vintner is desperate to get his crop of grapes harvested. So at the crack of dawn he hires workers, promising a denarius for their trouble. These people work from sun-up to sundown. But all day long the farmer keeps hiring more folks. At the end of the day, everyone got the same pay regardless of when they started work. Our human nature anticipates a quid pro quo situation. We respond ungraciously to our own unanticipated hardships and to grace or generosity shown toward others.