To Die Is Gain

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Scripture: Philippians 1:21–26

Introduction

The famed filmmaker Woody Allen once quipped, “I don’t want to achieve immortality through my work. I want to achieve immortality by not dying.” He said, “I don’t want to live on in the hearts and minds of my fellow countrymen. I want to live on in my apartment.” And for many people, that’s about as good as it gets. They fear death, but they can’t imagine any alternative except just more of this extended existence here and in this place.

Paul envisions something different. He envisions something better. He does not fear death. He welcomes it. In fact, he says he prefers it. And that’s not because of how bad life on earth is. If you recall from last week, we were challenged to remember that for the Christian, life is a supreme blessing, and that we have the opportunity to commune with our Savior, to truly know our Savior, through service to Him and to His body, the church. And that’s a blessed thing. But even so, Paul says that when he really thinks it through, death is to be preferred.

And the word there in verse 21, it’s an accounting term: to die is *gain*. It’s the idea that he’s worked the numbers. He’s done the math, and he cannot deny the result. Death would be a net gain for him. Now, how is that so? And how can we come to the same solution as Paul when we do the math of life? How can we call death gain? Actually, Paul goes further than that, doesn’t he? He doesn’t just call death gain. If you look down to verse 23, look what he says there. He calls death something that is far better than life. He actually uses a double comparative. If you were to translate it literally, it would sound like he had the grammar wrong. It would sound like he said death is “more better.” Not just really good, not even better, but better by far.

That seems backwards, perhaps, to some of you today, perhaps to most of us. That seems counterintuitive. It might even just seem wrong. Don’t we nearly universally speak of death in the exact opposite way? Someone dies and we’ll go up to their family, their friends, and we’ll say, “I’m sorry for your loss.” We speak of losing loved ones. Paul instead speaks of gain. So how can we get his perspective? It’s a perspective that releases us from the at times idolatrous grip that we can have on life and the things in life. It’s a perspective that also will put our apprehensions and our fears of dying to rest.

Well, there are two things we need to realize about death for the Christian if we’re to be able to say what Paul says. And those two things are both found there in verse 23. Look with me again at verse 23. We’re going to see here that for the Christian, there’s something that we leave and there’s someone

that we get. He says, “I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and to be with Christ, for that is far better.” So we want to consider this morning what we leave and who we get.

1. What We Leave

First, what we leave. Paul speaks of leaving something. He says, “My desire is to depart.” And the word in the Greek, it’s an interesting one that evokes some helpful metaphors. It means to unloose. And so, it could be used in nautical terms of casting off from port and setting sail on a journey. It’s also the word that would be used of people who are camping, and they’re untying their tents and they’re tearing down camp from the night and they’re packing up and they’re heading out on the next portion of their adventure. But in either case, Paul presents life here as something that’s just a momentary stay. It’s a brief stopover. And that keeps with the Scriptures’ consistent teaching that this life is a pilgrimage and a sojourn.

Now, what are we departing, exactly? Paul says, “I want to depart.” Depart from what? When the Christian dies, what do they leave behind? What do they place in the rearview mirror? What do they record in the history books, never again to be dredged up, never again to be relived or experienced? What do we depart from? Well, we could say a few things.

Sin

First is obviously sin. And isn’t that alone enough to justify Paul’s conclusion and evaluation that death is gain compared to life, if we leave sin behind? Think of it, friend. Your entire existence from conception, the Scriptures even teach, is lived in a world that is shot through with sin. You live in a world that’s infected and infiltrated with sin. It’s the atmosphere we breathe. We can hardly conceive of life without sin, just as a fish can hardly conceive of life without water. It’s just all around us.

It’s not just all around us. Of course, it’s in us, too. It’s in you. And you have felt it. You have felt it this week. Perhaps you even felt it this morning, right? The rising heat of anger and frustration as the kids aren’t listening, as you’re trying to get them dressed and into the car and ready to get here to church on time. Maybe you have felt the tinge of contempt. You haven’t been able to hold back the eye roll toward your spouse at that one thing that they just do. Maybe you felt the pull of pride, the desire to outperform your peers or to impress your neighbors, or the inability to be happy for others’ successes. There’s of course the lure of lust, that powerful voice that draws you into the darkness of adultery, of pornography, of fornication, and then leaves you there filled with shame but empty of any satisfaction.

What sin might be clinging so closely to you? What do you feel is weighing you down today? There’s the seed of every sin in all of our hearts. And we have watched, we’ve known from personal experience, how those seeds can take root and blossom in our lives to great and disastrous effect. Aren’t you tired of it? Aren’t you ready to leave that behind? There’s a day coming, dear Christian, when your every thought will be bright. Your every motive will be pure, and your every action will be noble and true. Wouldn’t that be far better than life here?

Suffering

We leave sin behind when we die. We depart from suffering as well. Not just sin, but suffering. Why is death gain? Well, because Paul envisions a world in which there’s no more illness, no more cancer, no more wheelchairs, no more birth defects, no more oppression, no more scandal, no more economic

disasters, no more natural calamities. Thomas Watson put it well when he said that the best of a Christian's comfort begins when his life ends, because death brings the removal of all evils and the attainment of all good. The best of a Christian's comfort begins when his life ends.

When we depart this place, it's to arrive in a world where everything works right, where justice reigns supreme, as we come into the immediate presence of Christ, the Judge Himself, who sits at the right hand of God in the throne of glory. And He has put all things under His feet. All wicked things, all evil things, all painful things, it's all under the feet of Jesus. He's in control of it all. And in that world, no one suffers there.

Sadness

And if there's no suffering, that means then, thirdly, there's no more sadness. We leave sadness behind when we depart. Why does Paul desire to depart? To depart sadness. You recall John also speaks of the life to come in this way. What is our great hope? That He will wipe away every tear from our eyes. And death will be no more. Neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain of any kind. For why? For the former things have passed away. The former things are those forlorn things: disappointment, heartache, broken dreams and broken hearts, uncertainty about the future.

That's what the Christian leaves behind when they die. If you are in Christ, the moment you die, you step out of anxiety. You leave worry behind. No more fretting, no more doubting. Can you even imagine that? Just full confidence, just utter security, just perfect peace.

Some of us in this room are laid low by the weight of emotional and mental fears. Some of them are crippling, even for some. Getting out of bed each morning is a victory. And getting to church is a challenge. And being in those social situations that other people find invigorating, some people find them incapacitating. But death for the Christian, for the Christian, death is the moment when you cast all of that off and you leave it all behind and you step into a domain of pure delight, a land of sweet love, a place of peace and calm. How is that not gain? Don't you long for it? Can you imagine never being worried again, ever? Some of you are probably thinking, "What would I do with all that time I'd have?" Imagine the sleep I would get. This is the world that we enter into when we close our eyes to this life.

A Sober Word

But even as we long for it, I need to bring you back to this text and underscore what the Scriptures are not permitting. I want to be very sober here, and sensitive. Paul says death is gain. Yes. And he says that Christians should see that it's better. But he does not say that therefore you can take death into your own hands. The Lord is the one who gives us our life, and it's His prerogative when He takes it away and how He takes it away. So, you can long for it. You cannot force it.

There might be a hurting brother or sister here today who's wondering, if everything that you're saying is so true, why should I even stay here another moment? But that's not where Paul goes. Paul, the one who did the math and said, "Death is gain, and it's far better than life," says, "But I know if I'm here, it's because I have a purpose. There's a calling I must fulfill." Right? You see that in our text, verse 24: "But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account," Philippians. And because "I'm convinced of this, I know I will remain, and I'll continue with you all for your progress and your joy in the faith."

And so, God appoints our days, and He's appointed all of yours. And as long as the Lord gives you breath, you have a calling yet to be fulfilled. That desire that Paul has isn't something by which he concludes, "I'm going now, I must step out of this life." No, rather that desire is what motivates his steps in life, because he knows where he's going. He knows what it'll be like when he gets there. And so, he can bear up under any trouble, any trial in this life, if it means he can gain the next.

The Good Things We Leave Behind

And of course we recognize that by God's grace life is filled with joys, and there's much that we enjoy in life. So we don't want to dismiss that. When we think of what we leave behind, many of us are thinking, there are things I don't want to leave behind. There are people I don't want to leave. And if you were to die today, would you be able to say, "Death is gain"? Or would you maybe protest and say, "Lord, could I please just have a few more years? I would love to see my children graduate high school." Or, "I'd love to see my first grandchild be born." Or, "There's this important project that I've been working on, a ministry I've been a part of, and I just want to bring it to completion. Could you just give me a little more time?" What do we do with that? How do we square Paul's math with the fact that life is not all sin and suffering and sadness? How can he call death gain, but we know that there are good things in life too that we maybe do not want to leave behind?

Well, to that reality, we need to steel ourselves with this truth: that there is not a single good thing that we would lose by death that we will not gain a hundredfold in heaven. And that requires faith to believe, friends, right? Because none of us can die, check heaven out, make sure that it is better than this life, and then come back and say, "Okay, I'm good. I can live my life here as long as the Lord gives me, because I do know it's better there." No, we have to trust this, because we can't go there and test it out. But you have tested the Lord. You've tried Him out, haven't you? Hasn't He proven to you that He is a good Father, that He gives good gifts to his children? Aren't you able to say and recognize that if the Lord has provided for me in this life, even though it's mingled with all kinds of trials and troubles, well, then can't you see how the math works out, that that same God will do abundantly more for you in a world where there are no trials, there are no tribulations, and there are no tears?

That's what you need to believe even as you think about good things you might have to say goodbye to if death were to come. Would you leave behind friends? The least friend in heaven is better than the best friend here on earth. Might you have to leave your family? Oh, it's to join that forever family of God, with the confidence that those who know the Lord will be with you there in heaven. They'll come to you. If you leave meaningful work, it's to have eternally satisfying employment in the service of God. Friend, the greatest pleasure on earth cannot be compared to the smallest pleasure in heaven. The best things in this life are far better in the next.

Far Better Is Only the Beginning

And the "far better" that Paul speaks of, it's not even the best that there is. Paul is talking about, in theology we call it sometimes the intermediate state. Where do our souls go the moment we die? But that's not the end of the story, right? That's far better. But that's not best. What is best? Well, best is on that great day, the last day, when Christ returns and our bodies, united to Him while in the grave, are resurrected and restored, freed from corruption. And so death takes us to Christ immediately. But it is that future day which will bring us home to a new heaven and a new earth with bodies redeemed. Far better is only the beginning.

2. Who We Get

So Paul speaks of what we leave. But that's not the only thing. In fact, it's not even the main thing. The main thing that makes death gain is not what we leave, but who we get. That's the second and final thing this morning. Who we get. Again, it's there in verse 23. Paul says he desires to depart *to be with Christ*. He writes elsewhere, 2 Corinthians 5:6–8, "We know that while we're at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord." He writes of how death brings us into the presence of God in Christ. And that's what Paul is drawn to so powerfully. That's what makes the thought of departing so ultimately sweet and to be desired. It's not that he's going to be freed from the thorn in the flesh. It's not even that he'll be rid of the chains that he wears in prison. It's that he gets to, at last, be in the presence of his Savior.

And no wonder he longs for this. This is what we have all been made for, to commune with God. It's what Adam and Eve had in the garden at the very beginning. But it's what they lost by their sin. And it's what man has needed to recover ever since. And yet our sin is an act that proclaims we actually have very little interest in a relationship with God. Right? When we sin, we're running away from God. We're rebelling against God. We're turning our backs to God. And death confirms that choice. Right? We sin, which says we have little interest in relationship with God. And now death comes in because of sin, and it consigns us to a torturous eternal existence in hell, where we do not have God as our Father or as our Friend, but only and always and forever as our Judge. Truly, truly, the wages of sin is death.

But then the gospel has made it so that now, for the Christian, we say death is but my entrance into glory. How could that happen? How does that happen? How could death, which is the consequence of our sin, be transformed into the consummation of our salvation? It's a marvelous mystery. And this is it. For death to be gain for us, it had to be unspeakable loss for someone else. And that's precisely what it was for Jesus. He took on the wages of sin, the curse we deserve for running away from God. And He did it in order to bring us back to the God that we've run from.

Death for Him is not what Paul is describing here, which is a departure from all that is evil. At the cross, in His death, Jesus actually entered into the full weight of all that is evil and all its effects. We rightly say, as we do in the Apostles' Creed, that on the cross, His death was nothing less than a descent into hell. But friends, this is the transformative power of the love of God: that as He dies and as He descends into hell, He has made it so that now our death is an ascent up into heaven to be with Him.

This is heaven. That's what the gospel gets us. Fellowship with God, communion with God, life with God forever. Jesus said it. "In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, why would I tell you that I go to prepare a place for you?" And He says, "And I do go to prepare a place for you, so that where I am, there you may be also," so that you can be with me. Jesus says, or even David foreshadows this, right? What's that great culmination of Psalm 23? "And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever." Right? The hope of heaven isn't dwelling forever. It's dwelling in the house of the Lord forever. It's being with God forever. His company is what makes all the difference.

If we were not to share heaven with Jesus, it wouldn't be heaven at all. He is what makes heaven so glorious. He is what makes heaven so good. He is what makes heaven gain. Truly, friends, all of heaven is packed into these four words: *to be with Christ*.

This is the Christian's great expectation, that one day we will be with our Savior. We will see God. Titus 2:13 says, "We're waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior." And John tells us that in seeing God, it's such a hope because it fulfills not only our desire, which is to be with God, but our purpose, which is to be like God. First John 3 says that when we see Him, we shall be made like Him. Oh, we get to be with Christ.

Friends, we don't know a whole lot about heaven. The Bible is sort of silent on a lot of the questions we might have about what happens when we die. But it is not silent on this. Heaven is life lived with Jesus. And so, when we meditate upon heaven, we're not doing it correctly if we're not meditating on our Savior. Perhaps you think of heaven, and you know what you think of immediately is no more pacemaker, no more doctor's visits, no more arthritis, pain getting out of bed in the morning. And maybe you think of heaven and really all you yearn for is to see your spouse again, or maybe that child who was taken from you far too early. And here I'm saying no, no, when you think of heaven you need to think of Jesus.

Does that mean those other things don't matter? Are they not also part of the glories of heaven? Of course they are. Jonathan Edwards put it best. He said, "The glorious excellencies and beauty of God will be what forever entertains the mind of the saints, and the love of God will be their everlasting feast." Listen to this. The redeemed will indeed enjoy other things. They will enjoy one another, but that which they shall enjoy in each other or in anything else whatsoever will be what they see of God in them. Edwards is saying that everything that makes the next life so wondrous for the believer is all tied back to Jesus.

Oh yes, we want to see the loved ones that have departed this life, and that's a good and right desire, but we don't even know the half of it. When we see them, it will not be just a reunion, a time to catch up with an old friend. We're going to see a transformed individual, someone we only had a glimpse of here on earth, as their sanctification shone through here and there. No, when we get to glory, we're going to see them made perfect in holiness. And that will be what delights us, to see God in them, to see Christ in them. Everything that makes the next world so wondrous is tied to Jesus, because He is ultimately our heaven.

Application and Warning

And so, if that's really what death brings for the Christian, what does that mean for us right here and right now? Well, it means that the only way you'll ever be able to say *to die is gain* is if you have first said *to live is Christ*. Remember, that's Paul's dilemma here. His dilemma is not really living on earth or living in heaven. His dilemma is serving Christ and seeing Christ. His dilemma is Christ or more Christ. But Christ is at the heart of everything for Paul. And the question is, is He for you? Is He at the center of your being? Is He the center of all your hopes and dreams and desires? If you have not lived for Christ, why should the thought of living with Christ be of any interest to you? How is that good news?

And so, the warning today is that if you are using Jesus just as some sort of safety net to keep you out of hell, but you don't desire actually to commune with Him, you have no interest really in getting to know

Him through His means of grace, or in serving Him, or serving His body, the church. If you are just using Him to get out of hell, well then, let's just say you happened to get to heaven, you would be supremely disappointed, because heaven is Him. If Jesus is not your life now, he won't be your eternity. But if you want to make your death the greatest thing to happen to you in your life, then you need to live for Jesus now, today.

Conclusion

Come to Him today so that you can be with Him forever. And why wouldn't you? How could you not come to a Jesus like this? To the one who is the friend of sinners, the hope of the helpless, a substitute for wretches like me and like you. The one who would be separated from His God so that we could be brought back to ours. The one who descended into hell so we could ascend up to heaven. This is who Jesus is. This is what He has done. And He is who you get in heaven if you have placed your faith in Him.

And brothers and sisters who have placed your faith in Him, you who have set your hope on Him, who have lived your life for Him, then you know that if death gets you more of Him, then it is indeed gain. Can you even wait? At last, to look into those eyes that wept tears for your pitiful condition. To at last see that beautiful face that was struck and punched and beaten and bruised for you. To hold hands that were nailed for you. To lean into a side that was pierced for you. To spend all of your days in the presence of the one who desires, at the very bottom of His infinite heart, nothing less than your eternal happiness and your fullness of joy and your life and your glory. You get to be with Him forever.

At death, dear Christian, you at last enter the immediate presence of the one, the only one, who has only and always perfectly loved you. That cannot be said of anyone else in all the world. And the only one of whom it can be said is in another world. And so, to get Him is one thing. And it is one thing only.

It is a gain.