

Midweek Message

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” (Philippians 1:21 ESV)

It’s so easy for us to get discouraged as we walk through difficult times such as we’re now facing. There’s so much uncertainty regarding this pandemic, so much uncertainty regarding all the unrest and violence that’s occurring, so much uncertainty with our upcoming election and what that’ll mean for the future of our country, that if we only look at what’s happening it certainly can lead us to that place of discouragement and despair. As we learned this past Sunday, we can defeat discouragement and overcome those times of despair when we keep our mind fixed on Jesus the Author and Perfecter of our faith. That’s what the Apostle Paul speaks of in Philippians chapter 1 and verses 12-26 and in this message, I would like to look briefly at what he writes so that we can also be encouraged and not discouraged.

First, we can defeat discouragement when we remember God is in control. We see this in verses 12-14 where he tells us,

“I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.”

The Apostle Paul seemed to look for the good that God was doing in any and every situation instead of the troubles he was facing. Here he was in prison, still witnessing, but also see God at work in others who now had to take up the slack, as we say, because God had removed him from the ministry with which he was previously involved. He could have greatly lamented his situation and thought everything was going to fall apart. However, instead he looked at what God was now doing through others as they took the reigns and carried on the ministry. Sometimes when things happen that we don’t understand, like this current pandemic, we simply need to remember that God is doing exactly what’s needed in this time and this place. Our God is sovereign and will do whatever is necessary for His glory, our good, and redemption of His people. If that means a pandemic then so be it. If this brings us closer to the return of Jesus, then let’s trust in Him.

Second, we can defeat discouragement when we respond with humility to criticism. When we notice verses 15-18a we see this character trait being expressed through his life.

“Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.”

There were many believers, and even some leaders of the church, who said that the Apostle Paul was in prison because he wasn’t doing it the right way. It’s what often happens with sinful people when things aren’t as they might believe they should be. What usually happens is some sort of character assassination where those who think they know what’s better rail against those who are experiencing difficulties and troubles. However, the Apostle Paul, once again, looks for the good that God is bringing out of a very tough situation. His life was focused on the gospel and even if some preached with malintent toward him, if Jesus was being proclaimed, he was encouraged. You know, we need to have a similar perspective with all that’s going on in our world and in our country. I’ve read numerous articles and letters and emails of how God is using this time and these crises to change lives and bring people to faith in Jesus. People today are looking for hope and many are going online to find that hope.

Third, we can defeat discouragement when we resolve to live for Christ. That's the main focus of this passage in Philippians. In verses 18b-21 we're told,

"Yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

When the Apostle Paul contemplated what might happen to him, he didn't become discouraged or fall into depression because he knew, with absolute confidence, that he belonged body and soul, in life and in death, to God. His faith, his trust, was in his Savior and the finished work Jesus had accomplished through the cross which completely paid for all his sins. Listen, there's no reason for believers become discouraged with life or even with death. We belong to the Lord and whether we live or whether we die we're His forever. Nothing can change that; nothing can take that away from us. We're God's people and we'll forever be God's people. All the Apostle Paul desired, and all we should also desire, is that we'll find sufficient strength in God's grace so that we move through life's troubles in such a way as God is glorified and others are blessed. Since God is sovereign and in control of all that transpires, we can, with great confidence, know that everything will, in some way, whether in this life or the next, work out for our overall good.

Finally, we can defeat discouragement when we realize our usefulness to the church. This is his concluding thought regarding his life being lived for Christ. In verses 22-26 he writes,

"If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again."

I think we all know that being in heaven with Jesus would be far better than continuing on in this sinful and cursed world. The Apostle Paul expresses that truth quite plainly, doesn't he? However, his real concern wasn't about what he might desire but instead was about what the blessing and benefit he could bring to the church. He wasn't focused on himself and his current troubles but upon what those around him needed. He knew he had gifts, physical and spiritual, that would benefit the believers around him and so he desired to continue using his gifts for the furtherance of the gospel in the lives of those to whom he could minister. In fact, he speaks elsewhere in this letter of guards in Caesar's household who came to faith through his ministry. You see, the mission and ministry of the church, made up of individuals never changes. Only the means and methods have varied depending on the time in which we live. We all have a calling to serve the Lord in every way that we can and with every ability we've been given. Whether it's in times of great prosperity, when things are going well, or even in times of crises, such as we're currently facing today, we still push on to minister to those around us, whether they happen to be believers, our brothers and sisters in Jesus, or non-believers who simply need to hear the great message of the gospel.

I know it's been a struggle for us as we've continued on through this time of uncertainty. We can become very discouraged and even fall into the pit of despair when we look at all that's happening in our world, our country, and our lives. God has a purpose, a great and glorious purpose, and we who belong to Him will be blessed in the end. We just need to keep our eyes on Him.

Pastor Mark