

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice,¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.²⁰ I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.²¹ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith,²⁶ so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me. (Philippians 1:18b-26)

To be a Christian is to be Torn

A few months after my oldest child was born, I taught a Bible class about what happens when we die. I began by asking a question, a question that I would like all of you to think about: what do you have to live for? If you died today, what things from your life would you miss out on, even in heaven? I answered that question then for myself at that moment in my life. My daughter was just at the age when she would smile when you came to pick her up. When a baby smiles, their face just lights up. A certain number of those smiles were for me. If I had died eighteen years ago, I would've missed out on so many of those smiles. That common parental experience points out a reality of the Christian life: we are torn between heaven and earth. We have things that pull us toward this life – God pleasing things that are important to our lives and our faith. But if we have faith in Christ, we also feel a pull toward heaven. Every Christian experiences that dilemma to some degree. It's part of who we are here. My friends, **to be a Christian is to be torn.**

I.

St. Paul says the same thing to us this morning, because he experienced it just like we do. **To be a Christian is to be torn.** On the one hand, **we desire to depart and be with Christ.** The smiles of all of my children have been one of the great joys of my life. But even though I would not have had those smiles if I had died eighteen years ago, in heaven, I would not have felt cheated at all. I would have felt that living with Christ was better.

That's the point St. Paul is making in our epistle lesson for today. When Paul wrote these words, he was in prison for preaching the gospel. He was three or more years into an unjust sentence. He made a statement that every one of us should adopt as our personal motto: **For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.** As long as we live here, our life is all about Christ – what he promises and what he calls us to do and how we can support and share in the preaching of the gospel. And we trust that when the day comes, we will go home and be with him. That is faith. Right after I arrived at my last church, a member of the congregation took me to see her mother. Her mother was quite elderly. Her husband was long dead. She was in constant pain and she was sad and lonely. In our very first visit, she asked, "Pastor, why am I still here?" Before I could say anything, her daughter blurted out, "Mom, don't say that!" But her mother wanted to go home to heaven. That statement showed her faith in Christ and her desire to lay down her burdens and be folded into her Savior's arms.

St. Paul said, **"I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far."** Like that elderly Christian woman in Muskegon, St. Paul wanted to die because he knew that going home to heaven would be better by far. In truth, all Christians want to die. Every year, I use this passage in catechism class and I ask the kids if they want to die. I point out to them that as we get older, as life gets harder, as we hurt and struggle and long to be free, this desire becomes clearer and sharper. But every Christian has it. Do you feel it? Obviously, we can understand why that sick and lonely, elderly woman felt that way. We can understand how St. Paul who had already spent years in prison could feel that way. But do you feel that way? Do you want to die and go home to heaven when you're a child? When you're a newlywed? When you're at the top of your career and your kids are growing and you're making your mark on life?

The truth is, if you are a Christian, you do have that desire. Inside the heart of every believer, God has created a New Man. That New Man wants to go home and be with the Lord. Every believer understands that going to be with Jesus is better than prison, or poor health, or loneliness. But it's even better than the best this life has to offer, because when we go home to heaven, we are free from sin. The Old Man, the part of us that

likes sinning, the selfish, rebellious part of us, will be gone. So we won't feel temptation or lust or greed anymore. We won't want to sin anymore. We will rejoice in God and all that he does for us. And of course, when we reach heaven we will be free from all that sin does to us – from pain and sorrow, from sadness and loss, from loneliness and conflict. And we will see Jesus every day. We will be surrounded by all the believers of all times, and we will be perfect in our fellowship before Christ. We will revel in praising Jesus for all eternity. Yes, we are going to think that singing in the choir is the best, most fun, most enjoyable thing we could possibly be doing.

So that means you want to join the choir right now, and practice for heaven, right? I'm sure that some of you do love to sing hymns. But the fact that that statement provokes a chuckle shows that while we're here, we don't always realize how much we want to be there. We still have that Old Man in our hearts. He's the reason so many of us don't even open our hymnals on Sunday morning. He's the reason that we might be afraid to die. That Old Man is deeply invested in this life and he doesn't really believe in the life to come. For large parts of our lives, the idea that heaven is better is something that we say and believe, but it's a pretty theoretical concept. It's only through years of struggle with sin and hardship that most of us reach the point that we can say, "I desire to depart and be with Christ which is better by far." But even if we aren't ready to make that emphatic statement yet, the believer inside us still knows that it's true. He still longs to go to heaven and be with Jesus.

How do we grow in that desire? By growing in our faith. St. Paul started this section by rejoicing that the gospel was preached. He knew that the message about Jesus is what makes us look forward to heaven. Jesus loved us before the world began. The Son of God took on human flesh and lived and died and rose again to take away all our sins and then he ascended into heaven to prepare a place there for us. Now, all things in heaven are ready. When the time is right, Jesus will set us free from this life and take us home to heaven where we will wait for the day when our bodies will rise and the earth will be remade. Already at the moment that we leave this life, we will have the perfect joy of heaven.

II.

St. Paul was torn by that promise. Why? Because he also had things here that he loved, things that God had given him to do. Don't we all understand that point? When I first told that story about my daughter's smiles, I did not want to leave them behind. I didn't want to miss out on the children that God hadn't given us yet. I didn't want to leave my wife alone to raise them. God called me to be her husband and their father and I felt like I had important work to do before I entered heaven. I still feel that way. Don't you? That is a perfectly Christian feeling. But while we stay and do that work, we still feel the tug of heaven. As we grow in our faith, that pull gets stronger. **To be a Christian is to be torn while we remain until our work here is done.**

Paul said, "**It is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.**" God had called him to be an apostle. But it wasn't about him and his ego. The church still needed him and for as long as he lived here, he proclaimed the good news about Jesus. Now, I'm sure he wondered sometimes about how God was using him to do that. Four or five years in prison seems like a waste of human resources to us. But people streamed to him while he was in chains. And he wrote multiple books of the Bible while he was there, works that God has been using for two thousand years to build up his people. Paul couldn't see how that was going to play out, but God had work for him to finish. It was up to God to decide when Paul's work was done. All that is still true for us today. Even when life hurts and we want to go home, we don't get to speed up the process. We have to let God be God. He may still have things for us to do that aren't obvious in our suffering and longing.

God calls us to be husbands and wives. God calls us to be children and parents. He gives us work to do in those roles until he calls us home. I think it's easy for us to feel like we have to discharge those duties before we go home. But never lose sight of the desire to go home. God does sometimes call us to leave before we think that work is done. He promises to take care of our spouse or our parents or our children.

But there is another area in which God has given responsibilities to all of us: the Church. God calls us all to be a part of his work, in our local congregation and throughout the world. Do we feel the same pull to work for our congregation that Paul felt? God has given all of us the opportunity to be a blessing to Peace Lutheran Church, even if we aren't pastors or teachers. Do we rejoice in that work? Do we rejoice in being part of preaching the gospel here? Everything we do for our congregation does contribute to that preaching. Even coming on our Arbor Day and doing maintenance and cleaning contributes to making this a place where

the gospel is preached. Do we feel that we personally have work to do here? Or is there nothing here that pulls us? Do we shrug our shoulders and figure someone else will take care of it?

Sadly, in the Church today, it's easy for us to feel pulled to do the work God has given in our families but to feel nothing about the work God has called us to do in his Church. That's just sin, my friends. If that is your sin, then you need to repent. You need to think about what Paul meant when he said that he was confident that **“Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.”** If Christ is not exalted in your life by the way you use your body to serve him, at home and at work, and yes, at church, then you need to recognize that lack of commitment to God. The Christian life is trust and service. The Christian who makes no effort to serve God denies his faith. The Christian who feels no need to serve his fellow believer deserves nothing but death and hell.

But Jesus died for that Christian, too. That's the good news that Paul wanted preached by his life and by his death. That's the good news that he rejoiced in, even in prison. That's the good news that gave him the hope of heaven and the confidence that he could serve Jesus here in all that he did. Jesus died for you. God has forgiven you for not wanting to serve him, for not helping your congregation proclaim the gospel, for not taking seriously his call to serve your family and your congregation and the Church at large. Jesus took all that sin away. It is gone forever. You will not see hell. Now that you are forgiven, give glory to God with your life. Serve your family as a child of God – spouse, children, parents. And contribute to the work God calls us to do to proclaim the gospel. Give of your time. Give of your talents. Give of the financial resources God has given you. Do it all to give glory to him.

The Christian life truly is suspended between this world and the next. While we live here, we wait and we hope for the life to come. The more we struggle with here, the more we want to go home. Through the gospel, God keeps our trust in that promise of eternal life alive. But until he decides that it's time for us to go home, he gives us all service to do here. It isn't all in this building, not by any stretch of the imagination. But it is all for the good of others. Trust in God's promise that in Christ he will bring you home. Until that day comes, do the work he sets before you in your family, in your congregation and in every walk of life. Amen.