

Introduction: We continue with our 2020 Reformation Bible notes, turning to the important subject of the believer's confidence against *the last enemy* – death itself. As Luther's famous hymn says: "For still our ancient foe, does seek to work us woe..." – first by killing our souls while we live and then one day claiming our bodies as his own. Make no mistake. Just as every sin aims at the highest possible power over us, so every temptation from Satan is meant to bring us down forever in death – first the death of our souls, and then our bodies. What then is the shield of hope that Scripture gives us in the face of death - so that we might be enabled to say with Luther, "we tremble not for him, for lo, his doom is sure, one little word shall fell him." Let's look at Philippians 1:19ff to find out.

**Monday: read Philippians 1:12-21.** Here Paul gives the first answer to the Devil's deadly threats, (namely), to remind us of the unbreakable physical as well as spiritual bond which Christ forges with each of His children! We see evidence of Paul's *confidence* in this bond when he declares in Philippians 1:12-19 that even his imprisonment, (and eventual death as a prisoner of the Romans), cannot hinder God's purposes for his life. He knows that he will be delivered and even expects in verse 20 that Christ will be magnified in his body, not only in life – but even in death!

In other words, Jesus Christ is so close to our humanity (because He Himself took on our flesh) that no one can break His grip on our physical lives. Though we fall again and again into the 'Sloughs of Despond' in this world, He as our Help is there (not only to point out the stepping stones by which we can stand and walk upon God's promises) but to take us in His iron grip and pull us out of the miry pit! He will not abandon our bodies to the hand of Satan... He will not listen to any bargain of the evil one, as if Satan could say to our Savior, "take their souls... just give their bodies to me."

Prayer: Thank you that you care for us body and soul, Lord Jesus, and in your risen and ascended humanity you now have an omnipotent compassion when the Devil seeks to destroy our bodies. LOOK DOWN FROM YOUR THRONE OF GRACE, LORD JESUS... YOU KNOW WHAT IT IS LIKE TO BE TEMPTED AS WE ARE! Bind the evil one and rescue us right where we are in our fallen flesh. Look back, Lord, and see how many times you have rescued our bodies before. Please do not give up on those bodies now. Amen.

**Tuesday: read Philippians 1:20-21.** Paul speaks of Christ being, "exalted in his body, whether in life or death." In other words, he believes that to live or to die will be fruitful and beneficial. Why? Because to live or to die is Christ. This is an amazingly potent and terse declaration of Christ-centered faith in verse 21. There actually is no verb 'is' in the sentence, which could read (as Calvin paraphrases), "For me to live or to die - GAIN! Because to live or to die – CHRIST!" Christ is Paul's life and Christ is Paul's victor over death. In both life and death, then, Christ will be with the Apostle, at the center of his experience!

Perhaps you may with me confess right here that not even living (let alone dying) appears very triumphant for you right now. Because of the current pandemic and political chaos in our land, life appears to be more deadly and dangerous than ever, and dying appears to be more fearful as the news brings daily death tolls from this mysterious virus. How does Paul rise above?

Well, here is one practical reason, which Rev. William Harrell gives in his January 2003 Bible notes on Philippians 1:

"For to the apostle, Christ gains glory and leads the trophies of His grace to victory in life and in death. Paul had seen this, for example, in the case of Stephen's death, at which the martyr deacon, being full of the Holy Spirit, saw the glory of God and Jesus standing at God's right hand (Acts 7:55-60). Never had Paul seen a man die so triumphantly. Thus, Paul reckoned that for him to live would be continued service for Christ, while for him to die would be his gaining personal transformation unto perfection and enjoyment of the nearer presence of his Lord."

Meditate and Pray: Let us give thanks this Thanksgiving season for faith witnesses and even martyrs who victoriously embraced suffering and death because of the reality of Jesus Christ in their lives. Isn't this what hymn # 578 teaches us in our red Trinity hymnal?

*The Son of God goes forth to war,  
A kingly crown to gain;  
His blood red banner streams afar!  
Who follows in His train?  
Who best can drink His cup of woe,  
Triumphant over pain,  
Who patient bears his cross below,  
He follows in His train!*

*That martyr first, whose eagle eye  
Could pierce beyond the grave;  
Who saw his Master in the sky,  
And called on Him to save.  
Like Him, with pardon on His tongue,  
In midst of mortal pain,  
He prayed for them that did the wrong:  
Who follows in his train?*

*A glorious band, the chosen few  
On whom the Spirit came;  
Twelve valiant saints, their hope they knew,  
And mocked the cross and flame.  
They met the tyrant's brandished steel,  
The lion's gory mane;  
They bowed their heads the death to feel:  
Who follows in their train?*

*A noble army—men and boys,  
The matron and the maid,  
Around the Savior's throne rejoice,  
In robes of light arrayed.  
They climbed the steep ascent of Heav'n,  
Through peril, toil and pain!  
O God! to us may grace be giv'n,  
To follow in their train!*

**Wednesday: read Philippians 1:21-26.** Paul's departure to be with Christ in verse 23 is to him "far better" because he was enduring the imprisonment which may well have led to his death: (There is a possibility that Paul was released according to his hopes in verses 24-26 and able to minister among the churches again, but it was at the hands of the Romans whether by one long imprisonment or two briefer ones that he in the end died) - a death which capped off a life of severe suffering for the sake of the Gospel. As Bill Harrell points out in his notes:

"When the crises are most severe, the dangers mortal, and the darkness its blackest, it is comforting for believers to know that Christ uses even those most grim tools to serve for His glory and the good of His people."

Meditate and Pray: "Lord, help us to make good use of our times or pain, affliction and even heart-break. May such trials cause us to long for Christ all the more. Amen." Sing about such a longing to depart and be with Christ, using hymn # 546:

*The sands of time are sinking,  
The dawn of Heaven breaks;  
The summer morn I've sighed for—  
The fair, sweet morn awakes:  
Dark, dark hath been the midnight,  
But dayspring is at hand,  
And glory, glory dwelleth  
In Immanuel's land.*

*The King there in His beauty,  
Without a veil is seen:  
It were a well spent journey,  
Though seven deaths lay between:  
The Lamb with His fair army,  
Doth on Mount Zion stand,  
And glory—glory dwelleth  
In Immanuel's land.*

*O Christ, He is the fountain,  
The deep, sweet well of love!  
The streams on earth I've tasted  
More deep I'll drink above:  
There to an ocean fullness  
His mercy doth expand,  
And glory, glory dwelleth  
In Immanuel's land.*

*The bride eyes not her garment,  
But her dear bridegroom's face;  
I will not gaze at glory  
But on my king of grace.  
Not at the crown He giveth  
But on His piercèd hand;  
The Lamb is all the glory  
Of Immanuel's land.*

**Thurs/Fri: read Philippians 1:22-26.** It is important to avoid an idealistic, simplistic, or even ‘Super-Spiritualized’ misinterpretation of the longings which tore Paul in two. Yes, he longed to depart to be with Christ, which is far better. Yes, he also longed to see more spiritual fruit in the Philippians and recognized that might mean his life extended on earth for the sake of further Christian service in the church (verses 24-26).

But to say that these are the only longings which perplex the saint facing death is not true. True, there ought to be a longing in each believer for the nearer presence of Christ which comes after death. But there may also be the desire to remain to see unsaved loved ones come to Christ. There can also be perplexities surrounding what appears to be an “unfinished life” - which can make death quite tragic, even for the believer. Just this week I am praying for a fellow pastor who fell off a ladder and appears to have catastrophic brain damage. Surely his whole congregation is struggling with what seems like an untimely accident and possible death. In fact, there are many believers who pray fervently for their loved ones to be spared the ravages of a terminal disease, but who go through the dark valley of death instead. At such times, all of us ask the question, “Where is God in all this suffering and loss?”

At just such times we learn that *trusting God* is not a matter of feelings or reliance on past religious experiences. It is an act of *the will*, whereby we cry out to God to honor His promises in our lives. We must also remember that our Savior Jesus is especially active to guard our hearts and souls when we experience just these kinds of grief. He is always concerned to “pray for us that our faith will not fail” – even when we are being sifted by sadness, sickness doubt and despair (Luke 22:32).

Meditate and Pray: Let us give thanks that Jesus was *truly forsaken* in death on the Cross in order that *we might never be!* Even the loneliest times of sorrow and dying, we can sing of this fact in hymn # 250:

<i>Throned upon the awful tree,</i>	<i>Lord, should fear and anguish roll,</i>
<i>King of grief, I watch with thee.</i>	<i>Darkly o'er my sinful soul,</i>
<i>Darkness veils thine anguished face:</i>	<i>You, who once were thus bereft</i>
<i>None its lines of woe can trace.</i>	<i>That Your own might ne'er be left,</i>
<i>None can tell what pangs unknown</i>	<i>Teach me by that bitter cry</i>
<i>Hold You silent and alone.</i>	<i>In the gloom to know You nigh.</i>

**Further Reflection:** Here are the words of Martin Luther as a grieving father, as he poignantly asks his friend to give God the praise for his daughter’s passing which is he is temporarily unable in his grief to give:

*“I and my wife should joyfully give thanks for such a felicitous departure and blessed end by which our daughter Magdalena escaped the power of the flesh, the world, the Turk and the devil; yet the force of our natural love is so great that we are unable to do this without crying and grieving in our hearts, or even without experiencing death ourselves. The features, the words and the movements of the living and dying daughter remain deeply engraved in our hearts. Even the death of Christ... is unable to take this all away as it should. You, therefore, my dear friend, give thanks to God **in our stead**. For indeed God did a great work of grace when he glorified our flesh in this way. Magdalena had (as you know) a mild and lovely disposition and was loved by all... God grant me and all my loved ones and all my friends such a death - or rather such a life.”*

**Sat/Sun: read Philippians 1:21 and Acts 26:12-16.** While we recognize Paul’s desire to depart and be with Christ as a longing to be delivered from the confines of imprisonment, we must not think his hope to see Jesus was mere escapism – as if thoughts of heaven were really just Paul’s coping mechanism to deal with life’s pain. This of course, was Marx’s slander – that Christianity’s claims to eternal life and heavenly glory shared with Jesus Christ were really just an “opiate of the people” to dull their senses to their present suffering.

Rather, Paul's great hope that he would one day soon "depart to be with Christ" was rooted in the real-life event of beholding the risen Christ on the Damascus road. As Pastor Geoff Thomas put it, preaching on Philippians 1:22-26:

"The greatest reason the apostle believed in life after death was his never to be forgotten encounter with the risen Lord Jesus Christ as he was on his way to arrest and imprison followers of Jesus Christ. This is how he recounts the incident to King Agrippa: "On one of these journeys I was going to Damascus with the authority and commission of the chief priests. About noon, O king, as I was on the road, I saw a light from heaven, brighter than the sun, blazing around me and my companions. We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads.' Then I asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting,' the Lord said. 'Now get up and stand on your feet. I have appeared to you to appoint you as a servant and as a witness of what you have seen of me and what I will show you'" (Acts 26:12-16).

Meditate and Pray: Give thanks that all our hopes of future comfort and eternal life with the risen Christ are based on real events of history. Paul, after all, was not the only one to bear witness to the appearance of Christ on that road. His companions in his travels also experienced the awe hearing the voice of Jesus Christ, as well as being thrown to the ground by the sheer majesty of Christ's presence. Though these companions could not understand this appearance to Paul, they fell to the ground in mute testimony that they were in the presence of God! Compare the different accounts of Paul's encounter with the risen Christ in Acts 26:13-14; Acts 22:9 & Acts 9:7).

Sing about the power of Christ's Resurrection, and those who with Him now in Heaven bear witness to the truth of His Ascension to God's right hand, using the following hymn by Isaac Watts (# 544):

*How bright these glorious spirits shine!  
Whence all their white array?  
How came they to the blissful seats  
Of everlasting day?*

*Now with triumphal palms they stand  
Before the throne on high,  
And serve the God they love amidst  
The glories of the sky.*

*Hunger and thirst are felt no more,  
Nor suns with scorching ray;  
God is their sun, whose cheering beams  
Diffuse eternal day.*

*Midst pastures green He'll lead His flock  
Where living streams appear;  
And God the Lord from every eye  
Shall wipe off every tear.*

*Lo! these are they from sufferings great  
Who came to realms of light;  
And in the blood of Christ have washed  
Those robes which shine so bright.*

*His presence fills each heart with joy,  
Tunes every mouth to sing:  
By day, by night, the sacred courts  
With glad hosannas ring.*

*The Lamb, which dwells amidst the throne  
Shall over them still preside,  
Feed them with nourishment divine,  
And all their footsteps guide.*

*To Him who sits upon the throne,  
The God whom we adore,  
And to the lamb that once was slain,  
Be glory evermore!*