

November 1, 2020

THE HEART OF ONE WHO LOVES CHRIST AND HIS CHURCH

Philippians 1:18b-26

(3 of 13 in a series through Philippians)

I sat in my car thinking, “I want to know the Bible better.” That thought kept running through my mind. I can’t think of a time in my life when I felt a greater desire to know Scripture. And it wasn’t because I’d just been told I should know the Bible better. I hadn’t. I had just finished listening to a biographical sketch of Jonathan Edwards. There were no commands to know the Bible better in that lecture that I remember. Not once had I heard a warning about the danger of not knowing the Bible well. The sketch was almost entirely descriptive. It just told about Edwards’ life and habits.

But it was when the narrator began describing Edwards’ habits of studying the Bible that I found my soul being arrested. I felt as if something so attractive was being held in front of me that my heart was yearning for it. I’m sure you’ve felt that before. Maybe you see a married couple who love one another well and find your heart drawn out to long for the same or someone serving to the point that what may have once appeared as something unappealing was now something you deeply desired to do. This reality that seeing something demonstrated in someone is as—if not more—powerful as being instructed to do something has led to the declaration that sometimes things are “more easily caught than taught.” What we mean of course is that it’s easier to be moved to do something and understand how to do it by seeing someone else do it than it is to just be told how to do it. We’re motivated by example.

And that’s why I think Philippians 1:18b-26 is such a powerful text. Perhaps more than any other section in Paul’s letter, he invites the reader into his heart to see how he wrestles with issues, what motivates him, what his desires are, and where his hopes lie. And what we see as we get a glimpse at these things is a man whose love for Jesus and the gospel is so deep and so pervasive that I don’t think it’s possible for us to get a look at Paul’s heart and be unaffected. So my prayer this morning is that we catch, if you will, Paul’s hope, desire, and motivation that we see in these verses and that we walk out with our hearts arrested by this picture of what should drive us and shape us. So let’s look at each of these aspects. First, we see Paul’s hope—that Christ will be honored.

Paul’s hope: that Christ will be honored

I cut us off last week in the middle of verse 18. Paul had just been discussing that though individuals were preaching the gospel, thinking it would afflict him by drawing honor, praise, and glory that Paul could have longed for, they had misjudged his heart. He didn’t preach in hopes of getting these things for himself. He simply loved seeing the gospel go forth. Therefore, far from causing him affliction by preaching the gospel from vain motives, Paul found himself rejoicing simply in the fact that the gospel was being preached. So, he had ended with the phrase, “and in that I rejoice.”

Well, he begins the next paragraph with the rest of verse 18, saying, “Yes, and I will rejoice.” In other words, he’s telling us that the rejoicing he’s doing will continue on because he foresees even more reason for rejoicing. What exactly is that? He tells us, beginning in verses 19-21. Here’s what he writes: “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.”

Now let’s take our time and work through the details of this because they can be confusing, but if we can see them clearly, it is quite powerful. First off, when Paul notes his confidence that this will turn out for his “deliverance,” we might be tempted to think Paul means his deliverance from prison. That is, Paul could be saying that he’s rejoicing because he feels confident that he’s about to get out of prison. But I don’t think that’s what he’s saying.

First, I don’t think that’s what he’s saying because when he goes out to explain what his “deliverance” would look like he speaks of it in terms of that happening whether he lives or dies, that is, whether he is released after his trial or sentenced to death. And, well, if he’s contemplating the possibility that he’ll be soon executed, it doesn’t make sense to think that by “deliverance” he means his absolute confidence that he’s about to be released from prison.

There’s another reason, though, that I don’t think he is talking about his deliverance from prison. The word translated “deliverance” here is the word Paul uses to refer to “salvation” or “vindication.” In other words, I think he’s got a bigger vision than potentially being delivered from prison. I think he’s declaring that he believes the Lord will preserve him during this time so that Paul won’t shrink back or be ashamed of the gospel when the time comes for his trial and his fate to be decided. In other words, the Lord will continue to vindicate his saving work in Paul until the end. Here’s why I think that.

First, he mentions that he thinks this will turn out for his deliverance (or salvation) through their prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ. That is, he’s dependent on their prayers and the Spirit’s empowerment for this result he’s hoping for. What result though? Well, he says, “as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed but that with full courage.” The result he’s looking to—and believes will happen—is that he won’t be ashamed but instead will have courage. Courage for what? Again, he says it is his eager expectation and hope that “Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.” Now here it is.

Paul is saying that he’s confident that the Lord will preserve him as one whom he has saved. God will not let him go but bring about full deliverance/salvation. Specifically the Lord—working through the Philippians’ prayers and the empowerment of the Spirit—will give Paul courage not to be ashamed of the gospel but to show the worth of Christ. And Christ’s worth will be demonstrated whether he is released from prison and lives or is sentenced to an execution and dies. If Paul is released and lives, then Christ will be honored because Paul’s life is all about Jesus. He speaks of him, serves him, loves him, and obeys him in all of life. That’s why he can

say, “For to me to live is Christ.” However, if he’s sentenced to be executed and dies, then Christ will be honored because even in the face of death Paul didn’t shrink back or become ashamed but counted death as a gain because he will have been obedient to Christ to the point of death and now gets to be with Christ.

So, let’s just take note of Paul’s hope here. He’s not sitting in prison eagerly hoping above all else that he’ll be released. Nor is he sitting in prison thinking, “If I get executed I’m eagerly hoping that it’s not too painful.” No, his great hope and expectation and longing is that Christ will be honored, that Paul will not be ashamed and shrink back but will be courageously willing to die for Christ or be released and live for Christ. That is his utmost concern—that he would bring honor and not shame to Jesus.

Isn’t that impressive—and convicting! Once again, it’s worth asking ourselves if our hopes and longings match Paul’s. When we pray is our great concern that Christ will give us courage by his Spirit so that he never shrink back but magnify him—whether in our living or dying? I don’t think is this is a picture of some kind of super Christianity that Paul is picturing here. This is just Christianity. We have been saved to declare his excellencies. That is our aim. Our hope should be that Christ will be magnified above all else in our lives.

But as impressive as this is, we see more with Paul. We also see his desire.

Paul’s desire: to be with Christ

Having just stated that his wants Christ to be honored, whether by his life or death, Paul now begins contemplating those realities. And this begins for him an exercise in reflection. After all, Paul has no choice over what will ultimately be decided at his trial. And there’s no question that if he were presented with an option to renounce Christ and live he would choose rather to hold fast to his confession and die. But he begins contemplating and wondering if the choice were up to him—if Nero perhaps were to say to Paul, “I can let you go and continue with your life or I can execute you as one who will not back away from your confession that Jesus is Lord” —what would he choose?

And what he initially concludes is that it’s a really hard choice. Now my guess is that if we’re honest, we would find this conclusion a bit shocking. Execution versus release from prison and permission to live life freely hardly seems like a tough fight to figure out which is preferable. Yet listen to what Paul says in 22-23a, “If I am to live on in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two.” Again, we want to say, “What?” What could possibly explain this? Well, Paul tells us. He says, ‘My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better’ (v. 23b).

You see, the passion of Paul’s life is Jesus. He loves Jesus, serves Jesus, and lives for Jesus. He wants Jesus magnified in all aspects of his life. And the earnest desire of his heart is to be with Jesus even more closely than he is now. Obviously, we live our lives in the Lord’s presence. He is with us and through his Spirit indwells us. But as close and weighty as we feel the Lord’s

presence, even the points in our lives where we are most aware of his presence pales in comparison to the reality of actually being in the Lord's presence in a way that we will be at our deaths or his return. Consequently, because Paul longs to be present with the Lord so much he tells us that the reason the decision is a difficult one is because his deep desire is to be with Christ in a greater way, and death would bring that.

Now, of course, this doesn't entail that any believer should take his or her own life. The Scripture forbids murder, and that includes not only the murder of another but of oneself as well. But it is not morbid for any believer to recognize that death for us means departing from this world where Satan, sin, and death reign and going to be with the Lord.

One of the most powerful examples of this understanding comes from Martin Luther as he wrote a letter to his dad. Luther received news that his father had become quite ill. He'd wanted his dad to move to Wittenberg, but his dad's condition was too bad, and he was too weak to travel. So Martin wrote to him in February of 1530 before his dad died a mere three months later. And in the letter Luther is comforting his father, talking about how quickly we are transferred from this life to the next in death, and then he writes, "If it is his divine will that you should postpone that better life and continue to suffer with us in this troubled and unhappy vale of tears, to see and hear sorrow and help other Christians to suffer and conquer, he will give you the grace to accept all this willingly and obediently."¹

Now, don't you expect that to go the other way? Don't you expect Luther to say, "If the Lord wills that you die, he'll give you grace to accept this"? But that's not what he says. Rather, he says that if the Lord wills that you live and "postpone that better life," then he'll give you grace to accept that willingly and obediently. I think Luther saw what Paul saw. To depart and be with Christ is better. Paul's desire is to be with Christ.

And one of the things this challenges me to do (and I think should challenge all of us to do) is to seek to walk so closely with our Lord in this life and get enough of a taste of the glory of living in his presence that we long even more to know his presence in the life to come. Paul knew that, and I think that's why he could say without any hesitation that to depart and be with Christ was better in his mind than continuing on. Again, what a challenge! Paul's desire was to be with Christ.

And finally we see Paul's motivation.

Paul's motivation: the good of the church

After Paul notes his desire to be with Christ he does say that there is a strong weight on the other side of the scales, though. He writes, "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

¹ Martin Luther, *Letters of Spiritual Counsel*, 31-32.

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” (vv. 24-26).

What Paul is saying here is that as he contemplates these hypothetical choices, what he desires for himself—to depart and be with Christ—isn’t enough to tip the scales. The reality is that he wants to do what is best for the church. And he acknowledges that if he is released from prison and is able to visit the Philippians and encourage them face-to-face, that would be incredibly helpful to them.

Now, it’s a little difficult to know what to do with the language of verse 25. When Paul says, “I know that I will remain and continue with you all,” does that mean that he is certain he’s going to get out of prison? Did he get some kind of revelation from the Lord that he will be released? Well, scholars are about perfectly split in answering this question. Some say, “Absolutely,” and they point to Paul’s use of the word “know.” Paul *knows* that he will not die but will get out and get to see them again. So, why make this harder than it is? Take the words at face value. Now, one thing tricky here is that we know that Paul was eventually killed under the Roman emperor Nero, and so this group proposes that Paul must have been released from prison, went around continuing to preach and plant churches again, and then was eventually imprisoned again and was executed by the Roman emperor.

Others, however, say that we shouldn’t see Paul speaking as certainly here. They’ll note that the future tense in Greek often “signals expectation” rather than certainty, and verse 25 would be better translated, “I know that I expect to remain and expect to continue with all of you.”² This group will also note that a chapter later in 2:17, Paul speaks of the possibility of him being “poured out as a drink offering,” which is the kind of language he uses in 2 Timothy when speaking of his coming death. So, they argue, if Paul is still entertaining the possibility he could die, then we shouldn’t understand him to be writing with certainty in verse 25 that he’ll get out of prison and come see the Philippians again.

So which is it? Is Paul writing with certainty that he’s getting out of prison or simply saying that this seemed like a good expectation as he contemplated the Lord’s possible will for him? Well, I don’t know, and I’m not sure it matters. The reason why I don’t think it matters is because the biggest thing I think we need to see here is that Paul’s great motivation is whatever is good for the church. Maybe he is weighing which he can confidently pray for, and his decision is to pray for his release. And the reason why, of course, is because it would be more necessary for the church. Do you see? Even if he has found something far better for himself (departing and being with Christ), he is motivated by what is best for them—the church.

Let me ask us, do we make decisions in our lives based on thinking, “What is best for the church? What would be most edifying for my brothers and sisters in Christ?” It may be that we’re so far removed from this idea that it seems almost absurd. After all, aren’t my decisions simply about

² D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians*, 29.

my life? Why should the church factor into what life decisions I make? But that is exactly how Paul thought. He understood that Christ loved and laid down his life for his bride, and as a believer Paul was called to love what Christ loves, and Christ loves his church. Therefore, Paul would measure his decisions in light of what is best for the church.

What if we lived our lives the same way, asking what is best for the church as we take jobs, move, handle our money, decide how to spend our time, and on and on? Wouldn't that send a message to the world about a love we have for the church that would seem odd to them? And yet isn't this precisely what Jesus said would indicate to them that we are followers of Christ—our love for one another?

So this morning, my hope is that we feel an eager longing to want our hearts to mirror what we see from Paul in these verses. May our hope and longing be that Christ is honored in our lives. May our deepest desire to be even more present with our Lord. And may our motivation be to do what is best for the church, whom Christ loves and gave himself for. And may we pray for these things even as we now come to the table. Amen.