

Pentecost 17 / September 20, 2026

Philippians 1:21

*"As it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honoured in my body, whether by life or by death. For to live is Christ and to die is gain."*

To Live is Christ. To Die is Gain

In verse 29 of our text St. Paul writes, *"For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in Him, but also suffer for His sake."* Maybe no one told you that when you signed on! In his first letter St. Peter wrote, *"For this is a gracious thing, when, mindful of God, one endures sorrows while suffering unjustly."* We probably don't think of enduring sorrow and suffering as gracious things. Paul saw things differently, experiencing the presence of Christ in his suffering he wrote in the letter to the Colossians, *"Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh, I am filling up what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of His body, that is the church."* What is lacking in Christ's afflictions? Didn't Christ already suffer sufficiently in bearing the sin of the world? Certainly, Christ's suffering in bearing the world's sin was full and all sufficient. What Paul speaks of as not fully completed, which is a better expression than lacking, are the afflictions Christians endure on earth due to the effects of sin and sinfulness in the world and our own sinful flesh and sufferings that come from the hostility of the world in rebellion against God as a result of our witness to Christ. We don't suffer any affliction without Christ being afflicted with us.

We don't work for our salvation. Salvation is the free gift of God for the sake of the work of Jesus, who fulfilled all righteousness with His life and atoned for human sin through His death. We don't work for our salvation, but we will suffer because of it and for it. The apostles in Jerusalem after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, were daily in the temple courts proclaiming salvation in Jesus' Name. Declaring Him the Messiah. Calling people to repent of their sins and put their faith in Him as Saviour. The reward they received for the call to repentance and the promise of forgiveness and life through faith in His name was arrest, beating and the threat of more violence from the religious authorities if they continued preaching faith, forgiveness and eternal life in Jesus' name. Instead of shrinking back in fear at the threat of more violence and further suffering, the apostles "left the presence of the council rejoicing that they were counted worthy of suffering dishonour for the Name."

There is nothing more precious than the name of Jesus. It is the only Name given under heaven by which we are saved. It is the Name that is above all names. It is the human name of our Lord, who saves us from our sins. It is the Name by which we receive forgiveness and are promised salvation in time and for eternity. It is a blessing to suffer affliction for the name of Jesus. It is because of the name of Jesus that we can endure suffering. Because of the name of Jesus, we can face affliction with joy and can say with Paul that to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Paul could endure suffering, because he experienced Jesus in his sufferings. No one enjoys suffering in and of itself, not even Paul. He prayed earnestly and repeatedly for the Lord to remove some physical pain in his body, which he called a thorn in his flesh, a messenger of Satan sent to harass him. He heard Jesus speak in His word, *"My grace is sufficient for you for my power is made perfect in weakness."* He experienced Christ in his afflictions and was made strong not simply to bear his afflictions. He was made strong to rejoice in his afflictions because he was strengthened by Christ who was with him in his afflictions. It has been granted us both to believe in Christ and to suffer for His sake. The sufferings and afflictions of our lives are means by which the Holy Spirit impresses on us more fully, the great blessing of faith, the power of Christ within us and the power of God's love that fills us and surrounds us. These things, dark in themselves, are the frame in which the love of Jesus is pictured, portrayed and vividly highlighted, so that we may see how truly beautiful is His grace and experience the full power of His love.

Paul considered the manner in which he experienced affliction and bore suffering as part of his witness to Christ and the gospel of forgiveness and life in His Name. Bearing up patiently under suffering was and is a sign to non-believers of the conviction of our faith and of the power of Christ in us. One of the ways the Holy Spirit opens the hearts of nonbelievers to faith is by the testimony Christians give by bearing up under unjust suffering. Paul's eager expectation and hope was not to avoid suffering and affliction, but to magnify Christ in the things he suffered and the afflictions he experienced. He prayed *"that with full courage now as always Christ will be honoured in my body, whether by life or by death."* A time came for Paul to honour Christ in his death, as it came to all the apostles, as it comes to all believers and as it will come to us according to God's holy will. Paul honoured Christ in his death by making the good confession of faith to those who condemned and executed him. He did not call death to himself, instead he left it to God's holy will and sought his release with every legal means available to him, knowing that he could benefit the faith of many by remaining in the flesh.

We should not call death to ourselves, but instead leave it to God's holy will. But neither did he seek to run and escape when death came to him. He accepted the sentence of death, even though it was unjustly rendered according to both the law of the Roman State and the law of God. He submitted to the holy will of God, who determined that he would honour Christ by his death in this way. We seek to honour God and magnify Christ in the way we live and in the way we die. Paul lived in the confidence of God's love in Christ Jesus. He lived in Christ. He passed more fully into Christ's presence through death. We too have the same confidence of God's love in Christ. To live in the body is to live in Christ, to depart from the body is gain, because it is to be more fully in the presence of Christ awaiting our share of His resurrection to everlasting life.

Paul writes, *"Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ."* A manner of life worthy of the gospel of Christ is a life in which God's grace and mercy are magnified, made big and obvious, by the way we treat others and each other as members of the household of faith. A manner of life worthy of the gospel of Christ is, as Paul wrote in the letter to the Ephesians, to *"walk in love, as Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."* A manner of life worthy of the gospel, is to walk in love in the spirit of the two great commands upon which the law and the prophets hang, to love God with all our heart, soul and mind and to love our neighbour as ourselves. A manner of life worthy of the gospel is a life in which we seek to share the good news of salvation through faith in Jesus with others in our words and through our actions. A life worthy of the gospel, is a life in which we accept the afflictions and sufferings of life and especially those that come upon us because of our faith in Christ, as God's will, His means of drawing us closer to the heart of His love in Christ and also as a means by which we can magnify Christ and share our faith in Him with others, so the Holy Spirit may open their hearts to receive Jesus and their spirits to believe in His Name.

A life worthy of the gospel, is a life in which we stand firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, not being frightened by anything of the devil, the world or our sinful nature, knowing that He who is for us is greater than anything that is against us. A life worthy of the gospel, is a life in which we know that life will not always be sunny, but that it has been granted to us if it is God's will, both to believe in Christ our Saviour and to suffer for Him who suffered for our salvation. A life worthy of the gospel, is one which we realize that we are not our own to do as we please and to die as we choose. It is to realize we

are the Lord's blood bought possession so we may honour Him in the way in which we live and the way in which we die. A life worthy of the gospel is a life in which we realize that to live is Christ and to die is gain. It is to know that Christ is with us in life and that through death we will be brought even more closely into His presence.

Paul rejoiced because he knew that his imprisonment would turn out for his deliverance. Either he would be released from prison and continue in ministry with the Lord, or he would be released from the prison of this world of sin, his body of sin and come more fully into the presence of the Lord; where sin, death and devil are no more. Either way he was with the Lord. In life and in death we are with the Lord and the Lord is with us. God grant us faith to believe and courage to say with Paul *"to live is Christ and to die is gain."* In Jesus' Name. Amen