

Fear changes us. We don't like admitting that, but it's true. Even non-Christians can see that. Aristotle once noted that fear curves a man in on himself. When a man is afraid, he thinks only of saving his own skin. He becomes selfish. He becomes... sinful. Aristotle didn't use that word, of course. But it's pretty much the same thing.

Which is a problem. Because there are so many things in this life that can make us afraid. We fear what might happen to us or to the people we love. We fear sickness and suffering. We fear losing our jobs or our homes. We fear persecution because of what we believe. And perhaps most of all, we fear death. Even Christians, who know what awaits us beyond the grave, can still feel the fear that comes with the thought of dying.

Yet our Epistle lesson today gives us a remarkable picture of a Christian who does not live under the control of fear: The Apostle Paul. Paul is writing these words from prison. He doesn't know whether he'll be released or executed. He doesn't know what the future holds.

And yet he says with perfect confidence and peace, *"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."* Whether he lives or dies, he belongs to Christ. And, therefore, neither life nor death has any reason to make him afraid.

Paul actually speaks about fear twice in this passage. First, he talks about the other Christians who have seen his imprisonment. *"Most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear."*

Paul's suffering has not made the Christians around him afraid. It's actually made them more courageous. They've watched Paul suffer for the sake of Christ. And instead of deciding that following Jesus is too dangerous, they've become more willing to speak about Jesus themselves.

Near the end of this reading, Paul brings up fear a second time and tells the Philippians to live in the same way. He says that they should not be *"frightened in anything by your opponents."* There were people who opposed the Christians in Philippi, just as there were people who opposed Paul.

Paul knows that opposition can make Christians afraid. It can turn us inward on ourself. Make us think only of self-preservation. Make us want to keep our heads down, keep our faith private, and avoid drawing attention to ourselves.

But Paul says, *"Do not be frightened."* Why? Because Paul himself isn't frightened. *"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."* That's what life is for him. That's what life is for the brothers who have become emboldened by Paul's imprisonment. And, whether they realize it or not, that's what life is for the Philippians as well. Whether we realize it or not, that's what life is for us as well.

But even though it's a fairly short statement, there's a lot there to unpack. *"To live is Christ."* Paul isn't saying that his life is always easy because Christ is with him. In fact, the opposite is true. His life in Christ has brought him suffering. He's sitting in prison as he writes these words because he spoke the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He's been beaten, persecuted, rejected, and threatened because he spoke the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Yet none of that changes his confession: *"To live is Christ."*

For Paul, the question isn't, "Will following Christ make my life easier?" Because it won't necessarily. The question is, "What am I here for?" And the answer is Christ. As long as Paul is alive, he has work to do for Christ. He can preach Christ. He can encourage Christians. He can strengthen the churches. He can proclaim the Gospel to people who have never heard it.

Even his imprisonment, something that looks like a complete disaster from a human perspective, has become an opportunity for the Gospel. Paul says that his imprisonment has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that his imprisonment is for Christ. What looked like a setback has become an opportunity for Christ's work.

As Christians, we value this life. Earthly, human life is a gift. And so we take care of our bodies. We seek medical treatment when we're sick. We protect ourselves and one another from unnecessary danger. We pray for healing. We rejoice when God gives someone many years of life. And we grieve when someone dies. Life is a gift from God and we receive it with thanksgiving.

But why is life a gift? Ultimately, that's not merely because life itself is pleasant or enjoyable. It's a gift because God gives us opportunities to love our neighbors, to serve our neighbors, and to proclaim Christ. Every additional day God gives you is another day in which you can pray for someone, encourage someone, forgive someone, serve someone, speak the truth, care for your family, support your congregation, and confess the Gospel. And so Paul says, "*To live is Christ.*" That's why we're all on this earth. That is our reason for living. We live because of Christ.

But then comes the other side of his statement: "*To die is gain.*" Which is kind of a shocking thing to say. We don't normally think of death as gain. Death takes things from us. It takes away our health. It takes away our families and friends. Death is an enemy. Scripture itself calls death "*the last enemy to be destroyed.*" We don't have to pretend like death is a good thing.

But Paul knows something about death that changes everything. He says, "*My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.*" To die is gain because death doesn't mean that Christ has abandoned you. It means that you are with Christ.

Which means that Christian hope isn't found in trying to convince ourselves not to be afraid of death. We don't face death by pretending that it isn't frightening or that it isn't painful. We face death because Christ has conquered it. Because Christ went into death Himself.

He was nailed to a cross. He suffered the judgment of God against our sin. He truly died. His body was placed in a tomb. But on the third day He rose again. And because Christ lives, death is no longer the final destination for those who belong to Him.

That is Paul's confidence. He doesn't know whether he will live or die. But it doesn't really matter. If he lives, he lives with Christ and serves Christ. If he dies, he departs this life and is still with Christ. So what is there to fear?

Now, that may be easier said than done. I'm not St Paul. You aren't either. We're sinful creatures, easily curved in ourselves, and we're probably going to feel the fear of death at some point in our lives. Thankfully, our confidence doesn't come from how courageous we are. It doesn't come from having a strong enough personality to stare death in the face without trembling.

Nor does it come from convincing ourselves that nothing bad will happen to us. Bad things happen. Christians suffer. Christians die. No, our confidence comes from Christ, who has already gone through suffering and death for us and has come out the other side.

So when Paul tells the Philippians, "*Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ,*" he's not saying it to shame them into being as fearless as he is. Instead, he's giving purpose to their suffering and encouragement in their trials.

If God gives you another day, receive it as His gift. Use it. Love your neighbor. Serve your family. Encourage your fellow Christians. Speak the Gospel. Come to Christ's house. Receive His Word and His Sacrament. Do the work He has given you to do. These are the blessings of living as a Christian, even in the midst of hardship and persecution. These are a manner of life worthy of the Gospel.

But we don't have to cling desperately to this life as though it were the only thing we have. Because there is something better. "*To die is gain.*" When the Lord finally calls you out of this life, you are going to Christ. And that means you and I can stand in the face of both life and death and say, "I belong to Jesus."

If I live, I belong to Jesus. If I suffer, I belong to Jesus. If I am persecuted, I belong to Jesus. And when I die, I belong to Jesus. That day and forever. Amen.