

GIVE ME MINISTRY THEN GIVE ME DEATH! **(Phil. 1:22-26 June 24, 2001)**

At the end of the Apocalypse, when Jesus said, "I am coming quickly," the Apostle John added his amen and urged, "Come, Lord Jesus!"

Which of us has not at some time cried out from the depth of our soul – even so, come Lord Jesus, come?

We know that to be absent from the body is to be with the Lord. To be in Paradise. To walk the streets of heaven with Christ. And every child of God longs for that day.

So why would any believer, any saint, actually desire to remain in this world?

In the passage we will examine today, the Apostle Paul gives us the answer – the only answer a child of God can give.

Paul might express that answer as a prayer:

Oh Lord God, thank you for the fruitful labour You have given to me. Whilst ever there is ministry that I may do that will bring glory to your name, then I pray that You would give me life and breath, fill me with Your strength, give me the Spirit of Christ Jesus and give me a great task.

Let me know every joy that serving Christ and living for Christ can bring.

But Lord, the moment, the very moment that my task in this life is done, the moment that there is no further ministry You desire of me – then please take me to glory. Let me be with Christ.

Heaven is the final leg of our journey. But there is one God-centred task that we can do here that we cannot do in glory. And that is the task of ministry to the glory of Christ. To proclaim the gospel. To encourage the saints. To live for the glory of Christ in this fallen world.

If it were not for this ministry – then there would be nothing of substance for the saint in this life. No reason for us to remain. At conversion we might as well be raptured.

But I want to tell you something right up front. This passage is not saying that we are simply to endure this life until glory. Far from it. It tells us to rejoice in the ministry given to us, *and* to rejoice that glory awaits us.

We have a great task to perform. We have a reason for life. And in this life there is abounding joy. And only when that task is complete is heaven for us.

In 1540 Luther's great friend and assistant, Frederick Myconius, became sick and was expected to die within a short time. On his bed he wrote a loving farewell note to Luther. Luther received the letter and instantly sent back a reply:

I command thee in the name of God to live because I still have need of thee in the work of reforming the church. The Lord will never let me hear that thou art dead, but will permit thee to survive me. For this I am praying, this is my will, and may my will be done, because I seek only to glorify the name of God.

Luther looked at the work of the reforming a decayed church. Godly men like Myconius were desperately needed.

Luther's letter is part prayer and part exhortation. Prayer to God – Oh Lord there is task to finish. Please spare Myconius for he still has work to do. Heaven can wait. And this is part exhortation to Myconius – You can't die yet because the work's not done. Now get out of bed and help!

And although Myconius had already lost the ability to speak when Luther's letter came, in a short time he revived. He recovered completely and served the Lord faithfully with joy for six more years. Then two months after Luther died, Myconius himself died suddenly and went to glory. His task was now done.

Give me ministry and then and only then – give me death! Let me live daily for Christ. Shine brightly in the world. Rejoice in the task I now have. And then when my wick is spent – go to glory. This is the cry of the child of God. This is the heart-cry of the Apostle Paul.

In Philippians chapter 1, verses 19-26, Paul gives us 3 encouragements on living in this world. We looked at the first two last week.

The *first* encouragement on living in this world is found in verses 19-20 – **Live so that your life is an ornament to the glory of Christ.**

The *second* encouragement on living in this world is found in verse 21 – **Live so that your life is Christ-centred.**

Today, we look at the third and final encouragement on living in this world. It is found in verses 22-26 – **Live so that your life overflows in the joy of living for Christ.**

Listen to how Paul says this in verses 22-26:

But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labour for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again.

There are three ways to view life and death.

First, we can love life and fear death. This is the most common view in the world. For the pagan, death is to be feared. Life is to be clung to at all costs. As the godless Voltaire lay dying, his doctor pronounced that he would soon be dead. The philosopher

gripped him and begged, “I will give you half of what I am worth if you will give me six-months life!”

Second, we can love death and fear life. Tragically, some men and women reach the point where they despair of life – for them death appears a release. Pain – physical, spiritual, emotional, financial – it forces them to the edge – and some actually take their lives.

However, the consistent testimony of Scripture is that the child of God should have a different perspective. He should love life *and* love death.

Know this! We are the most blessed of people. We have a great task to perform here. We have the joy of serving God with all our might. And then when the Lord deems our time is up – we have the ultimate pleasure of going to glory.

But never forget that the length of our ministry in this world is not ours to choose. It is in the hands of the Lord. Psalm 139:16:

Your eyes have seen my unformed substance;
And in Your book were all written
The days that were ordained for me,
When as yet there was not one of them.

God gives us life and He numbers our days.

We should love this life – for it is here that we have the privilege to live for Christ and delight in Him. But we should also love death – for then we go to Christ who is our delight.

In verse 22, Paul expounds on his statement that for him to live is Christ.

If he lives on in the flesh, if God gives him further life – then, this will mean fruitful labour for him. God gives the child of God life for one reason – fruitful labour – ministry.

What is this fruitful labour?

First, let me tell you what it not. It is not labouring to put down roots in this world for yourself. Spending all of your time building a career, paying off a mortgage, saving superannuation and finally dying with the good thoughts of family and friends. If these things are done without the glory of God in mind, then these things are the fruitful labour of the world.

The fruitful labour of the child of God is to glory in Christ. To exalt His precious name in worship, in evangelism, in edification, in proclamation, in holiness. Don't get me wrong. Wives and homes and the like can be good things – if they are seen as the gracious provision of God and are seen as gifts to use to His glory rather than goals to please self. It is the attitude that matters.

Do I work as an electrician to the glory of God – to provide for my family, my church and is work a place to proclaim the glories of Christ? Or do I simply work because I want things and work provides them.

A child of God can work at a career and provide for his family when it is done to the glory of God – not for selfish gain. Such fruitful labour is the delight of the child of God.

Let me put it a different way. Does this mean that every Christian has to be a pastor or missionary? No! You can labour with great fruit as a plumber, a mother, a dentist. But you work to the glory of Christ – serving God and not men. Your work is a place to provide for family and to witness for Christ. It is not to be the consuming focus of your life. Christ is to be the consuming focus of your life.

So wherever God has planted you – serve Him.

The tragedy is that so many who name the name of Christ give the best part of their day, their week, their life to labour for the things that rust, moth and thieves can destroy – laying up worldly treasure with little thought of laying up eternal treasure. We are not here to live for this life. We are sojourners and aliens who are to live for eternity. Our focus is to be on labouring to the point of exhaustion in serving Christ.

I am sure that there is a part of Paul that wanted nothing more than to go to sleep one evening and wake in glory. When He wrote these words, he was in prison shackled to a member of the praetorian guard. He was nearing the end of his life. His other letters tell us that he has health problems. He desperately wants to see Christ.

But his work was not done. Whilst ever he has breath, he has a great duty to discharge. Despite prison, pain and old age – there is still ministry, but in this ministry there is great joy.

Paul know that if he lives – God must have a purpose for him. In prison or out of prison – there is ministry – fruitful labour to do. There are lost souls to win, churches to encourage, letters to write, the glories of Christ to proclaim.

If he remains in prison – he has the Praetorian guard and Caesar's household to reach.

If he is released – there are souls to claim and churches to strengthen.

If Caesar chops off his head – even better – he wins the martyr's crown.

Life or death – Paul is not just content, he is blissfully happy.

In these verses we find Paul musing about the joys of life and death. And his musings turn to contemplate this thought – what if somehow the choice of life or death were his? Then he would not know which to choose – because Paul can't lose. Truth is that he is glad he is not given the choice of paths to take because each choice – life or death – is so good.

It is a little like when my kids go to Baskin and Robbin's 31 flavours. You walk through the door and you are in deep trouble. I watch them stalk up and down the counter. And

I know what they are thinking – how do you decide between the chocolate ecstasy, the rocky road and the chocolate chip cookie dough? I mean these are tough decisions people.

But you want a really tough decision. Life or death. Both are so good, Paul wouldn't know what to choose if the choice were given to him.

As I read this. As I thought about Paul's love of this life, his absolute wonder that he gets to have his cake and eat it to – to live for Christ and then one day to die and go to Christ. And remember, this is written by an elderly man suffering in prison.

I thought about myself and about you. Can you say with Paul – Thank you God! – My cup runs over – For me, to live is Christ and then to die is gain – Hallelujah – I am the most blessed of men?

I then pondered why it is that some Christians might read the book of Philippians and wonder if Paul lives on some other planet. They sit in their nice homes with a TV, a pack of Honey Baked Ham Kettle potatoe chips and air-conditioning – yet they find this life so wearisome. They can't come to grips with an old, sick man in prison who loves this life.

How can a successful Christian businessman with a nice home, a devoted wife and good kids find that he gets so little pleasure from living for the Lord that he finds himself wanting to leave this life and go to heaven? He has had enough worldly labour – he just wants glory.

Jeremiah gives us the answer. In Jeremiah 2:12-13 God declares:

Be appalled, O heavens, at this,
And shudder, be very desolate," declares the Lord.
My people have committed two evils:

They have forsaken Me,
The fountain of living waters,
To hew for themselves cisterns,
Broken cisterns
That can hold no water.

Here is the picture. The Lord's parched people are standing before two choices. Choice #1 – a crystal clear fountain of fresh water supplied by God. Choice #2 – a broken cistern into which they have poured their own precious water and it has leeches into the dust.

Then instead of coming to drink at the divine fountain, they choose to stoop down to suck at the dry dust at the bottom of the cistern.

And then they have the audacity to accusingly cry out to God, "Oh Lord, why do I still thirst?" At this, the very heavens are appalled and shudder at this evil.

Octavius Winslow warns us:

Encompassed as we are by earth, blinded by objects of sense, weighed down by human cares and anxieties, we need to be watchful against their secular influence upon our minds.

Oh, it is appalling to think what self idolatry and self seeking and self complacency may reign in our hearts, and prompt and govern our actions!

We become so blinded by our sin and the lure of this world that we can actually believe that pleasure is to be found in this world, rather than in Christ. And this is a great evil.

Jesus told us that He is the fountain of living water and whoever drinks of His water shall never thirst. That if we delight ourself in Him – if we are consumed by Him – if we live for the fruitful labour that glorifies Him – if we are filled with His Word, communing with Him in prayer, living to exalt Him – *then* we will **never** thirst.

But we choose to ignore Him and put our mouths to the dust of this world; and seek to quench our thirst in cars and homes and jobs and TV and sport and lust and leisure – and we have the audacity to despair of life and accusingly cry, “Where is the joy You promised? Where is the satisfaction? Why do I thirst? I wish you would strike me dead, get me out of this hell-hole and take me to glory!”

Why oh why do we continue to repeatedly suck at the dust and wonder why this world does not satisfy?

It need not be so. Do **not** commit this evil. And as Jeremiah said – it is evil – one of the gravest of all evils.

Instead, delight yourself in Christ. Find that His love is sweetness to the soul. That He makes life wondrous.

That in Him, the fruitful ministry of this life is a delight to your soul. That in Him you will never thirst.

David Brainerd entered Yale to become a pastor. He was at the top of his class and seemed destined for a comfortable position as pastor of a church. But, God had other ideas. Brainerd struggled with the fact that the lecturers and tutors weren't even saved. He spoke out.

The college then passed a resolution that if anyone even intimated that one of the faculty was unsaved they would be expelled. Brainerd could not remain quiet. He said that one tutor Chauncey Whittelsey, “has no more grace than a chair.” He also wondered why the Rector, “did not drop down dead” for fining students for their evangelical zeal.¹

Brainerd was expelled. As a man expelled and without a degree, the only ministry he could find was not a comfortable pastorate, but in the wilderness as missionary to the Indians.

¹ Cited in John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001) p. 128.

Brainerd was dying of tuberculosis, barely had enough food to survive on, struggled to love the Indians and was in constant pain and hardship. But this is what he said:

Such fatigues and hardship as these serve to wean me more from the earth; and I trust, will make heaven the sweeter. Formerly, when I was thus exposed to cold, rain, etc., I was ready to please myself with the thoughts of enjoying a comfortable house, a warm fire, and other outward comforts; but now these have less place in my heart (through the grace of God) and my eye is more to God for comfort.²

God taught him to delight in Christ and not the world – and Brainerd learned that it was good.

This is the lesson every child of God must learn. Drink from Christ and find that He is good.

Verses 23-24:

But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.

Paul is continuing to muse out loud. Life or death? If the choice were mine – which of these two wonderful options would I prefer?

Now, if I were the only one involved here – if my ministry in this world were done – then this is a no brainer. The best, the cream is to be with Christ.

But, I am not the only one involved here – my ministry is not done – so it is necessary for me to remain alive and minister to you.

Let me see if I can help you follow Paul's musings by giving you some musings of my own.

I read about some Muslims in Sudan lining up Christians and asking them one by one this question. Will you bow the knee to Allah? If the answer was no – then a sword would be thrust into their abdomen and twisted about.

They went down the line one after the other and this question was asked. But what if I were number sixteen in that line. Am I ready to die?

In one sense death would be the sweetest of releases. I would be with Christ. The pain, the struggle with sin, the battle to persevere would end and eternal bliss in Christ would begin.

I trust I would never deny Christ and in this would welcome the thrust of the sword.

² Cited in John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001) pp. 139-140.

But, I know that I would have this hesitation. I believe that my work is not yet done. I am unsure of the salvation of some of my children. I have an unsaved brother. I have unsaved friends. I am unsure of the eternal fate of some in this church. In one sense I would feel the necessity of finishing the ministry entrusted to me.

If God takes me so be it. But there is still seems work to do.

And this is Paul's belief. To remain on in the flesh is *more necessary* for your sake. There are souls to be won. Wavering saints to encourage. Churches to strengthen. New lands to evangelise. My labour is not done.

We hear this same echo in the letters of John Bunyan. Writing to his congregation from prison, a prison he did not know if he would leave alive, Bunyan shared his heart:

Thus have I, in a few words, written to you before I die, a word to provoke you to faith and holiness, because I desire that you may have the life that is laid up for all them that believe in the Lord Jesus, and love one another, when I am deceased. Though then I shall rest from my labours, and be in paradise, as through grace I comfortably believe, yet it is not there, but here, I must do you good. Wherefore, I, not knowing the shortness of my life, nor the hindrance that hereafter I may have of serving my God and you, I have taken this opportunity to present these few lines unto you for edification.³

Did you hear that Pauline echo? If I die, I shall rest from my labours, and be in paradise, but once dead my ministry is ended. It is *here* that I must do you good.

I must write and do what I can. And Lord willing I will be released to uphold the faint hearted, encourage the saints and declare the glories of Christ.

What a heart! Life is Christ. Death is Christ.

Note that Paul said:

To remain on in the flesh is *more necessary* for your sake.

Going to glory is good, but there is still ministry to the glory of Christ to be done here. My personal desire to be in glory must be superseded by the necessity of ministry to the glory of the Lord.

Oh for ten hearts like that! John Wesley once cried:

Give me one hundred preachers who fear nothing but sin, and desire nothing but God, and I care not a straw whether they be clergymen or laymen; such alone will shake the gates of hell and set up the kingdom of heaven on earth.

Wesley wanted one hundred men who feared nothing but sin and desired nothing but God. I am not so ambitious. I have often thought about would happen if there were but

³ Cited in John Piper, *The Hidden Smile of God*, (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2001) p. 62.

ten men and women in this church who feared nothing but sin and desired nothing but God.

Ten who wanted to live for Christ. Ten who found it necessary to give themselves in fruitful labour. Ten for whom life meant Christ. Not the pleasures of this world but Christ.

Ten men and women whose single passion was Christ – to the point that money, career, fame, lust, self – these powerful idols withered in the sun of their passion for Christ. Men and women who delighted in Christ. Men and women who ooze the joy that the world desires but seeks at the dry cisterns of worldly pleasure.

Ten men and women who can honestly say – for me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Just ten! And the result would be staggering. These ten would learn what it means to drink at the fountain of living water. To be blessed beyond words by serving Christ. Their hearts would be satisfied in Him.

But the ripple effect would be incredible. This church would be transformed. This city would be transformed.

For such is the power of a life consecrated to Christ. For such is the power of being able to say – to remain on in the flesh is *more necessary* for your sake – to the glory of Christ.

Verses 25-26:

Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again.

Paul was convinced that his time on earth was not done. That God still had ministry for him.

Luther was convinced that Myconius still had necessary ministry.

A similar conviction was found in the life of John Knox. In 1547 Knox and a number of other Protestants were sentenced by the Catholic authorities to serve as *galerien*. These were slaves on French galleys. Most died on these accursed ships.

In the summer of 1548, the galley on which Knox was a slave passed by the east coast of Scotland. One of Knox's fellow prisoners pointed out the spires of St. Andrews, and asked Knox if he knew the place. He replied:

Yes, I know it well; for I see the steeple of that place where God first opened my mouth in public to see his glory; and I am fully persuaded, how weak so

ever I now appear, that I shall not depart this life, till that my tongue shall glorify his godly name in the same place.⁴

Knox believed that he would not die on that galley. That he would be released and would preach in Saint Andrews to the glory of God. He was certain that he still had work to do – fruitful labour in this life.

How do we account for this? Paul, Luther, Knox and many others. All I can say is that it seems that the Lord sometimes chooses to give His servants a sense of the ministry, the great task that He has entrusted to them.

Humanly speaking – Paul may well have died in prison, Myconius should never have risen from his death bed and Knox should have died a *galerien*.

But God had other plans. And each of these men sensed that God still had work for them in this life.

Paul did not die in this imprisonment. He was released probably released around 63 A.D. He had a few more years ministry and then he was imprisoned again and beheaded in either 65, 66 or 67 AD. Which means he lived two, three or four years before his final death. And in those two, three, or four years, he had a great task to perform.

After his release, he started on a journey to Asia Minor and on the way to Asia Minor he left Titus on the island of Crete to establish the churches and their leaders, according to Titus 1:5. He then arrived at Ephesus in Asia Minor. Travelled through Ephesus on to Colossae as he had referred to in Philemon 22 and then returned back to Ephesus.

Coming back to Ephesus he met Timothy there who had brought him news from Philippi. When Timothy and Paul met at Ephesus, Paul cleaned out the two worst leaders in the church, Hymenaeus and Alexander, and then left Timothy there to set the rest of the church in order. Soon after, he wrote to Timothy in what is now the first epistle to Timothy.

He went on to Macedonia as he had planned, according to 1 Timothy 1:3, and hoped to return back to Ephesus, but in the mean time he wanted Timothy to straighten things out as he said in 1 Timothy 3:14 and 15.

Then from Macedonia he wrote the book of Titus. And in the letter to Titus he asked that dear servant to meet him at Nicopolis.

He travelled to Nicopolis on the east coast of the Ionian Sea, and spent the winter there with Titus, according to Titus 3:12. He then headed for Asia Minor where he was forced to leave Trophimus deathly sick, according to 2 Timothy 4:20. He then had a final meeting and a tearful separation from Timothy, 2 Timothy 1:4. He went to Troas

⁴ Cited in Douglas Wilson, *For Kirk and Covenant: The Stalwart Courage of John Knox* (Nashville: Highland Books, 2000) pp. 35-36.

to visit Carpus at whose house he must have left his cloak, as indicated in 2 Timothy 4:13.

After this all too short a time, he was arrested again and taken to Rome for a second imprisonment. It is here he wrote 2 Timothy. This imprisonment was very brief, very severe, only Luke was with him. Demas forsook him. So did all the rest of his friends, according to 2 Timothy 4. He urged Timothy to come to him, 2 Timothy 4. He was staring death in the face. He was soon beheaded, we don't know whether Timothy or Mark ever got there before he died.

Two, three or four years. But in that time he established churches, strengthened them, disciplined sinners, built up saints, set ministry in motion and he wrote those incredible Pastoral Epistles.

God certainly had work for him to do. It was necessary for him to remain in this life for a time. And we can thank the Lord for this short window of extra time in which his labour was indeed fruitful. Paul did not spend this time on himself. It was ministry to others for the glory of Christ.

Paul knew that God had work for him to do. He had to labour as he said to the Philippians:

For your progress and joy in the faith, so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again.

He had unfinished business with the Philippians. He wanted to encourage them to progress in the faith. To grow more like Christ. And in so doing to come to a profound joy in the faith. His desire was for his children in the faith to drink from the same fountain as he had – to find their joy in Christ – to live for Christ.

Verse 26 continues the reason why he believes he needs to come to the Philippians. It doesn't read very well in the NASB. A better translation is this:

My desire is that through my being with you again, you will glory in Christ Jesus to the point that your glorying in Christ will overflow.

I want to come to you and encourage you and exhort you to glory in Christ Jesus. I want you to delight in Him to the point that He is your joy, your boast, your life.

And this is so important, it is a pleasure to put off heaven for a time and see you glory in Christ.

Give me ministry *then* give me death!

I don't know how long the Lord will give me to minister to you. But this is my task. To encourage you and exhort you to glory in Christ Jesus. I want you to delight in Him to the point that He is your joy, your boast, your life.

I have unfinished business. I am uncertain of the salvation of some of you. And I am certain many of you don't understand delighting in Christ. I have work to do. And if

God gives me strength and health I will endeavour to spend myself in the task, till God decides my time is done.

If this passage did not challenge you, encourage you and shake you to your foundation – then you didn't understand it.

We are the most blessed of people. Men and women blessed with a great task. Every one of us has a great task. To find our life in Christ. To live for Him. To commune with Him, learn from Him and proclaim Him. To serve Him with all of our strength and in so doing to be blessed beyond words. And then when our ministry is done – we get to go to glory and be with Him forever.

It doesn't get any better than this!

Brothers and sisters, do not settle for the pitiful pleasures of this life. The dust of the dry cisterns. Don't let the example of your life tell your children, your neighbours, your workmates that life is found in this world. By your life and words, point them to the fountain of living water – to the One who will satisfy now and forever.

Don't just exist till heaven. Paul didn't want the Philippians to just survive this life, he wanted them to progress and have joy in the faith, to overflow in the glory of Christ – to know what it means to say – for me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

This is my prayer for you. I beg you – don't settle for the dry cisterns. Don't even settle for a little water mixed in with the dust. A bit of Christ and ministry and a lot of me.

Settle only for the best – to live is Christ. Have all that this life can offer. Fulfil your ministry and be blessed.

You don't have to be a pastor or missionary. We desperately need Christian grocers and teachers and firemen. What we need is for them to have the attitude of being ambassadors of Christ in the world. That this is the ministry given to them.

At work, in the family, in the church – do all to the glory of Christ.

Don't let your ministry for Christ in this life consist of coming here once on a Sunday, getting to a few homegroups, reading the Bible to your children and every few years or so telling someone about Christ.

That is robbing yourself of the greatest pleasures available in this life.

I am so sorry for those whose ministry here is a bit of Christ and a lot of self. You are missing out on life – the abundant overflowing life that Christ promised in John 15.

I feel so sorry for those whose ministry is limited to this:

To attend but one service of a Sunday because they need time with their children and they need their rest.

To occasionally if ever attend a homegroup and the precious times of fellowship because their work week is busy and it is hard with children.

To not attend prayer meetings or special church meetings.

To rarely experience the delight of proclaiming Christ to the lost.

To not delight in the Word and prayer.

To not be a spiritual leader in the home.

To not be an ambassador for Christ in the workplace.

To not know the joy of giving to Christ to support the church and ministers and missionaries and evangelists.

To not choose to suffer for Christ. To choose comfort instead of sacrifice.

Instead to choose the fruitful labour of this world – labouring for self, laying up treasures for self, consumed with self.

I weep for you. Paul weeps for you. Christ weeps for you. For it need not be so. You can feast on the joys of Christ and never thirst again.

So with Paul, I exhort you:

Live so that your life overflows in the joy of living for Christ.