Sermon: "In Life and In Death"
Scripture: Philippians 1:21-30

For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again. Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well – since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.
THIS IS THE WORD OF THE LORD!

Paul's circumstances are dire, but he sounds every bit the confident preacher. Confident, that is, until he expresses his "Eager expectation and hope" (v.20) that he will not be ashamed, that Christ will be exalted in his body, whether by life or by death. Facing the real possibility that he will be executed, he starts speaking to himself. "For to me living is Christ and dying is gain," (v.21) "I do not know which I prefer," (v.22) "I am hard pressed!" (v.23) "My desire is to depart". These are Paul's stream of consciousness, bracingly honest cries to himself as he is swept up in visceral realization of the extremity of his situation.
Since Paul was in prison awaiting trial, he had to face the fact that it was quite uncertain whether he would live or die – and to him it made no difference.
Living, he says, in his great phrase, "is Christ to me". For Paul, Christ had been the beginning of life, for on that day on the Damascus Road it was as if he had begun life all over again.
Christ had been the continuing of life; there had never been a day when Paul had not lived in his presence, and in the frightening moments Christ had been there to tell him not to be afraid (Acts 18:9-10). Christ was the end of life, for it was towards his eternal presence that life always led. Christ was the inspiration of life; he was the dynamic of life. To Paul, Christ had given the task of life, for it was he who had made him an Apostle and sent him out as the evangelist of the Gentiles. To him, Christ had given the strength for life, for it was Christ all-sufficient grace that was made perfect in Paul's weakness.
For him, Christ was the reward of life, for to Paul the only worthwhile reward was closer fellowship with his Lord. If Christ were to be taken out of life, for Paul there would be nothing left.
"For me," said Paul, "Death is gain." Death was entrance into Christ's nearer presence. There are passages in which Paul seems to regard death as a sleep, from which all at some future general resurrection shall be awakened.

(1Corinthians 15:51-52); "Lo I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in a twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed." (1Thessalonians 4:14, 4:16); "For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have fallen asleep. For the Lord himself will descend from heaven with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of the trumpet of God." But, at the moment when its breath was on him, Paul thought of death not as a falling asleep but as an immediate entry into the presence of his Lord.

If we believe in Jesus Christ, death for us is union and reunion, union with him and reunion with those whom we have loved and lost awhile.
The result was that Paul was wavering. "I am caught", he says, "between two desires". "I am hard pressed between the two." (v.23) The word he used was *senechomai*, the word which would be used of a traveler in a narrow passage, with a wall of rock on either side, unable to turn off in any direction and able only to go straight on.
For himself, he wanted to depart and to be with Christ; for the sake of his friends and of what he could do with them and for them, he wanted to be left in this life. Then comes the thought that the choice is not his but God's.
"My desire is to depart" says Paul, and the word he uses for "to depart" is *analuein*. It is a word for breaking up a camp, loosening the tent-ropes, pulling up the tent pegs and moving on. Death is a moving on. It is said that in the terrible days of the Second World War, when the Royal Air Force stood between Britain and destruction, and the lives of pilots were being sacrificed, they never spoke of a pilot as having been killed but always as having been "Posted to another station".
Each day is a day's march nearer home until, in the end, camp in this world is finally dismantled and exchanged for permanent residence in the world of glory. It is the word for loosening the mooring ropes, pulling up the anchors and setting sail, a departure on that voyage which leads to the everlasting haven and to God. It is the word for solving problems. Death brings life's solutions.
There is some place where all earth's questions will be answered and where those who have waited will in the end understand.
It is Paul's conviction that he will remain and continue with them. This means to wait beside a person, always ready to help. Paul's desire to live is not for his own sake, but for the sake of those whom he can continue to help, the new churches.
So, if Paul is spared to come and see them again, they will have in him grounds to boast in Jesus Christ. That is to say, they will be able to look at him and see in him a shining example of how, through Christ, they can face the worst standing tall and unafraid. It is the duty of every Christian to trust in this way so that others will be able to see what Christ can do for those who have given their lives to him.
One thing is essential – no matter what happens either to them or to Paul, the Philippians must live in a manner that is worthy of their faith and the belief they declare. Paul chooses his words very carefully. "Only live your life in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ." (v.27). Some versions say, "Let your conversation be worthy of the gospel of Christ".
To us conversation means talk; in Latin the word *conversari*, means "to conduct oneself. And a conversation was not only a person's way of speaking to other people; it was that individual's whole behavior. The phrase means let your behavior be worthy of those who are pledged to Christ."
Paul was writing from the very center of the Roman Empire, from Rome itself; it was the fact that he was a Roman citizen that brought him there. Philippi was a Roman colony; and Roman colonies were little bits of Rome planted throughout the world, where citizens never forgot that they were Romans. They spoke the Latin language, wore the usual Latin clothes and called their magistrates by the Latin names, however far they might be from Rome.
So, what Paul is saying is; You and I know full well the privileges and the responsibilities of being a Roman citizen. You know full well how even in Philippi, so many miles from Rome, you must still live and act as a Roman does. Well then, remember that you have an even higher duty than that. Wherever you are, you must live as befits a citizen of the Kingdom of God.
What does Paul expect from them? He expects them to stand fast. The world is full of Christians on the retreat, who, when things become difficult, play down their Christianity. True Christians stand fast, unashamed in any company. He expects unity; they are to be bound together in one spirit. Let the world quarrel; Christians must be united. He expects a certain unconquerability. Often, evil seems invincible; but Christians must never abandon hope or give up the struggle. He expects a cool, calm, courage. In times of crisis, others may be nervous and afraid; Christians will still be serene, in control of themselves and of the situation.

If they can be like that, they will set such an example that those who are not Christians will be disgusted with their own way of life, will realize that the Christians have something they do not possess, and will seek out of a sense of self-preservation to share it.
Paul does not suggest that this will be easy. When Christianity first came to Philippi, they saw him fight his own battle. They saw him beaten and imprisoned for the faith.
Acts 16:19 says, "But when the owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers." They know what he is now going through. But let them remember that a general chooses the best soldiers for the hardest tasks, and that it is an honor to suffer for Christ. So, Paul says to the Philippians; "For you and for me the battle is on; let us do something fine for Christ.

Closing Prayer: O God who brought your people out of slavery with a mighty hand, strengthen us to take our stand with you beside the oppressed of the world, that in your victory over sin and death every chain of bondage may be broken, and the whole human family, restored in your image, through Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.

Benediction: We are given two options: to give up and experience defeat and death, or to proclaim like Paul, that even in the deepest despair, our Savior lives, and we shall experience God's goodness in the midst of it all. Like Paul, I choose life. I choose to look beyond my circumstances and believe that God will show me a way that will lead me out of my prisons, out of those valleys of shadow and death in which all of us sometimes find ourselves. God will lead us out.