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Newark, Delaware

Psalm 145:1-9  
Philippians 1:1-5, 18-30

### **“Living or Dying. Whatever!”**

Paul, follower of Jesus, the Christ, is in prison in Rome and writes this letter to his dear friends in Philippi. He and Timothy had gathered this church a few years earlier. Now he sends a letter of friendship and encouragement.

It's clear that Paul was in a difficult spot.

Held in a squalid prison cell...  
In Rome...  
Far from friends ...

He writes this letter.

It's a hopeful letter to encourage the Philippians.  
To encourage we who follow.

But get the full story ...

Paul was in prison because he couldn't help himself –  
He spoke persistently/insistently of good news.

Telling that Jesus is his Lord.  
But more than that, Jesus is the Lord of all  
creation.

And Paul could not be silent until all tongues  
-- everyone -- would confess that Jesus, the  
Christ is Lord.

And Paul pressed on in the story of God's amazing grace. Jesus' way is one of love and forgiveness, and that way of living is so potent that a Roman trial and crucifixion – death on a hideous cross -- could not divert him. Jesus, the Christ arose, and walks with us ... Leads us ... and invites, “Come, follow me.”

But the Roman authorities, the people with the power, insisted,  
“Paul, recant, there is one Lord, and his name is Caesar!”

Paul, don't make waves. Give them what they want.  
Repeat after the Roman authorities ...

“There is one Lord ... and his name is Caesar.”

But Paul refused ... “Jesus is Lord.” **“Jesus is Lord.”**

And so Paul has taken up permanent residence in that foul prison cell.

But the prison cell was not too lonely, for there were other prisoners and the jailers themselves and Paul told and retold the stories of Jesus to them ... and sang songs of God’s power and love.

Actually, it seems like Paul’s imprisonment got his adrenalin flowing. Empowered him. Emboldened him. Prisoners and even some Roman guards heard Paul’s message gladly and were baptized.

But there was another adversary that stalked Paul. A plethora of antagonists who attacked him from different directions. And these people hurt Paul the most. They deeply grieved Paul.

“Paul, was not a true follower of Jesus,” these opponents alleged. He was a Johnny-come-lately.

He had bogus credentials. (probably from an on-line seminary)

They testified that just a few years earlier, Paul was notorious for having sought-out followers of Jesus’ way and had them killed.

They went on with their charges,  
Paul was a Pharisee of the highest,  
most obnoxious sort.

Don’t follow Paul, they warned,  
he is a lion in sheep’s clothing.

So attacked from the outside – by the Roman authorities who allowed no lord but Caesar. All other affirmation is treason and requires imprisonment and execution ...

And Paul was also attacked from the inside –

By those baptized in the name of Jesus.

By those faithful to Jesus Christ, yet who had a different perspective on what it meant to be

obedient to Jesus. And they spread seeds of doubt and fear.

But most telling/most destructive of all, Paul began to doubt himself. Perhaps he had misread the signals. Mistaken God's call. Though that call seemed so clear to him at the time. And seemed confirmed to him many times.

You can well imagine when you're in prison, in a cell, you have a lot of time to run such things over in your mind, and thoughts fester there ... and eat away at your spirit.

But you find yourself affirming ... even in the most dire straits, as Paul affirmed:

*Here I am Lord. It is I Lord.  
I have heard you calling in the night.  
I will go Lord, if you lead me.  
I will hold your spirit in my heart.*

I believe that's what happened to Paul. Time and time again.  
He was not defeated.  
He was assured of God's call.  
He remained faithful.

So he writes to his dear friends in Philippi, *I want you to know beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard – (that is, among the highest-ranked guards, those who guarded the emperor -- and to everyone else, that my imprisonment is for Christ.*

*Some proclaim Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. These proclaim Christ out of love. And others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition. What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motive or true; and in that I rejoice.*

So the word was out, spread from this squalid cell. Jesus, the Christ is alive ... and on the loose ... and spread into the highest ranks of Caesar's palace guards, and over into Philippi. Actually,

having expanded to Rome the news of God's awesome love had touched most of the known world.

But Paul remained haunted by this profound tension – Life? Or Death? His dear friends back in Philippi fretted about this also. They needed Paul's guidance. His encouragement. His letters meant a whole lot, and they longed to see him again. They eagerly awaited a personal visit.

"But oh Lord God, keep Paul safe. "Don't let him die in prison."

"May he not be executed by the Roman authorities."

They knew that Paul's stay in prison may lead to his death...

OR, IT MAY LEAD TO HIS EVENTUAL RELEASE.  
BUT FOR NOW THEY COULD ONLY WAIT.

So in just a very few words, Paul seeks to present the benefits of either outcome (life or death) and to encourage the Philippians in what was certainly a time of doubt and anxiety.

Paul writes ... "FOR TO ME, LIVING IS CHRIST.  
DYING IS GAIN."

Dying, he writes, in fact means a departure and the opportunity to "be with Christ". So dying does not signal the end, but rather the culmination of a Christian's hope in the triumph of Jesus Christ. While death is not to be sought, its arrival is not to be dreaded.

Living in the flesh, on the other hand, also IS CHRIST. Continued life in the flesh also means an opportunity for extended labor as an apostle.

So for several verses Paul goes back and forth ... to live versus to die. Departing to be with Christ versus remaining in the flesh.

Finally, Paul's consideration of these options comes to an end: He concludes, "TO REMAN IN THE FLESH IS MORE NECESSARY FOR YOU."

So Paul's vocation wins out. He has been called to be an apostle and labors under a tremendous compulsion to proclaim the gospel

in new places and to care for the churches he has already established.

He can't abandon that commitment in favor of an escape from the world, no matter how attractive that escape might be. Paul's vocation – his calling from God – comes first.

Now, "Live your life worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Whether I come to see you, or are absent and so 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 in no way intimidated by your opponents.

This is evidence of your salvation.  
And this is all God's doing.

**For me, living is Christ. Dying is gain.** It's difficult to let that concept settle in our hearts and minds. My mother never understood that concept. "Go to eastern Kentucky and you'll bury yourself in the mountains," she warned. And I, all too easily, said "Mom, for me living is Christ. Dying is gain."

The truth is, I was too innocent, too naive to understand the depth of what I was saying.

But slowly I have come to understand and appreciate the power of Paul's affirmation. As Paul later affirms in his writings to the Philippians, I live. Yet not I, but Christ lives in me. Christ lives through me.

And Christ lives through you too.

