

"TO LIVE IS CHRIST, TO DIE IS GAIN"
Philippians 1:15-26

A few weeks ago I conducted a funeral service for Alberta

Roberts father, Mitchell Ellis. This morning, I want to share something that I said at his funeral.

Sometimes people make the most powerful witnesses in the least expected way. As some of you might be aware, Congressman Jack Kemp recently passed away. Jack was not only an outstanding professional football player but after football he was a congressman and Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. I had heard that his memorial service at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC. was quite an event and so, [a few Friday nights ago] I logged onto my computer and watched the entire service. The crowd overflowed that historic sanctuary. Buses brought congressmen and senators. People came from far and wide to pay respects to one of the most energetic and effective political servants of our generation.

It was extraordinary as time and time again, the Good News of the Gospel was proclaimed by it from one of his children or a number of other individuals including Jack's own pastor, Dr. Rob Norris of Fourth Presbyterian Church, who gave the main message, from Job 14:14 that was entitled: "Can a dead man live?" His message was one of the clearest expositions of Scripture I've ever heard, powerfully presenting the Gospel—and all this being listened to by most of the power establishment of the city of Washington. Some of the commentators afterward said that there had never been such an overtly Christian memorial service in the National Cathedral. And in the last several days, there was a flood of columns and commentary from both sides of the political aisle, appreciating Jack and the memorial service. What was so great was to hear that Jack and his wife, Joanne, who was the strongest spiritual influence on Jack's life, raised four children and 17 grandchildren in the Christian faith. Perhaps Jack would have been surprised at what a powerful witness for Christ his life truly was.

You see, Jack gave his life to Christ two decades ago. But he didn't feel comfortable sharing his faith. He would talk about being a Christian, and he left no doubt about his faith. But he wasn't an evangelist—or so he thought. But you see, as I'm coming to understand, Jack Kemp's *life* was his witness. God used the death of this great public servant for perhaps the most powerful witness I have heard of in Washington. As I watched his memorial service, you could sense the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Cathedral that day. And I'm sure many others did as well—perhaps to their great surprise. No one there, believer or not, could have walked away without understanding why and how Jack Kemp lived the great life he did. Ironically, Jack told Joanne before he died that he wanted a simple service in his home church. He didn't care to have testimonies from political friends or professional colleagues. He just wanted a Christian service. Well, the outpouring was so great; the memorial had to be moved to the National Cathedral. It wasn't the simple affair Jack wanted—but it certainly was

Christian. And God, beyond anyone's expectations, used the amazing service to glorify Himself through Jack's death.

As I was watching the service, I thought about all the funeral services I have attended or officiated and how so many of them have been, as a result of the deceased person's life, a witness, not to them, but their faith in the One who saved them and gave them life, Jesus Christ. Oh, how great it would be that, for all of us, God would be glorified through our deaths.

(portions taken from ***Breakpoint, The Witness of Jack Kemp***, Chuck Colson, May 14, 2009)

And let me now add, through our lives. And the Apostle Paul said in Philippians 1:21, "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain." Let me ask you, do you ever look back over your life, no matter how young or old you might be, and contemplate what you have done, or maybe not done or wished you had done? I certainly have and sometimes do. Do you ever think about dying- what it will be like after you have taken your last earthly

breath and where you will be or go, what heaven will be like? I have and do. I wonder if Jack Kemp, as his earthly life was winding down ever found himself looking through the rear-view mirror at his life or look ahead and thinking about the afterlife, heaven.

These past few months I have been watching my 81 year old Father struggle, health-wise, and wondering if this is the beginning of his end. Now it doesn't appear to be imminent, but it is obvious his health is slipping. As I have been going back and forth to Pittsburgh to be with him, I have time to think and I have wondered what it will be like for me, as I enter the twilight of life, and I find I am asking things like, is this the way it will be for me? Will my kids have to take care of me? Life and death- these are real issues we all face or will face.

If you read a few verses earlier in our passage, verses 12-14, you discover that Paul is in prison, he is under military guard all because he spoke out boldly for Jesus Christ. And so while he is there he has plenty of

time to think. He reports on the effect of his imprisonment, upon the church in Philippi and upon himself. For you see, the fate of Paul and the fate of the church are bound together. And yet he points out that both his desire and that of the church are subordinate to the will of God and the furthering of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. When you read this passage it does seem a bit difficult to follow as there is a mix of certainty and uncertainty, deciding and yet not deciding, wanting to die and yet wanting to live. It is obvious that Paul is experiencing intense mental conflict. He even says in verse 23, "I am hard pressed between the two." It is almost as if Paul is either talking to himself or thinking out loud in the presence and confidentiality of close friends as he contemplates dying and living.

What lessons can we learn from Paul and his situation- first, **be honest about your longings and desires**. Paul was really transparent about what he was feeling. Was he ambiguous in his desires?

Yes, but he was willing to lay, right out there, his struggle honestly and openly about his longings and desires.

Although Paul was sharing his thoughts with the church people at Philippi I wonder, do you have someone to share your longings and desires with, that person or group, that small group ministry that can truly listen to you and walk with you when you need a friend or friends? These are stressful times, folks. If you don't have someone, I encourage you to find that person or person and not feel like you have to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders alone.

Second, **have you come to terms with the issues of life and death?** The older we get it seems as though the years seem to quickly slip by. It is hard to believe that when we came to Akron 15 years ago our oldest daughter, Rebecca, was and our youngest, Ashley, was 3. And now they are 21 and 18 and Ashley just graduated from high school this past

Monday. As you think about your life do you find yourself content, restless, wishing you could do a lot of it over again, satisfied, or wanting?

Friends, we all make mistakes, we all wish we could do things over again, but lingering on those things, those issues will not change the outcome. If we think about them too long we might become depressed and want to give

up. But as I look at Paul he knew it was futile to live in the past, only look to the now and the future. He knew where his strength needed to come

from and who he needed to turn to, he knew who would guide him and

sustain him for he says in verse 19, "for I know that through your prayers

and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my

deliverance." Paul was willing to give his life over to Jesus Christ and let the

chips fall where they may because he was centered in Christ and in Christ

alone. Paul wasn't afraid of what life would bring him and he wasn't afraid

to die.

Are you afraid to die? I know and have known people who are. Is it because they fear the unknown and death is the unknown? Is it because they fear dying a horrible death? Is it that they are not sure of their eternal outcome; whether they will be with Christ in eternity or because they haven't made a commitment to Christ they are not sure where they will find themselves in the end? Even Jesus believed in a heaven and a hell, being with God for eternity and being separated from God forever. In Philippians 3:10-14 we read, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained this or have reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but his one thing I do; forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus." Paul knew what

awaited him at death because he had made Christ Jesus his own. Accept Christ and receive the prize He offers, eternity with Him.

Oh, that we might be able to say with Paul, "for to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain" that is the highest, clearest point to which our faith can take us, is it not? I pray that we all are striving for this so that when we come to this point in our spiritual journey, we will be able to live with joyful, self-giving abandon where we welcome all of life and live without fear of death.

And third, **be on top rather than beneath your situation.** There is a real sense that Paul has absolutely no control over his decision- he is in prison and so he is in the hands of the Roman authorities and he is at their mercy. And yet Paul was not going to let his circumstances dictate and control him; he wasn't going to let his imprisonment crush his spirit but rather he takes the initiative, he is going to walk into his own future, he is going to be on top of the situation rather than let it crush him and control him. And a lot of this has to do with his mental state. Are there things right now

that control you rather than you and God together controlling it, whatever the "it" might be? Whatever might be weighing you down right now, give it to God and, with the help of Christ, let Him move you on top of the situation rather than beneath the situation. Don't let the pressures and the burdens of life weigh you down, no matter where you find yourself right now.

Remember what Paul says in Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through [Christ] who strengthens me."

I leave you with this true story. Theodore Parker Ferris was one of the great preachers of the past. After his death, the leaders of the church in Boston honored him by collecting and printing what they felt were his best sermons Dr. Ferris had preached during his 30 years as their pastor. One of the sermons was entitled "When Things Don't Go Well." In it he gives us some handles on which to take hold as we seek to cope and live: 1) "Remember that there is nothing that can happen to you that has not happened to millions of others." 2) "Remind yourself that as a human being

you run the risk of this kind of thing happening.” The human condition is that life is fragile and love makes us vulnerable; we are going to be hurt, but our huts will pass; some dreams will be shattered while others will come to fruition. 3) “Remember there are people who become great facing what you must now face.” 4) “Say, ‘I don’t know how I’m going to handle this, but I can. I know that from sources of which I am not conscious help will come, not necessarily the help I ask for, but help that I know nothing about right now will rise up in me, will appear suddenly from all sorts of unexpected places.’”

Paul was going to make it no matter what? How? Through Christ, for Christ was his strength. And so, in life as well as in death, Paul was going to be victorious because Christ lived in him. Friends, it is true- to live is Christ, to die is gain. Amen.

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Philippians 1:15-26

Introduction: Something I shared at a recent funeral...

Philippians 1:12-14, 23 Paul is in prison

What lessons can we learn from Paul and his situation?

First, **be honest about your _____ and _____**

Second, **have you come to terms with the issues of _____ and _____?**

Paul knew who would guide him and sustain him vs. 19

Are you afraid to die?

Philippians 3:10-14

And third, **be on _____ rather than _____ your situation**

Whatever might be weighing you down right now...

Philippians 4:13 "I can do all things through [Christ] who strengthens me"

Conclusion: Theodore Parker Ferris and his sermon entitled, "When Things Don't Go Well". "To live is Christ, to die is gain."