

CHRIST IS MY LIFE

Philippians 1:1-30

Key verse 1:21

"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."

We thank God for abundantly blessing this past Christmas service, which we were able to celebrate live and via Zoom with numerous sheep even in this pandemic season, and receive great joy as a result. Like the three wise men, we were thereby allowed to bring God our best gifts of true worship. Thanks be to God for also entrusting Sh. Noah with a powerful and content-filled message for the Christmas Eve service, which encouraged us to faithfully serve the Nativity ministry. At the end of the year, we may learn Paul's philosophy of life: for to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. This was not a cry of despair, but a victory cry. Paul could speak this victory cry with confidence even when he was in an adverse situation because he had accepted God's dominion over his life and had decided to give his life unswervingly for the sake of the gospel. We may also look back on the past year of 2020 with this shout of victory and with thanksgiving. May God also give us clear prayer requests and direction and a decision for 2021, whether in life or suffering and death, to give ourselves faithfully for the salvation work of God, especially among the Next Generation and on the campuses to the end.

1. Paul's imprisonment for the furtherance of the gospel (1-18)

Let us read together verses 1 and 2: "Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Paul addressed this letter to the church in Philippi,

whom he greatly esteemed and loved, calling them the saints in Christ. Philippi was a city of the first district of Macedonia (Acts 16:11,12), a Roman colony and the first Christian church established on European soil. Therefore, it was largely composed of Gentile Christians. The church in Philippi had come into being as a result of Paul's hard struggle of faith (1 Thessalonians 2:2). Through it, first a purple merchant Lydia, then a maid with a spirit of divination, and even the local jailer had come to believe in Christ. That he had a close relationship with them we see, among other things, that he allowed himself to be supported by their gifts, whereas otherwise he deliberately refrained from being financially supported (1 Corinthians 9; 2 Corinthians 11). The date of the writing of Philippians is dated to about 61 AD. Paul was a prisoner in Rome at the time. His clear stance had provoked strong reactions even among Christians, and many had turned away from him. The church in Philippi, however, stood faithfully behind him and behind the truth and thus gave him much strength and comfort during the time of imprisonment. Paul encouraged them that God would bless their faithful love, pure faith and participation in suffering.

Let us read verses 3-7: "I thank my God every time I remember you. In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus. It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you

share in God's grace with me." If we look at verse 3, we see that Paul begins this letter with thanksgiving. This is truly remarkable when we know what a difficult situation Paul was actually in. The prisons of Rome were not modern facilities like they are today, but dark and cold dungeons that he probably had to share with serious criminals. Moreover, he was separated from the people he loved and who loved him. So, humanly speaking, he was in an absolutely hopeless situation, awaiting his death sentence. But he did not lull himself into self-pity, fatalistic thoughts or resentment, but was able to write a letter of thanksgiving and a letter of joy, and also to encourage his brothers and sisters in the faith to rejoice in afflictions. We, too, have experienced Satan's temptation this year. But we need not be sad or discouraged because of this, but rather, especially at the close of the year, we may thank God with all our hearts for His work through the afflictions and look to the next year with clear prayer requests, joy and vision.

If we look at verse 5, we see that Paul gave thanks primarily for their fellowship in the gospel. We can learn from this that for Paul, fellowship in the gospel was what mattered. This was not about a nice feeling of human togetherness or nice words, but fellowship through one-on-one Bible study, life fellowship, and fellowship in the sufferings of Christ. True deep fellowship in the Word seems to be outdated and is no longer highly respected by many churches. But it is through fellowship in the Gospel that God works powerfully in the hearts of young people. Through the fellowship on the gospel from the servant of God with Samuel Abraham Chang, he was allowed to work on a 20-page paper on Hebrews 5:8,9 and through that he met Jesus personally.

Verses 8-11 say, "God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus. And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ,

filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ--to the glory and praise of God." We can learn two points from Paul here. First, we learn that Paul had a clear and spiritual prayer request for the church at Philippi. He was not praying for his own deliverance or for the improvement of their conditions. His prayer was that they would grow spiritually and that their love would become even richer in knowledge and experience, and that they would gain spiritual insight and be incorruptible for the day of Christ. He prayed that they would learn to bear fruits of righteousness instead of doing their own work. Sometimes we live with the attitude that we have given ourselves and suffered a lot, but do not necessarily want to do so for someone else, such as our children or sheep. But by having this mindset, we trample on God's precious heritage of faith. We may continue to pray for our Next Generation with the spiritual intention, not that they will succeed in the world, but above all that they will follow in the footsteps of the First Generation and live as people of spiritual influence. We may pray for them to study excellently in school and university, not to be able to earn a lot of money later, but to be trained to work as prayer workers and leaders. M. Peter has been praying for the Next Generation in this way for 40 years with the spiritual intention not to improve their conditions, but to give their lives for God's mission until the end, no matter what the cost. He prayed for my brother and me to become doctors, not for his satisfaction or for our financial security, but to serve the world mission. In this sense, it is a matter of gratitude that 5 young people Joshua Elsholz, Samuel Abraham Chang, Sarah Schweitzer, Peter Josef Chang and Sarah Grace Chang were able to make a clear decision for Jesus this year based on 1 Peter 4:13, to give their lives to Jesus and to give themselves to God even in suffering. It is a matter of great gratitude that through the time of suffering and misunderstanding, they were able to grow in knowledge and experience, become spiritually strong, and clarify their identity. Their decision is the fruit of righteousness

and God will complete the good work that He has begun in them.

Second, we learn from Paul that he always thought of his sheep first instead of thinking of himself and his situation first. When we are in a difficult situation, we think primarily of ourselves and how I can get my problems be solved quickly. However, we may think first of our sheep on campus and serve them even in this pandemic time. At the Christmas service, we saw great willingness in the hearts of some sheep to serve God and work together. God blessed the shepherd's heart of Sh. Jochen and M. Priska for Olaf, Patrick and Kai and Sh. Peter and Sh. Anja for Luke to challenge them to participate in the work of God practically even in the pandemic time until the end. Their participation in the theater and for the technology gave us joy, hope and comfort. Some sheep from Koblenz also participated in the services through Zoom. When we focus on our mission, we can experience God's mighty work in the students. We will see through one-on-one Bible study and life fellowship that they make a decision for Jesus and serve God with their whole life.

Let us look at verses 12-15: "Now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill." The Praetorium was an institution full of Roman officials and commanders. So Paul, as a prisoner here, was subject to strong secular pressures. But even in such a cruel place, he did not go quiet, but stood firm to his faith. He even became known as the one who wore his shackles for Christ. Paul encouraged the brethren in Philippi, with the amazing response in all the churches that many who had been more reserved before gained confidence through his imprisonment and now preached the gospel without timidity. Although the inten-

tion of Paul's opponents had been to stifle Paul's influence, all of a sudden many little "Pauluses" stood up and testified to God's Word without compromise and without timidity. We see here the principle of God's work, that it is purified and grows through suffering and persecution, in other words, that suffering serves to further the gospel. We also learn that it is crucial with what attitude we should serve the work of God in difficult circumstances and under the pressure of the current humanism and zeitgeist. It is easier to follow the spirit of the times and go with mass. However, we may continue to hold on to the truth and see spiritual growth as a result. It will lead to many rising up among the students and the Next Generation who will serve the work of God with clear testimony. In this sense, we may also thank God for allowing us to grow and become strong through persecution in the early 2000s as well as this year. The false accusations and lies were not easy to bear and humanly speaking it was a difficult year overall. But we were allowed to remember 1 Peter 2:4,5,9, clarify our identity, and choose to share in the suffering of Jesus. As a result, we were able to see amazing growth in our ministry this year. Despite the misunderstandings, we were able to hold the 2020 GLE Forum. We were also able to celebrate the 40 years of God's work in Bonn UBF this year with great gratitude. Above all, there was spiritual growth. Sh. Peter Ryu, in spite of opposition from all over the world, grew spiritually stronger and matured as a leader for the Next Generation by simultaneously earning his doctorate and serving the M mission. Under his leadership, the Next Generation from all over the world was able to become experts in Question Making and the Inductive Bible Study method at a young age. The co-workers engaged in intense word warfare by, instead of pointless battles, intensively studying books from the Bible and faithfully conducting Daily Bread and one-to-one Bible Study Battles and Life Fellowship. Our co-workers devoted themselves to complex topics of philosophy and were able to pass them on to us excellently in a way that was easy to understand and had spiritual signifi-

cance, so that we were able to understand our faith even better as a result. We were able to experience again at our own hand that our work became clearer and stronger in times of persecution and could be used as a good influence for the world mission.

In verses 16-18 we see that Paul had to experience tribulation through various people and circumstances. But he did not live with resentment and hatred toward them. Nor did he sink into fateful and fatalistic thoughts or think of his ruined reputation, but gave thanks that the gospel would continue to be preached and increased. He could see in the sufferings and misunderstandings the work of God and as a logical consequence of his uncompromising attitude. M. Peter and M. Sarah's name and heritage was dragged through the mud by various haters that year. But they did not think fatefully about it or that their life devotion was in vain, but continued to pray for the work of God through UBF and focused on Bible study and mobilizing and equipping the Next Generation. It is crucial how to deal with suffering and misunderstanding. We can bury ourselves, think fatalistically and negatively, or we may continue to dedicate our lives to God's work with vision and focus like Paul. Above all, we learn from Paul not to fight against people, but to recognize Satan in the attacks. May God help us to learn this attitude from Paul, to stand unswervingly on the side of truth, and thereby be used as influential leaders for this generation.

2. Be it by life or death (19-30)

Let's look at verses 18 and 19: "But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance." Although Paul was in adverse conditions, he had firm confidence that God had prepared the best for him. God had blessed his prayers and de-

votion and those of the Philippians and would surely continue to bless them. Let us read verses 20 and 21: "I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." These verses contain Paul's famous philosophy of life: To live is Christ to die is gain. Paul had once been the worst persecutor of Christians, building his life on his righteousness and achievement. But since his conversion, out of gratitude for grace, Paul gave his life unreservedly and fearlessly for one purpose, to proclaim the gospel to the ends of the earth. For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain! Paul testified here that it made no difference to him whether he lived or died as long as he was united with Jesus. Many people are afraid of death, or do not want to deal with it, because they have no certainty of what will happen afterwards. But for Paul, death did not represent a serious event, but a way for him to be with his Lord even faster. That is why he even considered death as a gain. Regardless of his current suffering, whether he lived or died, it was enough for him if God was glorified through it.

Paul's confession was not a sentence simply spoken, but came from the deepest love and life relationship with Jesus. It sprang from his struggle of faith and experience with suffering, through which Paul had come to know Jesus ever more deeply. But this philosophy of life of Paul was not a fatalistic cry of despair in an adverse situation, but a victory cry with which he could confidently lead his life and victoriously surrender for God unreservedly to the end. Paul was convinced that this time of suffering would carry no weight compared to the glory that would be revealed in him (Romans 8:18).

Let's read the key verse together again: "For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain." Paul was able to give such a profound and mature testimony and, without thinking of himself, give himself to God's work because he had completely surren-

dered the dominion of his life to God. This, in turn, came from his deep personal relationship with God. Often we find ourselves in situations where we can surrender our lives to God up to a certain point, but have an area that we cannot surrender to God. Money is my life. Career is my life. Children are my life. Marriage is my life. Comfort and acceptance in society are my gain. Then we quickly get involved in human thoughts and try to fight with our own strength. But that we build a backup plan for our lives shows that we have not given God dominion in our lives or that we do not trust God's guidance. We can experience peace of heart only when we completely surrender our lives to God. During this time, let us develop a deep, personal, and committed relationship with Jesus through one-on-one Bible study and life fellowship. This bond gives us the strength to place our lives completely under His Lordship. It gives us strength to give our lives completely to him and to testify: For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

When my father began his missionary life, he came to Germany with this guiding verse from Philippians 1:21 and with a clear decision based on this word not to seek a life of improved conditions, but with a clear purpose to give his whole life for the mission of God. My parents lived consistently according to this Word, opening their lives and homes and faithfully studying the Bible for the last 40 years to serve the young German students. Because they did not live for their petit-bourgeois purpose but for God's mission, they could experience the joy of students accepting Jesus personally and deciding to give their lives to God. But they also had to experience difficulties and misunderstandings several times, which are actually humanly unacceptable. Nevertheless, they held on to this word until the end. Human recognition or a fulfilled retired life was not their gain, but to serve God's mission until the end of their lives. They continued to shout that victory cry by not retiring, but making a decision to give themselves to the Next Generation and the young people on campus until the end of their lives. They

even pray that they are needed now to establish three bases in the Muslim world.

I thank God for also encouraging me personally to follow in my parents' footsteps. With the same clear life decision, I must not strive for recognition among people or for convenience, but for giving my life to the end for God's work. Even our license plate number is BN PH 121 because it is our son Paul Ezra's life motto. It is God's grace that I could see this philosophy of life practiced in my parents from childhood. It is God's grace that I was able to witness two waves of persecution and thereby realize that misunderstanding only makes us stronger. I repent of having sought a worldly backup plan by being preoccupied with finances or my career. I grew tired of doing servanthood for other people who might ultimately betray and hurt you. I fell into fatalistic and hurt thoughts instead of looking forward. But God encouraged me through the faith struggle of Paul, who saw suffering as God's sovereignty and guidance and chose to live for God's mission until the end of his life. In Christ, I have everything I need. I don't want to chase after career or transient living conditions, but rather prioritize my life according to Matthew 6:33 for the mobilization of the Next Generation and the pioneering of Muslim countries.

We may also encourage our Next Generation to continue to struggle faithfully with this philosophy of life so that it can be used as God's powerful unit in the next 40 years. Students on campus are striving for wealth, career and love as their gain. Young people today cannot wait to finally become independent from their parents and begin a life full of apparent opportunities. God blessed Sh. Noah's faith decision to pursue spiritual training after graduating from high school, instead of doing Work & Travel through Australia, according to Matthew 6:33. Although he is still young, he was able to grow spiritually and share excellent messages through the preacher training this year. God will bless his decision to obey a word from Genesis 6:9 instead of following his worldly dreams, and use him as a spiritual leader.

This word also gives us clear direction on how to look back and conclude this year. Humanly speaking, this year has not been easy in various ways and it is easy to get fixated on it. But from God's perspective, this year has been an absolute win. We may find numerous expressions of gratitude through our involvement with the Annual Guiding Word Symposium at the end of this year. We can look forward to 2021 with great expectation and clear prayer requests, and continue God's work with confidence and clear decision.

When we look at verses 22-26, we see that Paul was in conflict. For him, departing from the world meant being able to be with Jesus quickly. But he encouraged the Philippians that it was more necessary for them and the discipleship that he remained in the flesh. He was full of confidence that he would remain with them so that their boasting in Christ would be even greater. Many of Paul's opponents most wanted him to disappear from the scene unopposed and quietly. But Paul showed the Philippians an example by not disappearing quickly and meaninglessly into his well-deserved retirement, but continuing to participate in the suffering of Jesus in his old age for the sake of God's work and the spread of the gospel. As a result, they were encouraged to keep fighting.

Let us read verses 27-30 together: "Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved--and that by God. For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have." Paul further encouraged the Philippians here on three points of how they

could walk worthy of the gospel: they were to 1. fight with one accord for the faith of the gospel, 2. not be frightened in any part by the adversaries, and 3. suffer for His sake. Paul did not gloss over anything, he told them that they would and had to fight his battle. There will always be people trying to intimidate us because of our faith. But we must not let them frighten us in any way, but we can fearlessly live our life of faith before God. Then we will experience God's help and abundant blessings.

In today's text, we could learn that suffering and persecution serve to promote the gospel, and God's work becomes stronger and clearer as a result. We also learned about Paul's philosophy of life, that he had a clear goal in life, which was to give his life completely for God's work and to be united with Him in life and death. With this attitude, we can serve God's work with priority and give our lives to Him fearlessly and unreservedly. We may look back on the year that is ending with joy and gratitude, and begin the coming year with clear intentions of repentance and prayer. May God help us in the new year 2021 to fight unswervingly according to Ezekiel 37:10 that Germany may be changed into a priestly nation and that 100,000 Bible teachers and 5 million prayer workers may be established.