

**“Shepherd Me, O God (Psalm 23)” Hymn #473 in Glory to God  
Philippians 1:21-30**

**September 24, 2017**

*Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC*

**GOSPEL LIVING**

***Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.***

Offered the chance to stay safely in the United States as a guest lecturer, Dietrich Bonhoeffer chose to return to Nazi Germany. There he worked with the Confessing Church, taught at an underground seminary after Hitler’s government banned him from teaching openly, and worked to rescue Jews.

When he decided to return to Germany, Bonhoeffer wrote in a letter to Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the leading Reformed theologians of the 20th century, “I have made a mistake in coming to America. I must live through this difficult period in our national history with the Christian people of Germany. I will have no right to participate in the reconstruction of Christian life in Germany after the war if I do not share the trials of this time with my people.”

Along with leading German Christians such as theologian Karl Barth and pastor Martin Niemöller, Bonhoeffer helped write The Theological Declaration of Barmen. This statement of faith is included in our Presbyterian *Book of Confessions*. In the face of Hitler’s claims and his co-opting of the German church, you can imagine the danger these Confessing Church leaders faced by boldly declaring, “We reject the false doctrine, as though there were areas of our life in which we would not belong to Jesus Christ, but to other lords — areas in which we would not need justification and sanctification through him. We reject the false doctrine, as though the State, over and beyond its special commission, should and could become the single and totalitarian order of human life, thus fulfilling the church’s vocation as well. We reject the false doctrine, as though the church in human arrogance could place the Word and work of the Lord in the service of any arbitrarily chosen desires, purposes, and plans.”

Because of his work with the underground Resistance and his public opposition to Hitler, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was put in a black Mercedes in April 1943 and taken to Tegel Prison. He was imprisoned for two years in different Nazi prisons and concentration camps. In his imprisonment, he regularly corresponded with his family and friends, acted as a pastor to his fellow prisoners, and developed a theology of God’s power in the weakness of the cross and suffering. In one letter he wrote, “To be a Christian does not mean to be religious in a particular way, to make something of oneself (a sinner, a penitent, or a saint) on the basis of some method or other, but to be a man — not a type of man, but the man that Christ creates in us. It is not the religious act that makes the Christian, but participation in the sufferings of God in the secular life.”<sup>1</sup>

Two weeks before the Americans liberated the Flossenbürg concentration camp, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hanged on April 9, 1945, at the age of 39. His family and friends had not heard from him for two months, and would not find out about his death until several months later. In July 1944, Bonhoeffer wrote a letter to his dear friend, Eberhard Bethge, after an assassination attempt against Hitler had failed (in which Bonhoeffer had played a role), and he said, “How should one become arrogant over successes or shaken by one’s failures when one shares in God’s suffering in the life of this world? You understand what I mean even when I put it so briefly. I am grateful that I have been allowed this insight, and I know that it is only on the path that I have finally taken that I was able to learn this. So I am thinking gratefully and with peace of mind about past as well as present things . . . May God lead us kindly through these times, but above all, may God lead us to himself.”

Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s final recorded words before he was hanged on April 9, 1945 were, “This is the end — for me the beginning of life.”<sup>2</sup>

Dietrich Bonhoeffer probably would have resisted any direct comparisons with the Apostle Paul, but it’s hard not to notice the eerie similarities between his situation in Nazi concentration camps and Paul’s circumstances in a Roman imperial prison. Paul wrote his letter to his beloved fellow Christians in Philippi from a Roman prison, very likely in the empire’s capital city itself. Paul and the Philippians had an especially close relationship. His letter is, in effect, a thank you note for something they sent him (maybe money?) by way of Epaphroditus.

The Letter to the Philippians is often called the “Letter of Joy” because of its positive, encouraging, uplifting tone (“I will continue to rejoice . . . Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice . . . I rejoice in the Lord greatly”). This is all the more remarkable because Paul is in prison, maybe for the last time, facing execution. And yet, while not ignoring his dire plight as unimportant, Paul writes to the Philippian Christians about gospel living — living with hope, “standing firm in one hope, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.”

Think about Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s reflections on participating in God’s suffering and actions in the world, and his perspective on life and death, as I read some of Paul’s words again: “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. . . For [God] has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well.” (Philippians 1:21-24, 29)

On Thursday morning, National Public Radio aired an interview with the president of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, about his country’s continued fight against the Taliban and his hopes and strategies for the future. After the interview, another correspondent with much experience in that country evaluated the president’s hopes and plans. He identified the difficulties of reaching those goals. He said that many of the Afghan soldiers are not willing to fight and die for the current government.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “If a man has not discovered something that he will die for, he isn’t fit to live.” Not too many of us want to think about dying even a natural death, much less for a cause or a movement or a person. At the same time, not many of us (if any of us) will ever be in the position that the Apostle Paul and Dietrich Bonhoeffer found themselves in, in prison facing imminent death because of their Christian beliefs.

However, what Bonhoeffer and Paul said about life in Christ and what they demonstrated in how they lived and died believing in Christ is applicable to all of us. They knew what they lived for and what they were willing to die for. The heading in my study Bible over the section I read from Philippians is “Paul’s Present Circumstances.” Well, Paul’s present circumstances in the year 64 or 65 A.D. weren’t very promising. Actually, from the world’s perspective, we might say his circumstances were hopeless. But Paul hardly sounds hopeless when he writes about how “living is Christ and dying is gain.”

Dante Alighieri’s long poem, “Divine Comedy,” tells of his journey through the afterlife, from the night before Good Friday to the Wednesday after Easter. Dante travels through hell, purgatory, and paradise. The poem is considered by many to be an allegory of the soul’s journey to God. In part one, *Inferno*, there is an inscription above the gates leading to Hell, which ends with these famous words: “Abandon Hope All Ye Who Enter Here.”

One commentator has written, “People start dying when they lose hope. The person who has nothing to live for will lose hope and die quickly. That is what Paul is trying to counteract in this passage. It is God’s will that we experience life and not death.” But the life that God offers us in Jesus Christ is not just to be found in a future resurrection, as glorious as that will be. The life that God offers us in Jesus Christ can be found in our present circumstances. Again, the commentator says, “Sometimes our eyes are so focused on the sky, waiting for our resurrection and ‘true life,’ that we miss in our present life the opportunities for the abundant life to which Christ calls us. We know that tomorrow holds promises of hope and joy. Our God, though, is also in our present, challenging us to look at life and its circumstances through the lens of hope that will bring a song of joy into our life. God has already spoken a word of life on our behalf. This spoken word will help us find hope in the midst of the most difficult situations life will lob at us.”<sup>3</sup>

Paul tells the Philippians — and by extension, us and all believers — “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Gospel living doesn’t ignore the present circumstances of our lives, which can sometimes feel very much like a prison, even if not literally. Gospel living helps us find a way to walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Gospel living helps us choose life when life circumstances scream “Abandon hope all ye who enter here.” Gospel living puts Jesus Christ at the center — at the center of everything we do; at the center of our thinking; at the center of our ethical thinking and our moral actions; at the center of our worship; at the center of our very lives.

Also, gospel living is not just — or even primarily — about me getting into heaven. Gospel living is about living in community. Remember what Paul said? “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.” (Philippians 1:27-28) The pronouns are plural — this is a call to the church to be the church together. One of the things I like about the Presbyterian Church is the idea that your faith is always personal, but never private. No one can profess your faith in Jesus Christ for you. That is a private decision, but it is professed in the presence of the community of faith. Gospel living is what comes after our profession of faith. Gospel living shows the world that we have hope in Jesus Christ in our present circumstances, and that’s why and how we can go on living for God.

As I was reading for this sermon, I came across a blurb about Bette Midler’s song, “The Rose,” in connection with Paul’s encouragement to hope in Christ and to choose life in the face of dire life circumstances. So, I read the lyrics, and the second verse seems to speak well to Paul’s advice:

*It’s the heart afraid of breaking  
That never learns to dance.  
It’s the dream afraid of waking  
That never takes a chance.  
It’s the one who won’t be taken,  
Who cannot seem to give,  
And the soul afraid of dyin’  
That never learns to live.*

In another of Paul’s letters, this one to the Roman Christians, he also talks about what it means to live with hope in Jesus Christ. Romans 14:7-9 are my favorite Bible verses. I guess you could say they are my life motto. Think about what they might say to you in your present circumstances, about what gospel living might look like in your life.

“We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living.”

***Let us pray: God of grace, your grace reaches out to all of us. You call us to live as citizens of heaven, to work together with one mind and purpose, to reach out in love to those in need. Strengthen us so that we might live in a manner worthy of the Good News we have received, offering our lives to the building of your kingdom, where there is grace enough for all. Amen.***

NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The information about Bonhoeffer to this point in the sermon is based on “Dietrich Bonhoeffer: German theologian and resister,” at [www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/martyrs/dietrich-bonhoeffer.html](http://www.christianitytoday.com/history/people/martyrs/dietrich-bonhoeffer.html)

<sup>2</sup>Taken from “Bonhoeffer’s Last Words, Before He Was Hanged (69 Years Ago Tomorrow),” April 8, 2014 at [www.abramjk.com](http://www.abramjk.com).

<sup>3</sup>Gilberto Collazo, “Philippians 1:21-30, Pastoral Perspective,” David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, editors, *Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), pp. 86-90.