**Pastor Tim’s Message Note from 9-10-2023**

**Should I Stay or Should I Go?**

Today is a special day here at Chestnut Grove. Today we are blessed to lift up the ministry of Heavenly Hands in a special way. Our Early Learning Center is a fantastic ministry that nurtures children in the love and grace of Jesus Christ. Truly there is truly nothing more important than caring and loving and sharing Jesus with God’s precious little ones. And we are grateful for all of the Heavenly Hands staff who have served and thank God for those who continue to serve in these very important ways.

Today, in particular, we seek to bless and honor Joelle Beck, whom our Lord called here a number of years ago and whom has called her to go forth from here a few weeks ago. We say thank you, Joelle, for all you have done. You have been a faithful, godly leader. You have served well and have left us in good hands. Well done. You go with our blessing.

And please take a moment to thank Joelle during the reception that follows our worship service today.

And we also thank God for the Heavenly Hands staff that are called to stay and lead in this ministry. We thank the Lord for each and every one of you. All of you are sowing many seeds of God’s Kingdom into young lives. You will not likely see each of the seeds sprout in all the ways that they will, but remember that God sees and He will share with you one day and you will see more fully than ever the difference you have made and are making.

Today, as we honor all of you and bless Joelle in your going forth and bless those remaining here, I am reminded of Paul the Apostle and some of his words to the church in Philippi. A few weeks ago, we began a sermon series walking through this beautiful letter in our New Testament we call Philippians. It is such a profound and powerful letter of instruction.

Paul, interestingly, is writing this letter while under house arrest in Rome. It is easy to forget the fact that the early church lived under the constant threat of persecution. But that was the case.

Paul’s life wasn’t easy. He endured much sufferings and persecutions. This wasn’t Paul’s first incarceration and it wouldn’t be his last, either. And he would be beaten and stoned as well for his faithfulness in following Jesus.

In fact, in the midst of his letter, in our highlighted passage today, it falls right after his sharing about his present suffering and right before the potential suffering that the Christians in Philippi might be facing by remaining loyal to Jesus. And between these words, Paul shares a few very powerful words about staying and going. Except on this occasion, remaining on earth or going to heaven.

Let us turn to the text now and take a closer look at Philippians 1:21-26.

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| Philippians 1:21-26 New International Version (NIV)**21For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 22If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! 23I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; 24but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. 25Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, 26so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.** |

Paul says “for to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

This is one of my favorite verses in the Bible for a few reasons.

First, Paul states that for me, to live is Christ. In other words, Paul’s life is so bound up in the life of Christ that everything he does, he doesn’t seek to do alone, but rather in unity with Jesus. Jesus had become Lord of everything in Paul’s life. And this was so much the case that Paul can say “for me, to live is Christ.”

Before Paul came to know and love Jesus, Paul’s life was really focused on Paul. Looking at Paul from the outside, he might appear to be a zealous, godly, God-loving person. But in actually, he was selfish and covetous and did not know the Lord.

But when Jesus graciously revealed Himself to Paul, Paul surrendered to the Lord. Jesus became everything to Paul. This was so much the case that Paul’s life was so focused on Jesus that everything he did connected to Jesus. Jesus became his life. Jesus was his Life, his King, his Savior. And as long as Paul remained in his physical body, his life was to be lived with Jesus at the center.

Let’s pause for a moment to think about God’s amazing grace towards Paul. Paul had persecuted the church. He was partially responsible for the stoning of a Christian named Stephen. But Jesus, in His mercy, revealed Himself to him. Jesus even did so when Paul was on his way to round up more Christians and get them thrown into prison.

Jesus made it clear that Paul was living his life completely in the wrong direction. But Jesus was giving him another opportunity to be made new by putting his faith in Him. And Paul does this. And with the same zeal that led Paul to persecute the church, Paul would become one of the leaders of the church.

But in Jesus’ encounter with Paul, the Lord also makes it clear to him that he would suffer greatly for the Name of Jesus. And this certainly was so.

In light of his many sufferings, including his present time being chained to a Roman soldier 24/7, it is understandable for us to read what Paul writes about in these verses for today.

Again, for Paul, to live is Christ. But he doesn’t stop there. He says, “And to die is gain.” Paul understood that physical death was not something to be afraid of.

Now, Paul is certainly not being suicidal in his thoughts and words here. Rather, he is merely stating the truth that heaven is going to be awesome. For people that have responded to the good news of Jesus, like Paul, heaven is going to be a great improvement.

No more pain. No more suffering. No more grieving. But instead, endless joy in the presence of God and God’s people through the ages. Joyous reunions. Not to mention meeting all of God’s heavenly host – the faithful angels who have known and loved God before humanity was ever made. Paul knew that it was amazing what awaited him after his physical death.

In fact, in another of Paul’s letters, Paul seems to describe a near death experience (perhaps it occurred when he was stoned and left for dead, but then was revived). And in this experience, Paul seems to have been briefly caught up into paradise, into heaven, and it was just amazing and indescribably good and beautiful.

But here in Philippians, Paul is using this should I stay or should I go language in order to strengthen the faith of the Philippians. He wanted them to be so excited for the glorious future that God has for his people that the Christians there were to remain steadfast in their commitment to Jesus, even in the face of possible persecution.

Maybe you’ve heard the saying, “he or she is so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good.”

But the truth actually runs the other way. We are to be so heavenly minded that we can only be of earthly good. This was what Paul was wanting for the Philippians.

In this passage, Paul shares that he is convinced that his time to go to be with Christ has not yet come. He believed that God still had him in the body and on earth for the benefit of others, like the believers in Philippi. Paul believed that he was called to help them to progress or become more spiritually mature in their faith.

And so as much as Paul was excited about heaven in his future, he was also confident that as long as he remained in the body, he was to be a blessing to God’s church and a vessel in God’s hands.

So what is the big idea for us to remember from this today? I believe that it is this. **We are to be excited for heaven, but convinced that God has us here to be a blessing to others.**

There was a saying that was popular a few years back, something is life and the rest is just details. (and the something could be “soccer” or “baseball” or “basketball” “bowling” “hockey” “fishing” “softball” or even “beer” or “coffee” being ‘life’

Sadly, for many people this is true. If anything or anyone becomes our life besides Christ, it is a god to us, an idol. And that is not a good thing.

Rather, Jesus Christ must be our life. If He is not our life, we will undoubtedly make something else our life. Maybe ourselves. Maybe something or someone else.

So friends, Christ must be our life. May we say, like Paul, “For me to live is Christ.” The rest are just details. And these details are to be lived with Jesus at the center.

What does this mean? It means that Jesus must be at the forefront of our minds at all times. It means that everything we do is meant to worship unto Him. It means that we are to live to bless and honor and glorify Him in everything.

And when we do this, I believe God will help us to enjoy many others things. For example, soccer will not be our life, but will be one way that we worship God and Jesus.

Paul then says “to die is gain.”

Paul knew what awaited him in glory. Do you know what awaits you? Are you excited? As followers of Jesus, we should be excited for heaven. It is going to be awesome and amazing and a place more fully alive than we have ever experienced. And eventually the new heavens and new earth. Truly, the future is very bright for every believer. The people of the world who do not know God live their lives in fear of physical death. But this should not be for the Christian.

In other words, for God’s people, the best is yet to be. Physical death is not something that we have to fear, but is actually something that will enable us to realize the hope that we have in Christ more fully. Yes, physical death is still an enemy and not something to celebrate. But because Jesus conquered death, we need not live in fear of it at all.

Paul knew that physical death led to being with Christ and so he writes to the Christians in Philippi **“I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far”**

Being with Christ in glory will be amazing brothers and sister. Jesus called this place paradise. It will be a place where we’ll see our Savior face to face and walk with Him. There will be no more pain and suffering and persecution. We will be with other believers through history and we’ll continue to grow in our love and knowledge of our Triune God.

And eventually the Lord will make a new heavens and a new earth (or remake this one) and we will live with the Lord forever in a very physically healthy and emotionally healthy life that will never end. This is amazing news!! The best is yet to be!

But while Paul was certainly excited about what awaited him in the future, he knew that as long as he was in the body, there was work yet to be done.

22 **If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me.**

And while Paul was torn between want he wanted the most (whether to remain in the body or to be with the Lord),

he concludes, “**it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body**.”

Even from a prison cell, facing continuing suffering, he knew that as long as he remained alive in the body, there was work to be done. There were people that needed to hear the good news. There were Christians that needed to be strengthened in the faith.

If Paul would have stopped ministering, we would not have the books of 1 & 2 Timothy and Titus and possibly other letters that God inspired Him to write and we continue to be blessed through studying them.

Like Paul, we need to live every day as long as we are here on earth, as days to bless God and bless others. God has assignments for each of us. We are to be His vessels. Jesus called His followers the light of the world and the salt of the earth. So you and I are here to be a blessing to others as long as we are here.

Our vision as Chestnut Grove Church is to be a light on a hill sharing the love of Jesus Christ the Son through Service, through Outreach, and through being Nurtured in the faith.

This will look different for each of us. But to live is Christ.

How is God calling you personally to service in the church? We are looking for liturgists, we love hearing testimonies, we would love more Sunday School Teachers. We would love more small group leaders. These are just a few examples.

There are outreaches throughout the year here at Chestnut Grove. And we are looking for volunteers to help. We also reach out by inviting others to church and to church events.

And we also bless God and others as we are intentional in being nurtured in the faith. Everyone should be doing something to help them grow in their love and knowledge of God and Christ. And as we grow, we will be better able to help others grow as well.

So friends, let us be excited for the future. Heaven. Eternal joy in God’s presence face to face. Beholding our Savior with our own eyes. And everything else that the Lord has in store for us. But as great as that will be, we are to live today and every day to be a blessing in this world for Jesus. With God’s help, may we live this out to the glory of God. Amen.