

Held by God's Goodness

† To live is Christ

† To die is gain

In the name of Jesus, our Advent Lord and Savior, dear loved ones of Phyllis, and especially you, Dolf, my good friend and brother in the faith:

It's always interesting to me where the Holy Spirit will lead when I ask Him for a funeral text. What Word of God will most clearly capture the life of the dear one now safe at rest with God? These words from Paul's letter to his dear Philippians were the Lord's answer in my waking moments the other morning. Reading the entire letter today suggests that Philippians was also one of Phyllis' favorite books of the Bible. So much of it applies to her in so many beautiful ways. Let's meditate on God's grace.

From house arrest, chained in Rome, the Lord's Apostle Paul writes to dear Christians back in Philippi, Macedonia. They supported him so eagerly – brothers like the jailer at Philippi, sisters like Lydia, successful business woman. (Acts 16) From the start they enjoyed with Paul a rich *“partnership in the gospel”* which I too have enjoyed with Phyllis and you for so many years. We grew together in grace because God kept bringing us back to His loving kindness and tender mercy that forgives us day by day and forever. Our confidence has been rewarded. *“He who began a good work in you [has carried] it to completion until the day in Christ Jesus,* when our dear Lord called Phyllis home to Himself.

With Paul, I say, *“I have you in my heart”* because *“you share in God's grace with me....I long for...you with the affection of Christ Jesus.”* That's why I sincerely thanked Phyllis for calling me Tuesday evening, asking me to bring her Holy Communion. The Lord was answering Paul's prayer for us: *“that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight..., pure and blameless until the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that come through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.”* Now Phyllis is enjoying the real presence of Jesus in God's house.

Phyllis would be the first to tell you that none of this was her righteousness, not by works. It's all God's righteous through the perfect life and innocent death of our Lord Jesus Christ. She received this righteousness by God's gift of faith and it showed. In the verse before our text, Paul expresses this 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.”* The NIV translation, *“sufficient courage,”* can also be rendered, *outspokenness, frankness, plainness* of speech. Wasn't that one of the things you had to love and admire in Phyllis? She reminded me of the mothers of my classmates in high school at Mobridge, SD. So far from home for Thanksgiving and Easter breaks, they mothered me. Farmers and ranchers wives know how to give you the unvarnished truth. As I loved them as I loved Phyllis for that. You always knew where you stood. And she was always standing with our Lord and Savior Jesus. Stand by Him, you stood by her. That's what it meant for Paul when he said, *“For to me, to live is Christ....”*

“If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.” This mutual respect flows from faith in Jesus. As God from all eternity, *“He humbled himself and became obedient to death – even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”* (2:1-11 NIV84)

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With all this **To live is Christ**, what does it mean when Paul says, “*To die is gain*”? Paul says that he has not experienced this yet. He just knows that two positive things have a grip on him from both sides. It’s the way Phyllis talked about wanting to go home to heaven, but not wanting to leave you, Dolf. How could anyone decide between two positives like that? How blessed we are to be **Held by God’s Goodness**. As God brought you two together in marriage over fifty years ago when you first committed your hearts to one another, so God has kept His loving grip on you throughout these years. To this day He still has not let you go. He never will. To this moment you are both **Held by God’s Goodness**.

The rest of Paul’s letter gives us some wonderful insights into what Phyllis is enjoying now in God’s gracious presence. She knows by experience that **To die is gain**. Paul counted every earthly gain as a self-righteous Pharisee as “*rubish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith. I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*” (3:9–11 NIV84)

Phyllis no longer has to say, “...*somehow...*” She knows how. At last she’s home in total communion with God. Faith has been replaced by sight. Hope by fulfillment of our most eager expectations. Feelings all wrapped up the fullness of joy which is hers now, nestled in the heart of God.

Paul gives sincere advice to us who still struggle here below. “*Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.*” By faith in Jesus we have received God’s righteousness. All He sees in us is the credit He gave when He raised Jesus from the dead, the credit He wrote in our account in heaven. There all Christ’s merits and Christ’s alone count for everything. He sanctifies us to do good works as grateful evidence of our faith. So Paul writes, “*Let us live up to what we have already attained.*” Do the things that show you are a believer. Comfort the sorrowing and grieve with those who grieve. God lifts our minds above earthly things because “*our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.*” (3:13–21 NIV84)

When we see Phyllis after the resurrection on the Last Day, she will be more bright and beautiful than ever on this earth. We too will enjoy glorified bodies like Jesus’ body, as long as we continue to put our faith in Christ alone as our Lord and Savior. In this hope, **To die is gain**.

Now the Lord says through His Apostle: “*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*” There, at home at last with God, our joy will be complete and overflowing. “*Let your gentleness be felt by experience for all. The Lord is near.*” (TPA) Christ is coming near now in His Word and sacrament, coming again soon in His Second and final Advent to judge the living and the dead.

Society worries and frets about evil. But through Paul, God says, “*Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.*” (4:8–9 NIV84)

“*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus....To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.*” (4:6-29 NIV84)