

She was born in Brooklyn, New York, into an African American family. For as long as she could remember, she had gone to church, with memories of walking there as a child. The course of her life took her to southeast Ohio, an interesting place to be a black Lutheran, a long way from the Big Apple. But she handled it with dignity, poise, and faith. The end of her life was hastened by cancer, and she ultimately decided to receive hospice care at home. I will never forget sitting at her bedside as she responded to my question of how she was feeling. She told me, describing the pain she was in, and some of the struggles she had as she thought of leaving her family behind. She talked about those things and then said, “I am going through all that, but, God is love, and I can’t wait to see him.”

He was born in Tarsus, into a Jewish family. He received a thorough religious education, mentored by influential teachers. He was so zealous for the traditions of his fathers that he felt it necessary to intimidate and imprison members of the upstart movement that held Jesus of Nazareth to be the promised Messiah, until that fateful day when Jesus met him on the road to Damascus, changing the trajectory of his life forever. He became an active ambassador for Jesus, preaching the gospel and training local leaders, and this brought him great joy and great suffering. Towards the end of his life, he found himself under house arrest, perhaps even chained to a Roman guard, left with plenty of time to think and reflect. And it was under such less-than-ideal circumstances that he composed a letter to the Christian Church in Philippi, writing the following:

“For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which shall I choose, I cannot tell. 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 on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith...”

Placed side by side, here are two real-life statements of faith that highlight the win/win nature of Christian expectation. If I’m alive, right here, right now, that’s a win. If I die, if I depart from here to be with Christ Jesus, that’s a win—the biggest win. You have the invitation to live in the strength of this win/win by trusting in Jesus’ resurrection for you. When you are fully convinced that Jesus defeated death by a physical resurrection and ascension, *and you will join him in both*, you enter into a confidence and peace of mind that nothing else in the world can give. Confident faith in a risen, living Lord is like rocket fuel that propels the believer to do the unthinkable. Here’s a couple historical examples.

The Antonine Plague, which took place from 165–180 AD, was a pandemic now believed to be smallpox that was introduced to the Roman Empire by soldiers returning from Syria. Five million people died as it ran its course. In the following century, the Plague of Cyprian (251–266 AD) spread from Africa throughout the known world. It was transmitted person-to-person by physical contact and by touching or using clothing and items infected by the sick. Half of all people who encountered the disease died.

During each pandemic, government officials and the wealthy fled the cities for the countryside to escape contact with those who were infected. The Christian community remained behind, becoming caretakers of the sick. On Easter Sunday in 260 AD, Dionysius of Corinth, a pastor and leader, praised the efforts of the Christians, many of whom had died while caring for others. He said:

“Most of our brother Christians showed unbounded love and loyalty, never sparing themselves, and thinking only of one another. Heedless of danger, they took charge of the sick, attending to their every need and ministering to them in Christ, and with them departed this life serenely happy; for they were infected by others with the disease, drawing on themselves the sickness of their neighbors and cheerfully accepting their pains.”

The early Christians’ dedication to caring for their neighbors during times of plague and sickness, whether the sick were believers or not, showcased the integrity of their unique message of love for others. These Christ-like actions had a great social impact and attracted outsiders to the faith. What compelled them to do this? The power of win/win faith.

It’s the same win/win faith that enabled a wonderful Christian woman to say, while staring death in the face, in her hospice bed in Zanesville, Ohio, “God is good and I can’t wait to see him.” The time has come to ask the question: are you in possession of such faith? “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”

It’s often been said that “everyone wants to go to heaven, but no one wants to die to get there,” and there’s a lot of truth to that comment. And it’s understandable, because death is our enemy; from a Biblical perspective, death exists as a consequence of sin; it’s so difficult to think about, that we’d rather not. We’d rather not dwell on it. Some people simply will not talk about it. But faith in Jesus gives us the tools to talk about it. Faith in Jesus pulls the fear out of it. How can that possibly be? Turn your attention to what Jesus has done.

You might fear death because you know you haven’t lived up to God’s standards. Other people may look at you and call you a “good person,” but you’ve got some things in your past that still haunt you, and you sense that if God is grading you on performance, you’re going to fail. Knowing all this, Jesus lived a life in which He passed every test, always lived the Golden Rule every single time; He fulfilled every obligation perfectly. You’d think that would entitle Him and Him alone to be rewarded by His Father, but in a shocking move, He shares His perfection with you. He won the gold medal, if you will, but He had one made for you, and when you wear it, you’re treated like the Champion He is.

Or, in light of your own eventual death, you might say, “I sure hope God lets me into heaven.” But you’re not convinced He will. Why not? Because you’re looking at your own track record for assurance. Instead, the assurance you’re looking for is found in Jesus’ own words from the cross, “It is finished.” The term Jesus uses also translates as Paid in Full. What is finished? The sacrifice He was making on the cross. What was paid in full? Your debt of sin and mine. The worst things we’ve ever thought, said, and done, are wiped from the books. Knowing that Jesus’ perfect life, suffering and death on the cross sets the balance on an eternal zero, we can join Paul in claiming that “there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our

Lord” and in saying “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better.” It follows that If you’re aware of the enormous sacrifice Jesus made for you, you will want to be close to Him, to somehow say thank you, to have forever to do that.

And it’s that awareness, that closeness, that thankfulness that I urge you to nurture and cultivate now, today. We can join Paul in saying, “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far,” but only if we’re convinced that being with Jesus is the greatest good. You cannot be convinced if you’re holding Jesus at arm’s length. You cannot be convinced if your schedule shows you’re too busy for Jesus. Turn your attention to Jesus by letting him speak to you through His Word. Turn your attention to Him by giving ample time for prayer each day. The enormity of Jesus’ victory becomes more beautiful the longer you think about it. Jesus becomes more admirable and praiseworthy the more you think of Him. Follow the Spirit’s promptings and invest your time in Jesus, and you will see your own perspective shift towards the win/win.

Now please take note: God’s Word says it’s a win to “depart and be with Christ,” and it is a win to ‘remain.’ It is a win to live life in the here and now. Paul writes, “If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me.” He is saying, there is a benefit to me if I’m still alive, but that’s not all. He goes on to declare, “I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith...” It is a win to keep on living a Christ-like life that benefits others. If you are still here, and clearly you are, it is not for your self alone. There is someone else God wants you to bless.

Today our congregation is renewing its commitment to Operation Christmas Child, and do you see? We are here; we are beyond materially blessed; we can be a blessing to children around the world, and along with the contents of each box, they will receive an introduction to Jesus, who is by far a better gift. It’s a win to be alive and able and willing to participate in something so joyful and generous.

To live is Christ. To die is gain. It’s a win/win.

God grant you faith that says, “God is love, and I can’t wait to see him.”