

## HARD PRESSED

2 Cor: 4:8 We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9 persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed. 10 We always carry around in our body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be revealed in our body. 11 For we who are alive are always being given over to death for Jesus' sake, so that his life may be revealed in our mortal body.

Phil. 1: 21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 22 If 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! 23 I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; 24 but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. 25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.

“I wish I were dead,” said the 89 year old. “My husband is gone, I don’t have any children, and now, my only companion, my dog is sick. What do I have to live for? There’s nothing left for me. Life is empty, and I’d rather be with the Lord.”

These words were spoken to me not long ago by a woman whom I visit at the nursing home. They echo many words that I have heard through the years by people from many walks of life. I remember a similar sentence from an 80 year old man who had just had a heart attack and had a long road of rehabilitation ahead of him. Or the young mother who was fighting a losing battle with cancer. Or the teen girl who had tried to commit suicide because of the sting of many losses over a short period of time.

They are not unlike St. Paul’s words in our text: “I am hard pressed on every side; perplexed; persecuted; struck down.” “I desire to depart and be with Christ.”

Is it wrong to want to be free from this “vale of tears,” as Luther called it? Is it sinful to yearn to be free of a body laden with sickness, of a heart that’s scourged with grief, of flesh and bones that are tired, weary, worn out – “hard pressed on every side; perplexed; persecuted; struck down.”

It seems not, on the basis of Paul’s words in our text: “to die is gain.” After all, to be free of all sickness, free of all sin, free from the Tempter, free of a broken society – well, you almost wonder why God has us stay on the earth at all after we have come to the saving knowledge of our Lord. Why not just take us to heaven right away?

But please notice the rest of Paul's words in our text. Concerning whether to die and be with the Lord or live and serve Christ on earth he says: "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 joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me."

Paul recognized and believed that, while he would have preferred to be with the Lord, that the Lord was keeping him here because He was not through using Paul to serve others – He was not through with Paul as a disciple – there were still things that He wanted Paul to do. And so, rather than pray for a quick end to his struggles, Paul continues to make himself available as God's instrument. As he says, "8We are hard pressed on every side, but not crushed; perplexed, but not in despair; 9persecuted, but not abandoned; struck down, but not destroyed."

In today's society, most people do not think like Paul. Most people, in fact, do not at all prefer to think of being a servant of Christ when it becomes messy, difficult, or painful. They would rather either be free of the pain or, as an alternative, be gone. And those who look after those in difficulty are even more compassionate and desire their parent or child or whomever they care for, the freedom from difficulty – the joy of release – the future of glory rather than the present of pain.

When my mom and dad were both sick and near death, I asked the Lord to either heal them or take them. It was not my regular prayer for Him to "use them as His people to accomplish what He desired –even if they had to suffer." I guess, to be honest, I didn't want them to struggle any more. I wanted them free of the cancer, free of the pneumonia, free of the Alzheimers. I've been next to many hospital beds, with many people, and seen the same thing, and prayed the same prayer, many times.

One time, however, particularly stands out to me. It was prayer for a lady named Martha, who had had a stroke at home, fallen to the ground, and been alone for many hours. Martha's prognosis was not a good one. The doctors told her family that she had been deprived of oxygen for too long – that there was little to no chance that she would regain any of her abilities. Some in her family considered taking her off of life support right then and there, others felt that Martha

might rally. But nobody knew. It was a gut wrenching time for everyone – including me as their pastor.

Two years later, Martha, a holocaust survivor, had survived another challenge. She walked out of the rehabilitation center on her own power – with her own voice. And for the next few years she continued to be, at Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, and in Terryville, Connecticut, a powerful voice of courage, faith, and persistence.

When Christopher Reeve fell off his horse and became paralyzed from the neck down, I bet there was a long time when he wished that God would just let him die. But he had work to do. When John McCain was in the throes of torture, I bet that there were days when he just wished it was all over. But he had work to do. LCMS member Maggie Karner was diagnosed with a brain tumor that would cause her debilitating abilities. I'm guessing she had those days when he wanted to throw in the towel. But she was a powerful voice for the gospel ESPECIALLY in her last years. Helen Keller was born blind and deaf – no doubt there were many days of discouragement and frustration to the point where she wondered why she journeyed through life and wasn't taken to the place where she could see and hear again. But she had work to do.

But we all know that these folks have accomplished. God used them – mightily – through their struggles, -- yea, even because of their struggles – to bring blessing, knowledge, wisdom, Christian witness, to those who surrounded them – and even, in some cases, to many they did not know.

Here's the thing that Paul reminds us as he holds out the great confession: "To live is Christ, to die is gain." No matter what we face, no matter where this life takes us, no matter how much we suffer or what pain we might endure, there will be an end to it, eventually. And for those who believe in God's unwavering love for us in Christ Jesus, the final outcome is the same whether it happens quickly or after some period of time. We will go to be with Lord, we will live forever in the glory of His presence, we will know freedom from the ills of this age and be connected with the joys of perfect love. And until that time, as we wait, God promises to be with and help us through it all.

Consider Jesus as He came into this world. He had already known the perfect love of heaven. He had already known what it was like to have all glory, honor and power. His hand was present in the creation of the world and his hand had been involved in every act of preservation. After all, He was God for the entire eternity before He took on human flesh.

Even to limit himself to human flesh for 33 years must've been a sacrifice – if you consider that He was limited not only by the physical abilities of a body, but also by limitations on exercising His almighty power, His all-present nature, His all-knowing ability. But even beyond that -- to allow himself to be beaten, mocked, nailed to the cross and crucified, must've taxed every fiber of His love. Yet still, He suffered through it – FOR US. And in fact, the book of Hebrews later says to us, that He did it because of the joy set before Him. Listen to the words: “2Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. 3Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart

Joy!!! Amazing. He went to the cross with the joy of our future salvation enabling His every step. That's how it can be for us, brothers and sisters. The joy set before us colors the dark clouds of pain, suffering, depression and sorrow.

Oh, no doubt there will be days of challenge. The people in Elicott City, Maryland know what that's like – so do the people in Hawaii. The stock market is flip-flopping – the latest news having to do with the imposition of tariffs in the US. In 1929 when the stock market crashed, some jumped off of buildings they were so devastated. Sickness and disease continue to wreck havoc among good people. Some suffer through poverty, some through loneliness, some through pain and some through war.

But St. Paul's words echo in the distance. “To live is Christ, to die is gain.” And we hold on to the life preserver in the middle of the waves that will one day be reeled in to the glory of heaven.

May God bless you, brothers and sisters, to have such faith not only in the middle of crisis, but also each day, every day, as you cling to Him, the Shepherd and Guardian of our lives.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.