

Sermon to the Saints of God assembled at Topeka, KS: Sunday, May 3, 2020

To Live is Christ

The last few months have been an amazing, instructive, and unique period in our lives. The Sovereign God of all creation has demonstrated a little fraction of His power before the face of the whole world, with this plague called COVID-19. Satan has deceived this world into believing that they can overcome God with human unity, innovative technology, and medical brilliance – it is a modern day Tower of Babel whereby men believe that they can reach up to heaven, and set themselves on equal footing with God himself. “[L]et us build us a city and a tower, whose top may reach unto heaven; and let us make us a name, lest we be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth.” (**Genesis 11:4**) Oh foolish man! Hear the response from your maker! “[L]et us go down, and confound [them]”! (**Genesis 11:7**) The God of judgment has appointed this “pestilence that walketh in darkness” as recompense to this sin-loving world, and a continuing proof that He alone holds the breath of life in His hands. He has put the entire world into an uproar, in the twinkling of an eye, thereby showing just how easily and quickly He will be able to reshape the fabric of circumstances, nations, and political power structures so that He can execute all of the prophesied events that will bring about the Revelation of Jesus Christ.

While the Lord has visited the world in wrath, and brought it to a fearful and fretting stand-still, he has also appointed a period of focused instruction for this little flock of slaughter. The God of providence intricately appointed all things such that we have a series of circumstances, afflictions, and trials that are weighing upon us (individually, by house, and as a body), and we have them at this particular time where He has caused us to be uniquely available to each other because of these “stay-home” orders that our earthly masters have put in place. Praise God for it all!

My intention for today is to touch on a couple of subjects that tie to some of these recent experiences:

1. “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (**Philippians 1:21**)
2. “Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together” (**Hebrews 10:25**)

“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21)

Jon gave us an excellent and comforting sermon last week entitled: “Absent from the body; present with the Lord. 2Corinthians 5:8” (Sermon: April 26, 2020). He described the doctrines surrounding the death of the natural, sin-burdened body leading to an immediate change whereupon the believing soul is present with our Lord. He spent some

time on today's verse, specifically expounding the second half: "to die is gain". What is that gain for the soul that rests upon Christ? To recap from that sermon:

- The believer is delivered from the "body of this death".
- The believer is delivered from all the troubles and distresses of this life, arising from diseases of body, losses and disappointments in worldly things; from the oppressions and persecutions of wicked men; from indwelling sin, unbelief, doubts, and fears, and the temptations of Satan.
- The believer instantly enters into the presence of God, beholding His glory; immediately, joyfully communing with Christ.
- The believer is at once in the company of angels and glorified saints; and, is possessed of perfect holiness and knowledge.
- The believer inherits a kingdom prepared from the foundation of the world, and wears a crown of life, righteousness, and glory; enters upon an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled; is received into everlasting habitations, into mansions of light, life, love, joy, peace, and consolation; is at perfect rest, and surrounded with endless pleasures.

Beloved, that is our hope in Christ! Our "hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began." (**Titus 1:2**) Truly, then, to die is gain; to be present with Christ Jesus, our Lord, is far better – for me – than to remain in this decaying, sin-burdened flesh. Consider the expression of that same faith and hope, that one of our dear friends made, when confronted with her approaching death:

"I always knew that my last day would come. I only want to be ready, and to have a proper spirit. I will not complain against God. He has blessed me in every way, and has given me many, many opportunities to serve him. I only wish I had done more, and that you all would learn that from me: do more for the Lord. I love you all – you should not be sad. The Lord is faithful, and He will give me my crown. The Lord will give me an abundant entrance."

Sounds an awful lot like the expectant hope that our brother Paul professed to Timothy, as his life drew toward its close:

2Timothy 4:5-8 *"5 But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry. 6 For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. 7 I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: 8 Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing."*

In both of these expressions of faith and hope in Christ, we see indeed that to die is gain – gain for me personally; upon the death of this body, I am put into the possession of my benefit – my reward. What joyful, lively hope! We all want that! We also see a strong provocation to remember that our lives – for as long as they are appointed - belong to Christ, and we therefore must render them for His service! To me to live is Christ! This instruction isn't theoretical, or for other people – it must be personal to ME.

Philippians 1:21-26 *“21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 22 But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not. 23 For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: 24 Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you. 25 And having this confidence, I know that I shall abide and continue with you all for your furtherance and joy of faith; 26 That your rejoicing may be more abundant in Jesus Christ for me by my coming to you again.”*

Some thoughts that I take from this passage:

1. **My life belongs to Christ, and not to me.** He purchased us with his own blood, and therefore He owns us: body and soul.
 - **1Corinthians 6:19,20** *“19 What? know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? 20 For ye are bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God’s.”*
 - When I find myself wrestling with covetousness (I want something) or pride (I am something, and I deserve something), then I must flee to the Lord to remind me: “Ye are not your own!”. My thrashing pride and desires have NOTHING to do with my Lord, they have everything to do with my foolish heart. On the merits of that truth, I must DAILY mortify those fleshly deeds with humble thanksgiving for the lot that God has been appointed for me!
 - The primary thing that I want you dear friends to take away from this sermon is that fact: this life isn't about me! It isn't about how I want to do things! It isn't about me being right about every thing! It isn't about me being the one who gets to do every thing! When that starts welling up in us, we had better remember that to me to live is Christ! The fact that I'm alive, the substance of my life, and the purpose of my life is all and only Christ!
2. **My life is to be employed in the service of Christ and His interests.**
 - **Luke 9:23-25** *“23 And he said to them all, If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow me. 24 For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: but whosoever will lose his life for my sake, the same shall save it. 25 For what is a man advantaged, if he gain the whole world, and lose himself, or be cast away?”*

- Steve gave us good, practical words on this topic, last summer (Sermon: June 23, 2019). I recommend reviewing those exhortations, particularly the last 1/3 or so that is focused on the practical import of denying ourselves, in order to set aside time to pray, read the Bible **for ourselves**, commune with one another, etc.
- Our lives are not primarily for our own benefit, but for the interest of Christ's Gospel and Kingdom, and therefore, for the benefit of others, such that by our faithful testimony (words and deeds) we benefit the household of faith. This is a laborious life of service, but it is utterly reasonable for us to sacrifice our lives to that service! Consider the encompassing and practical blueprint that Paul gives us as to HOW we should employ our bodies – our lives in this flesh – for the interest of Christ.
- **Romans 12:1-21** *"1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service. 2 And be not conformed to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is that good, and acceptable, and perfect, will of God. 3 For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith. 4 For as we have many members in one body, and all members have not the same office: 5 So we, being many, are one body in Christ, and every one members one of another. 6 Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophesy according to the proportion of faith; 7 Or ministry, let us wait on our ministering: or he that teacheth, on teaching; 8 Or he that exhorteth, on exhortation: he that giveth, let him do it with simplicity; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that sheweth mercy, with cheerfulness. 9 Let love be without dissimulation. Abhor that which is evil; cleave to that which is good. 10 Be kindly affectioned one to another with brotherly love; in honour preferring one another; 11 Not slothful in business; fervent in spirit; serving the Lord; 12 Rejoicing in hope; patient in tribulation; continuing instant in prayer; 13 Distributing to the necessity of saints; given to hospitality. 14 Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not. 15 Rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep. 16 Be of the same mind one toward another. Mind not high things, but condescend to men of low estate. Be not wise in your own conceits. 17 Recompense to no man evil for evil. Provide things honest in the sight of all men. 18 If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men. 19 Dearly beloved, avenge not yourselves, but rather give place unto wrath: for it is written, Vengeance is mine; I will repay, saith the Lord. 20 Therefore if thine enemy hunger, feed him; if he thirst, give*

him drink: for in so doing thou shalt heap coals of fire on his head. 21 Be not overcome of evil, but overcome evil with good."

- So we see that this service that we owe is certainly our time and energy, but it is also the consistent spirit and action of charity – love – whereby we mortify our fleshly desires and hateful, prideful, malicious thoughts and conduct, in favor of Christ and His perfect Law of Liberty. This service includes our words, but more importantly, our spirit, and our actions, which must align with our words.

- **James 1:24-27** *"24 For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was. 25 But whoso looketh into the perfect law of liberty, and continueth therein, he being not a forgetful hearer, but a doer of the work, this man shall be blessed in his deed. 26 If any man among you seem to be religious, and bridleth not his tongue, but deceiveth his own heart, this man's religion is vain. 27 Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world."*

3. **I must patiently await the promised blessings.**

- We all struggle with the sinful and selfish desire to live for ourselves. The other trap that we can fall into is the desire to escape the woes of this life prematurely. As we render our service to God, the world becomes more hateful toward us and more vexing to us; we get older, our burdens get heavier, our decaying bodies suffer more and more. From this posture, Satan tempts us to a spirit of discontentment against God, such that we would have no patience to endure hardness, but rather accuse God in our hearts, and insist that we be relieved of our suffering on our own time line. Our hearts certainly yearn within us to be present with our Lord; we want to be in possession of the "gain" that comes at the very moment of death. That desire is good and appropriate – it is a part of godliness to have a God-ward and eternal focus, rather than an earthly one; however, that desire must be matched with contentment in our current circumstances: "But godliness with contentment is great gain." (**1Timothy 6:6**) Why must we resist our flesh on this point? Why must we seek the Lord to exercise patience and contentment in us while we await our change?

- Quite simply: The will of God. As long as our life persists, it is His will being fulfilled in the matter, and it is therefore the best thing for us, and for others.

- The prize and possession comes after the preparation. To come to the fullness of adult strength, we must first endure the painful growth of infancy and childhood. To receive the prize of a race, we must first run

it. To win the battle, we must first endure hardness as good soldiers. To drink the pleasant wine, we must first labor in the vineyard. Likewise, to receive the gain at death, we must patiently live for Christ; to hear the blessed words “enter into the joy of thy lord”, we must first hear “well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things.” (**Matthew 25:21**) Therefore, we must patiently endure, so that we are prepared to meet our God; so that through resting upon God in the face of affliction, we are made whole and entire, and lacking nothing when we leave this flesh. *“2 My brethren, count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations; 3 Knowing this, that the trying of your faith worketh patience. 4 But let patience have her perfect work, that ye may be perfect and entire, wanting nothing.”* (**James 1:2-4**)

- **2Corinthians 4:15-18** *“15 For all things are for your sakes, that the abundant grace might through the thanksgiving of many redound to the glory of God. 16 For which cause we faint not; but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. 17 For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; 18 While we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal.”*

○ It was on this earth, and in this flesh that Christ Jesus suffered and died, enduring more than we can imagine: both the physical and mental distress caused by the things that His own creation did to harm Him (**Hebrews 12:3**), and the unmixed wrath that the Father poured out upon Him – that wrath which was owed to each of us. He could have called legions of angels to short circuit that whole process, but He didn’t; He fulfilled the covenant, and completed the work of Salvation. He patiently endured it all for our sake, saying: “Father, if this cup may not pass away from me, except I drink it, **thy will be done.**” (**Matthew 26:42**) My friends, we must remember that the servant is not greater than his lord. (**John 15:20**)

- **2Timothy 2:10-12** *“10 Therefore I endure all things for the elect’s sakes, that they may also obtain the salvation which is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. 11 It is a faithful saying: For if we be dead with him, we shall also live with him: 12 If we suffer, we shall also reign with him: if we deny him, he also will deny us.”*

○ There is a great work to be done in this earth: preaching the Gospel, for the interest of Christ and His Kingdom; the preparation for that

Kingdom is why this whole world continues to function – it is why God hasn't wiped the whole creation clean. He is willing to patiently wait until each little lamb is born, prepared, and called to Salvation through the working of the Holy Ghost; He is not willing that any should perish. (**2Peter 3:9**) Therefore, we must diligently, and faithfully labor, because the harvest is coming: *“Therefore said he unto them, The harvest truly is great, but the labourers are few: pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he would send forth labourers into his harvest. Go your ways: behold, I send you forth as lambs among wolves.”* (**Luke 10:2,3**)

- Sometimes we need help to redefine what we believe to be “helpful” or “useful” service to Christ. We tend to see activity that we do toward someone else as the only service of value. For example: picketing, sermons, giving good counsel, cooking, cleaning, construction, caring for children, etc. To be sure, these things are good and helpful, if they are done with a meek and quiet spirit before God. However, there are times when we sincerely desire to put our hand to work for others, but by the providence of God, we cannot – because of time, age, health, or circumstance. Thank God for these times! This is where we are taught that it is God's view of useful that matters; useful in our own eyes, and by our own strength is ultimately our pride talking. This is where we come to learn that when the Lord puts us in a place of weakness and need, that we serve the interest of Christ, and minister to others by humbly allowing them to minister to us!
- **2Corinthians 12:9,10** *“9 And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. 10 Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong.”*
- We know that there is no lasting joy in this life, and yet we are not thankless, self-flagellating, stoical curmudgeons. The Lord shines His gracious countenance upon us, and provides each of us a particular portion in this life, that we can and must use with joyful thanksgiving. The Lord refreshes us – body and soul – every day; in big ways and small ways. We have to be thankful for both; we cannot despise the day of small things. Our labor is a great blessing in itself; we should engage in our labors with joy that we have the privilege.

- ***Ecclesiastes 9:7-10*** “7 Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works. 8 Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment. 9 Live joyfully with the wife whom thou lovest all the days of the life of thy vanity, which he hath given thee under the sun, all the days of thy vanity: for that is thy portion in this life, and in thy labour which thou takest under the sun. 10 Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might; for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.”

“Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together” (Hebrews 10:25)

Everything about living for Christ does violence to the selfish flesh within each of us. Individually, we have to prayerfully, daily seek the Lord to give us the Spirit, and the grace sufficient to overcome our flesh, and focus on Christ; the grace sufficient to put charity into action, and to make our calling and election sure (**2Peter 1:10**). As parents, we must teach Christ to our families – conceptually, and practically - thereby doing our duty to maintain the heritage of God in the earth (**Psalms 127:3**); we do that knowing that it our duty to joyfully labor, while God alone will appoint the increase according to His wisdom and pleasure. As individuals, we must take that testimony for Christ with us into the world, as we do our various duties – and we have to do it without hypocrisy, regardless of the setting we are in. Thankfully, my dear friends, the Lord has not left us to fight this bloody war against our flesh alone as individuals, or as parents; rather, in great mercy, the Lord appointed the church, whose purpose is to make and maintain disciples for Christ. (**Matthew 28:18-20**) Herein we are instructed and authorized to participate in the never ending cycle to “teach them to observe all things whatsoever Christ has commanded”; His commandments, His form, His pattern, His discipline – to live is Christ! This is a never ending cycle: learn the pattern, live the pattern, teach the pattern, and then get right back to learning. Learn → Do → Teach.

1Timothy 3:13 “14 These things write I unto thee, hoping to come unto thee shortly: 15 But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou oughtest to behave thyself in the house of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth.”

Remember friends, that the word “church” in our English Bible comes from the Greek word “Ecclesia”, which means “called out assembly”. The “Christian” world wants to turn that into a human institution that consists of buildings, power structures, rituals, and balance sheets. That’s the reason that this current worldwide pandemic has made such a stir amongst the churches of the world. They are trying to protect their rituals and schedules, because that is where they derive power and money. God forbid! The

assembly is not a thing that exists only in a particular building, or on Sunday or on holidays. There are times when we must literally be assembled together – when those times come, and the assembly is called, then we must be there if at all possible. At those times when we literally assemble together before the Lord, the Holy Angels, and the great cloud of witnesses, we ought to have a great deal of sobriety and gravity about what we do and why we do it. For instance, that’s why our women cover their heads at those moments, so that we as a body can physically express our obedience to the pattern that the Lord set in the earth – namely, that we recognize that He has placed us under authority. We do that, because we were instructed to do it - see 1Corinthians 11 – not because we invented a ritual. The scriptures don’t give us a lot of prescriptive instruction about how or when the assembly should be called. We know that we are to worship God in spirit and in truth; we see scriptural examples of assemblies being called together to teach doctrine, to offer prayer, to seek deliverance, to seek wisdom and guidance on pressing matters, etc. We do those things, and we try to do them decently and in order according to our understanding of the scriptures. I don’t believe that any of this revolves around a location, or a set schedule– the New Testament does not appoint such a thing. (**Acts 17:24**) When the assembly is called, we should put away our worldly cares and endeavors, and willingly run to participate in any way that we can.

So, yes – the called out assembly is literally called to assemble at specific times, for specific purposes. That concept is very important to us; and yet, I believe that the heart of the Ecclesia is this: God has **called us out** of gross darkness, into His marvelous light (**1Peter 2:9**), and **assembled us into one body** – namely, the body of Christ. Charles preached an excellent sermon on this topic, and I incorporate it here (Sermon: July 8, 2018) The assembly is a living organism – many members, but one body; each member freely and continually providing their gifts, knowing that they belong to Christ. We – together – functioning as His body, and He our head, directing us. That body does not – CANNOT – exist only when literally called to a meeting. Consider the scripture:

Hebrews 10:24-27 “24 And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: 25 Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. 26 For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, 27 But a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries.”

The “Christian” world treats this instruction to not forsake the assembling as if it’s simply telling us to make sure to come to church on Sunday and put money in the box. God forbid! The context disallows that interpretation. Consider one another, to provoke unto love and to good works ... exhort one another - encourage, correct, BE encouraged

and corrected - so that we aren't willfully sinning. This is the warp and woof of the assembly. This cannot be a matter that is conducted one way from the pulpit each week. This is each of us helping each other to see how to live for Christ – on the ground, daily, where it counts. If one of us is at a place where we are willfully refusing to assemble when we're called, then it won't be fixed by merely pushing someone to show up on Sunday; that's like trying to fix a hang nail on a hand that has already been amputated! The assembly that we must not forsake is 1) being assembled into the body in the first place, and then 2) willingly submitting yourself to the body EVERY DAY – considering and being considered; provoking and being provoked to live for Christ. Watch for each other, so that we can help, and be helped, with the flesh breaking work of denying ourselves and following Christ TODAY, in our particular circumstance, with our particular frames. Talk with one another; seek and HEED scriptural counsel from our dear friends; pray for one another with sincere, fervent desire toward one another. We must do it like we mean it; do it because we KNOW that to live is Christ, and this is HIS BODY.

What does it look like to “forsake the assembling”? The obvious answer is that it looks like someone who refuses to be a part of a church, because they believe themselves to be superior, moral free agents. They twist scripture to make allowance for their prideful desire to operate in a vacuum, where they can completely avoid the heart breaking, flesh crushing work of submission to the body of Christ, in favor of crafting and exalting their own version of moral living. The world is chock full of these Christians-in-a-vacuum, that forsake the body of Christ, and therefore have no part with him. But, beyond that, there are more subtle ways that Satan can tempt us into forsaking the body, even as we are called members. Here are just a few examples:

- We can believe that we are above the body. This is a sneaky and pernicious sin that is liable to beset **any of us** at any time. We don't literally think “I am above the body”, but Satan gradually convinces us that we have wisdom (whether generally, or on a specific topic) that excels those around us. To behave that way, is to behave like the head of the body, set in place to direct it. This is deadly. We must seek hearty, two-way, iron-sharpening-iron communion with EACH of our fellow members. There is safety in MANY counselors (**Proverbs 11:14**). Christ alone is our head.
- We can isolate ourselves. We can blame it on how busy we are, or we can blame it on our personality, we can blame it on others, etc. This is deadly. This is forsaking the assembly. When we find ourselves doing this, we must get out of our self-imposed hole, and sincerely engage with the body, lest we be found to be a tumor when all is said and done.
- We can isolate others. We can direct people to come to us for wisdom, and direct them away from others. We can think and talk like we know everything, and we

can think and talk like others are unworthy and have no wisdom to give. Whether we do that subtly or overtly, it is deadly. We can have hatred, anger, malice, and wrath toward others in the body, and we can communicate that to each other in so many subtle ways, such that it creates schisms and divisions. That behavior places tourniquets all over the body, severely inhibiting blood flow; severely inhibiting charity.

- We can focus our attention solely on our family, or extended family. We all have a proper duty to our household that takes a great deal of our time. We have to be careful not to set up our lives in such a way that we turn family dynamics into ritualistic doting upon one another that keeps us so inwardly focused that we do not widely engage in the body. We can use our familial relationships to create pressure of obligation. We cannot spend our days provoking each other to chase after man-pleasing – it is an insatiable and deadly beast. Furthermore: **This body IS my family, and your family! It is the household of faith!** The only blood tie that should ultimately matter to us is the blood of Christ – that is what binds us together! (*Matthew 12:48-50*)
- We can put our focus and activity into only certain parts of the body, which creates sub-bodies. We cannot do this – we must strive to commune person to person, throughout the body. On this front, I have heard confusion (and in some cases, distress) from many people about the various “reading groups” that happen in our houses. What are those? What are they not? Here’s my take: Those are simply opportunities to execute upon our duty to see each other, commune in the spirit, read the Bible, and to thereby refresh our spirit. They are NOT sub-bodies, with a roster and appointed time. They are NOT elder centric. They are NOT required or compulsory, and we have no business making people accountable for attending. They are NOT a substitute for people doing the real work of reading the scriptures for themselves, and heartily communing person to person throughout the body. In my opinion, it is good and healthy for those things to be fluid, and reassessed every so often. We do not want the blood in this body to be thick and sluggish, but rather to be rich, oxygenated, and free-flowing.

Beloved friends – each of these things is a real danger for us all; each of these things causes real pain in the body; each of these thing is a real impediment to charity; each of these is living for the flesh. Let us all examine ourselves, deny ourselves, and help one another to be lively, healthy members of that body which lives for and by Christ our Lord!

I love you. Amen