

Philippians 1: 23

**“I have a desire to depart
and be with Christ, which is for better**

Lord God heavenly Father – you are the Lord of the living and the dead. We thank you that you brought our departed brother to the knowledge of the truth and through your Son Jesus Christ forgave him his sins. Through the Gospel you kept him in the faith until his end. We pray you to keep us mindful of our own departure and to send us the Holy Spirit. In this way we will see our own last condition and by faith cling to Jesus Christ. Then we will receive the crown of life and peacefully fall asleep in Jesus’ name. We will then be with Christ and live and reign with him throughout all eternity. For Jesus’ sake we ask this. Amen

It is indeed with mixed emotions that we today lay to rest our departed brother in the faith. We are sad because of his departure from this vale of tears. We are deprived of his presence, sound advice, and thoroughly Christian influence. This will be felt by his sons, daughters, and relatives, but also by his fellow church members. On the other hand, we are happy that he has been removed from all the sickness and sorrows of this life and is now enjoying eternal rest. He is in the bosom of the Savior

in whom he trusted. We believe that he departed believing in the all-sufficient merits of Christ. We have every reason to believe this by his own confession and manifold testimonies during his life. In penitent sorrow he confessed his sins as a lost and condemned sinner. He had a heart felt joy in clinging to Jesus as the only Savior from sin and death. He was a well informed layman that knew the Bible. He was always interested in the current events of the Church at large and of the Norwegian Synod of which he was a faithful member.

I learned a lot from him during my administration and visits. Those who were near and dear to him heard sound Christian advice and will always cherish this memory. They will remember the Bible by which the departed one lived and died. He indeed recognized a great need for the Gospel word as evidenced by his presence at divine worship and frequent attendance of the Lord's Supper of which he was a guest during his last days. We are assembled in the House of God which was so dear to him. Here he found comfort and consolation and learned to know Jesus as his personal Savior. We thank God alone for the grace and mercy showered upon him during a lifetime as a faithful follower of Christ. His journey through the Valley of the shadow was also guided by God's Word. He has now reached that heavenly goal which is the destination of every disciple of Christ. Therefore our sorrow is not like those that have no hope. It would also be against the departed's wishes that we on this day make his home

coming one of extreme sorrow. We have all the more reason and right to make this day of his funeral a celebration of his birthday. What? You say – a birthday festival on his burial day? Yes and the most glorious that can ever occur in a lifetime.

A true Christian has in fact three birthdays. The first when entering into this life and this is in common with all people. The second is much greater and more glorious and is to be found in Holy Baptism. In baptism one is born again of water and of the Spirit, washed of all sin, and made a child of God. The third is the most glorious of all - for then the Christian passes from the Church militant and enters the Church Triumphant. Through death, a believing Christian comes into a complete possession of all that Christ has won. Death for a Christian is an entrance into that eternal inheritance which in baptism had been sealed and which is nothing else than eternal life in heaven. That is how the departed looked upon death and we can now celebrate his death as a birthday upon entering life eternal.

Let us then today consider:

The Day of a True Christian Death is a Glorious Birthday

I – This is most certainly true

II – This is assured to every Christian

I

For a Christian - death is the beginning of true life, of eternal life. For that reason the Apostle in our text does not call it death,

but a departure: **“I have a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is for better.” Philipians 1:23**

The death of a Christian from this life is an end of all distress and sorrow. True life now begins where there is no more sorrow, sickness, or death. Yes, we will die to come to and begin a true life. Through death the true believer departs from all woes and distresses of this world. In death one's pilgrimage in the sin of this world comes to a close and there is a new destination - a place in our heavenly Father's House. Through death a believer leaves the stormy sea of this world and safely reaches the harbor of eternal rest. Death for a Christian is a true beginning to life.

True, also for the Christian, death is a result of sin – for the wage of sin is death. Because of this– death, even for Christians, is beset by many pains! But for the Christian the real terror of death is removed, so that they can say with Paul: **“I have a desire to depart ...” Philipians 1:23**

One need not fear the wrath of God, hell and damnation, for a Christian dies in the love and grace of God. For those who live in his love, even death cannot separate them from the love of God – even in death they belong to the Lord. By Christ's suffering and death on the cross, the curse of death has been removed. Christ has brought life and immortality to those who believe. Christ has removed the sting of death so that we say: **“Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death is your sting” I Corinthians**

15:55 Let us thank God who gives us wisdom through our Lord Jesus Christ to understand this passage.

The believer sees in death an end of all trouble and a new beginning and birth into life eternal. A Christian can say: **“I have a desire to depart ...”** **Philippians 1:23**

The death of a Christian is not only a death in Christ and with Christ, but also a coming to Christ and true Life. A Christian can therefore not only say: **“I have a desire to depart”** but also: **“and be with Christ.”** Through faith, Christians live and die with Christ and in Christ. A Christian dies and will then come to Christ and enjoy complete salvation, which already through faith had been conferred upon them, namely, eternal salvation. Christians are members of Jesus Christ and with him they suffer and also die on earth – and then with him they live and reign in eternity. In this life Christ is with his people in the Word and Sacraments. Then through death they come into his blessed presence and glorious majesty. In this life Christ leads his sheep as a good shepherd through the glorious words of life in the Bible that can sustain them under every cross. Through death we enter life itself where we will be free from all crosses. Death for a Christian is the birthday of true Life. Then the prayer of Christ will be fulfilled: **“Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory...”** **John 17:24**

And what a glorious change this birthday will be for the redeemed soul. On this birthday the cloak of sinful flesh is cast aside and now the Christian will shine forth in heavenly glory with the glorious cloak of Jesus Christ, like the holy angels. In death, a Christian puts aside the pilgrim's staff and goes into the Father's house and benefits from the blessed fellowship of all of the blessed. Having fought the good fight of faith, a Christian no longer hears the din of battle but instead hears the triumphant song of eternal bliss. A Christian comes out of death and into life – for death is a most glorious birthday.

Death for the departed was just this - his most glorious birthday of birthdays and an entrance into the eternal bliss of heaven. He believed that as the Lord had so often helped him in life, he would help him in death. During his last days he suffered, but in the hope of eternal life and in the certainty that he would be with Christ. He beheld death as an entrance to that life which is the goal of all Christians. For him the day of death was the first day of his birth into Life eternal.

II

Ah, to die thus – sigh many. Let us then secondly see: For whom will the day of death be a birthday to Life? - For all people? Unfortunately not! Heaven is indeed open for all, for: **“...God our Savior, who wants all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.” I Timothy 2:4** God earnestly desires to

save everyone and does not desire the death of the sinner but that sinners through him might live. Yet so many spurn and reject God and his words from the Bible. They prefer unbelief and thus hurl themselves into eternal death. They do not use the Word as a food for their soul and a light on their way and thus shut themselves out from salvation. And if such people do not repent and turn to Christ they never will celebrate this greatest of all birthdays.

There are those who have been led by the Holy Ghost to say with Paul: **“For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”** **Philippians 1:21 . . .** and: **“I have a desire to depart and be with Christ ...”** **Philippians 1:23** In death these people will have a birthday to eternal life. But who can say this? Not those who will not confess that they are poor sinners and do not care about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. These people think that they can save themselves by their own piety and works. However, Christ alone is: **“The Way”**; **“The Truth”**; and **“The Life”** as found in **John 14:6** No one comes unto the Father except through Christ. A life lived in faith accepts the blood of the crucified Savior and this leads to a life that will eventually rest in a heavenly eternity, outside of this there is no hope.

Those that chose to live outside of Christ are dead while yet living. Will a person pass from death into life who admits to be a poor sinner, has a name on the church books, listens now and then to the preaching of the Word – and yet does not follow the

Savior and does not live as a Christian? No, for such a person lives for self and for the world and merely professes to be a Christian. For those who do not live a life of faith in Christ in this life will not come to him through death.

Who then can enter such a life? We who can never hope to be as pious and holy as the Apostle Paul? Dear friends, Paul was not saved because he was pious. He was a sinner like you and me and was saved by the grace of God who brought him to faith in Christ and kept him in faith. Paul did not save himself by his powers and works - but instead tells us that it was the power and work of Christ alone so that he could say: **"I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes..." Romans 1:16**

Not what these hands have done - can save this guilty soul.
Not what this toiling flesh has borne - can make my spirit whole.
Not what I feel or do - can give me peace with God.
Not all my prayers and sighs and tears - can bear my awful load.
Thy grace alone, O God, to me can pardon speak.
Thy power alone, O Son of God, can this sore bondage break.
No other work save yours - no other blood will do.
No strength save that which is divine can bear me safely through.
I bless the Christ of God, I rest on love divine.
And with unfaltering lips and heart, I call this Savior mine.
Tis he that saves me and freely pardon gives.
I love, because he loves me - I live, because he lives.

Behold then the great mercy and grace of God who gives us power and strength through his Word in the Bible and in his Sacraments. God and God alone leads us to such life, calls through the Gospel, invites and then brings us to Christ. Christ keeps us with him – in this way he creates and keeps a saving faith which justifies us. Let us then follow God’s guiding hand that will lead us from death into life. For such grace the true Christian heartily thanks God and gratefully follows his footsteps until our earthly death releases us into life eternal. In Christ we are certain of our salvation and can say with Paul: **“I have a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is for better.” Philippians 1:23**

Then our death will also be a birthday to a new life, eternal life in heaven. Oh Lord Jesus Christ, by your grace help us to pass from death into life. Amen