

If our lives are rooted in Christ, then we'll share Paul's view on death. It's true that we all love this life with its blessings and opportunities, but we also look forward to heaven where we'll worship and serve God perfectly and forever. It's a matter of focus. And it's not a focus on ourselves but on God and what he desires. Even if Paul was released from prison, he was going to keep giving himself away for others. His vision was focused on others, not on himself. Self-focused people have a difficult time letting go of this life.

An example of that is Howard Hughes, who never gave himself to a cause bigger than himself. While he was worth \$2.5 billion at his death, he died completely alone. Not a single acquaintance or relative mourned his death. The only honor afforded him was sixty seconds in his Las Vegas casinos. "At Howard Hughes' death his casinos fell silent. Housewives stood uncomfortably clutching their paper cups full of coins at the slot machines, the blackjack games paused, and at the crap tables the stickmen cradled the dice in the crook of their wooden wands. Then a pit boss looked at his watch, leaned forward, and announced, 'OK, roll the dice. He's had his minute.'"

All too often we fear death because we've been focusing too much on ourselves. We've taken our eyes off God. And our faith suffers for it. We're led to doubt that God has a sure thing in store for us. But he does. Death is simply the doorstop God uses to prop open the doors of heaven for us. We don't need to fear it. Jesus so clearly says, *"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die"* (Jn 11:25, 26). Even in death we can give God the glory and strengthen one another. In my role as Member Care pastor, I've sat at the bedside of many dying people and have been privileged to hear them confess their faith in Jesus, even as death was waiting at the door. What a joy it is to know that we or a loved one will be with Jesus, for isn't that, above all else, what makes us unafraid to die?

Fellow redeemed, because of the blood of Jesus, whether we live or die, we have a sure thing. As Paul confidently and joyfully believed that, so he urged the Philippians to believe the same. By God's grace, we believe it, too. In Christ we have a sure thing. It may not be in the stock market, our bank account, or our job security. The sun won't always shine on our vacation. Our favorite sports team won't always win. The blind date won't always go well. Yet we have a sure thing in Christ. We'll be given one opportunity after another to give him all the glory in this life, and in the life to come we'll be with him, who is the resurrection and the life. And that's a sure thing! Amen.

Philippians 1:12-27 – *Unshakable Faith* – 239, 406, 606, 588
07/08/18 – Pastor David M. Kuehl – St. Paul's, Muskego, WI

How often haven't you heard, "There's no such thing as a sure thing"? Or another version of it: "The only two certain things in life are death and taxes." These sentiments reveal not only a pessimistic outlook on life but also a skepticism that runs in the blood of our human nature. Whether we're talking about a stock tip or a robocall that promises us a free deal, we're all leery when it comes to anything labeled "certain." After all, if it seems too good to be true, it probably is.

That's why Paul's words to us today are so uplifting. The hope and joy that fill Paul's heart stand in stark contrast to our negative, cynical outlook on life. In fact, the apostle states in all confidence that we who are Christian do have a sure thing. As we continue to pray, *Oh, for a Faith Unshakable*, we today rejoice that:

Faith Believes that Dying Is Living

- 1. That affects our living.**
- 2. That affects our dying.**

1. The Christians in Philippi must have been troubled by what was going on. The Apostle Paul was locked up in prison, and they had no idea if he would survive or not. What's worse, they worried how this would affect them. Their beloved apostle was in prison and faced the very real possibility of death. Would people even bother listening to them if their leader and most eloquent speaker was a prisoner of the state? It must have seemed to them that the only sure thing was that the Christian movement was on a rapid, downward spiral.

The truth is that Paul's imprisonment was a tool in God's hands. God was working through Paul's stay in Rome to advance the gospel. The Palace Guard, a detachment of imperial troops that served as the emperor's personal bodyguard, was specifically assigned to guard Paul. As Paul awaited his trial in Rome, he became acquainted with soldiers of this elite guard. They began to realize that Paul was no ordinary prisoner, and he certainly wasn't a criminal. He was a prisoner only because of his connection to Jesus Christ. His only crime was that he proclaimed the gospel of Christ.

These soldiers spoke about Paul with each other, with their families, and with others in Rome. As a result, the good news of Jesus Christ, along with forgiveness and salvation in his name, was freely shared. Paul's case became "front page news." It was the talk of Rome.

As he sat in prison, Paul was faced with two alternatives. He could wallow in self-pity, doubting God's love, or he could take advantage of the opportunity before him to share with his captors the name of Jesus. Paul recognized that he had a sure thing, and he knew that God had given it to him. He trusted that God would provide for all his bodily needs. He believed the truth of what he had written earlier: *"We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Ro 8:28).*

Paul gives us some insight into his reason for being so confident, even in the face of uncertainty and danger. He says in verses 19 and 20: *"For I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. I eagerly expect and 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."* Did you catch that? Paul admits that his courage was the result of the Philippians praying for him. They had prayed that God would give Paul the strength to take advantage of his opportunity to share Jesus, even though he was in chains. The reason they prayed that way was because they trusted that the Holy Spirit would grant a sure thing, that he would give Paul the words he needed to share the good news of Jesus with those who imprisoned him. Imagine that! The Holy Spirit was using Paul's imprisonment to exalt, to glorify, Christ.

Now, it's fairly certain that we won't ever be thrown into prison because we're Christians, but God still promises us a sure thing. That sure thing is that he will give us opportunities to share our faith with others. What that means is that he might even put us in undesirable places to accomplish his purpose. He might put us in line at the unemployment office, so that we talk to someone there who needs the hope of Christ. He might put us in the hospital because a doctor, a nurse, or a fellow patient needs the confidence and joy we have in Jesus, our Savior. He might put a co-worker in our office who rudely slams Christ, just so that we have an opportunity to give the reason for the hope we have. [Share Gene Pfister and Jim's hospital stories.]

Too often we doubt God and wonder if he knows what's best for us. We wonder why God allows unemployment, sickness, or a family crisis to come into our life. Yet God tells us exactly why these things often happen. That's his way of giving us a sure thing, because that's his way of answering our prayers. We may be struggling with a problem or a crisis in life because that's God's answer to our prayers. Have you ever heard this?

**I asked God for strength, and he gave me difficulties to make me strong.
I asked God for wisdom, and he gave me problems to solve.
I asked God for prosperity, and he gave me a brain and energy to work.
I asked God for courage, and he gave me danger to overcome.
I asked God for love, and he gave me troubled people to help.
I asked God for favors, and he gave me opportunities.
I received from God nothing I wanted but everything I needed.**

That's also how God answers our prayers for each other. He may lead me to face a tough situation – unemployment, hospitalization, or a death in my family – to give you the opportunity to pray for me. It's in this way that we rally around one another and build each other up in the unity of the Spirit.

That's why Paul urges us to stand firm in the Spirit. He says in verse 27: *"I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of gospel."* "Stand firm" is an athletic term that Paul often uses in his letters. It brings to mind a defensive stance. Like the goalie in soccer or hockey, who has to "stand firm" to prevent his opponent from scoring, we Christians are to "stand firm" in the face of adversity or conflict. And we are to "stand firm" together. We are to utilize the fellowship we share as members of God's family. I've heard people say things like, "I don't have to go to church to be a Christian. I can worship God on the beach or in the woods." [Share Don Manz story.] It's true that we can worship God alone, but the Christian faith involves more than that. The Christian faith means that I'm part of a fellowship, a family, that sticks together in conflict and trouble, in peril and pain, that prays with each other and for each other. So, dear friends, stand firm and know that God will provide a sure thing in your life.

And he provides a sure thing in your death.

2. Paul writes in verses 21-24: *"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 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! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body."* Paul wasn't sure whether he'd be released from prison or put to death. Yet that didn't matter. In the end, he trusted that God would provide a sure thing. Paul had been baptized into Christ. He lived every day in his forgiveness in Christ. He drew his strength for daily living from Christ. His only desire was to know Christ more deeply and serve him more completely.