

Welcome and Notices

Praise: Morning has broken

Choices Video:

Choices – we all have to make them almost everyday of our lives. Some are lot easier than others. Paul understood the dilemma of the Philippian Christians, and so wrote his letter to both encourage and commend them for their approach to life in the faith.

James has prepared this presentation for us where you have some fun and thought-provoking choices to make. James is getting really technologically savvy ! He has also prepared a survey where you can indicate what choices you made. You can complete it if you so wish! James will collate our responses. All the details are in yesterday's written notices.

<https://www.surveymonkey.co.uk/r/VBXHWTF>

Prayer / Lord's Prayer

We thank you, O God,
for the miracles of supply
in our moments of need.

We thank you, O God,
for the miracle of resurrection
in our moments of lifelessness and despair.

We thank you, O God,
for the gift of faith
when our ability to believe is strained.

You are God,
You are accessible,
You are involved.

*Thank you that, as we seek to love, to serve,
to follow you and to make a contribution,
we can rely on your grace and your Spirit to support and guide us.*

Please forgive us, God;
when we forget that you are God;
when we treat you like a stubborn child;
when we claim you as our own,
and act like insiders,
like favoured members of your 'inner circle';
when we think we have you all figured out.
And when we foolishly fail to grasp,
that this kind of faith leads us away from the truth
of who you are.

Remind us of what the name 'God' means:
that your being cannot be contained;
that your knowing cannot be reduced;
that your creating and saving cannot be stopped;
and that who you are is more

than even our best words, our highest thoughts,
and our most creative imaginings
can hint at.

You are God,
You deserve our devotion and worship,
and we are humbled and awe-filled,
in your presence.

Thank you for your gifts to us
In response we offer our gifts, and ourselves in your service.
Amen.

Reading: Philippians 1:21- 30 (Julie Jeans)

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 labour 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 boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

²⁷ Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit,^[a] striving together as one for the faith of the gospel ²⁸ without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God.

²⁹ For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, ³⁰ since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

Sermon: For to me, living is Christ

Writing from prison, Paul tells the Philippians — and by extension all of us — “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Living and walking the way of our Lord doesn’t ignore the present circumstances of our lives, which in recent months has probably felt a little bit like prison.

Gospel living helps us find a way to walk through these tough times. Gospel living helps us choose life when life circumstances scream “Abandon hope.” Walking God’s way puts Jesus Christ at the centre — at the centre of everything we do; at the centre of our thinking and actions; at the centre of our worship.

It’s not essentially about me getting into heaven either. Gospel living is about living in community. Remember what Paul said? “You are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, and are in no way intimidated by your opponents.” The pronouns are plural — this is a call to the church to be the church together.

The context is important for us to understand. Paul writes this letter from prison, facing capital charges. Issues of life and death are no joke in this setting; yet he instructs people to rejoice in the midst of their circumstances, no matter how difficult they may be.

Many opinions exist about the purpose of this letter written to the believers in Philippi, but I would like to suggest that Paul's aim was to inspire people to find joy and hope in the difficult moments of life.

Some years back Bette Midler sang a song that became probably her most well-known hit. "The Rose" seems to offer a word of rebuke for those who are so afraid of dying that they never learn to live.

*It's the heart, afraid of breaking that never learns to dance
It's the dream, afraid of waking that never takes the chance
It's the one who won't be taken who cannot seem to give
And the soul, afraid of dying that never learns to live*

We are called to choose life. Paul speaks of the struggle between wanting to embrace death, which would allow him to be in the presence of Christ, and to stay in life, which would allow him to continue to witness of the power of the resurrected One. He chooses life.

We know that tomorrow holds promises of hope and joy. Our God, though, is also in our present, challenging us to look at life and its circumstances through the lens of hope that will bring a song of joy into our life.

God has already spoken a word of life on our behalf. This spoken word helps us find hope in the midst of the most difficult situations life throws at us. Over the years there have been messages preached that have offered a gospel that offers insurance against hard times. It sets up false expectations about coming to Christ to avoid the difficulties of life.

Yet we know that Scripture clearly states, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" No gospel is suffering-proof.

This text from Philippians is an invitation to focus on hope, to find joy in the midst of all of life's circumstances, so that God may be glorified. Walking God's way is not about finding an easy way out. It is about learning to see hope and possibilities even in the darkest moments of our lives.

Prisons in biblical times were scary places. It certainly wasn't the best place for Paul. Nevertheless, the Bible speaks of how prisons became places of worship and proclamation when the first Christians ended up there for their faithfulness. Under the most difficult of situations, they chose to look to God and not to their circumstances.

Sometimes we build our own prisons when we choose to look at circumstances instead of looking to God. If Daniel in the lions' den had looked to the lions, it would have been the end of him. By looking to God, he was able to rise above the circumstances and find hope even when surrounded by lions.

That is the message we are called to proclaim and model for others. How do we find hope and meaning in life? It all begins when we are able to look beyond ourselves and our circumstances. Paul in his prison cell looked beyond those dark walls to encourage and teach young communities of faith.

We are called to look beyond our own circumstances and help others find meaning. Do we dare believe God's promises that we will experience life, and life in abundance if we learn to live a life that trusts God even in the face of our greatest challenges?

We've all experienced of what it might be like to be locked up during the early months of this pandemic. It certainly hasn't been the most positive experience for us has it. I'd like to think that

as a church we have tried our best to provide both the practical and spiritual support that I'm sure we've all really needed.

I trust that help and support, together with the help and support you've received from family and friends has enable you to press on through the dark moments. I hope that God has enabled you still to proclaim with Paul midst the frustration and moments of suffering this time - I choose life!

I choose to look beyond my circumstances and believe that God will show me a way that will lead me out of my prisons, out of those valleys of shadows and darkness. There is no need to abandon hope; rather, we may embrace it and live. That is God's invitation for you today. In the midst of whatever you are living through, choose life.

Praise: For me to live is Christ

Prayers of Intercession:

Eternal, ever-living, ever-present God,
in the struggles and joys of this day, we pray:
for those who are overburdened, weighed down, demoralised,
fearful or desolate because of what life has thrown at them...

For those engulfed in pain and anguish, facing illness and death...
For those troubled in mind and spirit, who find no peace or calm...
For those alone and lonely, without friend or comfort...
For those frightened and bewildered, who see no direction
or purpose in their lives...

Eternal, ever-living God,
bless them all in this and every hour,
in this and every step of life's journey.

Amen.

Praise: Take my life

Benediction