

This year's winner of the prize for women's fiction is a historical novel called Hamnet, based on the tragic death of William Shakespeare's 11-year-old son.

A tragedy that inspired the bard to write one of his most famous plays, Hamlet.

And I'm sure you're familiar with the opening line of Hamlet's well-known speech that goes on to express his horror at both life and death.

To be, or not to be: that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles; and by opposing, end them?

To die: to sleep no more; and by a sleep to say we end the heartache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation Devoutly to be wish'd.

To die, to sleep; To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub; for in that sleep of death what dreams may come.

In other words, as Hamlet contemplates life and death both are troubling to him.

So, for example, to live is full of the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, and a thousand natural shocks.

And to die, well maybe he'll rest, but Hamlet can't be sure; and there the rub; for in that sleep of death what dreams may come.

And so, horrified by life's suffering, and uncertain if death will bring any relief, Hamlet wrestles with the question of whether to go on living, or to die by his own hand.

And it's a bleak and depressing outlook.

Well in stark contrast to Hamlet's despair, listen to the Apostle Paul who's also contemplating life and death from prison with the threat of execution hanging him.

He says:

For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me. Yet which shall I choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ which is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.

And so, writing to the Church in Philippi there's not a hint of despair as Paul thanks these Christians for their partnership in the Gospel and updates them on his ministry progress as a way of encouragement.

You see far from hindering his ministry, Paul's imprisonment has actually helped to advance the Gospel among the prison guards and others...

And so instead of being depressed because of his circumstances, Paul's letter to the Philippians is actually his most encouraging.

In fact, he mentions the words rejoice and joy 16 times throughout the letter.

But of course, with threat of imminent death a distinct possibility, like Hamlet, Paul's thinking about life and eternity

But with one big difference, you see for Paul to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Now up to this point Paul's already suffered considerably for the sake of the Gospel.

So, for example he's been shipwrecked, beaten, stoned, and insulted.

But even in his affliction, Paul's full of joy because he shares in the suffering of Christ as a faithful witness to him.

And even now as he waits for a possible death sentence, Paul's unwavering in his single-minded devotion to Jesus.

So, listen to this:

Paul had no side issues or competing loyalties. He had no other agenda. The entire reason for his life, the entire reason for his existence on earth, and the entire reason for which Paul lived, preached, travelled, was willing to be persecuted and imprisoned can be reduced to this one sentence, "For me, to live is Christ."

Or to put it another way, the controlling factor over Paul's entire life and witness is the Lord Jesus Christ.

And so, it doesn't matter what people do to him or how much he suffers, nothing can distract him from living for Jesus and sharing the good news of the Gospel.

Which in verse 22 he describes as fruitful labour.

And you know even as I say that I'm really challenged to ask myself if Jesus is at the centre of my life, in the same way.

Can I honestly say hand on heart, along with Paul, that for me to live is Christ?

You see everything we do should be done for his glory.

So, in my marriage, work, retirement, leisure time, and at Church, Christ should be the motivating factor of everything I do.

As a result, Paul's encouraging the Philippians and us to glorify Jesus in every area of lives.

So, for example in verse 27 he says:

Only let your manner of life be worthy of the Gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the Gospel.

And in chapter 2 he says: Be blameless and innocent children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world.

Now of course comparing my life to the Apostle Paul's could really discouraging, because there's no way I can match up to this great man of God.

And maybe it's the same for you.

But listen to what he says in chapter 3,

Not that I have already obtained perfection, or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.

And in his 1st letter to Timothy even describes himself as the chief of sinners.

In other words, just like you and me Paul's well aware of his failings, he relies on God's by looking to a perfect saviour who forgives him every time he messes up.

And that's a great encouragement to us isn't it because we follow the same Jesus that Paul did.

And he says what could be better than living for a saviour who died for us to makes us his own.

Well he tells us... Its death.

He says for me to live is Christ, to die is gain.

You see even though Paul loves life he says death's even better.

So much so that he's hard pressed between the two.

But how can Paul say that to die is gain when our whole instinct is to stay alive?

It sounds crazy doesn't it.

Well Paul knows that the Christian life is a win, win situation.

So, listen to what he says in verse 22: If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labour for me. Yet which shall I choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.

In other words, Paul says if he lives, it means he can carry on serving Jesus now, and be blessing to the church in Philippi, which he loves.

But he also knows that if dies being with Christ is far better.

And so, he's hard pressed between the two:

Faithful service here on earth serving Jesus or dying and being with him in eternity.

And so, Paul says the Christian life really is a win-win situation, because to live means glorifying Jesus now, and to die means being with him for ever.

So, listen to this:

Doesn't this also encourage you? Life's good when we're following Jesus, even when you go through incredibly difficult circumstances.

But life is far better when we die because we get to be with our Saviour. We get to see his face and talk to him and be in His presence constantly.

Jesus is my life and I want to live fruitfully for him now and bring glory to him in everything I do.

But to be with Christ is far better than anything this life has to offer. And so, I eagerly look forward to the day when I'll leave this life and look upon the One who died in my place.

And you know I remember praying with a lady once who was in the final stages of life, who told me how excited she was to die, because she was going to meet Jesus.

You see that's the hope we have as Christians.

Well finally as Hamlet contemplates life and death he says:

To be, or not to be: that is the question:

Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer

the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;  
for in that sleep of death what dreams may come.

But for the Apostle Paul full of joy and hope even with a death sentence hanging over  
him can say with confidence: For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. Amen