

“For Me To Live Is Christ”

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Scripture Text: Philippians 1:18-26, ESV

We have been making our way through this great letter, on that reveals the first love within the church and a passion for Christ and the glory of His name. It is a letter in which the Apostle Paul is facing much discouragement, yet he rejoices in Jesus. In the previous study, we considered one of the difficulties Paul is facing, not only that he is in prison in Rome, but there are some believers who are wishing to afflict him. They have chosen to be rivals against him. They are envious of him so they are using his weakened position, while in prison, to take advantage to cause other people to move away from him in loyalty and love and to set themselves in preeminence within the church. This is the context for Verse 18, where Paul is asking what should be done with these folks who are wishing to afflict him.

The Advance of the Gospel

¹⁸ What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

To Live Is Christ

Yes, and I will rejoice, ¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, ²⁰ as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹ For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. ²³ I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. ²⁴ But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

Not long ago I received a letter from a young man who is going off to serve his country and protect our freedom at the risk of his very life. I do not share his name for the need of privacy regarding military missions. This letter was written to family and friends as he was about to depart from these safe borders and enter into difficult and dangerous territory. He writes, “Family and friends, it is with profound that I write to you today because of the challenging circumstances that lie ahead. I say with joy because James tells me to consider it pure joy whenever I face trials of many kinds, because the testing of my faith produces perseverance and perseverance must finish its good work so I may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing.”¹

“Additionally, I realize the hardship of being separated from my loved one. I, also, realize the true treasure each of you have been in my life. I can rejoice at all times.

“The uncertain future, at times, can be crippling, but praise be to God for He is the mountain that props up my faith. If God chooses to take me, yes, God determines the length of our lives with His sovereign power, then I can rejoice in the full life God has given to me through Jesus Christ. If He were to take me today, who am I to complain? Has He not so richly lavished blessing after blessing upon my life? Are not each of you a wonderful example of His grace? I have lived a full life and proclaim with Paul, ‘to live is Christ and to die is gain.’”

“Family-, friends-, brothers-, sisters-in-Christ, I urge you to consider the beauty of the Gospel message, the message that tells us we are separated from God because of our sins and the only remedy for bridging that eternal separation is found completely in dedicating our lives to Christ, not based on the merits of anything we could ever do, but solely upon the finished work of Jesus Christ on the cross for our sins, who completely absorbed God’s wrath so that we do not have to bear that punishment any more. There is nothing more beautiful than what Christ has done for us.

“I love you all and wish you well.”

¹ James 1:2, 3, 4

What a great letter! I can think of no clearer or sweeter illustration for the passage before us in Philippians 1 than the letter of this young man of faith. He knows the realities of the physical dangers to his life, yet he rejoices. He genuinely exults in Christ, whether in life or in death. In either outcome his joy is unabated and his future is glorious. I believe the church is in need of legions of such men and women.

The Christian church in the United States is anemic, pale, weak, gasping from the smog of spiritual pollution resting upon her. It diets upon junk food and it craves only the things of this earth and it ignores the fearful awe of God's holiness. How will the church become relevant in our times? I believe the answer is only if God's people genuinely can proclaim, with the Apostle Paul, "for me to live is Christ and to die is gain".

Won't you pray with me, at the outset of this study, calling out to God as we listen to this because it is easy for these to be mere words. Won't we pray, "Lord, make Christ everything to me. Fill me with the awe of His majesty. Soak my soul in the Gospel so I think it, speak it, live it, love it every moment of every day? Lord, work in my heart so Jesus holds first place, preeminence. Lord, I repent of half-baked faith that is goeey and unformed in the center. Make every other interest, every other cause, fade into insignificance compared to the greatness of the glory of Jesus."

I believe we need to pray that kind of prayer before we open Scripture. I fear the words spoken in this study may even have a detrimental affect upon us if we do not, for if nothing changes inside of us when we hear God's Word, we actually inoculate ourselves from the Spirit's conviction. And, we deceive our souls into thinking that hearing the Truth is the same as living the Truth, which it is not! Won't you quietly pray today, and not just today, but every day you open God's Word. Pray, "God, transform me!"

We remember Paul is writing to this Philippian church from a prison room in Rome. Twelve years earlier God used Paul to start this church in Philippi and they became very sweet in their relationship with each other. The Philippian believers loved Paul and Paul loved them. These Philippian believers were worried about Paul. They had not seen him for the past four years. They had heard rumors about some of the trials that were going on in his life and these trials were deeply severe. They heard he was imprisoned in Rome and they were asking questions, "Is he sick?", "Is he still in prison?", "Is he still alive?"

Paul writes this letter knowing these dear brothers and sisters are worried about him and he wants to let them know what is happening in his life. Picture the Philippian church gathered on a Sunday morning for worship. An elder stands up in the church service and says, "Brothers and sisters, we have, today, received a letter from Paul!" We can imagine the Philippian jailer sitting in the front with his family and they are so happy they begin clapping. Then Lydia and her family, all dressed in purple, they begin clapping and everybody begins cheering. They wait with baited breath wanting it read to them. The elder begins and that is how this letter is read to the Philippian church.

I think it is important, when we read the Bible we read it with the same anticipation the first audience did.

In Verse 7, he quickly tells them he is still in prison. You can almost imagine their groaning as they respond, "Aw, he is still in prison!" But, he is quick to let his audience know he is not discouraged and he does not want them to be discouraged because he is not.

We come to Verse 12, and he says, "I want you to know, brothers..." and they believe they are finally going to hear what they really want to hear from Paul about how he is doing, "I want you to know what has happened to me has really served to advance the Gospel." He tells them that is what it is all about and it had become known throughout the whole imperial guard and all the rest in his imprisonment in Christ.

Many in Philippi were retired military soldiers. He knew they would be thrilled to hear the Gospel is reaching the imperial guard, a special, elite unit of soldiers who were set aside for the protection of the emperor himself. They knew these guys would have never heard the Gospel. They would have never gone to hear Paul preach in the public square. They were not that kind of men, but here they recognized these guards were going to be chained to Paul day in and day out and during each shift these guards were hearing and earful of the Gospel and they rejoice in that.

God uses Paul's chains for His glory and Paul is rejoicing in God's sovereign plan in that, even though it included suffering for him. Paul wants the Philippian church to rejoice in that.

Paul tells them of another painful part of his time in Rome. He lets them know some of the church leaders in Rome do not like him. In fact, they treat him with antagonism. They are self-promoting leaders and they see Paul's imprisonment as an embarrassment to the church. They use Paul's imprisonment as an opportunity to foster support for themselves and to afflict Paul.

We can imagine, as they are reading about this, that the Philippian church who loved Paul so much would get a little excited about this, "How dare they? Who are these guys?" Paul anticipates a response that perhaps would give rise to bitterness and anger,

¹⁵ Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry... ¹⁷ The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. ¹⁸ What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed...

This is what life is all about and he is telling the Philippian church not to be angry and bitter toward these guys because Paul is not. It is all about Christ and Christ is being proclaimed, even by people with sinful and evil motives.

Every joy, every sorrow, every gift, every pain, every happy day, every sad day, for Paul, the person who is focused on Christ, it is all viewed in reference to Christ and in reference to the advance of Jesus name in this world.

As we look at the text, we, first, consider the believer's great confidence, then the believer's chief purpose, and, third, two great possibilities we will enjoy in this life, and one of the two will happen for those who are centered on Christ.

The first great confidence is simply stated this way: God will complete His work of salvation in us! That is the confidence we have. Do you notice, in Verse 18, the two-fold pronouncement of Paul's rejoicing,

¹⁸ ...I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice...

Paul is saying, "First, I want you to know my present state; I am rejoicing. I want you to know my present commitment and decision; I will continue to rejoice and I will not get discouraged. I will not allow the temptations toward resentment and bitterness against those believers who seek to harm me to capture my heart."

Surely, it is easy for Paul to see why the Judaizers and the idolaters would want to have him imprisoned and executed. These are unbelievers. But, here in Rome, it is brothers- and sisters-in-Christ, genuine believers who are carrying the true Gospel, who want to trouble Paul. How hard it must have been to put away anger and bitterness when wronged by those from whom he would expect love and encouragement.

But, Paul shows us the way, doesn't he? The language indicates an internal, emotional conflict within Paul's soul. He says, "I rejoice and yes, I will rejoice. This is a commitment of my heart." This decision to rejoice is not easy and it does not come natural. Again, Paul is no robot or a mechanical computer. He hurts over this. Yet, he says, "Here is what is happening, yet, I will rejoice and God will strengthen me in this."

The principle we learn is: many servants of Christ become paralyzed from bringing glory to Christ simply because they have chosen not to resist the temptation to resent other Christians who hurt them. Have you ever been there? We give into it and once we give into it all is lost. There is no glory to Christ coming from us at that point. Paul says, "I am not going to do that. I am going to continue to rejoice."

How did Paul do this?

¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance...

Paul knows God is at work through His Holy Spirit, using the prayers of the Philippian church to bring about Paul's deliverance. Some commentators believe Paul is referencing his confidence that he will be let out of prison and when he goes to trial, Caesar will acquit him and he will be set free. But, Paul's use of this term "deliverance" suggests something much more profound is intended.

Paul is not merely rejoicing he will get out of prison someday. He does not even know that and we will see that in a moment. He is rejoicing that he is in God's loving and saving hands and God will bring about his salvation. The word "deliverance" is commonly used in the New Testament and is most often translated "salvation". Paul is confident God will rescue him from the penalty of sin so that when he stands before Him he will stand before Him faultless. He is confident God will deliver him right now from the temptations that gnaw on his soul toward resentment, bitterness, and anger. God will help him to conquer all of that because he can do all things through Christ who strengthens him.²

He tells of a future day, when he is standing before God in glory and God will have completely completed this work He is doing in Paul right now. Paul believes this will turn out for his deliverance. God is using this trial to bring about Paul's salvation and his sanctification so he becomes more and more like Jesus and he is confident of that.

Paul does not know how the trial with Caesar will go. He has no confidence in that; whether he will be alive or dead, but he believes God is going to keep him alive. Regardless whether he lives or dies, he is confident of God's deliverance and that is what matters,

²⁰ as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.

Paul is connecting his salvation with the courage needed, at this hour, to continue to magnify Christ, in the face of the opposition from those within the church, or in the face of potential death and execution at Rome's hands. Paul is not going to be ashamed and he is not going to do anything that would dishonor Christ. Why is he confident of that? It is because of the work of the Holy Spirit working through their prayers. It is eager expectation and his eager hope that God will save him from denying Christ out of fear, from being paralyzed from his joy in Christ out of resentment and anger. God will deliver him and he wanted the Philippian church to know that. He did not want them to feel sorry for him and he wanted them to know God is at work strongly within him.

John Piper writes, "What you love determines what you feel shame about. If you love for men to think highly of you, you will feel horrible shame when they don't. If you love for men to think highly of Christ, you will feel shame when they belittle Him on your account." Paul is telling them he is not going to feel ashamed. Paul loves for his life to magnify Jesus Christ. That is what his life is all about. He is not going to be ashamed, feel remorse, or feel this painful emotion as a result of his failing to magnify Christ. Why is that? It is because he knows God is at work and this is his confidence.

Paul loves Christ and his major concern is not the verdict to be passed upon him by Caesar. His major concern is something might cause him to shrink back from bold witness for Christ in a time of persecution. Isn't that an awesome concern? As he thinks of the temptation to fearfully shrink back, he says, "No, that is not going to happen because God is going to stand with me. This is my eager expectation and my hope."

The principle we learn is: our confidence in God's salvation brings joy, hope, and peace in the midst of fearful and painful trials. When we lack joy and hope, our lack is not due to God's failure, but it is to our distraction from Him. Paul tells us, "I know God and He is going to be faithful to me. That is why I have joy and hope and peace even right not in the midst of this difficulty." Christ is going to be honored in his body and that is the main thing that concerns Paul.

One commentator paraphrased Paul's statement, "My body will be the theater in which Christ's glory is displayed." I like that. It reminds me of a big Imax picture screen. Paul does not know where he is going to live, or when he will die or be in prison, but it will be like the Imax theater so people will see how great Jesus is. That is what gives Paul joy.

How does Paul know this to be true? It is not because he is confident in himself. He is not like Peter before the night during which Jesus was betrayed. Peter was self confident, "I will never deny you!"³ Peter was self-confident. Paul is not that way.

Where does Paul's confidence lie? It lies in God's salvation. It lies in God's rescue,

² Philippians 4:13

³ Luke 22:31-34

¹⁹ for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance...

First, notice he believes God works through prayer, and specifically the prayer of the church. This is why it is so important for us to be a praying church. God brings about the sanctification of individual lives through the prayers of the church. Paul believes the church's prayers for him impacts his life in such profound, dynamic, real ways. He believes his actual progress in Christ and his faithfulness to Christ is dependant upon God's Spirit as God's Spirit hears the prayers of the church and answers those prayers in his life. He is telling them that because of their prayers for him his life is different and the Holy Spirit is working in his life in ways that otherwise he would be deficient.

The principle we learn regarding prayer is: prayer is not merely a nice sentiment, but it is a lifeline thrown from one person to another. How important it is for the church to recognize this. Why is the church so anemic and why is it so worldly? Why do we look so much like the world. First, we have abandoned the preaching and teaching of God's Word. Secondly, we have abandoned prayer for one another and for our sanctification. I need your prayers and I ask you pray for me that I would be sanctified, saved, and delivered.

And, I believe you need our prayers. That is why we need to be a praying community. Prayer is not merely a nice sentiment, but it is a lifeline thrown from one person to another. Let us get involved in this work. I believe if we could see the objective fruit our prayers produce, we would invest more of ourselves in prayer. I believe the church needs more prayer and specifically more of this kind of prayer.

Sometimes parents get frustrated the direction their children's lives are moving. Parents talk to them and sometimes it is very forceful terms. Sometimes they may raise their voice, get angry, and get frustrated. Do we call out to God in prayer for those children? God answers those prayers and those children need the work of God's Spirit working in their life to change them.

There may be a spouse who is not exactly Christ-like and we get frustrated because of that. It is easy to begin to talk with that spouse and tell them where they need to become more like Christ, but the real impact to have on one's spouse is to go to God and ask the Spirit of Christ to work His work of deliverance and sanctification in their life.

The second idea we see is Paul believes the Holy Spirit would continue to minister to him personally. Because of the Holy Spirit's work, we never need to fear of running out of resources for us to honor Christ. The Holy Spirit's supply is like an artesian well that pumps water continually from a hidden source that is infinite.

What is our great confidence? It is that God is going to complete His work,

⁶ And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

Paul said that for the Philippian believers and he is saying that about himself now.

Secondly, our chief purpose is living for Christ. The chief purpose for the life of the Christian is stated here and is the most profound, complete, simple, succinct way possible. He alone is the eternal treasure that surpasses all others. He alone is worthy of giving our life. Notice how Paul personalizes his philosophy of life,

²¹ For to me to live is Christ...

He is planning a stake deep. It is his commitment and he is calling all of us to make the same commitment.

The principle we learn is: each person must choose the purpose for which they live life. But, we must choose wisely for the purpose we choose will determine whether our lives are rescued or ruined. For what purpose are you living?

Most would describe their purpose in life quite differently from Paul. Hugh Hefner would say, for instance, "For me to live is sexual pleasure." Donald Trump might say, "For me to live is power and money." Socrates might say, "For me to live is wisdom." Justin Beiber might say, "For me to live is applause."

Among the ruins in ancient Carthage there is an inscription inscribed by a Roman soldier, "To laugh, to hunt, to bathe, to game, that is life." I believe to many people think that way, "For me to live is to hunt, party, and have a good time." The problem with each of these purposes is that they are too weak to give joy in a world that is fallen, to give strength throughout the course of life, and they fail us, ultimately, in the end. None of them can tack on the phrase, "...and to die is gain" because they are all rooted in a temporal world that is passing away.

That is the reason why it is so glorious for us to be able to come along side of Paul and say, "Yes, for me to live is Christ and to die is gain." We recognize Christ is sufficient in all things.

One young person who does not have Christ in his life and who is finishing a college degree recently asked, "What is the point? To work hard to get a good degree so I can get a good job and lead to a good career and then retire and then die. What is the point?" I believe he is a pretty smart man to ask that question. Many people do not ask it until it is too late. What is the point? Each one of us must ask what the point of our life is.

Each person much choose the purpose for which they live, but we must choose wisely for the purpose we choose will determine whether our lives are rescued or ruined. What is the purpose you have chosen? What is your chief end?

Jesus, alone, gives greater satisfaction even at our departure from this world than even while we are in it, and He gives us complete satisfaction while we are in it.

Yesterday I had the privilege of being a part of my son's, and now my daughter-in-law's, wedding. This is the text I used, "For me to live is Christ." I look at their life and I see that is the way they are living and I was excited to be able to share that with them and encourage them in that. I communicated Jesus is the chief purpose of life because He is the Source of Life. There is no other life or place where we will find life. Jesus is the chief purpose for life because He is the strength of life and He is the means by which we can continue to go on, even though this world is broken and we experience its brokenness in often painful ways. He is our strength and we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.

Jesus is the chief purpose for life because He is the satisfaction of life. He is the One in which we can find ourselves drinking from this well and we say, "Yes, my thirst is quenched. He is the Water from whom once we drink we never thirst again."

From where do you find your greatest satisfaction? Where you find your greatest satisfaction is where you find your ultimate purpose for life. Life is what we are alive to and Jesus is that ultimate satisfaction. How satisfied is Paul with Christ? Do we find him complaining, grumbling, and griping? No we find him joyfully talking about two great possibilities at the end of our text, first,

²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell.

The first possibility is: we live and experience the joy of fruitful labor for Christ, and once Paul had this as his chief purpose, for me to live is Christ and to die is gain, the first possibility is for him to continue on in the flesh. That means fruitful labor for Paul.

Often times a pastor will preach a message on the responsibility of Christian service for the believer. We are often guilty of communicating this value through pressing obligations upon the people of God: You really ought to teach Sunday school; The nursery really needs you; You should really join the choir; You must commit to the prayer ministry; and on and on. But, beloved, obligation is not the motivation that drives the Christian and it never is. Our driving motivation is the pursuit of our joy in Christ.

Paul says, "For me to live is Christ," and if we do not have that, it does not matter whether we serve God, but when we serve God we serve grudgingly and sadly and poorly. But, if we can say, "For me to live is Christ," then we recognize if God has us to live, here is the reason why we are excited about being alive: it means fruitful labor for Christ and we can magnify Christ's name and we can be an Ima theater proclaiming and making Christ known to people. That is what life is all about.

What is fruitful labor?

²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith...

Fruitful labor is helping people make in their faith and finding joy in their faith. If a believer is sitting on the sidelines in the church, without any ministry or any service to Christ, the answer is not a good arm twisting. The answer is a good encouragement regarding the value of Christ. If we get that, service comes naturally to us and we say, "That is what my life is all about. Until the last day, when I breathe my last breath, I want to have fruitful labor for Christ."

Do you know what I really enjoy about this passage? Paul is older than me when he writes this passage. That is what I enjoy about this passage. His bulb is not growing dim. It is burning brighter and brighter.

I love being around younger people who are on fire for God. It is awesome. For some of you, I have had an opportunity to have coffee. If you are a young person on fire for God, I would love to sit down with you and talk. I would love to spend time with you.

But, do you know what is even more encouraging? It is to see an older person on fire for God. It is to see their fire matches and exceeds that twenty-year old who just first-experiences Christ and finds in Him life. This is Paul. He does not know how many days God will give him, but every day God gives to him is an opportunity for fruitful labor for Christ.

When we see Christ is of infinite value, our consuming desire is to magnify Him to others. We want others to see how great and wonderful His is.

The second possibility is: we die and experience the greater joy of the presence of Christ,

^{23b} My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. ²⁴ But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.

Paul is hard pressed here and he really means this. This focus is so much on Christ, he is really hard pressed and he does not know which he would choose. He knows God is sovereign. He is not saying this in a despairing way. Some worldly people talk about these two options in a way worldly people would talk about them. They say, "My life is hard and I do not want to live anymore, but death is not that great either. Maybe I would prefer death to living in this world."

This is not Paul at all. He is not talking about two negative options; he is talking about two great options and advantages. If he lives there is fruitful labor. If he dies, he gets to see Christ and His greater glory. That is what his life is all about and that is where his eternity is. Paul loves his life, but he has been beaten, imprisoned, criticized, and abandoned, but Christ has not abandoned him, "I love my life because that means fruitful labor for Him. If I die, I get to be embraced by Christ in His very presence." How awesome is that?

If you are without Christ today, death is the end of your life's purpose. There is no more. You die and there is no more purpose and you know that. But, for the Christian, that is absolutely not true and it need not be true for you if you would call out upon God and say, "God, give me your life through Jesus Christ." If God reveals to you the glory of Jesus Christ, say, "Yes, I want Christ to be my life, too," then you will share the same conviction. Death is not the end of life's purpose. It is actually a doorway into the greater purpose of our life.

Christian friends, for those of you who are older, 70's, 80's, 90's, never say, "My best days are behind me." That is simply not true. It is never true for the Christian. Your greatest days are way ahead of you. Keep living with the joy that the future is full because you are connected to the eternal Christ. For me to live is Christ and to die is gain.

J.C. Ryle writes, "All things are growing older. The world is growing old. We, ourselves, are growing older; a few more summers, a few more winters, a few more sicknesses, a few more sorrows, a few more weddings, and a few more partings, and then what? Why the grass will be growing over our graves." That is true for everyone of us

A worldly person considers that and it causes a fear which stabs them in the heart. For the Christian, we consider that and say, "Praise God because I will get to see Christ and He is my life."

I read you a letter from a young man which was written broadly to family and friends. He wrote me a personal note. This is a young man who is away in harm's way. He writes, "Brother Ritch, on the eve of my departure I am listening to your pod casts. I downloaded a lot of sermons." May his tribe increase! "I hope to enjoy them while I am gone. Thank you for your mentorship and friendship." It has been a privilege of mine to be this young man's friend. He continues, "There are significant challenges that are ahead of me and I plead with you, asking for your vigilant prayer, that I will rejoice in the Lord always, that I will trust in Him for all things, and that I will lean on Him even when it is difficult. Thank you, brother. Lord willing I will be in Peoria again. If not, I will see you in Heaven, for to me to live is Christ and to die is gain."