



Philippians

RBS
Philippians 1:12-26

Lesson 2: To Live Is Christ, to Die Is Gain

“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).

Doctrinal Focus: *Paul’s reaction to his chains shows that treasuring the glory of Jesus as our supreme delight enables Christians to respond to suffering with rejoicing, rather than with regret or resentment.*

Read Philippians 1:12-26.

Ancient Greek letters between friends and family members, like their counterparts today, included news about how the author was faring and requests for updates on the circumstances of the recipients. Paul’s epistle to the Philippians reflects this exchange of news about Paul’s situation in Rome (Philippians 1:12-26), and then about developments in Philippi (Philippians 1:27 – 2:18). Paul began by joyfully reporting the fruit that his imprisonment was bearing for the cause of the gospel in Rome. Part of Paul’s motive for conveying this news was to reassure the Philippian believers, whose affection for Paul was so strong that they must have been alarmed that his very life seemed to hang in Caesar’s balances. But the apostle’s deeper pastoral purpose for this “status report” on his own situation is seen in the next section: The Philippian Christians too were suffering for Jesus’ sake (Philippians 1:29-30), so Paul’s own attitude and priorities while suffering showed his dear friends what a Christ-centered reaction to persecution should look like and feel like.

Paul flagged the opening and closing of his “news report from Rome” with an unusual Greek word that captures the tone that he wants to convey. The word is “progress.” (The ESV translates it “advance” in Philippians 1:12 and “progress” in 1:25). Using this word as the “bookends” of his report, he highlights the theme of the gospel’s progressing in Rome and in Philippi.

His report falls into two sections. First he discussed his captivity and its present results (Philippians 1:12-18c), and then he contemplated the possible outcomes of his legal appeal (Philippians 1:18d-26). As he considered the present, Paul was filled with joy because his chains had furthered the “progress” of the gospel. As he weighed the alternatives for his immediate future (death or release), his preeminent concern was for whatever would further the Philippians’ “*progress and joy in the faith*” (Philippians 1:25). What mattered to Paul was not his personal comfort or safety, but Christ: Christ’s message, Christ’s honor (Philippians 1:20), and Christ’s people. As long as Christ’s cause was progressing, Paul could rejoice, whether his own situation was pleasant or painful (see Philippians 4:11-13).

Paul’s “imprisonment” (literally, “chains”) in Rome involved his living in private lodgings (Acts 28:30) but chained around the clock to a succession of Roman soldiers (Acts 28:16, 20). Probably each guard spent a six-hour “watch” locked to Paul. Since Paul eagerly shared the good news of Christ with everyone he met, one result of his captivity was that “the whole imperial guard,” the Praetorian regiment that were Caesar’s personal bodyguards, soon learned that Paul’s chains were for Christ. We do not know how many of these warriors came to faith through the witness of Christ’s apostle, but we do know that among “*the saints*” at Rome were “*those of Caesar’s household*” (Philippians 4:22).

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The gospel progressed on a second front as Paul's inhibited mobility emboldened other believers in Rome, who were not in chains, to proclaim the gospel fearlessly. Although Paul could not move about the city, others were prepared to take the message of Christ where Paul could not go.¹ Instead of keeping silent to avoid the punishment that Paul was suffering (a natural reaction), these Christians became even more vocal about their Savior. Although Paul was in chains, "*the word of God is not bound*" (2 Timothy 2:9). Not only could Paul tell his guards and visitors about Jesus, but also others were spreading the good news throughout Caesar's capital.

But Paul was a realist. He knew that not everyone who had been moved to preach by his chains was doing so for the best of motives. Many evangelized out of good will, eager to pick up the baton and carry the Word forward out of love for Paul. Others, however, were preaching Christ "*from envy and rivalry*" (Philippians 1:15), imagining that their success would make Paul's chains more painful (Philippians 1:17). They saw themselves as Paul's competitors and assumed that, as more converts trusted Christ through their preaching than through Paul's, the apostle would be envious. But they had misread Paul's heart, thinking it was self-centered like their own. As long as they were preaching Christ faithfully, Paul *rejoiced* that people came to trust Christ through their preaching. When other preachers competed with Paul in the Galatian churches, he pronounced God's curse on them, not because they were his rivals but because their message was a "different gospel," which led their hearers away from trust in Jesus (Galatians 1:6-9). In Rome, however, the preachers who saw themselves as Paul's rivals preached the true gospel of Christ and his grace, so Paul rejoiced that God was saving people through their message, even though their motives were impure.

Paul mentioned his rivals in Rome not to enlist the Philippians' pity or to show off his nobility of spirit. Paul knew that the unity of the church at Philippi was being endangered by "rivalry and conceit," as some focused on their own interests and devalued the concerns of others (Philippians 2:3-4). By including these rivals in his report from Rome, Paul was preparing his dear friends for his

loving rebuke of their self-centeredness. His own experience demonstrated how our hearts are set free from selfish competition when Christ is our chief treasure.

Toward the end of verse 18, Paul's report moved from the present to the future: "*I rejoice*" that Christ is being proclaimed widely, but more than that "*I will rejoice*" because the outcome of my case before Caesar will be very, very good. Paul referred to that happy result as "*my deliverance*" (Philippians 1:19), but what did he mean by this?

Some Bible scholars believe that Paul was confident that Caesar's review would lead to his release from custody. Others point out that "deliverance" is the word that Paul uses to express "salvation" in the fullest sense: rescue from sin's guilt, penalty, power, and (ultimately) presence. Paul was quoting the words of Job (Job 13:16), but was Job speaking of deliverance from his sufferings in this life or vindication in the age to come—since he had just said, "*Though he slay me, I will hope in him*" (Job 13:15)? Over the next seven verses, Paul would weigh the pros and cons of the alternatives of martyrdom or release, and finally conclude that it would be better for the Philippians for him to remain on this earth. Actually, though, "deliverance" meant more for Paul than avoiding execution and release from custody. In answer to the Philippians' prayers and through the "help" of Christ's Spirit, Paul eagerly hoped that, at the moment of crisis, the Spirit would give him the "full courage" to exalt Christ, whatever happened to his body—whether continuing life and service, or death (Philippians 1:20). Paul was *persuaded* that he would probably be released from custody and return to Philippi (Philippians 1:25; 2:24); but he *knew* that, whether he lived or died, God would save him from the shame of dishonoring Christ through fear or doubt. Because the honor of Jesus was the chief treasure of Paul's heart, Paul's physical comfort, safety, and even survival were secondary concerns. In fact, because for Paul "*to live is Christ*," he could also say "*to die*"—even by a Roman sword—"*is gain*" (Philippians 1:21).

In verses 22-26 Paul explained the life-or-death alternatives that he summed up succinctly in verse 21.

"*To live is Christ*" would be to continue to "*live in the flesh*" (Philippians 1:22, 24). That would

mean that Paul could continue his *"fruitful labor"* (Philippians 1:22) of preaching Christ's gospel and pastoring Christ's churches. Thus Paul's remaining alive on earth is "more necessary" for the sake of the Philippians (Philippians 1:24), since his coming back to them would promote their progress and joy in the faith and their praise of Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:25-26).

On the other hand, for Paul personally, *"to die is gain."* At the moment of his death, Paul knew that he would *"depart and be with Christ,"* a prospect that was "far better" than continuing life in this sin-cursed world (Philippians 1:23). Paul's ultimate hope was not to escape life in the body. He did not share the view of Greek philosophers and Gnostics that everything made of matter, including our bodies, is polluted and polluting. Our groaning, he wrote to the Corinthians, is not because we wish *"that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life"* (2 Corinthians 5:4). He was awaiting the return from heaven of the *"Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body"* (Philippians 3:21). Yet until that day of Christ's return and our resurrection comes, Paul knew that *"while we are at home in the [present corruptible] body we are away from the Lord,"* so his preference was to be *"away from the body and at home with the Lord"* (2 Corinthians 5:6-8).

So Paul faced a dilemma: *"Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two"* (Philippians 1:23). Did the Roman soldier chained to Paul laugh out loud when he heard Paul dictate those words to an assistant? How dare a prisoner of Rome presume to think that his fate was in his own hands, and not in Caesar's hands? Of course, Paul knew that the outcome of his case was not his to choose; but neither was it Caesar's decision. Paul belonged to Christ, in life and in death, and Christ the Lord had determined the number of Paul's days. Paul's dilemma was simply what to wish for, what to pray for, as he approached Jesus, the Lord of glory.

Paul therefore invited the Philippian Christians to look through a window into his prayer life. Why did he give them this glimpse into his very heart? He had concluded that he would, indeed,

"remain in the flesh" and return to Philippi to give his beloved believers even more reason to glory in Christ Jesus (Philippians 1:25-26). Why, then, did he lead them through the confusing process of weighing pros and cons, which led him to this persuasion in the end?

Paul opened his heart to reveal how he was "processing" his sufferings to illustrate for the Philippian Christians how such "processing" is done in Christ. They were suffering, *"engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have"* (Philippians 1:29-30). In their suffering they were tempted both to fear and to disunity. But Paul, their father in the faith, was about to summon them to fearlessness and selflessness (Philippians 1:27-28). When he instructed each believer to be concerned not only for his own interests but also for those of others, this included not only respecting others' perspectives but also caring for others' welfare (Philippians 2:4). We do not naturally react to external harassment with courage and to internal tension with humble compassion. So how could Paul expect such abnormal responses?

Paul could expect his Philippian friends to respond in such surprising ways because he had seen the abundant provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ (Philippians 1:19) work such a wonder in his own heart. God's grace had set his own heart free from self-focused rivalry and resentment at the success of others' ministries. God's grace had freed him from concern over his personal safety and survival so that he could concentrate all his hopes and longings on the greatest goal, *"that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death"* (Philippians 1:20).

Paul also reminded the Philippians (and us) that his Christ-centered joy, humility, and concern for others were not achievements that set him apart as more spiritual than other followers of Jesus. In fact, he would later stress that he had not arrived at perfection (Philippians 3:12). The devotion to Christ's honor and others' welfare that were seen in Paul's attitude were the fruit of Christ's Spirit, and they were reflections of Christ's self-sacrificing commitment to his Father's glory and our salvation (Philippians 2:6-11). The Philippians could take heart from the evidence that Paul's

Christ-centered focus was contagious: in Rome were many brothers and sisters who knew well that Paul's chains showed the cost of discipleship,

yet they boldly announced the gospel, out of love for the apostle and confidence in the Christ he proclaimed.

Notes

1. The barracks of the Praetorian Guard were on the northeast wall of the city, so Paul's rented quarters were probably located nearby. The sector in which the Jewish community lived (see Acts 28:17, 23) was outside the western wall and across the Tiber River.

Recommended Commentary

Philippians by Dennis Johnson (Reformed Expository Commentary)



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Questions for Discussion

Read Philippians 1:12-26.

1. As Paul reported on his situation to his friends in Philippi, he did not mention the weather, the food, privacy (or lack of it), the sights of the city, etc. (He did mention chains, of course!) What factors come first to your mind when you reflect on how your life is going day by day? What mattered more to Paul than his material surroundings? Why?
2. How did Paul's chains lead to the advance of the gospel: among the imperial guard? Among citizens of Rome who never met Paul?
3. Have you or Christians you know been able to respond to suffering (not necessarily persecution, as in Paul's case, but perhaps disease, bereavement, financial loss, etc.) in a way that enabled more people to hear and take the gospel seriously? Why can believers exude contagious joy in times of trial?
4. Ordinarily, seeing a criminal arrested does not tempt a sensible person to imitate his crime. Yet Paul wrote that *because of his chains* other Christians were emboldened to imitate his openness and to speak about Jesus to others. Why does a deeper and deeper grasp of the gospel of Christ set us free from fears for our physical well-being? See Luke 12:4-7; Romans 8:35-39.
5. The brothers in Rome who preached Christ out of envy and rivalry, not sincerity, show that it is possible to teach true doctrine but with wrong motives. What are symptoms of a "disconnect" between our message and our motives?
6. Consider what the gospel says about what you deserve, and about what you have received from God in Christ—and why you have received it. How can a deeper grasp of these truths on your heart set you free from rivalry and envy toward other brothers and sisters?

7. Paul told the Philippians what he was praying for them (Philippians 1:9-11), and now he expressed joyful assurance that through their prayers he would experience deliverance. Read Ephesians 6:18-20; 2 Corinthians 1:10-11. Why did Paul request prayer for himself? What did he ask his friends to ask for from God? Who is praying for you, and what are they asking for you?

8. What was the “deliverance” that Paul knew he would receive through the abundant supply of the Spirit of Christ? How does Paul’s “eager expectation and hope” help us discover the “deliverance” that Paul confidently expected in this situation?

9. Why did the honor of Christ loom so large for Paul that Paul’s own safety seemed so small by comparison? Read Galatians 2:20; Ephesians 5:2; Philippians 3:7-11.

10. The more deeply we know and trust Jesus, the less that we will fear death or seek death. Why will we not fear death? Why will we not seek death?

11. Paul “chos” the option (ongoing service on earth) that would mean more difficulty for himself, but more joy for others. We often confront that choice, though the stakes are not “life or death.” Where and why do you struggle to put others’ joy and progress ahead of your own safety or reputation or convenience? How can we help one another to find the freedom of a Christ-centered heart?