

To Live Is Christ and To Die Is Gain

Philippians 1:21

Please open your Bibles to Philippians chapter 1.

Introduction

I believe it was the 1990's when our culture saw the rise of T-shirts and bumper stickers that read something like, "Football is life. The rest is just details." (more examples) Basically what these shirts were proclaiming was what was most important to these people. It's the thing that they love most dearly, the thing that had become their life passion.

What would your life shirt say? For the apostle Paul, his shirt would have read, "Christ is life." But what does that mean?

On his second missionary journey, Paul, along with his companion Silas, traveled west along a major Roman road. They came to a significant Roman city in Macedonia named Philippi. Paul and Silas didn't find any synagogues there since there were so few Jews. However they did run into a group of women outside the city gate who were gathered by the river for prayer and whose hearts were hungry to know the God of the Jews. One of these was a business woman named Lydia who made her living in purple textiles. Later, Paul cast a demon out of a slave girl which enraged her owners and landed Paul and Silas in jail. While in jail, God moved in a mighty way and an earthquake opened their cell doors, thus providing the opportunity for the jailer and his whole family to also become converted.

These were the beginnings of the church in Philippi, a church that Paul birthed and loved very much. A dozen years later as Paul wrote this letter, we see many terms of endearment in it that clue us to the deep affection he has for this congregation.

The church at Philippi was not perfect, however, and one of the things Paul was trying to correct was their dislike of the prospect of being called slaves for Christ. Slaves, after all, had to be subject to someone else and do what someone else wanted. For this reason, Paul presents himself and Timothy as slaves, or bondservants, of Christ, and then proceeded to teach them that becoming Christ's slave is actually the road to lasting joy.

And this was especially important in the time that they were living which was a time when the church was facing more and more persecution. As a matter of fact, Paul wrote the letter to the Philippian church while in prison in Rome because of the preaching of the gospel. Paul's exhortation to them was that in the midst of their trials they can find joy and strength by seeing Christ as the only cause to make life worth living and death worth dying.

For Paul, Christ was everything. He lived his whole life with the desire to honor Christ and to share the Gospel no matter what. Paul mentions the word "gospel" nine times in Philippians – proportionately more than any other of his letters. He had a special love for the Philippian church because he and the Philippians were bound together with a common commitment to the gospel.

But they also shared another commonality – both were facing persecution for the faith and an uncertain earthly future.

Please turn to Philippians chapter 1, and we'll be looking at verse 21. I want to look today at a very special portion of Scripture, a verse that I consider to be my life verse because it sums up what I believe to be the whole of the Christian life, the foundation of everything we believe. Today we will look at a snapshot deep inside Paul's heart, and in so doing, it is my prayer that our hearts will be as it were a camera that will also capture the glory of these precious Words.

Philippians 1:21 ²¹ *For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*

Let's pray.

Notice first of all that this passage begins with the word "for." This tells us two things: 1) Whenever we see the words "for," or "therefore," or "because," or any other word like them, we should automatically know that it refers backward to something that was said previously. 2) The use of the word "for" or "because" says that what Paul is about to say becomes the basis or reason for what was said before. So in order for us to understand why Paul said, "For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain," we need to take a look at what was said up to this point in this letter. We can also get many clues from Paul's other letters that will help us to gain insight as to what exactly he means when he says, "For to me to live is Christ."

1. First of all, he is speaking *theologically*. Now please don't check out on me. The word theology simply means how we think about God. Everyone has theology. That is to say, when you think about God, what you think about Him, whether right or wrong, constitutes your theology. For Paul, to say "to live is Christ" was first of all a theological idea.

Galatians 2:20 ²⁰ *I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*

So then, when Paul says, "to live is Christ," he is first of all saying that theologically a transaction has taken place in his life. And this has happened on two levels. Look what he says. He says, "It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me." What he is saying is that he now completely and radically identifies with Jesus Christ.

And this is true for all believers. We once identified with the world and all of its pursuits and passions before we came to Christ.

Church history tells us that the church father Augustine used to live a very ungodly life before he came to Christ. He lived a loose and promiscuous life. When he came to Christ, that all changed. One day when Augustine was in his hometown, he was walking down the street and came upon a woman with which

he had been intimately acquainted before. The woman called out to him, “Augustine, it is I.” Augustine ignored her and walked on. Again she called out to him, “Augustine, it is I.” Once again Augustine ignored her and walked on. She persisted and called out a third time, “Augustine! Augustine! Don’t you remember me? It is I.” Augustine stopped, and without even turning around, he replied, “Yes, but it is no longer I.”

After we come to Christ we have a radical change of identity. Now we so identify with Christ that *His* history has become *our* history and *His* future becomes *our* future. We have taken on His identity. If you are a Christian, your life is different. It is new. As Paul says we are now “in Christ.” And all this is not just theoretical or abstract theology. This completely affected how Paul saw himself and the life around him. He literally saw all of life through the lens of Christ. As he went through life and interacted with everything, his identification was in Christ and he had a gospel mindset. We could say Christ and the gospel had become his whole worldview. That’s what Paul says baptism is all about in Romans 6. Which brings me to the second reason that saying, “to live is Christ” is a theological idea for Paul.

According to Romans 6:3-11, when we come to Christ our old self dies and we take on a new nature in Christ Jesus. This is seen so wonderfully in Colossians 3:3 which says, “For you have died, and your life is hidden with Christ in God.” This speaks of a definite spiritual change. This is what separates true Christianity from all other religions. All the other faiths of the world are based on knowing facts and learning how to live a certain way. They seek to attain a certain status or consciousness that would bring them close to their version of deity. But in Christianity, there is a complete transformation...a total change of life from the inside. Our old life dies and we are born again into a new life in Christ. No other faith does that. That’s why, as one of the speakers said this past week at our conference, as important as the Bible is, our faith is not even based on just the Bible, but rather a historical event, or rather a set of events, that the Bible reveals. Our faith is based on the historical events of the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is in these two events that we who have put our faith in Christ have now become so radically identified with. And it’s by the power of these two events that our lives are completely made new. 2 Corinthians 5:17, “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old is passed away; behold, the new has come.”

Point #1: “To live is Christ” means that in Him we have a new identity and a transformed life.

2. Second, when Paul says “to live is Christ,” he is speaking *idealistically*. If the definition of idealism is “the cherishing or pursuit of high or noble principles, purposes, goals, etc.,” then for Paul, Christ had become the highest pursuit of his whole life. One that, in fact, had supplanted all other pursuits.

This attitude is exemplified in the third chapter when Paul states:

Philippians 3:7-11 ⁷ *But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.* ⁸ *Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ* ⁹ *and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—* ¹⁰ *that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,* ¹¹ *that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.*

Paul had a resume like you wouldn't believe. He was the top of his class. He was the cream of the crop. By the standards of the world he lived in, he had it all and was the best among his peers. But Paul came to realize that we find our greatest fulfillment...in Christ and Christ alone. That life apart from Him makes no sense and has no meaning. Before we come to Christ we try to find our joy and pleasure in worldly pursuits. We seek for things to fill the hole in our hearts that only God can fill. As Tim Keller said, "We sin because we are looking to something else to give us what only Jesus can give us." That's why people seek greater and greater pleasures, bigger thrills, higher highs, and to experience that awe factor. And that's how we were created. We were created to be awed by greatness. We were created to have joy and pleasure. But we sin when we look for those things in anything else but Christ.

In this first chapter of Philippians we see this idea of Christ being the highest pursuit of our lives applied in two ways—these are some of the results that Paul mentions when Christ is our highest pursuit:

- 1) The more Christ becomes our greatest, all-consuming pursuit, the greater fellowship we have with each other.

vv. 3-5

³ *I thank my God in all my remembrance of you,* ⁴ *always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy,* ⁵ *because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*

vv. 7-8

⁷ *It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel.*

When we all have Christ as our greatest desire, our greatest love, then we are in fellowship with one another because we all have Him in common.

- 2) The more Christ becomes our greatest, all-consuming pursuit, the more we have hope through even the most negative circumstances.

vv. 12-14

¹² I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

¹⁴ And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

vv. 19-20

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.

Paul's tone and attitude here in these verses is one of hope, not defeat. Christ has promised us that He will never leave us or forsake us. Nothing can ever separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. So then, if through negative circumstances we lose our earthly goods or status or, yes, even our lives, we still have cause to hope because we will never lose Christ. So then if we, like Paul, can say, "To live is Christ and to die is gain," then we will always have hope through the gravest of circumstances.

And I'm speaking to all of us, but I especially want to address our students who will surely face this in their lifetime. Make Christ your all-consuming passion and pursuit. Don't waste your life pursuing other things that won't matter in the end. Develop a love for Jesus and see how that love will satisfy your souls and you will be able to stand and have hope through any trial or persecution.

Point #2: "To live is Christ" means Jesus has become our all-consuming passion.

3. The third thing we see that Paul means when he says, "for to me to live is Christ," is that he speaks *dependently* and *necessarily*. Paul knew that our very lives, indeed the existence of the world itself, is necessarily dependent upon Jesus Christ. Christ upholds all things and all things in life depend upon Him. Look at verses 9-11 with me. Paul says Christ is the means of a Godly life.

vv. 9-11

⁹ And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, ¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure

and blameless for the day of Christ, ¹¹ filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Paul also says the more our lives are consumed with Christ and the gospel, the more grounded and solidified we become in the faith.

vv. 27-28

²⁷ 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, ²⁸ and not frightened in anything by your opponents.

There is a very erroneous way of thinking that many people live by where they compartmentalize their faith. What I mean by that is they have their work life over here, and their family life over here, their private life over here, and over here they have spiritual things – and they have no idea that they are simply deceiving themselves. There is no compartmentalizing our faith. We need to realize that our whole lives depend on Him, even the very breath that we breathe. Our wisdom, our righteousness, everything is in Him.

1 Corinthians 1:30 ³⁰ *And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption*

In other words, Christ is our all in all. We said before that we find our greatest fulfillment in Him and Him alone. That life apart from Him makes no sense. But here we see that it goes even beyond that. Christ not only is our life's fulfilment, but He is the very reason we even have life to begin with. Colossians 1:17 says that "in him all things hold together." And Hebrews 1:3 tells us that "He upholds the universe by the word of His power." Jesus is not just our best option. Without Him we have no option! That's why when people reject Him they have no idea what they are doing. And people continually ridicule us for sounding the warning that life apart from Christ is death! They have no idea that what we're doing is not trying to push our beliefs onto them, but to share with them the truth that all need to hear that life apart from Christ will end up in ruin. Look again at our passage in Philippians 1, verse 11

¹¹ having been filled with the fruit of righteousness which comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God. ... The fruit of righteousness which is what God demands of us all only comes through Christ! 1 Corinthians 1:30, which I read before, says Christ has *become* for us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption. In other words apart from Christ we're just fooling ourselves. True wisdom is Christ. Our only righteousness is Christ. Our sanctification – the way we grow in the Lord – is Christ. And our entire redemption is found solely and completely in Christ alone. As the song goes, "In Christ alone my hope is found, He is my life, my strength, my song."

Point #3: “To live is Christ” means we realize our complete dependence on Him for everything.

4. Fourth, Paul is speaking missionally. He knows that Christ is the Gospel, and when Christ is preached, people get saved and that is His desire. And even in the midst of his own persecution, even while he was in prison, he took joy every time the Gospel was being proclaimed.

Look what he says in vv. 12-18

¹² I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, ¹³ so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. ¹⁴ And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

¹⁵ Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. ¹⁶ The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. 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, and in that I rejoice.

And even in the face of possible death, which he said would be even better because he would see Christ, yet he still desired that the Gospel would continue to grow and be rooted in the lives of the Philippian believers.

vv. 22-26

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.

The more our lives are consumed with Christ and the gospel, the more we glory in the advance of God's kingdom.

2 Corinthians 5:14-15 - *¹⁴ For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; ¹⁵ and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.*

Listen to what Paul said there! The love of Christ *controls us!* Other translations say, “For Christ’s love *compels us.*” In other words we are compelled by the very love of Christ to share this message that has changed us. The one who can say, “To live is Christ,” will love what Christ loves and join Him on the mission He is on. “To live is Christ” means then that we have a burden for lost people and we can’t wait to share the Gospel with them. And this isn’t just something that we do as a project. This is a lifestyle.

Students, last week when we went to Indianapolis to share our faith...I want to challenge you to make that a lifestyle. Make it something that you just naturally think about doing wherever you go. Why? Because to live is Christ!

Point #4: “To live is Christ” means we will love what He loves and join Him on the mission He is on.

5. Fifth, and finally, Paul is speaking *eschatologically*. This simply means Christ for us is our ultimate goal and end result. Paul embraces the truth that Christ is the ultimate *telos*, or goal, of a believer’s life, the end which his life is moving toward. That's why he says that to die is gain. Basically what he was saying is, “to live is Christ, and to die is even MORE Christ!” Paul’s attitude was, “What could people do to me?” He was already in prison for the sake of the gospel and he found his hope in Christ. If they killed him, that would only mean he would see Christ face to face which is the ultimate goal of the believer’s life anyway, to stand before Jesus with a heart that is finally untainted by sin and full of love. To look upon His glorious face and to live in His love for all eternity. This was a man who didn’t fret death because death was gain to him. So then he didn’t need to worry about persecution, but could concentrate on being on mission with Christ. Look at what he says in verse 6:

1:6 - 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.

v. 10 - ¹⁰ so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ

This “goal” or “end” here is referring both to Paul’s life and Paul’s death. In Paul’s life, his ultimate goal is Christ. In Paul’s death his ultimate goal is Christ. Look at verse 20 – and this comes to the ultimate crux of what “To live is Christ and to die is gain” means.

v. 20 - 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.*

That was the heartbeat of Paul’s life and ministry – the ultimate goal – the very reason why he lived and did all that he did. That Christ would be honored in his body whether by life or by death. His main concern was the glory of God, the

honoring of Christ – and that those things would be accomplished through him whether by his life or whether through his death. It wasn't about him. It was about honoring Christ. And if that could happen through his life, then that's what he lived for. But if Christ could somehow be better honored through his death, then that's what he wanted. "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

Point #5: "To live is Christ" means our ultimate desire is to honor Christ whether by life or by death.

Application

It's in times of persecution that we see the true believers, the true followers of Christ. It's in times of persecution that God's people are purified to become the holy bride of Christ we were meant to be. And Paul was writing this letter to a church who was living through such a time to encourage them, and to teach them that the only thing important in life, the only thing that will satisfy us, the very reason for our existence and our redemption...is Christ. Because when we stand before the Lord – and we will all one day stand before the Lord – we don't want to be ashamed. And the only way to not be ashamed when that time comes is to make Christ our all in all now in this life. And so he said, "For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain." No matter what he was to face, no matter the persecution, no matter the imprisonment or whether he would lose everything, it didn't matter. Life wasn't his anyway. His life belonged to the One who holds His life, the very Lover of his soul, Jesus Christ. And in the end, if he lost his life by being put to death for his faith, then it was gain because he would see Christ face to face which was what his heart ultimately longed for. To see Christ face to face is what he lived for, and what he would eventually die for.

I heard someone ask a question once that will challenge you to the core. If you went to heaven and were able to enjoy all the great things we will enjoy, but Christ was not there, would you still want to go?

This calls us to take action – to adjust our lives, redirect our affections, and redefine our goals. This calls us to sit down at our dining room tables with our family and ask the hard questions..."What is our ultimate life's passion? What are we spending our time doing? What is it that truly matters?" But what we cannot do, what isn't an option, is to do nothing and keep on living life as usual. I want to ask you something. What is the passion of your life? Can you honestly say that for you to live is Christ? When you think about the day when you die, can you honestly say that it would be gain because you would be with Christ? If this is something that maybe you can't fully say, but you want to, turn to Christ now in prayer and ask Him to help you make Him the all-consuming passion of your life. His grace is sufficient for you. The same Gospel that saved you is the same Gospel that will sanctify you and bring you closer to Christ. Meditate on it daily. Pray it. Set your heart to attain it and then trust Him to provide it.

For others who are here today, I'm wondering, do you know this Christ? Do you know Him? Have you tasted of His sweetness or caught a glimpse of His beauty? Do you know Him as the Lover of your soul? The one whose greatness surpasses all the wonders of this earth? Is He your all in all?

If you don't know Him, will you meet Him today? This Jesus went to the cross and died to take the penalty of our sins and to reconcile us to God. But that wasn't all. God vindicated Him as the Son of God, and put His stamp of approval on the sufficiency of Jesus' sacrifice by raising Him from the dead so that we could have new life in Him. Jesus says to us in John 14:6, "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." He calls out to us, as in Matthew 11:28-29, "²⁸ Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹ Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls." He offers eternal life to all who call upon Him in faith, to all who place their trust in Him, to all who are willing to turn from their life of sin, and follow Him for all their days. He offers this life to all who are willing to say, "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."