

Week 3 (Sept 24–30): Choose Joy in Life or Death! Philippians 1:18b–30

Most scholars agree that Philippians 1:21 is one of the keys to unlocking how and why Paul lives the way he lives:

Philippians 1:21

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

This one verse simplifies Paul's entire mindset. In one sentence, Paul communicates his overall mission as to how he approached life. In this lesson, we will ask a central question: Do we understand our lives the way Paul understands his life? Let's unpack this central verse by looking at the surrounding context.

You Have One Goal in Life or Death: HONOR CHRIST!

Philippians 1:18b–20

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, ¹⁹for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. ²⁰I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

As stated on numerous occasions already, even in chains, Paul rejoiced! Why? According to this passage it was because he fully expected deliverance. He speaks with joyful anticipation and hope of what is to come, even though his earthly future was uncertain. The word deliverance is probably better translated "salvation." Therefore, the passage indicates that through the prayers of the church and the empowerment of the Spirit, Paul fully expected salvation to come.

The question becomes: Is this in reference to his physical deliverance and salvation from his chains? More likely, given the context of verses 20-21, Paul is anticipating an eschatological salvation. Paul is convinced in a secure, certain and hope-filled future that was not dependent upon his circumstances, but upon the finished work of Jesus. Therefore, he was strengthened to live confident each day, that whether in life or death, his salvation was certain.

Paul's eschatological understanding of what was coming in salvation enabled him to live unashamed of Jesus. How did he have this understanding?

Because of his motto: To live is Christ and to die is gain! Let's unpack these two phrases:

To Die Is GAIN

Philippians 1:22b

Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.

In explaining his deliberation, Paul gets real and declares that death is better than life. Death for the Christian ensures no more suffering, no more persecution and that everything will be made new.

Do we understand death this way? We've probably heard the phrase, "Everybody wants to go to Heaven, but nobody wants to go now." Paul makes it clear that what is coming is far better than anything we've experienced in this life. Why do we hold so tightly to the present?

A lot of this has to do with our views of the life to come. Heaven isn't simply a white cloudy place where everyone plays a harp. Go read Revelation 21–22. In the end, believers will spend eternity with their Maker in a new and a new earth! What is the gain of the life to come? It's about being in the presence of the living God by grace alone. Eternity for the Christian will be marked by a total satisfaction of every human longing, to be with God, eternally worshipping the eternal King.

To Live Is CHRIST

Philippians 1:22a, 27a

*If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me...
²⁷ Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.*

An appropriate understanding of "to die is gain" should lead us to say, "Well, what then of this life? Why should we wait? Why not leave this world and go to this glorious one?" But Paul makes it clear: To live is Christ. This phrase means to live is to represent and bring honor to Christ, or to live is to live in a way where Christ is made known!

According to these verses, to live in this way is fruitful and good. We have one goal in this life: Imitate Jesus. When Christ transforms us, our actions and labor produces Christ-like fruit. He is the source of the fruit. He cuts off the bad fruit. He prunes the good so they will produce even more. Living as a representative of Christ is to produce the fruit like Christ. They will know you

by your fruit (Matthew 7:15–20). In other words, so long as we have breath in our lungs, we have an opportunity to live for Jesus. The following are three opportunities every believer has in life from the surrounding verses:

Life Is an Opportunity to ENCOURAGE OTHERS

Philippians 1:24–26

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.

Paul recognized that the Lord kept him on this earth to be an encouragement to other believers. What if we embraced our life on earth as a continual opportunity to encourage unbelievers and believers alike with the truths of the gospel? Encouragement can come in a variety of forms and ways. But we must be people who encourage one another: Write a note, send a text, give an extra high five, smile, etc. *To live is Christ* is to encourage people!

Life Is an Opportunity to REPRESENT JESUS

Philippians 1:27b–28

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, 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.

In every sphere of life, we are called to live in a way that represents Jesus. We must live as though at all times someone is looking at us and asking, “Do they look like Jesus?” Colossians 1:10 says, “Walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God.”

To use an illustration for these verses, we are called to live in a plexiglass house. In part, we have to understand that every word and action we do is a representation of the gospel we profess. And at the same time, when the world throws stones at us and attempts to dissuade us away from Jesus, we endure the attack and continue to live as Christ has called us to live.

Life Is an Opportunity to SUFFER FOR JESUS’ SAKE

Philippians 1:29–30

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.

The Philippians are in a similar struggle as Paul. But Paul flips their suffering on its head and proclaims that just as salvation is a gift, so is suffering. God does not call us to His gospel for our comfort but for our conformity to His likeness.

We must never be at home in this world. Living counter-culturally will naturally lead to suffering and sacrifice. But take heart, living for Christ is always better than anything this world has to offer.

Discussion Questions:

- How can you honor Jesus with your life?
- What does it mean to honor Jesus with your death?
- What are two things you look forward to the most about being reunited with Christ?
- How can you live in a manner worthy of the gospel?
- Vs. 21 contains the “secret” to being able to choose joy in every situation. Discuss the practical implications as well as what prevents us from always living out this perspective.
- Do you really view death as a “gain”? Explain.
- What does it mean to live “in a manner worthy of the gospel”? What are the consequences when we fail to do so?
- Paul ends this section by stating that suffering for the sake of Christ is a privilege. (v.29-30) Why are we often guilty of possessing an unbiblical viewpoint of suffering? (See Acts 5:21)
- What can you do today to encourage someone who is suffering because of his or her faith?
- What about your lifestyle do you most want to change in your desire to live for Christ?