

The Book of Philippians, Teacher's Guide

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

Philippians 1:12-26

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

What is doctrinally at stake here is the providence of God and the nature of Christian hope in life and in death. Paul interprets his imprisonment not as a defeat but as the advance of the gospel, teaching us to read our circumstances through God's purposes rather than through our preferences. He also gives us one of the clearest statements in the New Testament about the believer's hope beyond death, that to depart is to be with Christ, which is far better. Be ready to present this hope simply and faithfully, the assurance that the faithful are with the Lord at death and await the resurrection at his coming, without speculation beyond what Scripture says.

This passage is also profoundly formational. Most of your students live tethered to outcomes and afraid of death, the two chains Paul has been freed from. The aim is not to shame them for fearing loss but to hold up a man who has so united his life with Christ that he cannot finally lose, and to invite them into that same freedom. Paul's choice to remain for the sake of others, even when departing would be better for him, also models the self-giving mind of Christ that chapter 2 will unfold.

So aim at both targets. Strengthen your students' confidence in God's providence and in the hope of being with Christ, and at the same time loosen their grip on circumstances and drain the fear from their dying, so that they can begin to say with Paul that for them to live is Christ.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul says that what has happened to him "has really served to advance the gospel" (1:12), and that his imprisonment has emboldened others to speak (1:14). What does this teach us about how God works through circumstances we would call setbacks?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul reframes his entire situation in a single sentence. The Philippians would have heard the news of his imprisonment as a catastrophe, the silencing of their apostle. Paul tells them to look again. The gospel has gone places it could not otherwise have gone, into the praetorian guard and across the city, precisely because Paul is in chains.

This is the doctrine of God's providence in action. God does not merely rescue his people from hard circumstances, he works through them. The chain that bound Paul to a soldier became the means of preaching to the soldier. The setback became the platform. This does not mean every

hardship feels good or that we pretend evil is good. It means God is sovereign enough to bend even our losses toward his purposes.

Notice the second effect in verse 14. Paul's faithfulness in suffering emboldened other believers. Courage is contagious. When the congregation saw their leader stay faithful under pressure, they grew braver themselves. Your students should see that how they bear hardship preaches to everyone watching them.

Help your class resist two errors. One is fatalism, shrugging that whatever happens must be fine. The other is the demand that God always remove the hardship. Paul holds a third way, trusting that God is at work in the hardship to advance something larger than Paul's comfort.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The providence of God working through hardship, not only rescuing from it
- The advance of the gospel as a purpose larger than personal comfort
- Faithfulness under pressure as a witness that emboldens others
- Avoiding both fatalism and the demand that God always remove suffering
- Reading circumstances through God's purposes rather than our preferences

Discussion Prompts

- How does Paul's reading of his imprisonment differ from how we usually read setbacks?
- Whom might be watching how you bear your current hardship?
- What is the difference between trusting providence and pretending nothing is wrong?

Question 2

Student Question:

When your own plans are interrupted by hardship, illness, or loss, what is your usual first interpretation of what God is doing? How might Paul's perspective reshape the way you read your own setbacks?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question asks students to surface their default theology of suffering. Many quietly assume that hardship means God is displeased, distant, or absent. Others assume they have done something wrong. Naming the default is the first step to correcting it.

Bring them back to Paul's posture. He did not first ask what he had done wrong or whether God still loved him. He asked what the gospel could do from here. Invite students to consider how their reading of a current hardship would change if they asked Paul's question instead of their usual one.

Be pastorally careful. Some students carry genuine grief, and the answer is not a glib promise that everything is fine. The point is not to deny pain but to widen the frame, to trust that God is at work even in losses we cannot yet understand.

Encourage a concrete reframing. Ask each person to name one current interruption and to consider, in faith, what doors it might be opening or what it might be teaching, without forcing a tidy answer where none is yet visible.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Surfacing our default interpretation of suffering
- The temptation to read hardship as God's displeasure or absence
- Asking what the gospel can do from here rather than only what went wrong
- Honoring real grief while widening the frame in faith

Discussion Prompts

- What is your honest first thought when plans collapse?
- How would asking Paul's question change your reading of a current trial?
- Where can you trust God at work even without a tidy explanation?

Question 3

Student Question:

Some were preaching Christ "from envy and rivalry," others "from good will," yet Paul says, "Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice" (1:15–18). What does this tell us about the gospel message itself in relation to the motives of those who preach it?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul makes a remarkable distinction here. He does not approve of the bad motives, envy and rivalry and the desire to afflict him. Yet he can still rejoice, because the truth of the message does not depend on the purity of the messenger. The gospel is true and powerful whoever speaks it.

This protects the gospel from being held hostage to human failure. If the message only worked when the preacher was flawless, none of us would be safe, and the gospel would have died in the first generation. Paul's confidence rests in the message and in the Christ it proclaims, not in the preacher.

Be careful to keep the balance. Paul is not saying motives do not matter. Elsewhere he warns sharply against false teachers and corrupt leaders. He is saying that where the genuine gospel of Christ is truly preached, even by flawed or rivalrous people, God can still use it, and that is cause for joy rather than jealousy.

Help students apply this to their own hearts. We are tempted to resent it when good is done by someone we dislike, or when someone else gets credit for kingdom work. Paul's joy that Christ is proclaimed, regardless of who gets the glory, is a window into a heart set free from self-interest.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The truth and power of the gospel not depending on the messenger's perfection
- The difference between approving bad motives and rejoicing that Christ is proclaimed
- Motives still matter, even as God can use flawed preachers
- Freedom from jealousy over who receives credit for kingdom work
- The gospel as a fixed message, not the property of any one person

Discussion Prompts

- Why is it good news that the gospel does not depend on the preacher's perfection?
- How does Paul distinguish rejoicing in the message from approving the motives?
- Where do you struggle to rejoice when others advance the kingdom?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul rejoices that Christ is proclaimed even by people who are trying to harm him. Where do you struggle to rejoice in good that is done by people you dislike or compete with, and what would it take to rejoice as Paul does?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses the truth of the previous one into the student's own rivalries. Almost everyone has someone whose success they find hard to celebrate, a coworker, a sibling, another congregation, a person who once wronged them.

Help students name the root. Usually it is some form of envy or wounded pride, the sense that another's gain is our loss. Paul has been freed from this because his joy is anchored in Christ's honor, not his own standing. When Christ is the goal, another's faithfulness is simply more of what we wanted.

Encourage honest confession rather than performance. The point is not to pretend we already rejoice but to admit where we do not, and to ask God to reorder our hearts. Rivalry exposed is rivalry that can be repented of.

Offer a concrete practice. Suggest that students choose one person whose good they have resented and deliberately give thanks to God for the good that person is doing. Gratitude spoken aloud is one of the surest ways the heart is retrained.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Envy and wounded pride as the root of joyless rivalry
- Anchoring joy in Christ's honor rather than our own standing
- Confession of rivalry as the path to freedom from it
- Deliberate thanksgiving as a retraining of the heart

Discussion Prompts

- Whose good do you find hardest to celebrate, and why?
- What does your difficulty reveal about where your joy is anchored?
- What would it look like to thank God for that person this week?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul's deepest desire is "that Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death" (1:20). What does it mean to make the honor of Christ, rather than your own outcome, the aim of your life?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Here Paul names the single aim that organizes everything else, that Christ be honored in his body, whether he lives or dies. Notice the phrase "in my body." This is not abstract devotion but the honoring of Christ in a physical, embodied life, in how Paul endures prison, how he faces trial, how he might face execution.

This is the secret behind Paul's freedom. Because his goal is Christ's honor rather than his own survival or success, no outcome can defeat him. If he lives, Christ is honored in his living. If he dies, Christ is honored in his dying. The aim is reachable on every road.

Contrast this with the usual human aim, which is some preferred outcome, health, security, vindication, comfort. When our aim is an outcome, much of life threatens it, and we live anxious. When our aim is Christ's honor, even loss becomes an occasion to reach the goal.

Press the personal payoff gently. To make Christ's honor the aim is not to despise life or to court death, it is to be freed from the tyranny of needing things to go a certain way. Help students see how restful and how courageous such an aim would make them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The honor of Christ as the single organizing aim of life
- Honoring Christ in the body, in embodied and ordinary circumstances
- An aim reachable on every road, in life or in death
- Freedom from anxiety when Christ's honor replaces our preferred outcomes

Discussion Prompts

- What outcome do you currently treat as the aim of your life?
- How would making Christ's honor your aim change your anxiety level?
- Where could Christ be honored in your body this week, in something physical and concrete?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul says, "For to me to live is Christ" (1:21). In concrete, daily terms, what would it look like for your living to be Christ, in your work, your home, and your free time?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question moves Paul's confession out of the realm of slogan and into Monday morning. It is easy to admire "to live is Christ" as a beautiful phrase. It is harder to spell out what it would mean at the kitchen table, the office, and the weekend.

Encourage students to get specific by domain. What would it mean for their work to be Christ, in honesty, diligence, and treatment of others? For their home to be Christ, in patience, presence, and forgiveness? For their leisure to be Christ, in what they choose to feed their minds and how they rest?

Help them see that "to live is Christ" is not adding religious activities on top of a normal life. It is Christ becoming the center and content of the ordinary life they already have. The same job, the same family, now lived unto him.

Close by naming the alternative. Paul could have filled the blank with comfort, reputation, or family. Those are good gifts, but they make poor centers. Only Christ at the center can hold the weight of a life and survive even death.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ as the center and content of ordinary life, not an add-on
- Living unto Christ in work, home, and leisure specifically
- The difference between religious activity and a life centered on Christ
- Good gifts make poor centers; only Christ can hold the weight of a life

Discussion Prompts

- What would change Monday if your living were truly Christ?
- Which domain, work, home, or leisure, is hardest to surrender to him?
- What good thing have you been treating as the center instead of Christ?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul says “to die is gain” and describes departing “to be with Christ, for that is far better” (1:21, 23). What does this passage teach us about the Christian’s hope in the face of death?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Paul speaks of death not as annihilation and not as a fearful unknown, but as gain, as departing to be with Christ. For the faithful Christian, death is a doorway into the presence of the Lord. Paul can call it “far better” than even a fruitful life of ministry, which tells us how real and how good that presence is.

Keep the teaching anchored in what Scripture plainly says and resist the urge to speculate about details it does not reveal. The clear hope is this, that to be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8), and that the final, fullest hope is the resurrection of the body at Christ’s coming (1 Thessalonians 4; Philippians 3:20–21, which this study reaches in Lesson 10).

This hope is grounded in the resurrection of Jesus. Because he was raised, death has been defanged for those who are in him. Paul does not pretend death is nothing, he calls it an enemy elsewhere, but he proclaims it a defeated enemy, a gain rather than a loss for the believer.

Help your students feel the pastoral weight. This is the hope we lean on at gravesides. It does not erase grief, but it transforms it, so that we do not grieve as those who have no hope. Christians can face death with sorrow and confidence at the same time.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Death for the faithful as gain, a departing to be with Christ
- To be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8)
- The fullest hope as bodily resurrection at Christ’s coming (1 Thessalonians 4)
- The resurrection of Jesus as the ground of the believer’s hope
- Grief transformed, not erased, by hope (1 Thessalonians 4:13)

Discussion Prompts

- Why can Paul call death gain rather than loss?
- How does the resurrection of Jesus change the way we face death?
- How can a Christian grieve honestly and hope confidently at the same time?

Question 8

Student Question:

Be honest about your own relationship with death. What do you fear about it, and how does Paul’s confidence speak to that fear without pretending the loss is not real?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question invites the kind of honesty most people avoid. Fear of death is nearly universal, even among believers, and naming it is healthier than pretending it away. Some fear the pain, some the unknown, some leaving loved ones, some judgment.

Meet the fear with Paul's confidence rather than with denial. Paul does not say death is nothing or that it should not be grieved. He says that for the one in Christ, what lies on the other side is far better, the presence of the Lord himself. The fear is answered not by minimizing death but by magnifying Christ.

Be sensitive to those whose fear touches judgment. The honest answer is not false assurance but the call to be found in Christ, walking faithfully with him. Assurance in the face of death belongs to those who are living in obedient faith, and that is an invitation, not a threat.

Close gently. The aim is not to manufacture fearlessness in one lesson but to begin loosening fear's grip by fixing the eyes on Christ. Encourage students that growing confidence in the face of death is itself part of the good work God is completing in them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Naming the fear of death honestly rather than denying it
- Answering fear by magnifying Christ rather than minimizing death
- Assurance grounded in living faithfully in Christ, not in false comfort
- Growing confidence in the face of death as part of God's ongoing work

Discussion Prompts

- What specifically do you fear about death?
- How does fixing your eyes on Christ speak to that particular fear?
- What would it mean to be found in Christ, ready, today?

Question 9

Student Question:

Though departing would be "far better" for him, Paul is convinced he will remain "for your progress and joy in the faith" (1:24–26), choosing what serves others over what he would prefer for himself. What does this teach us about how a Christian is to weigh personal desire against the good of others, and where do we see this same mind in Christ himself?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal and formational climax of the passage, so give it room. Paul stands at a genuine crossroads. For himself, departing to be with Christ is far better. For the Philippians, his remaining is more necessary. And he chooses their good over his own preference. This is not resignation, it is love deciding.

Notice the logic. Paul does not weigh the two options by what would make him happiest, but by what would most serve the progress and joy of others in the faith. The needs of the body of Christ outrank his own legitimate desire for heaven. This is the cruciform pattern that runs through the whole letter.

This is exactly the mind of Christ that Paul will hold up in 2:5–11. Jesus, who was in the form of God, did not grasp at his own rightful glory but emptied himself for the sake of others, obedient even to death. Paul's small choice to remain mirrors Christ's great choice to descend. The pattern is the same, the good of others above personal preference.

Guard against two distortions. This is not a call to neglect oneself or to despise legitimate desires, Paul honestly names that departing would be better for him. Nor is it self-pity dressed up as sacrifice. It is the free, clear-eyed choice of love that counts others' interests as genuinely significant (2:3–4).

Press the application. Most of your students face daily, smaller versions of Paul's crossroads, where what they would prefer collides with what would serve their spouse, their children, their congregation. The mind of Christ asks not only what I want, but what will most help these people grow in the faith and joy of the Lord.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Love that weighs decisions by the good of others, not personal preference alone
- The needs of the body of Christ outranking even legitimate personal desire
- The cruciform pattern, foreshadowing the mind of Christ in 2:5–11
- Legitimate desires honestly named, not despised, yet freely surrendered in love
- Counting others' interests as genuinely significant (2:3–4)
- Daily, ordinary versions of Paul's crossroads in family and congregation

Discussion Prompts

- How does Paul decide between two genuinely good options?
- Where do you see the mind of Christ in Paul's choice to remain?
- Where does what you prefer currently collide with what would serve others?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole passage. Paul has been freed from needing his circumstances to go his way and from the fear of death itself. Name one specific way Jesus is using these verses to loosen your grip on an outcome you have been clutching, or to begin draining the fear out of something you dread.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the two great freedoms of the passage, freedom from the tyranny of outcomes and freedom from the fear of death, and asks the student to receive one of them personally. Resist generality, press for one specific outcome being clutched or one specific dread.

Help students name what they are gripping. It may be a job, a relationship, a health outcome, a reputation, a plan for their children. The grip is usually invisible to us until we try to pry our fingers open, so naming it is itself a small act of surrender.

Connect surrender to Paul's secret. He could loosen his grip because his life was Christ and his gain was Christ. The way to open our hands is not to care less but to be filled more, to let Christ become so central that the clutched thing loses its tyranny.

End the lesson in prayer, asking God to teach each person to say honestly, for me to live is Christ and to die is gain. Invite them to take one concrete step this week, a prayer of release, a conversation, a decision, that puts the truth into practice rather than leaving it as admiration.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The two freedoms: from the tyranny of outcomes and from the fear of death
- Naming the specific thing being clutched as an act of surrender
- Opening our hands by being filled with Christ, not by caring less
- Moving from admiration of the truth to concrete practice

Discussion Prompts

- What outcome have you been clutching most tightly?
- How does Paul's secret help you begin to open your hand?
- What concrete step of release could you take this week?