

The Book of Philippians

Lesson 2: To Live Is Christ, To Die Is Gain -- Philippians 1:12-26

We tend to measure our lives by whether things are going our way. The promotion came through, the diagnosis was clear, the relationship healed, the plan worked. When those things happen, we say God is good. When they do not, we quietly wonder if he has forgotten us. Paul writes this section of his letter from inside the very kind of circumstance we would call a disaster, and he refuses to read it that way.

He is under arrest, his freedom gone, his case unresolved. Yet his first concern is not his own comfort but the progress of the gospel, and he reports good news. The chains have not buried the message, they have spread it. The whole imperial guard has heard why he is bound. Other believers, watching Paul stay faithful in prison, have grown bold to speak. What looked like the end of his usefulness turned out to be a new pulpit.

Then Paul says something so simple and so staggering that it deserves to be written on the wall of every Christian's heart. For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. He has so completely tied his life to Jesus that he genuinely cannot lose. If he keeps living, he gets more of Christ and more fruitful labor. If he dies, he goes to be with Christ, which is far better. Whichever way the verdict falls, he wins.

Most of us live with a long list of things we feel we cannot live without, and death sits at the top of the list of things we fear. Paul has been set free from both. Not because he loves life less, but because he loves Christ more. As we walk through these verses, the question pressing on us is whether we can honestly say with Paul that our living is Christ, and whether that has begun to drain the fear out of our dying.

Group Discussion: Paul says his imprisonment has actually “served to advance the gospel” (1:12). Can you think of a time when something that looked like a setback turned out to open a door you never expected?

Personal Reflection: Paul could say, “For to me to live is Christ” (1:21). If you finished that sentence honestly today, “For to me to live is _____,” what word would you most likely write in the blank?

Read Philippians 1:12-26

Study Questions

1. 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?

2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?
10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Acts 16:22–34, Paul singing in the Philippian jail and the gospel advancing through chains; Romans 8:28–39, God working all things for good and nothing separating us from the love of Christ; 2 Corinthians 5:6–9, being at home with the Lord and making it our aim to please him; 2 Timothy 4:6–8, Paul facing death as a poured-out offering awaiting the crown; 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, the hope of the resurrection at Christ's coming that frees us from grieving as those without hope.