

Paul: From Persecutor to Preacher, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 11: To Live Is Christ: Faithful in Chains

Acts 28:16–31; Philippians 1:12–21

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This lesson brings Paul to Rome at last, around A.D. 60 to 62, but in chains, under house arrest while awaiting trial before Caesar. It pairs the closing scene of Acts, where Paul preaches 'without hindrance' from his rented quarters, with his own words from a prison letter to the Philippians. The historical setting is heavy with apparent defeat: the great missionary is confined, his travels ended. Yet both passages radiate joy, boldness, and confidence that the gospel is advancing through, not merely despite, his imprisonment. This is one of Scripture's clearest pictures of faithfulness and joy in suffering.

The doctrinal themes are rich and practical. God's providence turns hardship into gospel advance; the word of God is never bound even when its messengers are; the glory of Christ matters more than our own reputation, so that Paul can rejoice even when rivals preach from envy. At the center stands Philippians 1:21, 'to live is Christ, and to die is gain,' and 1:20, the desire that Christ be honored in his body 'whether by life or by death.' Note too that from prison Paul proclaimed 'the kingdom of God,' a reminder that Christ reigns now; the kingdom is present, not a postponed earthly realm. The heaviest doctrinal block (Question 9) draws together the supremacy and surpassing worth of Christ, the reigning Lord, as the aim of both living and dying.

This lesson aims squarely at the heart and the center of the student's life. Press the searching question of Philippians 1:21: if they finished 'to live is ____,' what word would they honestly write? Help them trust God's purposes in their own 'chains,' let opposition embolden rather than silence them, rejoice in the gospel above their own recognition, and make the honor of Christ supreme over the competing loves that crowd Him from the center. Hold up Paul, chained and joyful, as proof that a life wholly given to Christ cannot be defeated by circumstances. Send students home freer, bolder, and more centered on Christ.

Question 1

Student Question:

Writing from prison, Paul said, "What has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel," so that the whole imperial guard heard of Christ and other believers grew bold (Philippians 1:12–14). What does this teach about how God can use even hardship, setbacks, and suffering to accomplish His purposes?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Notice how Paul reinterprets his imprisonment. The Philippians likely saw it as a tragedy and a setback for the mission. Paul sees it as a strategy of God: 'what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.' The very thing that looked like the end of his usefulness became a new avenue for the word.

Trace the unexpected fruit. Chained to a rotating guard of elite Roman soldiers, Paul had a captive audience from the heart of the empire; 'the whole imperial guard' came to know why he was bound. And his courage in chains shamed and emboldened other believers to speak more fearlessly. God was advancing the gospel through Paul's confinement in ways his freedom never could have.

Set this within God's providence. 'We know that for those who love God all things work together for good' (Romans 8:28). This does not mean hardships are not real or painful; it means God is sovereignly able to weave even our setbacks into His good purposes. The cross itself is the supreme proof that God brings His greatest victories out of apparent defeat.

Apply it to perspective. Help students learn to ask, in their own hardships, not only 'why is this happening?' but 'what might God be doing through this?' Paul's example trains us to look for the gospel opportunity hidden inside the difficulty, and to trust God's purposes even when we cannot yet see them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's providence turning hardship into gospel advance (Romans 8:28)
- Apparent defeat as the arena of God's unexpected victories
- Confinement opening doors freedom never could
- Reinterpreting setbacks in light of God's purposes

Discussion Prompts

- How did Paul reinterpret his imprisonment?
- What unexpected fruit came from his chains?
- How can we look for God's purposes inside our hardships?

Question 2

Student Question:

It is easy to assume that when our plans collapse, God's work in us has stalled. Where in your life have you been tempted to see only the chains and miss what God might be doing through them? How can you grow in trusting God's purposes when your circumstances fall apart?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question invites students to apply Paul's perspective to their own setbacks. When plans collapse, a job lost, a door closed, an illness, a disappointment, we instinctively read it as pure loss and assume God's work has stalled. Paul saw chains; he also saw gospel advance.

Help students name a current 'chain.' The point is not to pretend the difficulty is not real, but to ask whether they have been so focused on the loss that they have missed what God might be doing, in their character, in their witness, in others around them. Sometimes the fruit is only visible later, or in someone else's life.

Move toward active trust. Encourage each student to take one current hardship and consciously entrust it to God, asking Him to use it for His purposes and watching for the opportunities hidden within it. Trusting God's purposes is a discipline grown over time, and Paul's joy in prison shows where it can lead.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Seeing beyond the chains to God's hidden work
- Trusting God's purposes when plans collapse
- The discipline of looking for opportunity within difficulty
- Fruit that may be visible only later or in others

Discussion Prompts

- Where have you seen only the chains in your life?
- What might God be doing through that hardship?
- How can you grow in trusting His purposes?

Question 3

Student Question:

Luke ends Acts by saying Paul preached "with all boldness and without hindrance" (Acts 28:31), and Paul says the gospel advanced even though he was bound. What does it mean that the word of God is never chained, even when its messengers are, and how have you seen the gospel advance in unlikely places?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Linger on the last word of Acts: 'without hindrance.' Luke ends his whole account not with Paul's release or martyrdom, but with the gospel going out freely from a prisoner's house. The image is deliberate: the messenger is bound, but the message is not. Paul later put it plainly: 'I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound!' (2 Timothy 2:9).

Explain why this matters. The advance of the gospel does not finally depend on favorable circumstances, political freedom, or even the freedom of its preachers. The word of God has its

own power and runs where God sends it (Isaiah 55:11). This frees us from the despair that says the gospel can only thrive when conditions are good.

Note what Paul preached: 'the kingdom of God' and 'the Lord Jesus Christ.' The kingdom was advancing right there in Rome, in chains, because the kingdom is the present reign of Christ, not a future earthly arrangement waiting on better conditions. Christ was already King, and His rule was spreading through a bound apostle's words.

Apply it with hope. Across history the gospel has often advanced most where it was most opposed, in prisons, under persecution, in hard places. Invite students to recall where they have seen the word bear fruit in unlikely soil, and to take courage that no chain, law, or hardship can finally stop the word of God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The word of God is never bound, even when its messengers are (2 Timothy 2:9)
- The gospel's advance not finally dependent on favorable circumstances (Isaiah 55:11)
- The kingdom of God as the present reign of Christ, advancing now (Acts 28:31)
- Courage that no opposition can finally stop the word

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that the word of God is never chained?
- Why is the gospel's advance not dependent on good conditions?
- Where have you seen the gospel bear fruit in unlikely places?

Question 4

Student Question:

Opposition tends to make us go quiet, yet Paul's imprisonment made others bolder, not more timid (Philippians 1:14). When you face resistance, ridicule, or difficulty, does it tend to silence your witness or strengthen it? What would more boldness look like in your current circumstances?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question contrasts the natural reaction to opposition with the gospel response. Normally, resistance makes us cautious and quiet; we lower our heads and wait for it to pass. But Paul's courageous suffering had the opposite effect on the Roman believers; it emboldened them. Faithfulness under fire is contagious.

Help students examine their own pattern. Does opposition, a mocking comment, a hostile environment, a difficult season, make them shrink back and hide their faith, or drive them to a deeper, bolder reliance on God? Naming the pattern honestly is the first step to changing it.

Move toward concrete boldness. Ask each student what greater boldness would look like in their specific circumstances right now, speaking up where they have been silent, living openly where they have been hidden, witnessing where they have shrunk back. Paul's chains made others brave; our faithfulness can do the same for those watching us.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The contagious courage of faithfulness under opposition
- The choice to let resistance embolden rather than silence us
- Our boldness strengthening others (Philippians 1:14)
- Concrete steps of courage in present circumstances

Discussion Prompts

- Does opposition tend to silence or strengthen your witness?
- What pattern do you notice in yourself under resistance?
- What would more boldness look like in your situation now?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul rejoiced that Christ was being preached even by those who did so “from envy and rivalry,” concluding, “Whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice” (Philippians 1:15–18). What does this reveal about Paul’s priorities, and about putting the glory of Christ above our own reputation or recognition?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is a remarkable window into Paul's heart. Some were preaching Christ to stir up trouble for Paul, out of envy and rivalry, even hoping to add to his affliction. Paul's response is not defensiveness or hurt but joy, because the thing he cares about most, Christ being proclaimed, was happening regardless of the preachers' motives.

Draw out the priority. Paul cared more about the advance of Christ's name than about his own reputation, vindication, or recognition. His ego was so thoroughly subordinated to the glory of Christ that he could rejoice even when others tried to use the gospel against him. The cause was bigger than the man.

Be careful to qualify rightly. Paul is not indifferent to motives or to truth; elsewhere he sharply opposes those who preach a false gospel (Galatians 1:8). Here the issue is not false doctrine but mixed motives among those preaching the true Christ. Paul can rejoice because the message is right even where the messengers' hearts are wrong.

Apply it to our own hearts. How much of our discouragement in ministry is really wounded pride, our work unnoticed, someone else praised, a rival succeeding? Paul models a heart so captured by Christ's glory that the success of the gospel, even through others, becomes a source of joy rather than jealousy.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The glory of Christ valued above personal reputation
- Joy in the gospel's advance, even through imperfect messengers
- The distinction between mixed motives and false doctrine (Galatians 1:8)
- Ego subordinated to the cause of Christ

Discussion Prompts

- What do Paul's priorities reveal about his heart?
- How can we rejoice when Christ is preached by those we find difficult?
- Where does wounded pride masquerade as concern for the gospel?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul could genuinely rejoice when others advanced in ministry, even rivals. Do you celebrate when fellow Christians are used and honored, or do you struggle with envy, comparison, and a quiet desire for recognition? Where does God want to free you from making ministry about yourself?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-examining question turns Paul's joy into a mirror. Envy and comparison are common and corrosive among those who serve, the quiet sting when someone else is praised, used more visibly, or thanked for what we also do. Paul's rejoicing exposes how much of our service can secretly be about us.

Help students name the comparison honestly. We compare gifts, roles, recognition, and fruit, and the result is either pride or discouragement. Both reveal that we have, in some measure, made the work about ourselves rather than about Christ. Naming this is humbling but freeing.

Move toward freedom and joy. The cure for envy is a heart captured by the glory of Christ, so that His honor matters more than ours. Encourage each student to identify one person whose success they have struggled to celebrate, and to deliberately rejoice in and even bless that person's ministry this week, as Paul rejoiced in his.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Envy and comparison as corrosive to those who serve

- Pride and discouragement as twin symptoms of self-focus
- The cure of a heart captured by the glory of Christ
- Genuine joy in the fruitfulness of others (Romans 12:15)

Discussion Prompts

- Do you celebrate or envy the success of other Christians?
- Where has ministry quietly become about you?
- Whose work could you deliberately rejoice in this week?

Question 7

Student Question:

Paul wrote, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). What does it mean to be able to say that living is Christ, and how does a life centered on Christ make death itself ‘gain’ rather than loss?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Unpack the first half: ‘to live is Christ.’ For Paul, Christ was not one part of life but the whole of it, the source, the center, the goal. To live was to know Christ, to serve Christ, to display Christ. His identity, purpose, and joy were all bound up in Jesus. This is not exaggeration but the settled reality of a life wholly given over.

Then the second half follows logically: ‘to die is gain.’ For most people death is the ultimate loss, the end of everything they live for. But if Christ is your life, then death is not loss but gain, because it brings you into Christ’s immediate presence. Paul goes on to say he desires ‘to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better’ (Philippians 1:23). Death simply removes the last barrier between him and the One he loves.

Show how the two halves depend on each other. Death is gain only if living is Christ. For the person whose life centers on comfort, success, or family, death is pure loss, the end of all they have. The logic of Philippians 1:21 works only for those whose treasure is Christ Himself, untouched and even increased by death.

Apply it to how we face our own mortality. A life centered on Christ transforms the believer’s relationship to death from terror to hope. Help students see that the way to rob death of its sting is to make Christ their life now, so that whatever comes, living or dying, they cannot lose.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ as the whole of life, not merely a part (Galatians 2:20)
- Death as gain because it brings us to Christ’s presence (Philippians 1:23)
- The two halves depend on each other: death is gain only if living is Christ

- A Christ-centered life transforming our relationship to death

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to say 'to live is Christ'?
- How does a Christ-centered life make death gain?
- Why does the logic only work if Christ is truly your life?

Question 8

Student Question:

Most of us, if honest, are living for a mix of things, family, comfort, success, approval, alongside Christ. What competes with Christ for the center of your life, and what would it take for you to be able to say, and mean, that for you to live is Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question presses Philippians 1:21 into honest self-examination. Few of us could truthfully fill the blank with 'Christ' alone. We live for a mixture, good things like family and work, along with comfort, approval, and security, all crowding around the center where Christ alone belongs.

Help students identify their real centers. The test is what they cannot imagine living without, what most controls their time, money, and emotions, what they would be devastated to lose. These reveal the rivals to Christ for the throne of their lives. Naming them is not condemnation but clarity.

Move toward reordering, not rejecting. The goal is not to despise family, work, or other good gifts, but to put them in their place beneath Christ, so that He is the center and they are gifts received from Him. Encourage each student to name one competing center and to take one step this week toward making Christ supreme over it, in priorities, in trust, in love.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Identifying the rivals that compete with Christ for the center
- Good things become rivals when they take Christ's place
- Reordering loves rather than rejecting good gifts (Matthew 6:33)
- Making Christ supreme over every competing center

Discussion Prompts

- What competes with Christ for the center of your life?
- What reveals where your true center lies?
- What step would move Christ to the center this week?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul's deepest desire was that "Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death" (Philippians 1:20), and from his chains he proclaimed "the kingdom of God" and the reign of "the Lord Jesus Christ" (Acts 28:31). What does it mean to make the honor of Christ the supreme aim of both our living and our dying, and how does the surpassing worth of knowing Christ, the reigning Lord, reorder everything else in life?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the doctrinal summit of the lesson, and it gathers up the heart of Paul's life and message. Begin with his single, controlling desire: that 'Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.' Paul does not pray first for release, comfort, or vindication; he prays that Christ be magnified, and he is content for that to come through either his living or his dying. The honor of Christ is the supreme aim that swallows up every lesser concern.

Explain what this surrender involves. To make Christ's honor supreme is to hold our lives, our plans, even our deaths, loosely, offering them all so that He might be glorified. It is the posture Paul urged on all believers: 'present your bodies as a living sacrifice' (Romans 12:1). Life and death are no longer about us and our outcomes; they are arenas for the glory of Christ.

Ground this in the surpassing worth of Christ. Paul could live this way because he had come to count everything else as loss 'because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord' (Philippians 3:8). When Christ is seen as the supreme treasure He truly is, everything else finds its proper, lesser place. This is not grim duty but the response of a heart that has found the pearl of great price.

Connect it to the reigning Lord Paul proclaimed. From prison Paul preached 'the kingdom of God' and 'the Lord Jesus Christ.' Christ is not a future king-in-waiting but the reigning Lord now, seated at God's right hand (Acts 2:33–36; Ephesians 1:20–22). Because He already reigns, making His honor supreme is simply aligning our lives with reality: He is Lord, and all of life, living and dying, belongs to Him. The kingdom is present, and we live now under our reigning King.

Land it pastorally and personally. This is the climax toward which Paul's whole life has been moving, from the proud Pharisee who lived for his own record, to the apostle who lived only for Christ's honor. Help students see that the most freeing, joyful, and stable life possible is one wholly given to the glory of the reigning Christ, where neither prosperity nor suffering, neither life nor death, can finally touch our joy. Call them to make His honor their supreme aim, today.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The honor of Christ as the supreme aim of living and dying (Philippians 1:20)

- Offering our whole lives as a living sacrifice (Romans 12:1)
- The surpassing worth of knowing Christ reordering all of life (Philippians 3:8)
- Christ as the reigning Lord now, not a king-in-waiting (Ephesians 1:20–22)
- The present kingdom of God under our reigning King (Acts 2:33–36)
- A life so given to Christ that nothing can finally steal its joy

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean to make Christ's honor supreme in life and death?
- How does the surpassing worth of Christ reorder everything else?
- How does Christ's present reign shape the way you live now?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back over Paul in chains, the advancing gospel, the joy that rivals could not steal, and the life that could call death gain. Name one specific way you sense Jesus using this account to form you, whether to trust God in your own chains, to rejoice in the gospel above yourself, or to make Christ the true center of your life.

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone gathers the lesson's threads: God's providence in hardship, the unbound word, joy over self, and a life and death wholly given to Christ. Ask students to name one concrete way the Lord has met them rather than offering a general reflection.

Offer the three doors. Some need to trust God's purposes in their own chains, looking for His work in their hardships. Some need to rejoice in the gospel and the success of others above their own recognition. Some need to wrestle honestly with what sits at the center of their lives, and to move Christ there.

Close with the image of the chained, joyful apostle. Paul had lost his freedom and faced possible death, yet his joy was untouchable and his witness unhindered, because his life was Christ. Send students home longing for that same freedom, the freedom of a life so centered on Jesus that no circumstance can defeat it.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Trusting God's purposes in our own chains
- Rejoicing in the gospel above personal recognition
- Making Christ the true center of life
- Joy and witness that circumstances cannot defeat

Discussion Prompts

- Which part of Paul's example speaks most to you?
- What chain do you need to entrust to God?
- What step will move Christ nearer the center of your life?