

Paul: From Persecutor to Preacher

Lesson 11: To Live Is Christ: Faithful in Chains -- Acts 28:16–31; Philippians 1:12–21

After everything, the storms, the shipwreck, the snakebite on Malta, Paul finally reached Rome, the great city he had longed to see. But he did not enter it as a free man, a celebrated missionary on a victory tour. He entered it as a prisoner, chained to a Roman soldier, awaiting trial before Caesar. By any ordinary measure, this was the lowest point of his career, the apostle to the nations under house arrest, his travels ended, his future uncertain. And yet the closing words Luke gives us are anything but defeated.

Luke tells us that Paul lived two whole years in his own rented quarters, and he “welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.” There is the chain on his wrist, and there is the gospel going out freely from his front room. Read the last word of the book of Acts slowly: “without hindrance.” The man was bound, but the word of God was not. The kingdom Paul proclaimed was not waiting on his release; it was advancing right there, in chains.

From that imprisonment Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, and his letter pulls back the curtain on what was happening in his heart. We might expect complaint, or at least discouragement. Instead he writes, “I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.” His chains had become a pulpit. The whole imperial guard had heard why he was imprisoned, and his courage had emboldened other believers to speak the word more boldly. Even rivals who preached Christ out of envy could not dampen his joy: “Whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.”

And then he gives us one of the most famous sentences ever written, the distilled essence of a life poured out for Jesus. He did not know whether his trial would end in release or execution, and remarkably, he was at peace with either. “It is my eager expectation and hope that . . . Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” This lesson sits in that rented Roman room with a chained and joyful apostle, and asks what it means to be so wholly given to Christ that nothing, not even prison or death, can take away our joy or silence our witness.

Group Discussion: From prison Paul wrote, “What has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel” (Philippians 1:12). He saw God using his chains for good. Why is it so hard for us to believe God is at work when our circumstances fall apart, and how might that change the way we face our own ‘chains’?

Personal Reflection: Paul could say, “To me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21). If you finished the sentence honestly, ‘For to me to live is ____,’ what word would you write? What does your answer reveal about what truly sits at the center of your life?

Read Acts 28:16–31; Philippians 1:12–21

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. 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?
8. 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?
9. 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?

10. 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.

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: Philippians 4:11–13, learning to be content in any circumstance through Christ who strengthens; 2 Timothy 2:8–9, Paul bound, but the word of God not bound; Romans 8:28–39, God working all things for good and nothing separating us from His love; Colossians 1:24, rejoicing in sufferings for the sake of the body; Acts 5:41, rejoicing to be counted worthy to suffer for the name