

## “To Live Is Christ”

### The Third in a Series on Paul’s Letter to the Philippians

*Texts: Philippians 1:12–30; Job 13:13–24*

---

Paul is confined to house arrest in Rome. But the Apostle has one-overarching desire—that Jesus Christ be proclaimed to everyone. Paul’s desire to see this happen stems from two important factors. The first is Paul’s dramatic conversion on the Damascus Road (as recounted in Acts 9). Paul had been instantaneously transformed from an arch-persecutor of Christ’s church to a shepherd of Christ’s flock. Paul was called to serve that one whom he had been persecuting, when the Risen Jesus appeared to Paul and called him to preach the gospel to the Gentiles—including those in Philippi. The second factor is Paul’s understanding of his office as apostle, and the concern that his ability to preach that gospel will be hampered by his imprisonment. The Philippians too are concerned about Paul’s imprisonment, not only for the Apostle’s personal circumstances, but for the on-going success of the gospel mission. Paul will assure them that even house arrest in Rome will not stop him and others from preaching the gospel. Whether Paul lives or dies, Jesus Christ will be preached and the gospel will progress.

Paul has already undertaken three missionary journeys and fully trusts in the power of Jesus, so that even though confined to house arrest, Paul still preaches Christ crucified to those with whom he comes into contact while in Rome—whether that be people who visit him, others likewise confined, members of the *Praetorian Guard*, or even members of Caesar’s own household. The proclamation of the gospel is not limited to Paul—God has called others to preach it as well. Although human sinfulness and pettyness threatens to get in the way, Paul tells the Philippians that he is not concerned with the question of *why* people preach Christ crucified (their motives), only that they do so. Since this is the case—the gospel is being preached throughout the empire by preachers for all sorts of reasons—Paul can rejoice in the midst of his imprisonment because Christ is still being preached in both Rome and in Philippi. The Apostle might be hampered by his ordeal, but Jesus’ power is most evident in times of human weakness.

We are continuing our series on Paul’s letter to the Philippians. We are now in the second half of the opening chapter (vv. 12-30). We have seen in prior sermons that Paul is writing while under house arrest in Rome to a congregation of Gentile Christians in Philippi, a church which Paul was privileged to help found some ten years or so earlier. He began his letter to the Philippians with the traditional salutation and thanksgiving, but Paul also includes a heart-felt prayer for the Philippians (vv. 3-11), petitioning the Lord to grant the Philippians abounding love for each other, a love which will be grounded in knowledge and discernment (v. 9). Paul also prays that the Philippians may approve of what is excellent so that they may be pure and blameless on the day of the Jesus Christ (his second advent). Paul sees all of these things not as a product of human attainment, but as the fruit of that righteousness which comes through faith in Jesus Christ. Knowing that God has already begun his good work of new creation in them, Paul is confident that Jesus will see that good work through to that day when he returns to raise the dead, judge the world, and make all things new.

So when we pick up with our text in verse 12, Paul is in mid-thought, so to speak. After praying for the Philippians, he begins to address a number of concerns the Philippians expressed to him through Epaphroditus, one of their own number sent from Philippi to offer Paul encouragement and support. In verse 12, Paul informs the Philippians that “*I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me*

*has really served to advance the gospel.*” The Philippians are understandably concerned about Paul and the outcome of his appeal to Caesar. The Philippians fear that the worst might happen—that Paul will put to death while in Rome, and the progress of the gospel will come to a halt. But far from impeding the progress of the gospel, Paul’s imprisonment advanced the cause of Jesus Christ.

Although the Book of Acts ends with Paul still under house arrest in Rome awaiting trial, we have good evidence that Paul appeared before Caesar (Nero?), and was released and perhaps even made a fourth (and final) missionary journey, traveling as far west as Spain. We also know that Paul returned to Rome at some point, was arrested again, and likely put to death by Nero during the great persecution of Christians in AD 65 after the great fire broke out in Rome and consumed much of the city—a fire which was likely started by Nero, but blamed on Christians who were scape-goated to take suspicion away from Nero that he had the ordered the fire to clear an area to build his famous Golden Palace.<sup>1</sup>

Since Paul knows that the sovereign God will accomplish his purposes—just as he had when the Holy Spirit prevented Paul from going back to Asia Minor and to cross into Macedonia to preach the gospel at Philippi—he knows that God’s purposes will still be accomplished despite his imprisonment. The gospel will still advance. One sign that this is the case, is Paul’s remarkable assertion in verse 13, that *“it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.”* Paul’s confidence that his imprisonment (his time under house arrest) has served to advance the gospel is grounded in the power of God, evident in the fact that members of the *Praetorium Guard* (the imperial guard of about 9000 men garrisoned in Rome) have heard that Paul is imprisoned precisely because he is an apostle of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

Paul may have been some sort of curiosity to those guarding him—a Jewish Rabbi who makes the Jews furious by his teaching that another Jew, Jesus, was the Son of God who was raised from the dead by Israel’s God. Those guarding Paul, no doubt, heard his preaching of this message first hand. Some of the soldiers may have debated with him, or even tried to pay him no mind. But Paul considers his imprisonment to be the means by which he is able to preach to those who otherwise would have never heard the Christian gospel. And who knows? We may see some of these soldiers in heaven because Paul preached Jesus to them and they trusted in him. Paul offers this news as an encouragement to the Philippians, that his imprisonment—while not a picnic—has not hindered his mission. God has used this circumstance to further the spread of the gospel within the very heart of a pagan empire—a matter of great importance, redemptive-historically speaking. Recall from our time studying Daniel, that Christ’s kingdom would one day crush the fourth empire (Rome). This is already coming to pass, through the most unlikely of means—Paul under house arrest in Rome waiting to appear before Nero.

In verse 14, Paul offers additional evidence that the gospel is still spreading rapidly despite his imprisonment. *“And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.”* Paul’s reference to brothers present with him may refer to Timothy and others, but more likely to those imprisoned with him, or to the growing number of Christians in Rome who have been in touch with Paul. We know from Acts 2 and the account of the Pentecost sermon that visitors from Rome were present for Peter’s first sermon in Jerusalem. There is good evidence that a church was formed in Rome soon after, and Paul has likely made contact with these

---

<sup>1</sup> F. F. Bruce, *Paul: The Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1977), 450.

<sup>2</sup> O’Brien, *Philippians*, 93-94.

Christians while there. Having witnessed Paul's trust in Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit to sustain the Apostle in the midst of this difficult trial, their own faith and boldness have been strengthened. These believers are now preaching Christ and sharing the gospel in the city of Rome with much more confidence and without fear. Calvin says of this, that instead of focusing upon "the cruelty and rage of our persecutors . . . When . . . we see at the same time the hand of the Lord, which makes his people unconquerable under the infirmity of the cross and causes them to triumph, we ought to venture more boldly than we had been accustomed."<sup>3</sup> This is exactly right. Paul's example has certainly encouraged others, and in turn, Paul can use the information to encourage the Philippians.

That some have become bold in their witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ raises the question of motives. It is hard for us to believe that so soon after Jesus' messianic mission ended that during the days of the apostles such a surprising level of pettiness could exist within a church where Paul is actually present. But the nature of human sin is such that we should not be surprised. Paul identifies two reasons why people preach the gospel. He tells us in verse 15 that "*some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will.*" Envy and rivalry (and selfish ambition in verse 17) are closely associated with sins of the flesh according to Galatians 5:21. The same words are used of those who delivered Jesus over to be tried and out to death by Pilate (i.e., Matthew 27:18).<sup>4</sup> The implication is that there is an implicit sectarianism within such people—they preach Christ to attract followers to themselves or to establish their own churches. The size of their congregation is their measure of success.

We should take note of the fact that Paul does not speak of such people who preach the true gospel for the wrong reasons with the same righteous anger he expresses toward those who preach a false gospel. We think of Paul's attitude toward the Judaizers in Galatians—"let them be accursed." Or even his attitude toward the "super apostles," who are agents of Satan (intentional or otherwise) who plagued the Corinthians (2 Corinthians). The people of whom Paul is now speaking have the right gospel (which is paramount), but the wrong motives. Paul does not condemn them as he does false teachers.

Yet, there are others who preach the same gospel but from the right motives. These are men of "good will," who see the cause of Christ and his church as far more important than personal interest. Paul goes on to say of these men (in v. 17), "*the latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.*" These men do not seek to attract followers of Jesus to themselves (and away from those with whom the apostle is associated) while Paul is imprisoned. They understand that Paul is imprisoned because of his faithfulness to his calling, and this is not a situation which they should seek to exploit.

Those who preach Christ from envy and rivalry are addressed more specifically in verse 17. "*The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.*" Those who preach the correct gospel for the wrong reasons are competing with Paul while he is under arrest. Paul speaks of them as "self-seeking," putting their own interests ahead of the greater cause of Jesus Christ and his church. Those who preach from pure motives know why Paul is in prison—because the gospel he preaches is a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Greeks. Those who preach Christ out of envy are insincere, and may even understand Paul's imprisonment as a sign of God's disfavor, or even of judgment upon Paul.

---

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Tomlin, ed., Reformation Commentary on Scripture, Philippians, 22.

<sup>4</sup> O'Brien, Philippians, 99.

More to the point, they think this a chance to “grow” their own ministries at the expense of Paul’s. Paul’s final comment in verse 18, puts such pettiness in the proper light. *“What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice.”* Paul will not perpetuate such rivalries by responding in kind. Instead, he chooses to rejoice in the fact that Jesus is being properly preached, even if some preachers are doing so for the wrong reasons. Paul is glad and will rejoice that Christ is being proclaimed, regardless.

There is a huge lesson in these words for American Christians who far too often have this matter completely backwards. We tend to judge preachers and churches by motives—“well, so and so has improper or even false doctrine, but he’s obviously sincere.” “In my heart, I feel he’s OK.” We are also consummate pragmatists—if it works, it must be true. “His church is huge.” “Based upon results, who are we to judge him?” Given Paul’s comments about motives so far, I think the Apostle would rebuke us to our face, and tell us that *if* Christ is not being properly preached then the preacher is a false teacher at worse, or a brother in need of a rebuke and more instruction at best, regardless of what we feel, or how apparently successful a preacher appears to be.

The other issue is that we simply cannot see into someone’s heart and discern true motives—this is utterly subjective, and frankly impossible. Paul knows this and so should we. “Oh, I know in my heart, he is sincere.” Just how do we know what is in someone else’s heart other than the same sin which is in ours? We may feel something strongly (it might be gas), but we cannot know nor discern anyone else’s motives. We may have an opinion, but we cannot truly know their motives. We should stop trying.

But we can listen to words which preachers speak and then compare their preaching with what is revealed Scripture and in the church’s historic teaching. This we can do (because it is objective and factual in nature). More importantly, this is something the Bible repeatedly calls us to do, because God is concerned with truth and we cannot know human motives. Paul would also tell us, I think, not to try and discern either a preacher’s motives, nor base our estimation of their faithfulness to Jesus Christ (or ours) by counting how many people worship there on Sunday. Paul would tell us, that as long as Christ is being properly preached, that should be enough for us. We should rejoice, and then do as Paul does, rejoice again! But if Jesus is not being properly preached there, better to never darken the door of the place and not judge them by motives (which we cannot do), but instead by their doctrine (which we can and must do). If people preach Christ out of envy so be it. If people sincerely preach a false gospel, have nothing to do with them.

Once again, in verses 20-21, we witness the Apostle rejoicing under difficult circumstances because of his eschatology—his confidence in what will happen at the day of Jesus Christ. Paul tells his brothers and sisters in Philippi, *“for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.”* It is worth noting that yet again we see Paul’s familiarity with the Old Testament surfacing in verse 19, in the phrase *“this will turn out for my deliverance,”* which is almost identical to the LXX’s rendering of a line from Job 13:16 (part of our Old Testament lesson).

Commentators debate whether or not Paul quotes the Job passage intentionally (in regards to his own circumstances), or if because he’s so familiar with the Old Testament (no doubt, he had memorized much

of it), that he simply expresses himself in biblical terms.<sup>5</sup> A good case can be made that Paul's words echo the Job passage because both verses are speaking of similar things, namely Paul dealing with those competing with him—echoing the role of Job's counselors, or more likely, in reference to Paul's current affliction, which like Job's, will end with God's gracious deliverance. Whether Paul is released from prison or not, he will be "saved," an obvious reference "to his perseverance in faith: the magnification of Christ, not his own freedom or even his life, is Paul's salvation."<sup>6</sup> Unbelievers have no such hope because, as Job says, "*the godless shall not come before him.*"

Sadly, many Christians live in perpetual fear of judgment day. They are terrified they will not measure up to God's perfect standards. Or they may not trust in Christ yet come to the realization they are sinners with no escape on judgment day. Or they may be like most Americans, and never even think about their guilt before God or the judgment which is fast approaching. Paul knows he is sinful. He knows that his own motives are not always pure. He knows that he has not always preached Jesus as perfectly as he should. He knows that he is prone to the same envy and pettiness as are those stealing sheep from his congregation. But he remains confident enough that he not only can rejoice when Jesus is preached by people with bad motives, but he fully expects to be delivered from whatever trial he must endure. How can Paul say this?

Paul can say this because his confidence is in Jesus Christ who has died for all his sins, who was raised from the dead for our justification and who will return again—not to judge his people, but to deliver us from that wrath which is to come upon the world. Paul knows that this same Jesus hears his prayers, as well as those of the Philippian Christians who are praying for him. He knows the blessing and confidence of the indwelling Holy Spirit, in whom we are sealed until the day of Christ Jesus (cf. Ephesians 1:13-14). Paul knows that he will be delivered from his trial either by death, or by God's sovereign power, just as he had been delivered from the shackles of a Philippian jail.

Paul, as a justified sinner, is confident and in fact, eagerly awaits what lay ahead. He has hope that Jesus will keep his promises so that Paul can live a life of gratitude before God, knowing that in Christ, the Father will accept him and all of his pitiful efforts at good works. Because of this knowledge, Paul is courageous and has nothing to fear in life or in death. But his hope in the meantime is that Jesus Christ is glorified in him whether he (Paul) lives or dies. May Christ be honored! A man who lives this way and believes what Paul does, ironically terrifies those holding him captive. His guards are used to terrifying prisoners and witnessing strong men break under such difficulties. Physically, Paul is as weak as any man. But his confidence in Christ makes him stronger than all others.

In verse 21, Paul utters what may be the purpose statement of his entire ministry. "*For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*" Because Paul is confident in whatever the future holds for him, he has a unique perspective on things. Should Paul's hearing before Caesar result in his release, then Paul can continue his missionary work—"to live," which refers to Paul's earthly existence in light of his heavenly future, as well as in light of his dual citizenship—Paul will argue that all Christians currently possess a heavenly citizenship (Philippians 3:20) in addition to his Roman citizenship (two kingdoms). If Paul is condemned by Nero and put to death, then his earthly suffering and hardship will come to an end. He

---

<sup>5</sup> G. K. Beale and D. A. Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI; Baker Academic, 2006), on Phil 1:19.

<sup>6</sup> Beale and D. A. Carson, Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament, on Phil. 1:19.

will receive his inheritance. If Christ is praised as a consequence of his preaching, so be it. If Christ is glorified in Paul's death, so be that too.

Paul explains this in some detail beginning in verse 22. *"If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me."* Paul understands that Jesus himself has called Paul to his office as Apostle to the Gentiles. Paul knows that his length of service will be determined by that one who has called him to this labor/service. As long as Jesus gives him life, Paul will preach Christ and him crucified. Yet Paul knows that his calling is taxing (physically and spiritually), and he certainly desires what he has identified as "gain." As one who has seen the Risen Christ and likely granted the privilege of witnessing the third heaven (2 Corinthians 12:2), we can excuse Paul for desiring to put his earthly sufferings behind him and simply go to be with Lord. Dare I say, every Christian has felt like that at one time or another.

In the last half of verse 22 through verse 24, Paul offers the Philippians a candid insight which explains a great deal about the nature of his calling and how he understands his apostolic ministry. *"Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account."* Paul is being honest when he reveals his desire to go and be with Jesus. God has built within us a desire to live until death overcomes us. And yet, knowing the glories of our heavenly inheritance which awaits us, someone who has been through what Paul has endured, can honestly say that he desires to be with Christ, for that is better—better than being beaten, scourged, ship-wrecked, opposed by false teachers, Judaizers, silver tongued "puper-apostles," and even those preachers with him in Rome who envy Paul and seek to exploit him while he is imprisoned. Of course, we can understand why he would rather depart and be with his Risen Lord. But in mid-admission, Paul explains that there is much more for him to do, and it may not be his time to receive his heavenly inheritance. He is content to leave this in the Lord's hands.

He says as much in verses 25-26, writing *"convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again."* If the Philippians still need his counsel, and if it is not yet God's time for Paul's missionary efforts to end, then he will continue his work. But the gospel's progress with not be impeded whether Paul lives or dies. His concern is that Christ is glorified in his work, and he hopes to come to Philippi to help them in this work of progressing in joy and in their faith in Christ Jesus. The spread of the gospel is God's work, not Paul's.

But Paul does not want his labors to be in vain, and so he exhorts the Philippians, *"only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents."* The last thing Paul wants to hear is that the Philippians allow dissension, faction, or the heresy of the Judaizers to divide them or cause them to give up when they have made so much progress and stand so firm. That would truly be a shame. Paul wants them to stand firm in one spirit (a spirit of unity), and one mind (that they stand together in the gospel that he first preached to them). They are to strive together in the faith and not be frightened by men of ill will. They must oppose such people.

Finally Paul tells them that in doing so, God's purposes become clear. *"This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have."* The failure of the false teachers to divide the church is but a foreshadowing to them of the judgment they will face for spreading such false doctrine in

the church. Jesus protects his own and will defend his church. He will save his people and grant them their heavenly inheritance, no matter what the circumstances.

But neither should believers be surprised when this happens. Believers in Jesus will suffer persecution from others precisely because we believe in Jesus. The world hated our Lord because he came to seek and save that which was lost. He gave no quarter to those who do not think they need to be saved. Nothing offends the self-righteous any more than to be told they cannot save themselves, and that they must trust and rely upon another (Jesus) to save them from the wrath to come, a message which unbelievers will do everything in their power to ignore. Experiencing such persecution from non-Christians is a fact of the Christian life. Sometimes this persecution is as serious as that which Paul faced—arrest, torture, martyrdom. Sometimes the persecution is simply derision and apathy from non-Christians. Thankfully, we know only the latter. As subtle as such persecution can be, it is real nonetheless—pressure to say nothing about our faith in Christ, pressure to tolerate or even accept pagan or secularist ways of thinking and doing, especially when it comes to sexuality.

Paul makes it crystal clear that God has graciously granted us faith in Jesus (which is yet another way of speaking of the doctrine of election—God has chosen us to believe in Jesus), and he adds that whatever persecution we face as a result is also for the sake of Jesus. In other words, if God graciously grants us the faith to believe the gospel, at the same time, he knows that we will suffer the same scorn Jesus did. The one (faith) leads to the other (persecution from non-Christians). Paul reminds the Philippians that they are engaged (like it or not) in the same conflict he is. He is in chains in Rome because of his proclamation of the gospel, just as he had been in chains when he first preached the gospel in Philippi. The Philippians may not be in chains, but they do know persecution. And they must understand, as we must understand, that all of this has been granted to us by Jesus, for the sake of his glory and to hasten the progress of the gospel. This is why with Paul we too can say, “to live is Christ, to die is gain.”