

Philippians 1:21

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[0 : 0 0] Let us turn to Paul's epistle to the Philippians. Philippians chapter 1 and verse 21. Philippians chapter 1 and verse 21.

For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain. Or more literally for to me to live Christ and to die gain.

There are no verbs in the original. The first thing we need to remind ourselves of is simply the wider context of this epistle.

That is to say that these words were written from a Roman prison cell. And I should like to hasten to add that the Roman prison cell would have been quite different from some of our modern prison cells.

Which are rather nice and comfortable. Unlike a cold Roman prison cell. No central heating. No coloured television. It was a place of punishment.

[1 : 1 1] A most horrible place to be in as a prisoner. Now Paul when he writes to the Philippians. He tells them that he was imprisoned. Not because he was a criminal.

But he was imprisoned because of the preaching of the gospel. In verse 12 onwards we read. I want you to know brothers. That what has happened to me. Has really served to advance the gospel.

As a result it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard. And to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Because of my chains most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged.

To speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly. Paul's imprisonment in the providence of God was no disadvantage.

The opponents of the gospel could not stop Paul preaching the gospel. It was Paul's great desire we believe. To reach Rome. And to preach the gospel there as well.

[2 : 1 2] And so Paul ended up in a Roman prison. And he was on his way to Rome. If indeed not in Rome itself. What is so remarkable in the light of Paul's circumstances at that particular time.

Is that we find no words of bitterness. No words of complaints. Paul is not asking the church to draw up some kind of a petition. Or to engage in a protest march.

But rather Paul is happy and content to accept the providence of God. Although it seems he is confident that he is going to be released very soon.

So when Paul writes these words. For to me to live is Christ. And to die is gain. He is writing these words from a prison. He is not writing as an armchair philosopher.

He is simply giving his own testimony. And we are also told that Paul is in a dilemma. Because he goes on to say in verse 22. If I am to go on living in the body.

[3 : 1 6] This will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what I shall choose. Or what shall I choose. I do not know. I am torn between the two. I desire to depart.

To die. To be with Christ. Which is better by far. But it is more necessary for you. That I remain in the body. It seems that Paul here is confronted with a choice.

A dilemma. Shall I die? Shall I live? What is to be preferred? These are two desirable alternatives. It is not that Paul has to sort of decide on what is the lesser evil.

To live on or to die. Rather he is pressed in from two different directions. And he just doesn't seem to know what would be best for him. To live on or to die.

He is ready for both. The text of course itself deals with two ultimate realities. It deals with life.

[4 : 18] And it deals with death. For to me to live is Christ. And to die is gain. And that's if you like is life all about.

Is it not? It is about life and death. We are born. And the moment we are born. We are already on our way to death. We are dying. And Paul in these two large comprehensive categories.

Discusses his own feelings. Now let's imagine for a moment that the religious affairs correspondence of the Jerusalem Post was to come to Paul's prison.

And ask Paul, well, I'd like to write a wee report. I think this is all unfair. You shouldn't be here. And I'm a press chap. And I'm going to give you an opportunity to express your feelings.

And we shall have it on the front page of the Jerusalem Post tomorrow morning. First edition. Now let's have a wee report on all this. What would Paul's answer be?

[5 : 22] Well, he sums it up in two words. Life means Christ. And death means gain. That's all that Paul has to say. It can be summed up in one word.

Christ. And in another word, gain. And that's how Paul views life and death. Everything else doesn't matter. Everything else is quite insignificant.

Because Christ is the one that matters. In chapter 4 and verse 11, we read these words. I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am.

These words, of course, too, form part of the epistle and were written in a prison. Paul knew what it was like to abound and to have plenty.

And Paul knew what it was like to experience poverty. Some of us have never experienced poverty. And maybe this explains our lack of contentment.

[6 : 25] Paul then is saying, as he advised to the Philippians, I have learned these things. It doesn't matter. What matters is Christ. In other words, the providence of God won't feel, won't sort of change my attitude to Christ.

And circumstances won't dictate the way I feel. How easy it is, is it not, to have our own lives controlled by circumstances.

Not so Paul. No murmuring. No complaining. He was full of Christ. As if he was saying, well, praise the Lord. Anyway, it doesn't matter what is happening to me.

Paul knew that all things worked together for us good. Well, after this lengthy introduction to the background and to the verse itself, let us now analyze it in greater detail.

First of all, we notice that Paul here talks about living. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Or perhaps you could translate it for me, to go on living, to stay alive, Christ or is Christ.

[7 : 40] We can put it negatively, of course. It is true to say that the unbeliever, the non-Christian, or perhaps even the professing Christian, cannot echo these words.

For him to live, perhaps, is misery or unhappiness. Or it may well be that it is something that doesn't concern you.

People say, well, I'm not interested in religion. I've got enough problems of my own. That sort of language. But Paul didn't say that for me to live is religion. He was talking about a person.

He was talking about Messiah. He was talking about Christ. The unbeliever's philosophy to life is quite different. For example, he would say, let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die.

And of course, that is perfectly true if you do not believe in the resurrection from the dead. It is then that the only logic, the only thing that makes sense would be to adopt that kind of lifestyle.

[8 : 42] Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die. Of course, it is foolish to say, tomorrow we die. We might die today. But nevertheless, the natural man lives through the things of this world.

What shall we eat? What shall we drink? Where shall we live? What kind of a car shall I get? What kind of a job shall I pursue? What kind of a career should I start? All these things, of course, are not necessarily wrong.

But there must never be the sort of preoccupation of the life of a Christian. Because Paul says, for me to live is Christ. Now, of course, Paul didn't always think like that.

Even when Paul was religious, his lifestyle was quite different. His life afterwards, when he became a Christian, could be summed up in one word.

For me to live, Christ. His life before his conversion could be summed up in two words. For to me to live is no Christ.

[9 : 47] In chapter 3, verses 5 onwards, he gives us his testimony. What kind of a person he was. He mentions that he was circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews, in regard to the law of Pharisees, as for zeal persecuting the church, as for legalistic righteousness, faultless, blameless.

Now, all these things meant so very much to Paul before his conversion. And he could boast about these things. And that's what life meant to him. To be a good law-abiding Jew.

And to boast in the privileges, whether acquired by nature or later on in life. But when he was converted, he goes on to say in verse 7, But whatever was to me, to my profit, to my gain, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things.

I consider them rubbish that I may gain Christ. And so forth. In other words, when Paul was converted, it was a turnabout.

[11 : 02] Everything changed. Christ now became the one that was most important. Before his conversion, Paul could have said, Lord, I was blind.

I could not see in thy mad visage any grace. But now the beauty of thy face in radiant vision dawns on me. This but now, this change, this turning point, this new attitude to Christ, whom once Paul persecuted, now Christ served.

And of course, it is thoroughly due to the conversion of Paul, which is described for us three times in the Acts of the Apostles, and also in other sections of the New Testament.

And so Paul could write on a different occasion, if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature or a new creation.

And then these well-known words, I have been crucified with Christ. Nevertheless, I live, yet not I, but Christ that lives in me. And the life which I now live in the flesh, I live by the face of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.

[12 : 12] The life which I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. So for Paul to live the Christian life was all about Christ.

He was at the center. He was the Alpha and Omega. He was the author and finisher of Paul's faith. He was around him all the time. And Paul was full of it.

In a different context, Paul writes, I know whom I have believed, and I am convinced that he is able to guard that which I have committed to him against that day.

In that one verse, three times he mentions Christ. And so when we ask Paul about his attitude to life, we would always notice it was Christ right at the very center.

The second thing we notice is not only Paul's attitude to life, summed up in the word Christ, but we also notice that Paul talks about death.

[13 : 16] Now I need not tell you that death is a very obscene subject, and people don't like to talk about it. Jewish people, for example, are very reluctant to talk about this whole subject, and they are very unhappy to even have it mentioned, for whatever reason.

But death to Paul means gain. Gain in which way? Well, three or four things on this particular point.

The first thing we notice is with Paul that death is a preferable option, because he goes on to say in verse 23, I am torn between the two.

I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far. As the original puts it, much more better.

Well, that's bad English, but it's very good Greek. Paul, if you like, is stuck for words, and he doesn't quite know how to describe it, but death to him is the preferable option.

[14 : 14] Now sometimes perhaps we are too heavily minded to be of earthly use. That is the accusation brought forward against the church. And yet I would like to turn around this thing and say, is it perhaps that we are of no earthly use because we are not heavenly minded enough?

Paul is stuck for words. When he talks about death, it is better beyond all expression to die, to depart, to be absent. The church doesn't very often reflect on the fourfold state, and on the last state in particular, the glorified state of the saints.

When did you and I hear a sermon on heaven? Well, the Bible doesn't mention much about heaven, but there is sufficient insight to stir us up and to move us towards this.

We could almost say that Paul was homesick. He wanted to be with Christ. Well, I cannot give you a full picture this morning of what heaven is all about, but imagine living in a sinless world, in a world of perfection, in a world where there is no doubts, no temptation, no trials, no one that would want to make your life a misery.

I was almost going to say there are no policemen in heaven. That would be quite wrong, but in one sense it is right, because there would be no crimes in heaven. Now, I cannot draw a picture of heaven, because scripture only gives us a very limited insight.

[15 : 50] Arguably, we know more about hell than we do about heaven. But here is one verse found in the last book of the Bible. He shall wipe away every tear from the eyes.

There shall be no longer any death. There shall be no longer any mourning, or crying, or pain. Well, if you call it utopia, well and good, but it is a reality, which the Bible tells us will take place.

Now, I believe that Paul had this kind of insight, and while he himself did not fully understand, because in this life we only know in part, yet at the same time, Paul knew something about the hope that was within him, and that heaven was indeed the preferable option.

Rather die and be with Christ, than go on living. But death of Paul not only meant a preferable option, it also meant he was to be with Christ.

He tells us again in the same verse, I desire to depart and be with Christ. For the saint to depart is to be with Christ. Maybe this is worth stressing, because there are heresies regarding this particular doctrine, sometimes known as the intermediate state.

[17 : 10] What happens between the death of a saint and the final resurrection? Now, Paul could say, I desire to depart and be with Christ.

That was Paul's belief. There is one doctrine which is held by many cults, and was held by many of the Anabaptists during the time of the Reformation, known as the doctrine of soul sleep.

That is to say, when a believer dies, or for a matter of any man dies, he just remains unconscious. Now, of course, there is absolutely no evidence for this. And if Paul could say, to depart was to be with Christ, then surely death was something to look forward to.

If Paul was to remain unconscious after he had departed, well, he wouldn't know Christ at all. I'd rather know Christ imperfectly in this world than not know him at all.

Another doctrine which was propagated during the time of the Reformation was the doctrine of purgatory, that if a believer was to die, he then would go into a place of suffering to be cleansed from his sins.

[18 : 19] The reformers, of course, protested against this doctrine. It detracted from the cross of Christ. It basically denied that the blood of Jesus cleanses from all sins. And again, this very doctrine, of course, is still held today.

It has been reaffirmed for Vatican II, and it is also held by many Anglo-Catholics. But Paul knows nothing about the doctrine of purgatory. To him, death means gain.

To him, death means to be with Christ. To him, to be absent from the body is to be present with Christ. Just as Jesus said to the dying thief, today you will be with me in paradise.

The next thing we notice with regard to Paul's attitude to death is that he was fearless. Here I need you to introduce you to the actual grammar of the text.

In verse 21, it says, To die is gain. The tense that is used here describes the actual act of death itself, the actual event.

[19 : 25] It is not dying as a process, but it is death itself, as a one-off event. Now, dying, I believe, is a fearful thing.

And those of you, perhaps, who have been in that condition will perhaps know that it is not easy to die, even for a believer. After all, death is the last enemy.

But Paul knew that death itself, the act of death, rather than the process, could mean nothing less than gain. And so Paul was fearless. He was not afraid.

He writes, for example, in chapter 2, verse 17, these words, Even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you.

To Paul, death itself was a fear, there was not a fearful event, it was a joyful event. And when you write these words, he's basically saying, Look, you Philippians, if I am to die, do not cry for me, do not weep for me.

[20 : 32] Now, one of the early church fathers coined a saying, which is still very well known, I believe. He said that the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

And it is absolutely fascinating to read the account of the early Christians, the post-apostolic Christians, how they suffered great persecution and martyrdom for their faith.

And yet, they rejoiced in it with a joy unspeakable and full of glory. And people could torture their bodies, but they could not kill their souls. And it was a joyful event.

Now, I believe that God can give us that special strength when it comes to our own departure, that God may give us that great joy, this insight, almost a vision of heaven itself.

And so, Paul, death was a joyful event, nothing to be afraid of. And one other thing we notice in this connection is also that Paul's attitude to death was very much an attitude of hope.

[21 : 42] He knew, he hoped, he was assured that he would be with Christ, which is better by far, as the NIV puts it. Now, sometimes we Christians can be guilty of denying this doctrine by our conduct.

We live as if this life was everything there is, forgetting that the best is still to come. I consider, says Paul, to the Romans, that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed in us or to us.

And Paul says, if we have only hope in Christ in this life, we are to be pitied. We are miserable and miserable indeed. So, Paul's attitude to Christ, to life, is Christ and his attitude to death is gain.

Gain in the sense that it means to be with Christ, which is the preferable option. It is a fearless event, something to be looked forward to with great anticipation.

What then does this verse say to all of us here this morning, having looked at what it meant to Paul, what does it mean to us personally? Well, to the unbeliever, life means anything but Christ.

[23 : 05] We've read, in our first reading, the book of Ecclesiastes. Now, I'm a great lover of this book of Ecclesiastes. I've never felt bold enough to preach many a sermon from it.

But the preacher tells us that everything is meaningless, meaningless of meaninglessness. It is, I don't think, a very good or fortunate translation.

It is one of these words you cannot easily translate. But the word means vanity, vainglory, emptiness, hollowness, shallowness. It is one of these rich words you cannot easily translate into one language.

And here, the preacher tells us that his whole life is just like that. Now, the key to this book, of course, is the phrase under the sun.

The preacher's viewing life under the sun. Now, the unbeliever, the natural man, views life like that. Under the sun, he only believes in the things he can explore empirically, the things he can perceive through his senses, what he can see and hear and smell and touch and feel and so on.

[24 : 10] Now, if you and I view life like that, then the only option we've got really is to think that life is meaningless. After all, why are we here? Where are we going?

Where did we come from? What answers the natural man got to these questions? He's got vague answers, probable, perhaps, the theory of evolution or something like that.

But there's no certainty. And Paul was certain that life to him meant Christ. It wasn't meaningless. Now, sometimes, we can be guilty as believers to take Christ out of the life and make something else far more important.

To some professing Christians, the life that they live is all about doctrine and arguing. There are some denominations that will not admit you into the ministry or into church membership unless you can dot every I and cross every single T.

And to them, that is the Christian life, to delight in these doctrines, in these creeds, and to be knowledgeable. To other professing Christians, the Christian life is not about Christ, but it's very much about living.

[25 : 18] Not creeds, but deeds. What you do, it's all about ethics, the Sermon on the Mount, that kind of lifestyle. Thoroughly detached from the person that delivered this great sermon to his disciples.

We must never be guilty of accusing others of saying to us, well, the Christian life to you is anything but Christ. Christ here is at the center of the life of Paul and it should be with us as well.

One of the very first books I read in my early Christian life was by a man called Jim Elliot and I may have mentioned it before. And in this book there's a quotation that says that he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

Now the natural man of course doesn't agree with such sentiments and yet it is utterly true. We are born naked and we shall die naked. We can take nothing with us and without Christ life is meaningless.

Sometimes we are so guilty aren't with Christians to always be on the defensive side. We always like to defend the gospel but we must also attack the unbeliever and treason with him and show him that life without Christ makes no sense whatsoever just as the preacher tells us in the book of Ecclesiastes.

[26 : 43] To put it differently Christ is at the center of Christianity. It is not necessarily a creed or the things we do but it is a person.

Jesus himself as we were saying to the children early on is the way to God. It is a person. The Bible itself is full of Christ. That certainly was the Lord's own conviction.

He says, you search the scriptures and they testify concerning me. Well, if you read Isaiah 53, such a great chapter, it testifies about Christ but the Jew doesn't see it like that.

The liberal doesn't want to see it like that. but Christ himself says that all these passages do testify to him. The Gospel of John starts by saying in the beginning was the word.

And the language is phrased in such a way that any Jewish believer familiar with the scriptures would be reminded of the very first verse in the Bible. In the beginning God. In the beginning was the word and the word was God.

[27 : 45] Jesus was there in the beginning. And the very last book of the Bible too mentions Christ again as the Alpha and the Omega. The Father himself says when Jesus was on earth, this is my beloved son.

Hear ye him. Listen to him. And there are other verses as well one could quote. There's one which says that when the Spirit comes he shall glorify me.

So many people today go around and tell us they have the Spirit and all they glorify in is the old experience. or perhaps the Spirit himself rather than exalting Christ.

The whole Bible the written word points to the living word and the living word points to the written word. And so Christianity is all about Christ.

Christ at the very centre. Christ is the midpoint of history as one theologian puts it. So let us be aware of a Christless Christianity.

[28 : 45] May God give us grace to see that to live means Christ. Now what are the implications of all this? Well again I don't want to wish to read too much into this text but I would have thought that unless Christ was God it would be rather blasphemous for a Jew to say that he lives for Christ.

Surely a godly Jewish person would want to live for God. And yet we know there are other passages that clearly teach that Christ is God. Paul himself does so in chapter 5 I'm sorry in chapter 2 verses 5 onwards.

And so to quote Luther he says this man is God. The God man. And Paul lived for Christ because he was convinced that Jesus was not only fully man but he was also fully God.

To live for anyone but God would indeed be idolatry. It would be blasphemy. It is also a very important verse for our own ethics.

Now I would like to develop that a little bit but not this morning. But if you turn to Colossians for a moment and chapter 3 Colossians chapter 3 and verse 17 it says here whatever you do whether in word or deed do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus.

[30 : 10] giving thanks to God the Father through him. Wives submit to your husbands as fitting in the Lord. Husbands love your wives and you don't be harsh with them.

In the parallel passage husbands are told to love their wives as Christ loved the church that's the pattern. And of course it's far more difficult to love your wives in that way than to submit to your husbands.

Verse 20 Children obey your parents in everything for this pleases the Lord. Slaves will be your earthly masters in everything. And again it mentions with sincerity of heart and reverence for the Lord.

In other words our Christian ethic is Christ centered. We live for Christ. We please Christ. Our whole life is to be lived in the light of that. Christ. We must never think that being a Christian is just something spiritual.

Something that is sort of confined to a Sunday morning. But our whole life is to be directed and controlled by Christ. Because Paul tells us in Philippians 2 that Jesus Christ is Lord.

[31 : 18] And if Jesus Christ isn't Lord of all, he isn't Lord at all. As one German political president put it, that half a Christian is a whole nonsense.

So if we cannot say to live means Christ, then we are simply not right with God. The hymn writer puts it, we're the whole realm of nature mine that we're an offering far too small.

Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all. Here's the response. What is ethics? It is but gratitude to the grace of God's revealed to us in Christ.

Paul is very desirous to live on because he mentions that it means fruit for his labor. Paul is willing to forego heaven, to live on, to glorify Christ, to work on and to labor for him.

What do you and I do for Christ? What do you and I do for the furtherance of the gospel? do we just live to please ourselves or do we live for Christ?

[32 : 35] Paul was unwilling to die. He didn't want to escape the miseries of life, but he simply wanted to face life. He was living, we may say, in the present.

Now, you and I, we too, must learn to live in the present. We must not live in the past because Christ, according to one theologian, is our contemporary.

We do not just follow and believe in an historical Christ, but we believe in the Christ that is omnipresent, the Christ that the early church prayed to, the Christ that is with us by his spirit.

We may say that Christ was the ground of Paul's being and his all absorbing passion. May God give us grace to see this as well in our own experience.