

Philippians 1:21

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[0 : 00] Please start working now to Philippians chapter 1 and to verse 21. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Well, this text before us is one of the most inspiring and, I believe, challenging verses in the Bible. In it we come faith to faith with a man who has found a reason and purpose for living. He's not just idling through life, as many do, but he has a focus and a motivation that many people envy. He knows who he's been, he knows what he's doing, he knows where he's going. Recently I read a book that said that people, and men, males in particular, require a cause to strive for.

A transcendent cause. A cause that is that is bigger than themselves. They need that if we're able to find contentment in life. And I believe that's true, and I think you can observe it in the world if you just look around.

[1 : 12] And you just think about the World Cup, and how passionate the English fans were, and how involved they were, supporting and following their team.

How every tactic was considered, the manager was considered, and Rooney's feats were considered. Everything was important. Or go to the world of politics, where you see people, you know, not just pursuing a career, but absorbed by what they're doing, and highly motivated, and seeking to do something for society.

Or the area of the environment, and ecology, and how completely absorbing that is for people. And they'll invest so much time and so much energy in these movements.

What is it, you might ask yourself, that can draw out of us that kind of energy, that kind of commitment? I believe it's the way we've been made.

It's the way God has made us. You and I need a cause to strive for. You and I need aims and ambitions, if you're to enjoy being human. 250 years ago or so, the framers of the Shorter Catechism, they recognized this.

[2 : 29] And they opened the Catechism with the question, what is the chief end of man? What is the chief purpose for which man is made? And the great answer, of course, man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever.

See, they understood way back then that we need a cause to be engaged in. A cause to strive for. We're made for a purpose. Because man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever. Paul says in one of his letters, whatever you do, whether you eat or drink or whatsoever you do, do all to the glory of God. Do everything to the glory of God.

Now many have turned their backs on God in our society. But they cannot undo their constitution. If you can't undo your constitution either, you can't undo the way that you're made.

You and I need still to be fully engaged. You need to do something with your life. Well, Paul, you might say, has struck gold.

[3 : 37] He's found his purpose. And he's rejoicing in it, is he not? For to me to live is Christ. And to die is gain. I want to examine the text from three perspectives, simple perspectives.

Past, present and future. Past, present and future. When we're thinking about the past, I'm really addressing the why question.

Why is it that Paul is thinking in this way or living in this way? What has happened to Paul that leaves him so motivated for Jesus Christ?

I think we could find the answer here. It's better to find the answer in the letter you're preaching from. Because in Philippians chapter 1 he speaks about sharing in God's grace.

The other Christians in Philippi, they all share in God's grace with me. But let me use another text from Galatians. He speaks about the life which he now lives. He says this, 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.

[4 : 47] This Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me. You see, it was always a marvel to Paul that the Son of God loved him.

And the Son of God gave himself for him. He never lost spite, it appears to me, of where he had been and of who he was. Later he's writing to Timothy and he regards himself as the chief of sinners.

And Paul never lost the sense of marvel as he recalled what he'd been like. I mean, he had been sufficiently conceited as a young man to think that he could impress God by his background. He, as we read in Philippians chapter 3, he had confidence in the flesh at one time. Circumcised on the eighth day of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, of Hebrew of Hebrews, in regard to the law of Pharisee.

As for zeal, persecuting the church. As for legalistic righteousness, faultless. He really thought growing up that he could impress God. That he could put God in his debt.

[5 : 54] Only to discover on that road to Damascus that, in fact, that was impossible. You cannot earn favor with God. You cannot deserve it.

And what Paul experienced was, therefore, God's grace. God's generous grace applied to him. This man who persecuted the church of Jesus Christ found that God's grace alighted on him.

Despite what he was. He found that the Son of God had loved him. And died for him. You know, when Paul met with Christ under the master's load.

Or rather, Christ met with Paul. We noticed, we read, that he was struck with blindness. I believe today that that blindness was symbolic of darkness in his soul.

As he groped about and grasped about. It's because he was suffering a profound and deep conviction of sin.

[7 : 02] It was revealed to him there. Just how deep and how black and how sinful his life was. He trembled before Christ.

He was terrified of Christ. He discovered that he deserved condemnation, not blessing. But instead, he discovered love.

And he discovered forgiveness. And he discovered God's generous grace. I think that's what motivated Paul.

That he discovered that there was one who had died for him. And given his life for him. And that's what motivated him to live in such a way.

And before we leave that past life of Paul. I think we need to ask a few questions of ourselves.

[8 : 06] Those of us who profess faith. Are we similarly motivated? Are we similarly motivated? And if not, why not?

As church leaders, as ministers and elders. Are we as motivated as Paul was motivated? We need to be highly motivated.

I'm not saying we are. I'm not making any great claims for myself. But I do ask the question of myself, as you must ask. Are we highly motivated? And I do wonder sometimes whether we've established a system where people can join the church with little sense of conviction of sin.

Little sense of who they really are before God. And therefore, little sense of gratitude. I ask the question, you know, is our preaching palatable, but not searching?

Is it acceptable, but not discriminating? Is it not exposing people's sin to them? Some of us ministers, at least, have a growing sense of fear.

[9 : 14] Or a growing fear, rather, that youngsters are increasingly just ticking the boxes and giving a mental assent. And coming through the ranks of the church.

And that's a time bomb waiting to explode that that's the case. I hope it's not the case. But it's a real danger, is it not? That people just grow up with a church that panders to them.

And that creates for them. And that engages them in all things positive. But never actually reminds them of the depth of their sin. I just ask the question of ourselves.

Are we the kind of people who know what it is to experience conviction of sin? And therefore, a great sense of gratitude to God?

Or again, still speaking to those who profess faith, have you and I forgotten what we are? Have we forgotten the depth of our iniquity before God?

[10 : 18] Tell me I'm wrong, but is it not all too easy to become spiritually dull? To become spiritually insensitive? One man was speaking to me about six months ago.

And he said that he'd gone through, he was a young man who'd gone through a period of backsliding in the 90s. I was trying to ask him about sin and how, you know, how did it happen and so on.

How did he cope with it? And he said, well, you just rationalize it. You explain it. You find reasons for doing the things that you do. Reasons are excuses. So, I'm asking, you know, are we motivated like Paul was motivated?

But what about those of you this evening who make no pretense to be a Christian? You make no pretense that you've found the Lord Jesus Christ. And you would like to know something of this conviction that I'm speaking about, this conviction of sin, this conviction of need, so that you do need a Saviour.

Can you convict yourself? I don't believe you can. Let me remind you of the advice from an old divine, I don't know the name of the person, but it's a well-known phrase.

[11 : 33] Someone coming up to a minister looking for help in this area, and this minister saying to this person, well, who didn't know conviction, go away and pray.

And the prayer to pray is this, Lord, show me myself. Show me myself. You need to pray that prayer.

You need to ask the Lord to reveal to you the things that he wants you to know about yourself, that will eventually drive you to the Lord Jesus Christ, and will drive you to seek a Saviour.

Show me myself. Show me myself. Paul's past was such that he knew real, deep, profound conviction of sin, and at the same time he tasted a profound grace.

He tasted the Lord Jesus Christ ministering to him, reaching out to him, and pronouncing forgiveness and all his sins, and then commissioning him to be an apostle.

[12 : 35] So that's the past, but what about the present? For me to live is Christ. And here I'm trying to address the high question. What does Paul mean when he says to live is Christ?

Godrej, another theologian, said this. What Paul is saying is this. My sole aim in living is to glorify Christ.

He is the supreme end of my life, and I value my life only as being devoted to his honour. Now I think that's a phenomenal statement, as Paul's own statement is.

And it's a statement that I would like to say that most of the time I aspire to, and I would really like to be able to say that, as you probably would if you're a Christian, you'd love to be able to say that this evening, but it's true of you.

But I would never be bold enough to say it of myself. I would never be able to say that I value my life only as being devoted to his honour.

[13 : 58] Can you see that? What does it mean though? Let me give four outlines, four principles, I think, four directions, if you like.

What does it mean for Paul? Well, for Paul it meant that he wanted to acquire knowledge of Jesus Christ. Philippians 3 and verse 10.

I want to know Christ, and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings. I want to know Christ.

Now, he wanted to know all there was to know about Christ, and to a congregation like this I would say he wanted to know all that he could know academically about Christ.

He wanted to know facts about him. He wanted to understand what God wanted us to know about him. He wanted to know about his work. He wanted to know about his person.

[14 : 57] He wanted to make great strides intellectually, and understanding the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. And of course, he will do that through all eternity, exploring the unsearchable riches of Christ.

But more than that, I think, it's that Paul wants to experience Christ. He wants to know Christ in his experience. He wants to know the power of Christ's resurrection.

That is, he wants to know the life, the life, the resurrection life of Jesus Christ, empowering him on a day-to-day basis, energizing him, giving him the ability to live to the glory of God.

He wants to know Christ's life, energizing him, and giving him victory over temptation, and victory over sin, because all of us Christian people battle with sin day by day, and very often we're battling with the same sin, day after day, week after week, year after year, and yet we're told by Paul, well, by God through Paul, to mortify the deeds of the body.

And yet many of us have to testify that instead of victory, it's defeat. And sometimes, you know, we become despairing, we become conditioned by our defeats.

[16:11] And Paul is reminding us, look, there is resurrection power available to us. And he wants to know that in his own experience. He wants to know, he wants to know the resurrection life of Jesus Christ, giving him victory over personal weakness, strengthening him to do the things that he naturally cannot do.

Some of us might say, might be tempted to think, well, it's, you know, it's okay for Paul to be single-minded and be devoted to God and Christ, but, you know, he didn't have family, and he didn't have distractions, he didn't have dependence, he didn't have problems at work.

You know, he didn't have all the kinds of things that we have, but you have to remember it. He was wanting the fellowship of sharing in Christ's sufferings as well.

And look at the context of this letter. Paul did suffer. Paul is writing from prison.

From prison. And in prison, we all know the art of positive thinking, we all know how important it is to think positive thoughts, but, you know, for Paul, it's surely much more than positive thinking.

[17:31] Verse 4. What's he doing in prison? He's thanking God. He's praying with joy. In all my prayer for all of you, I always pray with joy.

He's praying with joy, and he's praying for others. And the context of his prayer isn't so much for himself as it is here, but in verse 9, this is my prayer, that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight.

Here he is in prison, and he's reminding these Philippians that he's praying for them. And he's praying that their love might abound more and more in knowledge.

He's praying that they will be growing in grace. And in prison, as we'll pray later on in chapter 1, he's experiencing persecution. There are those who are seeking to stir up trouble for him while he's in chains.

And the strange thing is this, they're doing it by preaching Christ. I don't know how this is done. I don't know how it is that people could preach Christ to stir up trouble for Paul while he's in chains.

[18:39] But they did. They were doing that. And so he rejoices that Christ is preached. And you know, there's also internal pressure, internal temptation on Paul that we all must skim over, I think.

It's hidden away there in verse 20. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

The temptation, the pressure, well, it's this, it's of defeat. It's of, it's of failure. It's, it's Paul praying that, that he will not give up the faith because of pressure, because of trouble, because of pain.

He is, if you like, like a, like a spiritual warrior. He's engaged in battle. And he doesn't want to give up on the front line.

He doesn't want to be the one who lets the side down. He doesn't want to be the one who lets God down. I hope, I expect, that I will in no way be ashamed.

[20:01] But how is it that he hopes and how is it that he expects? I think this is important. He expects victory through empowerment by Jesus Christ.

Like I was saying earlier, he wants to know the power of Christ's resurrection. And here's something for us surely as a, as a, as individual Christians and as a congregation and as a denomination.

It's not through his own willpower and it's not through his own strength of character. He is talking in verse 19 about the prayers of God's people for him and the help given by the spirit of Jesus Christ. we are finished if we rely on ourselves. And you're finished individually on a day-to-day basis if you're relying upon yourself.

You have to be in relationship with Jesus Christ seeking his help on a moment-by-moment basis as Schaefer would say. You've got to live, you've got to, two spiritual artists living moment-by-moment, you're going to live out your faith on a moment-by-moment basis and you can only do that through trusting in Jesus Christ and through, through a prayerful dependence upon him.

[21:23] Otherwise, you're going to know defeat after defeat after defeat. You're not going to know the victory of the resurrection life of Jesus Christ.

So, we want to acquire knowledge of Christ, his resurrection power and for Paul sharing in his sufferings.

Secondly, we want to imitate Christ. In Philippians 2 and verse 5, he states to these people, your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.

In Ephesians 5, he says to the people there, be imitators of God, live a life of love, be mimics of God, coffee taps of God. That's the way we should be as individual Christians. We should be mimics of Jesus Christ. We should be copious, we should be living the way that he would have us live. we should be following his example.

[22 : 32] And I think it's so important that as Christians we have a real biblical grasp of the character of Jesus Christ. We live in a climate, a church environment where we follow leaders very often.

And we grasp images of holiness from the people around about us. Maybe it's a minister, maybe it's an old elder. And we formulate pictures of how we should behave and what's right and what's wrong from their behaviour.

I think it's time to make sure that we formulate our ideas of what Christ wants and what Christ was like or is like from the Bible.

We make sure that we explore it and find out who he is and what he does, how he behaves in different situations. Because if we don't do that, Christ is going to get shunted out of the picture, even though it's not deliberate and human traditions are going to grow up and legalism is going to develop very, very quickly.

Imitate Jesus Christ, not any human being. Another principle surely is this, when Paul is speaking about what it means to live for Christ, it's this, it's hard work for Christ.

[23 : 51] Look at verse 22 of chapter 1. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. If I am going to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me.

What was he going to do? He was going to come and visit him. He was going to preach. And through his preaching, he was going to build up believers.

He was going to see progress and joy in the faith in them. And you know, Paul was the kind of man who worked harder than all the other apostles.

What I like about this verse or these verses is this, that he had a really positive attitude. He expected, he knew that if he was fair, that if he was going to continue in the body, that when he went to work, that when he preached and when he ministered, their faith would grow.

I was listening to a tape in the car today by David Merbeth from Inverness, and he was speaking about church growth, or a church organized permission. And one of the things that he was saying was that where there is no numerical growth in a church, that church is a dysfunctional church.

[25 : 24] And then he put the numerical in brackets, because he didn't want to be so harsh, if you like, and then he came back to it, and seemed to expound indeed that he was speaking about numerical growth.

And this text here is not about numerical growth, it's speaking about progress, enjoying the faith, that one of the greatest things that brings joy in Christian life is seeing other people converted. And one of the reasons why we have so much, not quite despair, but why we feel so downtrodden in our churches at the moment is because people are not being converted. And if David Merbeth is right, that when there is no numerical growth, there is a dysfunction in the family, there is something not right, then it's a question that every congregation needs to ask.

And I need to ask it for my congregation because it's not seen growth, certainly not much growth. So, we need to be asking that question. Here Paul, he's saying, you know, to live for Christ is going to mean truthful labor for me.

He's going to work hard. He's going to see results for his labor. He's expecting to see growth, whether that is numerical or spiritual. We must never condition ourselves into the idea that as we preach the gospel, as we keep on motor enthused system of the free church, that we're not going to see growth.

[26 : 49] It ought not to be, and we have to be asking ourselves these kinds of questions. What else might it mean to live for Christ? Well, surely this, to enjoy Christ.

To enjoy Christ. fellowship with Christ. Out of hearts, where they ought to be.

We enjoy movies. We enjoy meals out. We enjoy sports and hobbies and this and that. somehow we've turned church and worship and Bible reading into work, into duties, into tasks.

And should it not be the other way around? Should fellowship with Christ not be our primary enjoyment in life?

Paul enjoyed fellowship with Christ. He knew Christ. He loved Christ. And he knew that Christ loved him.

[28 : 10] And I just pose the question more to myself than to you. Is my heart right? Do I enjoy the things of Jesus Christ? Or do I have to push myself?

Do I have to put myself into spiritual duties? Sure, there's something wrong if that's what I am. To live is Christ.

Paul was fully motivated living for Jesus. And then future, to die is gain. Let's move briefer here. I desire to depart, he says, and be with Christ, which is better by far. Don't you get the sense that Jesus Christ was very real to Paul?

Very real? He lived with Christ as a real part of his life. He worshiped him, he prayed to him, he relied on him.

[29 : 20] He watched him work in miracles on people through Paul and the apostles. He watched people being converted, spiritual miracles being worked out in their lives. And now he looked forward himself to being with Christ, getting to know him better.

The temptation for us, I think, is to fossilize Jesus, or to turn him into a collection of doctrines, and forget that he's a real living person.

And for Paul, life and death were all about the question of Jesus Christ, so that to die was vain. To die was to go to be with his Saviour.

Why is it most of us want to hang on to this life as long as possible? It's because our view of reality is skewed, isn't it?

we think that the things that are here and now are the things that are important. But as a natural fact, the things that are here and now are passing, they're disappearing, it's the things of eternity that are permanent, the things that are important, the things that we should be striving for, the things that we should be working towards.

[30 : 42] But we invest so much time here in our families, in our homes, in our hobbies, in our projects, and once we've invested our time in them and started to find purpose and meaning in life, like we were talking about earlier, we can't let them go, we don't want to let them go.

Paul has invested more than anybody in, you might say, the great project of the church, Christ's church, but he's willing to let go, and he's willing to depart and to loose the moorings and go to be with Jesus Christ.

Perhaps you and I need to be reminded again of what it is to die in the Lord, to be free sin, never to have that battle again, to be free from doubt, you know, many Christians live in the doubt, not so much doubt about the truth of their salvation, but doubt about their own faith in that Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Many of you struggling with assurance on a day-to-day basis, wondering, like the disciples around the Lord's table, the first Last Supper, saying, when Jesus speaks about one of you who's going to betray me, the disciples are there saying, is it me?

Am I the one who's going to betray you? There are those of you this evening that are wondering, am I a Christian? Imagine not living with that kind of fear, and that kind of fracture in your confidence, but being absolutely convinced, never for that conviction to be assaulted again, that you are Christ's, because that's the way it will be in glory, never to be analyzing yourself with regard to your sin, and with regard to your doubt, and your lack of assurance, and whether the process of your conversion was real enough.

[32 : 21] To be free from temptation, free from enemies, free from persecution, free from prison, free from trouble, free from suffering, all these things, and more because Paul is saying, it's to be with Christ.

In glory, you'll be surrounded by your best friends, you'll be surrounded by saints, you'll be surrounded by angels to minister to you here, and you'll be with Christ himself.

To live is Christ, to die is gain. I wonder if anyone here this evening who doesn't have a purpose in life, is looking for purpose, well, here is the purpose that's given to us by God.

to live for his son, to listen to the son, to glorify the son, to worship the son, to follow the feet of the son, to confess your sin before him, to find forgiveness, and to go on looking to being with him, in this life serving him, in the next serving him still.

let's pray. Let's pray.