

To Live is Christ
Philippians 1:12–26
March 10, 2019

Over the past 15–20 years, Christian subculture has created more than its fair share of clichés. What might begin innocently as a clever turn of phrase soon becomes so overused that you can nearly anticipate its arrival in the paragraph to come.¹ The phrase might not be abysmal in essence, but its use and overuse rendered it trite. And in some cases, the cliché actually bears little resemblance to the Scriptures or to orthodoxy.

As I studied the text this week, however, a statement I heard in student ministry probably 15 years ago kept circling back in my mind. One of my dearest friends regularly taught the church he served—especially the students—the phrase, “I’m third.” Over time, it really became something of a rallying cry. They’d say it to one another at Youth Events/Retreats/Camps. They had T-shirts made with the phrase stretched across the back. And back when this was the thing to do, my friend even called the ministry he led, “Third Place Ministries.” What does “I’m third,” mean? Well, Jesus is first. Others come second. You’re third. And if you don’t think I can ratchet up the cheese even higher than that, if you make that order an acrostic—Jesus, Others, and *then* You—it actually spells Joy.

Some of you might be considering running for the exits. I can’t say I would blame you. I’ve heard this so many times over the years that it pseudo-pains me to say it aloud. However, I also must admit that as overdone as this phrase might be, this is one of the clichés that isn’t patently false.

Our text today is, not only, but largely about joy. And though Paul’s teaching and instruction is a bit more sophisticated than, “I’m third,” he’s not saying or modeling something altogether different.

Note first,

1. Paul’s Joy is Christ (Proclaimed) (vv. 12–18c)

I don’t plan to repeat most of the background material I mentioned last week,² but this church at Philippi was planted in Acts 16 during Paul’s second missionary journey. In the 10-12 years since, this church continued to mature and faithfully supported Paul in his endeavors to take the gospel to those who hadn’t heard. They’d supported him by praying for him, in giving toward his efforts, and by sending people to him, all described last week as their *partnership in the gospel* (1:5). They’d just sent a man named Epaphroditus to Paul to deliver the most recent gift.

Where was Paul at this point? Most likely, Paul is in Rome. But he’s not strolling in the forum; he’s in chains.³ The Philippians knew of Paul’s plight, which prompted their sending of Epaphroditus. No different than how we might respond, they wanted an update on Paul. In that context, imprisoned, he writes this letter for Epaphroditus to take back with him and read to the congregation.⁴

Now, Paul’s going to get to joy, but it will take a few sentences. This section is similar to a missionary letter from the field. Most of us have read this kind of update, but not with these stakes. If we put ourselves in Philippian shoes for a moment, consider what you’d be expecting and desiring

¹ As you’re reading or listening to some teaching, you might think, “Oh no, I know where this paragraph’s going, or where this speaker is headed. Please don’t let him say . . . Oh, no. He said it.”

² See “The Church Plant at Philippi,” <http://www.southwoodsbc.org/sermons/the-church-plant-at-philippi/>

³ Peter O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, 20; Moises Silva, *Philippians*, BECNT, 7.

⁴ Gordon Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 39. Silva, 4.

to hear from the missionary you'd supported and partnered with after he'd been put in prison. You might wonder, "How are the conditions? In what ways are you suffering? Are the fellow prisoners or the guards persecuting you?" We'd want to know about *Paul*.

But Paul isn't thinking of Paul. He's likely been in prison for a year.⁵ He's had time to think about what to write the Philippians. And rather than the conditions, his suffering, or the persecution, he chooses verse 12: *I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel.* The NASB translates it: *My circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel.* You can tell he's saying something unexpected. When he says *has really served*, it means partly, "though you might not have anticipated this, Philippians, the gospel has advanced."

He'll detail the particulars in verse 13. The gospel has advanced, or progressed, among the unbelieving. Verse 13: *so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.* Your translation may say "Praetorian Guard."⁶ In Rome, most likely, this would refer to the emperor's own elite troops.⁷ There were most likely 8000–9000 men that belonged to this group.⁸ As you might imagine, they wielded significant influence, and not merely with their weapons. They'd made Claudius the emperor in AD 41, and as one man writes, "were emperor makers from then on."⁹

Paul expresses that the gospel has been advancing among this group. His imprisonment has influenced the influencers. And we see that in the phrase, *and to all the rest*. It had become known throughout *the whole imperial guard and to all the rest*. One might ask, "Who is all the rest?" Paul's referring to other non-Christians in Rome, in distinction from the Imperial or Praetorian Guard.¹⁰ Those 9000 men influenced the broader city. As these troops came to know or believe something, many others would soon as well.

What is it that Paul says they came to know? Why would he assert that their knowledge equaled the advance or progress of the gospel? Because it had *become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ*.

I thought back to Andrew Brunson's imprisonment this past week. If you don't recall, the Turkish government arrested Andrew in October of 2016 in the wake of an attempted, "coup." In the months that followed, charges were brought against him concerning his involvement with terrorist groups and accusing him of American espionage. That was the public message from Erdogan and his cronies. Because we had some friends in the region, we knew better. When this first happened, almost no one we talked to here in the States knew what was developing. But little by little the awareness of Andrew's imprisonment grew. And little by little the trumped-up garbage they were accusing him of was discredited. We knew why Andrew was in prison.¹¹

In a similar way, Paul's saying that in something of a ripple effect, many in Rome became aware of why he was in prison. Rather than Paul thinking about Paul, he's thinking about the message his imprisonment is advancing. Unbelievers are hearing about the Christ.

The gospel advanced among those unbelieving. And it did so *through* the believing. Can you imagine if Christians started being imprisoned in the United States for preaching the gospel or for taking a stand on this or that biblical issue? All of our faith would be tested. Some would fold in fear, I'm sure. Others would not.

⁵ Fee, 37.

⁶ NASB

⁷ Fee, 35

⁸ O'Brien, 93.

⁹ Joseph Hellerman, *Philippians*, EGGNT, 44.

¹⁰ Hellerman, 44.

¹¹ And thankfully last October he was released.

In Rome, Paul saw the latter. Verse 14: *And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.* If Paul's imprisoned, danger looms for all. Note how Paul piles up terms of courage:¹² confident, much more bold, without fear. *Most of the brothers* continue to speak the word, doing so with boldness. And this isn't mainly because of Paul's imprisonment. Paul makes clear that their confidence is *in the Lord*. Paul's imprisonment is merely the instrument the Lord uses to embolden these men in the advance of the gospel.¹³

I'm sure, at this point, some wondered when he was going to give them the details of the Roman prison. "Tell us what's it's like, Paul!" But Paul has different concerns.

I was studying this text when Pastor Phil sent us that video this week. And maybe three weeks into his chemo, you'd think his video greeting might include him talking about the challenges of side-effects, or the onset of fatigue. But that's not what you got. He said, in essence, "The Lord is sufficient. I miss gathering with you all. And press on in obedience to the Lord."

Paul's not obsessing over his own circumstances, he's thinking about how the Lord is using his circumstances for the advance of the gospel.

However, that doesn't mean Paul is unaware of some of the challenges. Though many are bold to speak the word, that doesn't mean they all do so for the right reasons. Verse 15: *Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry.* The juxtaposition in this verse is jarring. Preach Christ . . . from envy and rivalry? This same author, Paul, listed envy as one of the works of the flesh in Galatians 5:21.

Both envy and rivalry were common in this Roman honor culture, "where males vigorously competed with one another for acclaim in the public arena."¹⁴ These two were so common that some stirred the vice in others for their own advantage. Julius Caesar's demise was one example. Nicolas of Damascus wrote in A. D. 14 that, "Some, in order to please Caesar, heaped honors upon him, while others in their perfidy,¹⁵ approved and proclaimed these extravagant honors only in order that envy¹⁶ and suspicion might make Caesar hateful to the Romans."¹⁷ They weaponized envy. This political maneuvering harnessed the depravity of man for its own purposes. Men didn't like other men to succeed. And if someone did, envy and rivalry coalesced to cut him off at the knees.

Paul says here that some proclaimed Christ from envy and rivalry. Though we don't have the precise reasons for their envy of Paul, we can take educated guesses.¹⁸ It's possible they didn't prefer this outsider sending such an influential letter to their Roman churches just a few years prior. "What gall," they might say. Or maybe they envied his effective preaching or bigger following.¹⁹ I know that sounds ludicrous. You're thinking, "There's no way preachers of the gospel could envy one another's gifts or influence!" I guess we'll just have to take Paul's word for it.

Of course, Christian leaders or teachers aren't exempt from envy and rivalry. You know why? Because Christians aren't exempt.

And that's why Paul includes it here. In verse 17 Paul writes, *The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition.* Why would this Philippian church need to know about the selfish ambitions of preachers in Rome? Because they had their own selfishness. Paul's being indirect, preparing the soil for what he's about to address with them in chapter 2.

There were others, however, that proclaimed both the right content, Christ Himself, and did so with the right motive. Verse 15: *Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will.*

¹² O'Brien, 94.

¹³ Hellerman, 45.

¹⁴ Hellerman, 47.

¹⁵ I had to look this one up: deceitfulness

¹⁶ Same word as our text

¹⁷ Cited in John Reumann, *Philippians*, The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries, 178.

¹⁸ O'Brien, 105; Hellerman, 48

¹⁹ Walter Hansen, *The Letter to the Philippians*, Pillar Commentary, 74.

The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The latter, those who preach from good will, love Paul. And they do so because of a theological conviction; they know something. I think the NASB captures the sense of this verb better. It's not merely that Paul is "put" here, it's *knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel.*²⁰ Concerning the sovereignty of God, Paul doesn't waffle. Those with him, those who love him, don't either. They believe together that Someone appointed that Paul be in this prison in this moment.

Paul zooms out from his prison and considers God's purposes. I was teaching the teenagers this week on thanksgiving from John Onwuchekwa's book on prayer. In it, John O suggests that you can quickly tell whether you're entitled or grateful by what you mean by the phrase, "Why me?"²¹ The entitled heart bemoans how things have turned out, crying "Why me?" The humble and grateful heart meditates on the ever-present purposes and kindnesses of the Lord and says, "Why me?"

In this text, and during his life, Paul looked for and found things to rejoice in. He will summarize this section in verse 18. *What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.* After talking about the gospel's advance, among the unbelieving and through the believing—even through those with impure motives—Paul concludes, "What does it all matter?"²² What's the point? Paul's joy isn't placed in his present circumstances. It's not in whether or not everyone loves him. It's in one thing alone: *Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.*

In difficulty, Paul's joy is Christ. Christ proclaimed.

In difficulty, is joy difficult? Yes. But Paul models and teaches us.

2. Paul's Joy is Christ (Honored) Through Him (vv. 18d–23)

Now, you can't always trust the verse numbers. Those aren't inspired. In this case, the very end of verse 18 actually goes with what follows.

The preceding section brought him joy, and so would the things he'll describe now. Paul writes, *18d, Yes, and I will rejoice.* Why? Verse 19: *For I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance.*

Paul mentioned last week that in his prayers he remembered the Philippians. He gave thanks for them, praying for them with joy. While this is inferred here, it's worth pointing out that Paul believed the Philippians prayed for him as well. I thought this week: if church members don't pray for one another, who do we think will? Maybe some long-time friends from time to time, probably a number of parents, but mostly we're counting on the believers I've covenanted with to pray for us. I should count on you. And you ought to count on me. If we're not going to pray for one another, I'm not sure who will.

Paul rejoices that they pray for him, and that through their prayers and the help of the Spirit, v. 19, *this will turn out for my deliverance.* The question many consider is: what does Paul mean by deliverance? Is it ultimate deliverance, as in, a synonym for final salvation?²³ Is it that he'll be released from prison? Or that he won't be martyred?

While none of those interpretations should be dismissed entirely, verse 20 appears to explain what he means by deliverance. Verse 20: *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.*

We should keep in mind that Paul's not sinless. While he rejoices in the advance of the gospel, that doesn't mean he's immune from the spiritual challenges of imprisonment. I read a little

²⁰ NASB

²¹ John Onwuchekwa, *Prayer*, 85.

²² See BDAG, 189c.

²³ O'Brien, 108. But would the Philippians pray for that as if it were up in the air?

about Andrew Brunson's imprisonment this week. He said that he found much help in the writing of Richard Wurmbrand, the founder of Voice of the Martyrs. Wurmbrand spent time in a Romanian prison for the cause of Christ. While in solitary, he would read Matthew 5:11–12 every day: *Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.* Brunson said, following Wurmbrand's example, he read those same verses every day, but he frankly stated, "Rejoice and be glad, rejoice and be glad.' I was not rejoicing, but I did it as an act of obedience. It wasn't pretty."²⁴

Paul knew the sovereignty of God, but he knew as well the Romans 7 wrestlings of the flesh. Therefore, he knew he wasn't above a moment of weakness sometime before or during the Roman tribunal. He's not trusting himself.²⁵ As he approached that time, he hoped and trusted in the sufficiency of the Spirit's help and the prayers of God's people to help him persevere. Through those two, v. 19, *this will turn out for my deliverance.*

What's he mean by deliverance? Hear v. 20 again, *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.* Joseph Hellerman describes what Paul means by deliverance, "The specific outcome described in verse 20, namely, that Paul will speak with such boldness before the Roman tribunal that Christ will be exalted."²⁶

In verse 20, there's both shame and honor. When we say shame, we refer to that sickening and lingering feeling that accompanies our public failure to measure up before those whose approval we care about.²⁷ We might feel shame in a class, at work, on a stage, or even online. And when we say honor, it's the opposite. That's when we do well in front of people we respect, and therefore we're applauded in one way or another, that's honor. It's all about us.

But Paul's not thinking of Paul. He's not obsessing over whether he's publicly ridiculed for trusting Christ, or whether he's shamed by the Roman powers, or even whether he gets out of prison, he's eagerly expecting and hoping that he'd not be ashamed of Christ. I found John Piper helpful here: "Paul was a very unusual person. For Paul, the opposite of being shamed was not *his* being honored, but *Christ's* being honored through him."²⁸ Paul means deliverance, but he means deliverance from fear or disobedience. And he means deliverance from self, that through the Spirit's help he'd have *full courage* to honor Christ through his body.

The verb for honor here is instructive. When Paul writes, *Christ will be honored*, he chooses to use the passive voice. One man wrote that it's almost like "Paul cannot bring himself to write, 'I will magnify Christ,' and thereby give undue prominence to himself."²⁹ Paul's not honoring Christ. Christ brings honor to Himself. Paul's merely the instrument. And this brings Paul joy.

Deliverance can't merely mean deliverance from prison because of the last clause of verse 20, *whether by life or by death.*³⁰ While Paul might lean toward thinking he's going to be released, the trial ahead of him brings all possible scenarios to his mind. It's entirely possible that his trial might end in his death. Paul knew that.

²⁴ See, "A living martyr," https://world.wng.org/2018/11/a_living_martyr

²⁵ Isn't it interesting that he says that his perseverance is tied to the help of the Spirit and the prayers of God's people? See Silva, 72.

²⁶ Hellerman, 59.

²⁷ John Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life*, 64.

²⁸ Piper, *DWYL*, 65; emphasis in original.

²⁹ Hellerman, 64.

³⁰ If Paul were only focused on the certainty that he'd be delivered from prison, the Philippians might think God would necessarily give them relief from those that oppress them. See Hellerman, 59.

We've mentioned Matt McCullough's book a few times on Sunday mornings, but once again I thought about a section of it this week. Matt argues that modern Western culture, for reasons both good and bad, is largely insulated from death. Unless we spend a bunch of time in the hospital, we don't see death unfold. And therefore, we don't think about it. To discuss it in mixed company is considered "morbid." However, historically, with life expectancies lower and people often dying in homes surrounded by family, saints throughout the ages have come face to face with death much earlier in life and with much more regularity. Even to get to church, each week you'd walk right through a cemetery. That's not our world. We've been insulated from it. And that has a side-effect. Because the point of Matt's book isn't death, it's hope. He writes, "By avoiding the truth about death, we're avoiding the truth about Jesus."³¹

Paul's staring the possibility of death in the face. Then he makes this startling confession in verse 21, *For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain*. This verse actually challenges both our view of death and of life. The Greeks had their cliché mottos as well. One of them sounded like this, ζην χρηστος (Zān Chrāstos), meaning, "Life is good."³² This is the kind of thing they'd print on tunics and say to one another with regularity. Paul writes here, instead of ζην χρηστος, ζην χριστος (Zān Christos), meaning, *to live is Christ*. Peter O'Brien writes, "Paul asserts that living has no meaning apart from Christ; he is the object, motive, inspiration, and goal of all the apostle does."³³ Paul's joy is Christ through him. He lives to make much of Christ.

Verse 22 describes this life with Christ at its center: *If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me*. Paul's not predicting the future; he's speculating about two potential outcomes of his imprisonment: life or death. When he looks at the former, he says that were the Lord to give him more days, those days would be for the advance of the gospel. He lives for—his joy is in—Christ honoring Himself through Paul.³⁴

As he continues speculating about his future, he writes concerning life or death, v.22b, *yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two*. To live is Christ. That's a glorious calling, one in which he finds much joy. But there's something even better.

He goes on to explain what he meant by, in v.21, *to die is gain*. Verse 23b, *My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better*. Since there are multiple words in the original describing the superiority, the translation might even read here: *far, far better*.³⁵ There's no question in Paul's mind. Paul's all-consuming joy was Christ proclaimed and Christ honored through him. Since the goal was Christ through him, death was not something to fear. Because even better than Christ through me is Christ *with* me. Piper comments, "Better than all the friends at school? Better than falling in love? Better than hugging your children? Better than professional success? Yes. A thousand times better."³⁶

In *life*, Paul's joy is Christ through him. In *death*, Paul's joy is Christ *with* him.

And it's clear which one Paul prefers isn't it? But his preference is not the only consideration.

³¹ Matt McCullough, *Remember Death*, 24.

³² Ralph Martin and Gerald Hawthorne, *Philippians*, WBC, 55.

³³ O'Brien, 120.

³⁴ This fruitful labor might be akin to the *filled with the fruit of righteousness* Paul prayed for the Philippians in last week's text (v. 11).

³⁵ πολλω μαλλον κρεισσον

³⁶ Piper, *DWYL*, 67.

3. Paul's Joy is Christ Through Him for the Joy of Others

After considering how much better being *with* Christ would be, Paul concludes this section, v. 24, *But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.* Again, Paul's not thinking of Paul. He's thinking of Jesus first. Others second.³⁷

At this point, he's convinced of the necessity of living. Yet he knows that if he continues breathing, it's for the purpose of God. That's why his heart beats. What is Paul's purpose? Verse 25 describes it, *Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith.*

This word for progress is the same word used in verse 12 translated advance. In that verse, the gospel advanced, going *out* to the Praetorian guard. Here Paul knows that if he were to return to the Philippians, it would be for the gospel's advance *among and within* the Philippians. Paul writes, *for your progress and joy in the faith.* As the faith progressed or advanced within them, so would joy in the faith. Paul would live for that purpose. Their joy.

Paul found joy in Christ. He found joy in Christ honored through him. But that joy in Christ through him was for the joy of others. Verse 26 concludes: *so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.* The Philippians would glory, ultimately not in Paul, but in Jesus Himself. That which brought Paul joy—the centrality of Christ—would bring them the same.

Conclusion

It's a tad incorrect to say this passage is primarily about joy. Throughout, joy's a symptom. It's a byproduct of the kind of mindset Paul has here, that of Christ and His honor above self.

So what do you think will bring you joy? Are you attempting to find it in something or someone on this earth? Something that will be ripped away from you at your final breath? Or is it in something that even death can't take away?

If to live is *Matt*, or if to live is *you*—if *self* is what it means to live—to die will indeed be *loss*. That which we've lived for—that which we've sought joy in—will cease. The only way someone might say what Paul writes—that death is *gain*—is if they first say and believe, *to live is Christ.*

³⁷ Hellerman writes, "Serving the community takes priority over individual goals or desires," 70.