

Philippians 1:21-30 **Petty Passions or Master Passion?**

People talk a lot about the importance of goals – having them, setting them, reassessing them, achieving them. They need to be SMART – specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely.

So, what is your goal? What are you spending your seventy or so years on?

How would you finish the statement – for me to live is_____. What is the passion of your life? What are you driven to acquire, receive, or accomplish?

For me to live is acceptance.

For me to live is financial security.

For me to live is a guaranteed retirement.

For me to live is to accomplish my dream.

For me to live is to have perfectly polished and well accomplished kids.

For me to live is to be respected.

For me to live is to be married.

For me to live is to be left alone to pursue what I desire.

What are you trying so hard to accomplish each day?

Perhaps it's an unfair question. Because, for many of us, "to live" is not one big thing, it's a mixture of numerous smaller desires all competing with one another and therefore causing conflict in our lives.

Example – I want to join the Army, but I want to make my family happy, and I can't do both.

Most of us have desires that are in competition with one another and we can't always figure out a way to resolve the tension. We're caught up with petty passions when what we really need is a master passion; a regulating passion, something that can put everything else into order and reduce the conflict we feel between competing desires.

Paul had that master passion – one single goal that he could pursue while doing everything else in life, and which would affect the manner in which he did everything else. A meta-goal that would help him determine what other goals to pursue, what to say yes to and what to say no to, even if saying yes meant difficulty and struggle.

Paul's master passion was a passion for the Master. He lays it out in Chapter 1, verse 21. "For me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain".

Paul's greatest goal was to let Christ have His way in Paul. He wanted to be a reflection of Jesus. He wanted to fulfill his greatest capacity by living as the man that God wanted him to be.

Well, how is all of that going to play out in his current circumstances when he is chained to a Roman soldier and living under house arrest? Listen to his thought process:

[22](#) But if I live on in the flesh, this *will mean* fruit from *my* labor; yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. [23](#) For I am hard-pressed between the two, having a desire to depart and be with Christ, *which is* far better. [24](#) Nevertheless to remain in the flesh *is* more needful for you. [25](#) And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith, [26](#) that your rejoicing for me may be more abundant in Jesus Christ by my coming to you again.

“To live is Christ, and to die is gain.” Death doesn’t mean he’s lost the chance to pursue his goal, it means he has completely achieved it. Life is running the race; death is crossing the finish line.

Paul says, here I have the chance to quite possibly be put to death, but what that really means for me is a few moments of pain, but an eternity of peace in the presence of my Lord. I can pass through the veil of this world into the next and instantly attain my goal – I’ll be in the actual presence of God. Not a bad option.

And, if I only had myself to think about, it might sound pretty appealing – not terrifying, but appealing.

BUT, Paul realizes, if he sticks around a few more years, he’ll be a further blessing to the church in Philippi, and probably to several other churches as well. So, even though it’s probably going to mean more hardship, more travelling, more persecution, he’s pretty sure he’s going to live **so that** he can produce more fruit by serving Jesus through serving the churches. He can accomplish his master passion of worshipping Jesus whether he lives or dies. No matter how things turn out, he wins.

Paul also has an expectation that the Christians in Philippi would adopt his same attitude and be willing to suffer personally while serving others so that the gospel of Christ – the good news of who He was and what He had done, would be glorified.

[27](#) Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, [28](#) and not in any way terrified by your adversaries, which is to them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God. [29](#) For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, [30](#) having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear *is* in me.

When I talk with people about marriage, one of the big things I stress is the pursuit of common goals. All the conflict we have in marriage, and really in all our relationships, comes through disagreement about one of two things – we either disagree about what we should do, or how we should do it. I get frustrated because you won’t accept my idea or

you get upset because I won't accept yours. We have different goals or different priorities and preferences and therefore we have conflict.

The way we overcome that is by working together toward the same goals with the same convictions and desires – it's by having the same passions. Just as I need a master passion for my own life, we need a master passion for our relationship – and for the same reason, for regulating our competing desires and decreasing conflict.

And obviously, the greatest goal, the greatest passion we, like Paul, can pursue is that of pleasing God. Or as Paul puts it here – by “stand[ing] fast in one spirit, with one mind, striving together for the faith of the gospel.” Then, as we do that, we find it easier to coexist because I'm not always trying to get you to do things my way, and you're not always trying to convince me why we should do things your way, we're both submitting to God's way as the best way to live.

Paul also points out that the choice to put Christ first even holds up when it matters most - under pressure – when you face opposition in life. Whether the pain in your life is being caused by circumstances or by other people, when outsiders watch you suffering well because you stand on Christ, they are convicted of their own need for Him, and while they're convicted, you're encouraged in your faith. Suffering for Jesus helps you to know more of Him.

Let me share with you a little example of how watching people suffer for Jesus can be convicting to the unsaved, and then we'll come back to this idea of how suffering for Jesus helps you know more of Him.

After I left the Marine Corps I spent several years doing missionary work in and out of East Africa. So, in 2005, when I went to seminary, I minored in Cross-Cultural studies. My professor was Dr. Jones Kaleli, a Kenyan man. He was a third generation Christian, second generation pastor, and first generation professor.

His grandfather had been one of the tribal elders when a white man came to live in their area and tried to tell them about Jesus. That white missionary eventually caught some disease and died. But not long after, another missionary came to take his place. This man also died. And then, another missionary showed up, this time with his wife and children. And the elders, including my professor's grandfather, said, “you know, we need to listen to this message that these white men are dying to tell us.” And they did listen, and became born again in Christ.

His dad then grew up and became a pastor, and he followed his father's footsteps and also became a pastor and then eventually came to the United States to study and wound up earning a PhD and becoming a seminary professor.

Now, that's a pretty amazing story, when you have the whole story to consider.

But what if you're the first missionary? Or the second? You're lying there dying in a small town no one has ever heard of, half way around the world from your family, and the only reason you're there is for the sake of the gospel. You're suffering, you're dying – was it worth it?

You don't know what is going to come out of all of this. You don't know about the churches that are going to be started, or the pastors that will be called by God, or the seminary professor that will one day be training American pastors and missionaries. But you must make the call – what is life to you? Have you spent yours well? As you lie there on your deathbed, can you say, with confidence, "I have achieved my goal?"

The answer is yes if, and only if, you can join Paul in saying "for me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."

Because if you're that first missionary, you didn't see anyone come to accept salvation through faith in Christ. If you were the second missionary you didn't see a church started. You probably didn't see any of your great goals of being a missionary accomplished. As you lay there dying all you can do is say, "I was faithful. I saw a people in need and I tried to serve them."

But that IS Christ.

And when Paul said he was willing to give up going to heaven immediately so that he could be more useful to the Philippians and other churches, he was also reflecting Christ.

After all, what did Jesus do for us?

Jesus left Heaven where He had always been with the Father, which was, as Paul says, "far better." And He came to earth to suffer and to serve us because He knew that for Him to come in the flesh was, again to use Paul's reasoning, "more needful for" us.

Paul says, "for me to live is Christ," and then he shows what that looks like by living out the choice that Christ made, the choice to give up personal comfort in order to be a blessing to others.

That's an important thing for us to consider this week especially; as we prepare to remember the reason Jesus came to Earth.

Next week is Easter when we celebrate the resurrection of Christ, which means that this coming week would have been the last days of his life - some Christians refer to it as Passion Week. This was the week leading up to Christ's greatest work, His master passion – and, like Paul, His desire was to glorify the Father by serving others even if it meant suffering.

According to the Church calendar today is Palm Sunday, the day that marks His entry into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey while crowds of people shouted "Hosanna, Hosanna,

Hosanna in the highest!" They were shouting, Salvation, Salvation, the highest form of Salvation!

But they didn't know how much that salvation would cost.

Jesus spent Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday teaching in the Temple – He also performed some healings there and drove out a bunch of merchants who were trying to make money off of people who were coming to pray and offer sacrifices.

He taught about what would happen in the coming years and at the end of time, and then he shared the Passover meal with His disciples in the upper room.

There, He told them something that seems to fit quite well with what we see reflected in Paul this morning:

John 15:13 "Greater love has no man than this, than to lay down his life for his friends." Jesus came to this earth to lay down His perfect life in exchange for ours. We spend so much of our lives pursuing our petty little passions, the things we think will make us happy, but Jesus poured out His blood to save us – He spent His life on us.

So do you see – do you see how Paul can say "to live is Christ," and then settle on the side of living longer so that he can be a greater blessing to the church? He, like Christ, is choosing to give his life for the sake of his friends. Only Jesus can die for us, but we can live for one another. Only Jesus can give up His life for us, but we can give out our lives as a reflection of Him.

Of course, the timing was perfect – it was Passover – Passover was the feast they celebrated each year and had celebrated for more than a millennium, to remember God's deliverance of the Israelites from captivity in Egypt.

You may remember the story, found in Exodus, the second book of the Bible, how God used Moses to command Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt, to let the Israelites free. But Pharaoh would not, so God sent a series of ten plagues to try and persuade Pharaoh. The last plague was the death of the first-born. Every first-born male, whether human or animal, would die.

In order to escape this, all people had to do was slaughter a lamb and put the blood of the animal on the doorframe of their houses as they sat inside and ate the meat for dinner. That night, as the angel of death came through, he would skip over every house that was covered by the blood of the lamb. The next morning Pharaoh, devastated by the loss of his son, finally agreed to let the Israelites go.

Every year since then the Israelites had celebrated Passover by sacrificing a lamb, and now, in the midst of this very holiday, Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, was going to shed His blood so that everyone found under it will escape the second death.

During the meal Judas excused himself and went out to betray Jesus to the religious leaders who were looking for the right moment to arrest Him without making a scene.

Judas knew when that would be – in a few hours Jesus and the disciples would leave the Upper Room and head to a nearby Garden, more like a park, the Garden of Gethsemane.

There Jesus would pray the famous “not my will, but Thy will be done” prayer to God while waiting for Judas to arrive.

Sometime in the middle of the night, while most of the disciples were sleeping, they arrived: Judas with a contingent of soldiers to arrest Jesus.

They took Him to the high priest’s house where he was put on trial by the religious leaders. Of course, the problem was, they couldn’t find anything to charge Him with – He had done no wrong. So, they finally accused Him of something true – of claiming to be the Son of God.

This brought another problem – they wanted to see Him put to death, but they didn’t have the authority to do that themselves, so they had to take Him over to Pilate, the Roman governor.

Pilate didn’t understand what was going on, and didn’t see any reason to execute Jesus, so he tried having Him beaten and then released. The Jewish officials weren’t satisfied with that though; they wanted Him crucified for claiming to be a king. Pilate couldn’t see a way out of this political mess, so he eventually caved and ordered the execution.

Jesus was given a large timber to carry – the very piece of wood He would be nailed to, and forced to carry it through town to the place where He would die.

The Scriptures tell us He was crucified first, and then two thieves were placed beside Him. And while He was dying He asked the Father to forgive those involved, and promised salvation to one of the thieves.

The Scriptures don’t make a big deal about HOW He died, they don’t go into that much detail of what the process was like – though we may have all heard very vivid sermons describing the process of crucifixion, the Scriptures only saw fit to preserve the fact that it happened, no gory details were necessary. For, I suppose, HOW it happened wasn’t as important as WHY it happened.

Jesus, the Son of God, took on flesh and came to give up His perfect life as a sacrifice for us. We have all rebelled against God, every one of us has sinned - by doing things we shouldn’t have done or by not doing things we should have done. And usually because we were chasing after petty passions – doing what seemed right to us with little or no regard for what God had said.

Remember, that was how this all began – Adam and Eve committed the first sin in the Garden of Eden by turning their back on God and doing what seemed right in their own eyes. And like all rebellious children, they, and we, deserve to be punished by our Father.

BUT, we couldn't stand to take the punishment. It would destroy us. So, Jesus came to earth, and allowed Himself to be arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane, crucified on the hill of Calvary, and then, His lifeless body was taken by some of His followers to a tomb in a nearby garden where it laid for three days until God raised Him from the dead, accepting His sacrifice in our place.

We remember all of that this morning as we prepare to celebrate communion. And I'll tell you, if you haven't asked Him to cover your sins yet, you should do so now. Let next Sunday be the first Easter that you really understand. Let this Easter be the one when you knew it was more than just chocolate and eggs and bunnies.

Let this Easter be the one where you threw away your petty passions, grasped the reality of the Passion, and became gripped by a master Passion – “for me to live is Christ.” And then look out for the opportunities He gives you to spend your life on serving others. Allow the worship and service of Him to be the single cord that binds your life and your relationships together – even if, like Christ, you have to suffer as you serve.

Let's Pray

If you need to ask Jesus to be your Master Passion this morning – then pray something like this.

Heavenly Father, I need you. I need you to be my Master Passion. I have spent too much of my life trying to make myself happy and offending or ignoring you. Please, forgive me.

I thank you for sending your Son to give His life for me, and I ask that you would cover over me with His blood so that I can escape your judgment.

Show me how to live for Christ, and help me to see how death is gain. Not in a cliché way, but in a real, tangible way, something that I can hold on to as I make difficult decisions.

Help me to serve you with the rest of my life. In Jesus' name, Amen.

And for all of us, Lord, regulate our passions. Help every one of us to be driven by the desire to please you. Be our Master Passion. Help us to understand more about who you are, about what Jesus has done, and about how we can reflect Him to this world.

In Jesus' name, amen.

Communion