

Living in Christ

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Please consider donating to this work in the San Francisco Bay Area online at ChristChurchEastBay.org. A reading from Paul's letter to the Philippians.

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus to all God's holy people in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons, grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace garden to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ.

And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord, and dare all the more proclaim the gospel without fear. It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill.

[1 : 12] The latter is done out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.

But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached, and because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.

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.

For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose?

I do not know. I am torn between the two. I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far, but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

[2 : 20] Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you, again, your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Thank you so much, Cordelia. That was wonderful. And Juliana, thank you so much. Well, good morning.

We've been kind of over the past few weeks just working our way up into this letter to the church in Philippi, and it's a letter of friendship.

It's a letter of deep love and affection. And I want us to be remembering who's writing this letter. We looked a few weeks ago in Acts chapter 9, and we saw how this man Saul of Tarsus was transformed into Paul the Apostle, this man who had been adamantly opposed to Jesus.

[3 : 39] He was persecuting the people of Jesus. He had his own encounter with the resurrected Lord, with Jesus himself. And that utterly changed and redirected his life.

He began immediately to tell people that Jesus is the Son of God, Jesus is Israel's Messiah, and the world's true Lord. That was around 33 A.D., just a couple of years after the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus.

And then I want us to remember, too, who's reading this letter. And we looked at this a few weeks ago as well. Acts chapter 16, God calls the Apostle Paul to go to northern Greece, to the city in Philippi.

And we saw there were three amazing stories of transformation there where Lydia encountered gospel truth, and she was transformed. And that slave girl encountered gospel power, and she, too, was transformed.

And then the jailer, he encountered gospel life through Paul and Silas, and he was transformed. And many of their friends and their family, they all together, they repented, they believed, they were baptized, they became the first converts and the first members of that church that met in the house of Lydia there in Philippi.

[4 : 58] And that was around the year 46, 47, 48, I don't know, somewhere in there. 49 A.D., yeah, that's right. So I just want to pause to think about this.

To marvel at the grace of God in the lives of these people. Without the grace of God, without the power of God for salvation and for transformation, the Apostle Paul would never be writing and sending this letter.

There would be no members in this church plant in Philippi receiving and reading this letter. And none of us would be here today considering the contents of this letter.

But because of the power of the gospel and because of the grace of the gospel that came to each and every one of those people and each and every one of us from the Father, through the Son, and by the Holy Spirit, here they are as a result of God's grace living in peace.

They're living in shalom. That's why Paul says grace and peace to you because God's grace has enabled them to live at peace with God and in peace with one another.

[6 : 09] And this grace and this peace creates an amazing bond of fellowship and friendship. In fact, I think we have a slide, if we can pull that slide up, that just sort of illustrates a little bit of this three-way bond where Paul is reminding them that, look, none of us is here apart from God's grace.

And none of our relationships are merely horizontal and merely social. All of our relationships have been elevated because of the gospel.

We're united with Jesus. We share friendship in Christ. We're partners together now in the gospel. There's something totally different about the relationships that we have with each other.

And then Paul goes on and he writes this letter to them. And what does Paul want to say to his friends in this new church plant, to Lydia and the slave girl and the jailer, and all the people that through them heard about the grace and peace of God and Jesus Christ?

What does he want to say to the elders and the deacons and the members of this fledgling church? Well, he says to them, and we heard a little bit of this last week, he says, my dearly beloved friends in Christ, my partners in the gospel.

[7 : 19] I thank God for you constantly. I pray for you. I love you with the affection of Jesus Christ himself. And you're my joy.

You're my crown. And there's some things that God has put on my heart for you. And I want to think about three things today. I put it in the form of three questions, where Paul is basically asking this church in Philippi, how do you respond to adversity?

What are you living and dying for? And how do you get power to live a life worthy of the gospel? So how do you respond to adversity?

What are you living and dying for? And how do you get power to live a life worthy of the gospel? First of all, how do you respond to adversity?

Paul has received a report of his friends, these brothers and sisters in Christ, in the church in Philippi, and he hears that they're going through significant adversity, very difficult challenges.

[8 : 23] And Paul says, well, let me show you how I respond to adversity. Let me provide you an example and provide you a model for how I engage with my own challenges.

And hopefully you remember back, you remember how Paul and Silas were thrown in that prison in Philippi? You remember that? Just nod your head.

And then you remember what they were doing when they were in that prison at midnight? How they were praying to God and they were singing hymns to God? Well, Paul is actually in prison quite a lot.

So he's not just in that prison in Philippi. There's another slide. We're not sure if he's in prison now in Ephesus on his third missionary journey or maybe he's in Rome after his third missionary journey.

But he's sitting again in a prison cell and he's again praying to God and he's again singing to God at midnight. But now this time in his new prison cell, he's writing this letter, which is his happiest letter.

[9 : 27] In fact, the words rejoice and joy occur about 13 times in this letter. And it's clear that he wants his friends in Christ, in Philippi, he wants them to share in his joy.

He wants them to rejoice with him. In fact, later on in Philippians 3.17, Paul says, follow my example, brothers and sisters. You have us as a model. And he says in Philippians 4.9, he says, what you've learned and received from me, what you've heard from me and seen in me, I want you to put that into practice.

He's saying, look, I want to set you an example of joy. Joy in the midst of adversity. And here's how you see it in verse 12. He says, now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.

It's actually served to advance the gospel. What is Paul's highest priority and his greatest concern in the midst of his adversity? What is the source of his joy in the midst of all of his many challenges?

It's the gospel. Right? He sees all of life through the lens of the gospel. He doesn't write to them and say, I want you to know that what has happened to me is awful. And this prison that I'm in is terrible.

[10 : 44] And the treatment that I'm receiving from these Roman soldiers is miserable. And I don't have enough food. I don't have enough clothing. I don't have enough shelter to adequately meet my needs.

Paul's not focused on his comfort or his discomfort. He's not focused on his happiness or his unhappiness. He's not talking about whether or not he's well-fed or hungry or in plenty or in want or in constraints or in freedom.

What matters to Paul is the gospel. This message that God has come in the flesh to die on the cross to atone for our sins and that he's been raised to life to destroy death.

He cares about that message of God's good news and whether or not that message is advancing or retreating. Is that message progressing or regressing?

Is that message moving forward or is it moving backward? Paul says, the gospel is the thing that gives me joy in the midst of my adversity and what I really care about is to see the message of Jesus advancing.

[11 : 54] Now what is Paul saying here about the sovereignty of God? Paul is a student of Scripture and Paul I think would be reminding us to go back to Genesis, the first book of the Bible, back to Genesis chapter 50, back to that story of Jacob's son Joseph.

Remember how he was thrown into prison? Remember how he experienced incredible adversity and challenges? And what does Joseph say about his own adversity? He says, you intended evil against me but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done the saving of many lives.

It's an amazing statement where Joseph says that in God's sovereignty, God's intentions transcend and they overrule human intentions. And I'm sure that's what's on Paul's mind in the midst of his own imprisonment.

And I'm sure Paul is also thinking about Jesus himself. He's thinking about the worst thing that ever happened in human history, right? When human beings crucified the son of God.

God and how God and his sovereignty turned that worst thing into the best thing. That God took an act of human rebellion and he turned it into an act of divine grace.

[13 : 08] And God took death and he turned it into life. You meant it for evil against me but God meant it for good. And the Apostle Paul, I think here in his prison cell, is applying the story of Joseph and the story of Jesus and the whole story of the Bible to his own life.

Right? He says, I want you to know what's happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. See, here's Paul as the main architect of the greatest movement, the greatest faith, the greatest religion in the history of the world.

His intellectual gifts, his leadership gifts are such that he could go into any major metropolitan, sophisticated city in the Greco-Roman world and he could publicly debate people and after a while there would be so many converts in his wake that he could leave a new church there and he did that all over the Mediterranean world.

But here is Paul now and he's facing a terrible trial in the midst of, right in the very middle of his career. He's only had a few years to plant churches and now here he is, he's chained to Roman soldiers night and day, right, he can't sleep or go to the bathroom in privacy.

He's in a demeaning, demoralizing, dehumanizing situation. For a traveling apostle to be put in prisons like a concert pianist having his hands tied behind his back, right, and he's not only in prison, he's facing possible execution, he's in danger of his life being snuffed out within days or within weeks.

[14 : 50] It's the greatest defeat he's ever experienced and conventional wisdom would tell Paul and would tell us that if you take the greatest spokesman for the gospel, the greatest church planter who ever lived and you take him out of the game, he would be massively discouraged and the Christian movement would come to a screeching halt.

But I think Paul would say, yeah, but you're forgetting about our sovereign God. Right? Remember the God who turned Joseph's terrible situation into salvation for Israel and food for the whole world.

Remember the God who turned Jesus' crucifixion into salvation and took the dead corpse of Jesus and turned it into a resurrected body and hoped for the whole world.

That same God, Paul says, that same God can take everything that looks wrong in my life, prison, chains, everything that looks like a major difficulty and a major defeat and he can turn it into an opportunity for the gospel.

Do you all believe that? That he can take horrible, horrible things and he can turn them into good so that the gospel is actually advancing.

[16 : 21] And what he says in verse 13, he says, as a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. And because of my chains, now most of the brothers and sisters in this city have become confident in the Lord and they dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

You see, Paul never planned a mission to the palace guard. He never planned to have a mission to this force of elite soldiers. But now, he has a captive audience all day, every day for the gospel.

He's sharing the gospel with army rangers and navy seals all day, every day. Six times a day. They come in on four hour rotations, one chained on his right and one chained on his left.

And one by one, they're getting converted and transformed by the gospel. And then when the Christians in this city hear that these hardened Roman soldiers are having their hearts softened to Jesus, the Christians in that city, they start to grow in their own confidence in the Lord, that the Lord is here, the Lord is present, the Lord is powerfully at work.

And they start to overcome their own fears and they begin to find fresh courage to invite their friends and neighbors and coworkers to listen to them around their tables and to ask them, what do you believe?

[17 : 49] You know? What do you think about life and death and what's the meaning of everything? And they begin to share with them the good news about Jesus. What's amazing is if you turn to the end of this letter in Philippians chapter 4 verse 22, Paul says that all of God's people here send you greetings especially those who belong to Caesar's household.

Do you know what that means? That means that the good news of the Lord Jesus because of Paul's chains and because of his imprisonment, the good news of the Lord Jesus is advancing all the way into Lord Caesar's household, into the very upper echelons of the Roman Empire.

that the message of God's kingdom is advancing into the heart of Rome's kingdom. And people are hearing this message that Jesus is actually the new emperor and he's taken the throne of this world to be the king.

He's the one who's going to bring grace to this world and peace to this world. He's the one to whom every knee is going to bow and every tongue is going to confess that he in fact is the Lord.

None of this was part of the plan. No one formed a committee for how to reach these elite soldiers. No one created a playbook for how to reach the upper echelons of the empire.

[19 : 18] But this was God's sovereign plan. That both inside the prison and outside in the city, the gospel would be advancing and Paul says this is the reason I have joy.

This is the reason you too should be rejoicing. So friends, my question for you is, is this how you interpret your life and your circumstances?

Is this how you interpret your adversities and your challenges? Paul's setting for us a Christian example for how to do that. Do you have a strong belief and a robust confidence in the way that God works out His purposes through your hardships?

Do you believe that God can use the worst things that happen to you? Imprisonment, unemployment, sickness, injury, cancer, challenges with your kids, the loss of a loved one?

For Paul, most likely, and we do know that he ends up experiencing martyrdom in just a few years? Do you believe that any of these can be God's sovereign means for advancing the good news of Jesus Christ?

[20 : 39] How is God arranging and orchestrating your current circumstances so that the gospel might be advanced? how is God using adversity to grow you and your confidence in the Lord and give you a more fearless courage that you might take that message of Jesus forward among those who do not yet currently believe it?

Paul says that's the thing that any healthy church, any living church ought to be concerned about in the midst of their adversities. Okay, so that's question number one.

How do you respond to adversity? Are you with me? Second question is what are you living and dying for? He wants this church in Philippi to think about the question what are you living for and dying for?

Paul's heart for them is that they would learn the secret of the Christian life, the secret of Christian ministry, and that they would come to imitate his overriding ambition, that they would come to follow the example of what makes him tick, the model of what motivates him.

And Paul's arguing that everybody's living for something. And so he wants them to think about what are you living for and what are you dying for? If you had to fill in the blank of this sentence, to me, to live is blank, blank, and for me to die is blank.

[22 : 14] How do you fill in those blanks? Now, Paul says, for me, in verse 21, he says, for me to live is Christ, and to die is gain because I get Christ.

Now, after Paul was beaten in Philippi, after he was thrown in prison, after he was asked to leave that city, do you know what Paul did? Did he just give up?

No, Paul went on to the next city, and then he went on to the next city, which was Athens, and he went to the birthplace of Greek philosophy, the birthplace of Greek art and literature and science and democracy, and we're told that he began to debate there the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers about their many gods and their many different approaches to life and death.

And you can imagine him engaging with the different life systems and thought systems there in Athens, and like Socrates, like Plato, like Aristotle, Paul comes in and he asks questions and he says, well, what's your definition of life?

What's the thing that makes life life for you? What's your bottom line? What's your most important thing that if you say, if I have this, then I'm really living, then I'm truly alive.

[23 : 31] No matter what you take away from me, I'm really alive. And Paul begins to engage in the different alternative philosophies of life and death there in Athens.

And I think he probably said something like this, for you Epicureans, to live is pleasure. Right? To live is to have fun. Yeah, I've got a good job and I work hard and I make a lot of money, but really I'm living for recreation.

I'm living to play hard on the weekends. I'm living to pursue my hobbies and experiences, to get good food and to do more travel. for me to live is to be happy.

And he says, for you Stoics, for you to live is to be strong. For you to live is to be in control. It's to be a good and an upright moral person.

To have courage and to have grit and resilience in the face of all the hard facts of life, to just brace your shoulders and have a stiff upper lip and to have an iron will and to refuse to be defeated.

[24 : 35] These are the dominant definitions here in Athens of what it means to be truly alive. And I think you can probably look around and see in the Bay Area these definitions, these ancient definitions are still very much the things that people are living their lives by here in the Bay Area.

Or other people may say, you know, for me to live is my work and my career. For me to live is romance and sex. For me to live is my family and my precious children.

For me to live is my money and my stock portfolio and my 401k. For me to live is to be kind and to try to leave the world a better place. For me to live is to invest myself in politics and power.

But what does Paul, the greatest theologian, say? He says, you know, why do I exist? Why am I on planet earth? What is the meaning and the purpose of my life?

What gets me up in the morning? He says, for me to live is Christ. And for me to die is gain because I get Christ. And everything else is secondary.

[25 : 48] Everything else is subsidiary to that. Paul would say this is the only definition of life. The one bottom line that most important thing that will stand up to all the tragedies of life that every single one of us are going to face.

Even our own death. That when you lose all of your loves and when you lose your very life, you yourself, if you have this definition of life, you yourself will not collapse.

Do you realize how radical this is, what Paul is saying? He said, look at it again, verse 21. For me to live is Christ and to die is gain. And if I am to go on living in this body, this will mean fruitful labor for me.

Yet what shall I choose? I do not know. I'm torn between the two. I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far. But it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith so that through my being with you, again, your boasting in Jesus Christ will abound on account of me.

[26 : 57] Paul's awaiting the verdict from the imperial tribunal. He's awaiting this decision whether or not he's going to live or whether or not he's going to be beheaded. And Paul says, you know what?

I'm good either way. Why? Because if God's plan for me is to live, then I get to be a laborer in God's vineyard.

And I get to go out and sow seeds of the message of Jesus and I get to reap a harvest of gospel fruit and I get to make disciples and I get to help those disciples make progress and joy in their faith.

And I get to help people more and more come to learn what it means to boast and nothing else but Jesus Christ. But if God's plan for me is to be executed and to lose my head, well to die is gain because I've trusted in Christ and the passion and the goal of my life since the day that Christ Jesus apprehended me and took hold of me is to see Christ, not by faith but by sight.

To die means to depart and to be immediately, directly and consciously with Jesus, to be finally and fully in his presence. And this is the secret of Paul's life.

[28 : 20] It's the secret of the Christian life. And here's the logic. Paul says because of the empty tomb, because of the resurrection of Jesus on Easter Sunday in the past, and because of that coming resurrection of all who died trusting in Jesus that's coming in the future, death is no longer a loss, it's gain.

Death leads to victory. Death leads to triumph. Death leads to being with Christ as you await your resurrection body that will enable you to live in the new world that God is going to put right and remake completely.

And so Paul says because of that past resurrection of Jesus and that future resurrection of the dead, he says I have confidence, I have assurance that no matter what happens to me in the tribunal of Lord Caesar, I know where I stand in the tribunal of Lord Christ.

Right? No matter what happens to me in the courts of Rome, I know where I stand in the court of God. God, I'm going to be delivered, I'm going to be justified by grace.

And therefore, I can say for me to live as Christ and to die is absolute gain. Friends, can you imagine what kind of revival, what kind of spiritual awakening would happen here in the Bay Area if ordinary everyday Christians just embrace this one focus and the singular passion?

[29 : 58] It's very easy to say it with our lips, but it's actually in our priorities very difficult to live it out because we can say for me to live as Christ plus work plus leisure plus wealth accumulation plus relationships.

And how easy it is for that plus factor, for that secondary thing to become our primary passion. But notice what Paul does here with his personal preferences. He says, you know, I'm going to take my personal preference, which is to depart and to be with Christ, which is way better for me individually, and I'm going to submit my personal preference and desire to something greater than myself, which is the corporate and collective needs of Christ's church and Christ's mission.

And what if more Christians in the Bay Area were to reorder our preferences, reorder our desires, reorder our loves in such a way that we're not living for self-gratification, but we're living for the fruitful labor of advancing and progressing in the gospel.

Paul is in fact showing us and embodying to us a life that's not looking to our own interests, but looking out to the interests of others.

He's giving us a model. He's giving us an example of valuing others above our own personal preferences. Against his own personal desires, he puts the needs of the gospel and the needs of other people first.

[31 : 37] To depart and to be with Christ, that's emphatically better, Paul says. That is by far the best. There is no question about that for me, Paul says, but it's more necessary for you that I remain and that I live.

And it's more necessary for your progress and your joy in the faith so that your boasting in Jesus will abound more and more. And that's why I want to live. To live is to go on laboring for Christ and the praise of Christ.

And to die is to go on living that much more in union with the resurrected Christ. Christ. And because Christ is a singular focus and the singular passion of my life, whether I'm released or whether I'm executed, whether I live or whether I die, Paul says, I win.

I win because I get more of Christ. Christ. What would happen to your marriage if you live like that?

Or what would happen to your children and your family? What would happen to our church? What would happen to your workplace? What would happen to our communities if all of us filled in the blank and we said, for me, to live is Christ and to die is gain because it's more of Christ?

[33 : 04] Christ, that's my definition. That's my bottom line. That's what I'm living for. That's what I'm dying for. All right.

I'm out of time. But hopefully you now know, how do I respond to adversity? By seeing all of my life through the lens of the gospel and drawing all my joy from the gospel itself.

What am I living for and what am I dying for? I'm dying for nothing other than Christ. And I'm living for nothing other than Christ. And finally, how do you get the power to live this way?

Well, Paul says it very simply in verse 19. He says, I know that through your prayers and through God's provision of the spirit of Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.

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.

[34 : 11] Paul says, the thing that I need you to pray for me and the thing that I'm praying for you is that we would all, no matter what our circumstances, no matter what we're going through, we would exalt Christ, we would glorify Christ, we would magnify Christ.

And the only way we're going to have the power to do that is if God, our Heavenly Father, fills us with the spirit of His Son, Jesus, so that we live with that same power of Jesus and that same courage of Jesus and that same life of Jesus.

And so, friends, I want us to think about what do we pray for each other? What should I be praying for you? What should you be praying for me?

What should we be praying for each other? Oh, Father, fill us with the spirit of Your Son, Jesus, that we might live for Jesus and die for Jesus, that no matter what we're doing, we might seek to exalt Christ and glorify Christ and magnify Christ.

Without Your Spirit, we cannot do that. But with Your Spirit, we can do all things. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, Amen.

[35 : 31] Amen.