

Living is Christ

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[0 : 00] I've been reading, my Bible notes have been all about the tail end of Acts and it ties in really well with this passage from Philippians or the whole book.

! So forgive me for indulging too much perhaps on St Paul but let's explore. This letter was, as we know, written by St Paul and he was under Roman arrest awaiting trial. His incarceration was not for fault but for faith.

He'd been brought here because of false accusation by the Jewish authorities in Jerusalem where the local Roman authorities were looking for bribes and pandering to the Sanhedrin.

So he had appealed to Caesar because he knew he could not get justice in Jerusalem. So he'd been brought here to Rome. Here his imprisonment was a form of house arrest where he had to provide for all his expenses, his food, rent and so on.

And so he depended on the generosity of others to do that and that included this church in Philippi. He was able to receive visitors and preach but conversely he was chained to an elite Roman guard on an 18 inch chain the whole time.

[1 : 28] His guard would have changed every 4 to 6 hours say but he had no privacy. What would you do in that situation? It's unjust isn't it? It's inhibiting. It's denying dignity.

Paul's outcome was completely uncertain. He didn't know when his trial would be, whether he would then be released or thrown into a dungeon or executed.

Paul had no certainty over whether he would live or die in the next few days or months or years.

Plenty of reasons then to feel helpless and angry, to become despondent, always afraid.

Did Paul react in this way to his circumstances? With all this lack of justice and personal cost? No, Paul saw things differently.

Paul seemed to find strength where perhaps most of us would fail. He seemed impervious to his predicament. I want to explore this. I want to explore this. But in doing so, please understand, I'm not implying that therefore as Christians we should always man up, or indeed be expected to, in the face of adversity.

[3 : 01] We should remember that the Psalms are full of lament, of pain and worry expressed to God. Job took a long time to come through the devastation of the loss of his family and home.

Jonah moaned at God despite great success. It took Jesus three repetitions to restore Peter's confidence when he'd been knocked back by his failure.

For those of us who don't know my story, I was widowed at 47. Lynn died of cancer, leaving me with three children to care for and a massive hole in my heart.

The physical, emotional, the psychological and spiritual impacts of loss are real.

The pain of loss or trauma or even change aren't wrong or to be ashamed of. They're just a consequence of love in all its fullness.

[4 : 07] And a fragile thing we always carry that can make us gentler. Looking back, I can see just how God helped me at that time.

He was just with me in the pain, sharing it, allowing me space to carry it, not trying to bounce me out of it. But we can learn from St Paul who had a specific calling.

One that God had been setting out for him over a while. In Acts 20, in Macedonia, he said, And now, compelled by the Spirit, I'm going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.

And later added, The Holy Spirit warned me that prison and hardships are facing me. And then in chapter 21, through the Spirit, they urged Paul not to go to Jerusalem.

The people pleaded with Paul not to go. Clearly his friends weren't hearing all that God was saying to Paul at that time. I think it was Paul seeing the gold and white, whereas everyone else around him was seeing the blue and black.

[5 : 25] But there is a lesson here for us too, isn't there? In listening to all God is saying, not just the parts we want to hear. It's clear that the Holy Spirit had been preparing Paul, readying him, warning him of what his obedience would mean.

As well as equipping him and supporting his resolve to follow through. Paul went to Jerusalem. And the Spirit's warnings were true.

He was arrested, but God was with him always. And we can see God's plan. For Paul had also felt called and longed to serve the church in Rome.

And this was just the bizarre way that God was working that out for him. So St. Paul chose to see everything as an opportunity.

He wasn't seeing his imprisonment as a restriction or as a distraction from his calling. But there was a way to let it be known that he was there because of his love and faith in Jesus.

[6 : 33] If you were here last week, you'll remember John sharing testimony. I was blown away by it. It was amazing, wasn't it? And it's exactly this, I think.

John said, and I grabbed his notes so I can quote him exactly. He said, I'm here today talking to you from my own prison cell of dementia. And I feel totally blessed to be where I am.

Because without it, I would not have been able to do and continue to do all these things. The Lord is asking of me right now. Thank you, John, for that encouragement to see things so differently from the perspective of a servant of Christ.

Back to Paul. He didn't mind being chained to his guards either. This was a way to spread the message of Christ's love more widely. For every guard change meant a new person to witness to. So he didn't object to this depersonalising company of the palace guard. Because this enabled him to speak faith to the very heart of power.

[7 : 44] These elite soldiers were really influential. The makers and breakers of the powerful. Paul also chose to be glad rather than worry when others preached, filling the vacuum in God's mission to the Gentiles.

Nor did he worry about their motives, contrasting those loyal to him and those envious of him. I find that amazing too. But perhaps it's worth noting, although he clearly saw the difference in the motives of those people preaching, there was no question for him over any of them in their oneness in Christ.

Jesus was Lord for all these people. So Paul's talking about a secondary level of loyalty. Elsewhere in his letters he is very concerned about some of the false teaching being bounded about.

The church in Corinth, the church in Ephesus. Or in Paul's letter to Timothy. So he did worry about what was being said. But here there's no mention of that.

All we read is the light that Christ is preached. I wonder, have you ever been in that sort of situation, whether at work or at church, where a project dear to your heart is taken on by someone else?

[9 : 14] Paul knew he was called to take the Gospel to the Gentiles. Here he's happy that others take it over too.

Do we respond in the same way? Or are we protective of what we've done? Or our way of doing it? We know too from Paul's other writings, he was able to set aside his personal feelings.

Somehow he seemed able to weather his physical and emotional pain through identifying with Christ's suffering. I want to know Christ and the fellowship of fearing in his suffering, he writes later in chapter 3 of this letter.

So in summary, Paul wasn't worried about himself. He adapted to the circumstances around him, always looking for the positive opportunity and celebrated that God's work continued rather than being concerned about his own success.

How did Paul manage to be so positive? Because we know he did have his low moments in Corinth and even on the way to Rome. So I think we can assume that he wasn't an repressible tigger, as some people are, aren't they?

[10 : 34] Well, there are clues here in our passage as to why he was able to cope. Firstly, we notice in verse 18 that he chose to rejoice.

And sometimes it has to be choice. And that can be a hard choice. Yet we can delight in God, even when life is painful.

Going back to my story, a year or so after Lynn died, my daughter went off to New Wine with a school friend. And I had to go and collect her early.

I think she was off to Scout Camp or something. It meant I was able to go and join in with the celebration. I think of the last night of that festival.

It was the last night. It was a real celebration. Lots of joy, lots of worship, lots of praise. And I alone, just in my grief, sat there and wept.

[11 : 35] I was able to rejoice in God's presence through the tears. Not understanding his purposes, but for that moment at least, trusting in them.

So Paul was able to keep calm and carry on because of this. And because he knew the prayers of those he was writing to. We read, For I know that through your prayers what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.

How often are we buoyed up by the prayers of others? What an encouragement therefore for us to be diligent too in that praying for other people. And I know many of you are.

He also knew the provision of the Holy Spirit. Paul was sure of the Spirit's support. The one who had guided him so clearly this far. He had promised his deliverance to Rome through many an adventure.

It was the Holy Spirit who gave him reason to rejoice. For Paul knew his presence. It was the Holy Spirit that worked through the prayers of others.

[12 : 50] It was looking to what the Holy Spirit had already done that enabled him to keep going. But most of all, it was through the Spirit's presence, reminding him of his encounter with Jesus on that road to Damascus.

For since that moment Paul knew that nothing else mattered. Here, he found that he just trusted Jesus so completely that his own life didn't matter.

Verse 21 says, For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain. This wasn't being reckless, choosing unnecessary danger.

Nor was it exhaustion with life. He wasn't hoping to die as a knockout from life's struggles. He was simply so sure of the Christ he followed that he wasn't fazed by any outcome.

To paraphrase William Barclay, For Paul, life began on that Damascus road when he met Christ Jesus. And from that day, life continued with the presence of Christ Jesus guiding, directing and sustaining him.

[14 : 09] Thus, he knew that at the end of his life, the aim and final resting would be eternity with Jesus. Paul had no doubts what life meant.

I guess the question for us is, are we always that sure? Jesus doesn't expect us to be relentlessly positive.

But we do have the freedom to choose to see beyond how we feel. It's hard to choose to rejoice if something has made us angry or when fear overwhelms or our tears blind us.

But the Holy Spirit will support us in that choice. We're called to support each other in prayer, sustaining our efforts too.

And in doing so, we learn to put Jesus front and central, whatever unfolds. And when life ties us down, whether that's work we don't like or don't feel rewarded for, or demands on our time that we begrudge because we want to do our own thing.

[15 : 17] Or when the people that we are close to frustrate us. It does happen, doesn't it? We don't choose our families or our colleagues for that matter or even our brothers and sisters in Christ.

In all things that could distract us, Jesus' perspective can help us see it differently. With Him, everything is a time of possibility, a place of grace.

Every encounter is with a person to be loved and a chance to tell of Jesus our Lord. With Jesus, we can engage with what we are uncomfortable with too.

Not condemning, but trying to understand and seek to love and witness within that difference. The words of an old hymn came to mind. I do love the new ones, Julian, but I can never remember the new ones as well as the old ones.

Anyway, this is the... I wanted to quote a couple of verses from Oh the bitter shame and sorrow.

This is verses 2 and 3. Yet he found me.

[16 : 30] I beheld him bleeding on that cursed tree. Heard him pray, forgive them, Father. And my wistful heart said faintly, Some of self and some of thee.

Some of self and some of thee. Day by day, his tender mercy, healing, helping, full and free. Sweet and strong and ah, so patient.

Brought me low while I whispered, Less of self and more of thee. Less of self and more of thee. The last verse concludes, None of self and all of thee.

Isn't that our aim just like St Paul modeled? To be absorbed in loving Jesus that we forget ourselves? This is true freedom because it means not being concerned about us and our future. With the Holy Spirit's help, we can know that the task of our life is Jesus. The reward of our life is Jesus.

[17 : 41] The inspiration of our life is Jesus. Death simply enables reunion with Christ Jesus in all fullness and delight.

Living is Christ. Living is Christ. It's about him in everything. And I'm sure that the more we do this, the better the right.

Amen.