

# Normal Christianity: Christ first

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, please turn with me to the passage that we read a few moments ago, Philippians chapter 1.

And I wonder if I can sort of open up the passage by asking a simple question.

What's most important in your life? What's most important in your life individually, of course? What's most important in your family?

What's most important in the life of the fellowship? Galabost, free church. I should say that when I said to one or two folk that I was going to be over Galabost, some people thought I was going to somewhere out of Lord of the Rings, because Galabost just sounds like somewhere that might have elves and princes and battles going on in it, the great battle of Galabost or something.

And yet I've come here and found nothing but peace and tranquility. I've also enjoyed great fellowship with the elders. Yesterday evening was a very special time.

[ 1 : 19 ] And I do want to commend the elders to your prayers as together they seize the moment that God has created with you, not only for you but for the witness of the fellowship.

It is a significant moment for you. And to be able to have fellowship yesterday evening with the elders as they are seeking to seize this moment and respond to what God is doing and beginning to look ahead for what the vision and the strategy might be for going forward with God.

And I do commend the elders to your prayers in that. It is a vital process. It's an essential part of what it means to be leading in God's family.

And it was such an encouragement to spend time with these men yesterday and also to eat Chinese food. Tidally, I have to say.

And all the washing up was done afterwards. May I also just thank those who placed in the manse bacon, eggs, marmalade, tomatoes, tea, coffee, milk, and other goodies, fine oat cakes and biscuits.

[ 2 : 44 ] And very little of it will be left. So what's most important? In the passage that we read, Paul uses a phrase which, he uses it three times, in each of the three main sections, which indicates that as far as Paul is concerned, normal Christianity, not just the Christianity of an apostle like Paul, sort of GTI souped up wonderful version, but like normal Christianity, should be able to look at everything, even the worst things and great losses, and say, not irresponsibly, but responsibly say, whatever.

Those of you who have watched with your children in days of yore, Miss Piggy from the Muppets and Sesame Street, may remember Miss Piggy frequently saying, whatever.

So something would go wrong, some hugely significant thing would happen, some great thawning issue would be raised, and she would just say, whatever, and get on with life. Well, it's extremely doubtful that Paul had ever watched the Muppets.

But that attitude, that there is always someone or something more important than what I'm going through, was Paul's attitude.

And three times, he uses a phrase or a word which is best translated as whatever.

[ 4 : 37 ] So, in the first section, which runs from verse 12 down to about halfway through verse 18, and ends with, and because of this I rejoice, in that first question, it's laid out in paragraphs in the ESV and module versions as well, in that first paragraph, Christ is preached whatever.

So, whatever else happens, whatever else is going on, whatever people are like, whatever the cost, Christ is preached. And then in the second section, which runs from halfway through verse 18 down to the end of verse 26, he says, Christ is exalted.

So, you know, whatever, whatever happens to me, whether I live or die, whatever happens to my body, whatever happens to my plans to be with you, if Christ is exalted in my body, whatever.

And then in the third section, and this is how we know that this is normal Christianity, it's not just Paul, you know, super duper Christianity, he turns to the Philippians from verse 27 to the end, and he says to them, Christ needs to be first in your life, whatever. Because you're going through, he says to them, what I am going through. Christ first in your life together.

[ 6 : 12 ] Whatever. So let's unpack what these three sections are saying.

So Paul begins by saying, now I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so what has happened to him? Well, he has been arrested. And having been arrested, he's been dragged through the Roman legal system and dragged physically to Rome.

And he is now under house arrest in Rome. And the house arrest involves chains, which he refers to in verse 13. So he is chained under house arrest, either to the wall, or, given that it was house arrest, far more likely, to his guard.

And Paul was such a controversial figure, and had become almost notorious as he was passed through the Roman legal and governing system, that by the time he's got to Paul, he's, to Rome, he's been guarded, not by some squaddy off the street kind of thing, but he is being guarded by a member of the imperial guard, the palace guard.

Who were the imperial guard? Well, the imperial guard were the Caesar's elite personal guard. So like, when everything else had gone, there would still be this bunch of guards around Caesar whose sole purpose in life was to keep Caesar alive, not themselves alive.

[ 7 : 52 ] These were serious men. men, they weren't the kind of guys you'd want to muck around with. And one of them is chained to Paul.

Amazing. Paul is full of joy about that. Why?

Because what has happened to him has not really served to squash the gospel. It has not really served to silence Paul. In fact, it has served to advance the gospel.

And it is advancing the gospel through Paul's own testimony, because Paul is not gagged, he's only chained to a member of the imperial guard. And it has served to advance the gospel not just because Paul is still teaching and preaching and people are coming to visit him in the house and being taught by him and going out and teaching others.

And he is able to witness to the guards that he is chained to. It is also serving to advance the gospel because other Christians in Rome, most of the brothers in the Lord, verse 14, because of his chains, have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly, more boldly.

[ 9 : 17 ] So the whole thing about Christians talking about Jesus has just got ramped up in Rome when Rome was making every effort to push it down and suppress it.

No wonder Paul is rejoicing. And of course, in arresting Paul and carting him all the way to Rome, the world thought that it was going to silence the gospel and keep it marginal and keep the news about Jesus marginal and keep the worship of Jesus as king, Kaiser, Caesar, quiet, and the very opposite has happened.

So God, in his infinite wisdom and in his ironic creativity, has taken the most articulate preacher of the gospel from a backwater, Jerusalem, in Roman Empire terms, right to the very epicenter of the Roman Empire and he's giving, God is giving Paul the opportunity to preach to the members of Caesar's own imperial guard.

Like, how clever is that of God? He even has an imperial guardsman chained to Paul so he can't get away when Paul starts talking to him about the true king, the true Caesar in all the earth. So Paul is not dismayed at the way events have turned out for him. And Paul does not think that God has abandoned him.

[ 11 : 18 ] And Paul does not think that it's all gone horribly wrong. And Paul doesn't seem too worried that he's not going to enjoy a nice, quiet retirement somewhere in the Mediterranean with his feet up and a nice, ice-cold sangria by his side and a good scroll to read through.

He doesn't seem too bothered about the fact that any plans that he might have had for the rest of his life have just gone completely missing. God's why?

Because Christ, who means more to Paul than life itself, is being preached. And Paul is not even that concerned that some of the people preaching Christ are naughty bad people who are doing it with false motives.

we will get very stood up, I think, about that in most of our churches, that people might be preaching Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely.

Verse 17, supposing that they can stir up trouble for Paul. We might get very upset about that, that some, verse 15, will be preaching Christ out of envy and rivalry.

[12:40] We might think that you can't possibly preach Christ effectively and be pleased about Christ being preached by people who are bad. Not Paul. Verse 18, whatever.

What does it matter? What then? So what? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached.

And because of this, I rejoice. So he is rejoicing that Christ is preached, even though it means that for Christ to be preached boldly and courageously all over Rome and right at the very heart of the Roman Empire, it means chains and a trial awaiting it, after which he might be killed.

And he's really pleased because whoever's doing it, they're preaching Christ. Christ is more important than anyone for him.

now we might admire that in a preacher, we might admire that in a minister, we might expect that an apostle would say that kind of thing, but it is normal Christianity, it is not abnormal as far as Paul is concerned.

[14:30] so I look back over my life and I ask myself what is functionally, whatever I might say, what is functionally being most important to me and it has not always been that Christ is being made known and therefore honored and people drawn to him.

I am very interested in my own comfort and I am very interested in my own plans coming to fruition.

I am very interested in having a enjoyable life.

I am very interested in having some sense of security that comes from my environment around, people around me. I am very interested, very concerned about my kids.

I am very concerned and interested that my wife is contented and thriving. None of these things are things that I ought not to be worried about, it is just that they have given me a life and an existence which seems to be the thing I've got to preserve.

Christ, Jesus, is what being a Christian is about. Being a Christian is not about primarily having a life where everything takes its place and we fit church in and we fit kids education and we fit our family in and we fit our plans in and we get it all arranged neatly and it's fine and that's a Christian life.

[16:36] It's just like a non-Christian life only it's a bit cleaner we like to think and it's more religious certainly and we think it all comes from God.

But functionally it is very easy for us to live a life that other people would watch and they would be hard pressed to conclude that the most important thing in our lives isn't a thing it's Jesus.

it's not even church it's Jesus. It's not even the scriptures it's Jesus. It's not even our place in society it's Jesus.

It's not what people think of us it's Jesus. Jesus is like number one for Paul.

And so that gets repeated when he thinks about what's going to happen to him. So in one sense verses 12 through 18a are about what's happened to him that's gone into where he is.

[17:57] And from 18b through to 26 he's looking ahead and saying now what's coming? Well what's coming is the trial. As far as he's aware what's coming is the last stage in the whole Roman legal process.

There is no higher appeal than appealing to Caesar. And when you appeal to Caesar it means that Caesar will be there in the room listening to what you say. There is no higher authority in the land.

And if Caesar says off with his head that's what will happen. Because that's what a Caesar was like. If Caesar said it was Christmas everyone started singing carols.

Not historically speaking but you know what I mean. and so he looks ahead and he says I eagerly expect and hope that I will be in no way ashamed but will have sufficient courage.

I don't want to bottle out here. I don't want to collapse as a Christian. I don't want to be a weakling and just sort of disown everything.

[19:08] I want to have I hope I will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body whether by life or by death.

What a thing to say. Whether I live or die whatever I want Christ to be exalted.

So in first part Christ preached whatever. This part Christ exalted whatever. Life or death.

That's a very serious thing to say. When it's a real possibility that death might be the outcome, it is at least statistically unlikely that any of us will be asked to die for Jesus on Lewis this coming day. But there are little deaths. And who knows how it will go in the UK. And there are brothers and sisters around the world who this week are in a different position and for whom it is statistically quite likely that in this coming week they will either disown Jesus and live or own Jesus and die.

[ 20 : 50 ] Why is it that Paul can say whatever whether I live or die whatever as long as Christ is exalted and he will be.

He will be exalted by my courageous witness that will lead to my death or he will be exalted in my life because I will be serving him in my life. How do you get to that place where Jesus means so much to you that live or die you're going to exalted?

Well the answer is in verse 21. He can say what he says in verse 20. Christ will be exalted in my body whether by life or by death.

He can say whatever in verse 20 because for the beginning of verse 21 to me to live is Christ and to die is gain. in our culture to die is loss.

That's all. There is no gain in dying in our culture in our western world. How easy it is for us just to imbibe the cultural atmosphere.

[ 22 : 16 ] we would never say it but it's so easy for it to become part of our life.

If I may allude without crossing too many boundaries here, if I may allude to coastal malt.

I know that we know about these things. Coastal malt has apparently sort of salty, sea salty flavors to it.

It comes from the peat and possibly even from the process of producing such a 12 year old malt.

But if you look at the ingredients in malt whiskey, you will not find peat.

so I'm told. But you can taste it. So you can't precipitate out this stuff.

[ 23 : 21 ] It's in solution. It's just in there in the chemicals and solution in the real stuff. And none of us would ever precipitate out of life a statement that death is only loss.

But when we're living in solution it comes in to our thinking, it comes into our feeling from the world around us, from the peat.

We need to think well what does death mean for a believer? it means no more death and it means no more pain and no more sorrow.

And all those things that Revelation 21 lays out, it means no more wrestling against the tempter.

it means no more will the impact of sin be felt through this body and its aches and pains and its susceptibility to sin. For to me to live as Christ and to die as games of well known English Christian author and conference speaker he was telling the story of meeting an old friend some of the acquaintance they'd known for a while and they hadn't met for a couple of years or so and they'd kind of lost touch a bit in that time and the guy said to the speaker and the officer said how's your wife and he said she passed away last year and he began to say oh I'm terribly sorry and then he had to stop himself and think well hang on a minute she's gone to heaven so maybe that's better for her and then he thought well I can't say

[ 25 : 31 ] I'm not sorry because it's a bit of a quandary what do you say so as Paul is concerned this Paul who had supervised the stoning of Stephen who as the stones were raining down on him was looking up and seeing Christ in all his exalted glory this Paul who has learned that heaven is his home it is his new birthright in Christ as a gift of grace this Pharisee of Pharisees has learned that his home is with the father and he knows that heaven is gay death is gay because this is not his only life and it's never meant to be the best life and this is not your only life and this life is never ever meant to be the best life you'll have that's coming praise

God and so he says whether by life or by death whatever as long as Christ is exalted and I would love to depart and be with Christ but it's more necessary for you that I remain in the body and so his attention begins to turn back to them and so when he gets to the third part verse 27 to 30 he says it's the same for you whatever happens to me verse 27 whatever and whatever is going to happen to you conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ and then he spells that out in the rest of verse 27 and verse 28 what does it mean you read that phrase conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ what does that mean what does that look like well he spells it out then whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence here are the four things I will know that you stand firm in one spirit so nothing is moving you as a fellowship away from that foundation in God's word and in the gospel faith in Jesus Christ Christ your righteousness Christ

your only righteousness Christ your sufficient righteousness Christ your hope your only hope and your sufficient hope Christ your redeemer your only redeemer your sufficient redeemer Christ the lover of your soul stand firm on that and say don't let anything move you away from that and then the second bit of what it means to live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ contending as one now it says contending as one for the faith of the gospel but I want to break that one phrase into two little sections contending as one first of all it is so easy for us as human beings to contend with each other in churches but against one another not to contend as one but to contend against one another this is our tribe and like families it is surprisingly easy to go to war against members of your own family

I mean members of your own family can press your buttons like nobody else is that not true people that you're very close to and you love dearly and you've known all your life are the people who can just with like one word or one word with a slight intonation to it or one look really really get under your skin and annoy you and it is easy for those little things to stick and grow and families contend against each other within each other and that happens in the church family Paul says if you're living in a manner of the gospel then you contend as one for the faith of the gospel so you contend against that which opposes the faith of the gospel you contend against self-righteousness because the faith of the gospel is faith in

Christ who is your righteousness you contend for the faith of the gospel which is faith in God and not faith in an institution you contend as one against the tempter so that when one is under the cosh from the devil you'll get round them you pray for them and you love them and when one is falling under that you'll get round them and lift them up and love them and when one wanders away you don't contend against the one who's wandering away you contend as one for them so you just get round them and you love them and you know that what you've made is a place to be safe because whatever happens whatever you do whatever you say however much you mess up the people in church will be for you before God and will love you because that's exactly what

[ 31 : 53 ] God has done with them that would be a very attractive church to belong to that would be worth going to even if you'd never been to church before that would be a kind of group of people who'd feel glad to be amazed and then the false part of living in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ that you are not frightened in any way by those who are opposed because the Philippians are going to have to face in Philippi exactly what Paul had been facing for has been granted to you on behalf of Christ verse 29 not only to believe on him but also to suffer for him since you

Philippians are going through the same thing that I'm going through the same struggle you saw I had and now here that I still have don't be afraid don't be afraid what though they take my life but it's honored children wife yet is their profit small these things shall vanish all the city of God remaineth they can take your life but they can't take Jesus from you that's what he's saying don't be frightened don't be frightened by your position it hurts he's not saying don't feel hurt he's saying don't be frightened it's like going to the dentist you think it's going to hurt apologies to any dentists amongst us but you're going don't be frightened this is normal

Christianity what Paul was experiencing and was saying about himself and how important Christ was to him the first two sections exactly the same for these Philippians these ordinary Philippian Christians Christ is preached whatever Christ is exalted whatever let Christ be first amongst you and within you whatever that's normal Christianity and may God in his power through the spirit who is within you and amongst you may God give you everything you need every time you need it for it all to be about Jesus so the next time preaching pulls that easy trick of saying what's most important in your life somewhere in your heart you just quick as a flash saying Jesus not because it's the right answer but because it's your answer let's pray