

Grasp Hope In Jesus Christ

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[0 : 00] Through Christ our Lord. Amen. This sermon, like other ventures of mine, begins with a boo-boo.

I brought the wrong Bible. Excuse me a moment while I go to my pew and get the right one. Have you ever done a thing like that?

If not, don't worry, you will. Please turn to page 185 in the New Testament section of our Bibles. Our text this evening comes from the passage that was read to us, the second half of Philippians chapter 1.

It's six awesome words from verse 21 of Philippians chapter 1, page 185, left-hand column.

Writes Paul, To me, to live is Christ. You might call this a stethoscope text.

[1 : 23] There were many such in the Bible. Texts, I mean, which enable you to hear the heart of the speaker beating, just as a doctor's stethoscope enables him to hear your heart beating.

Now we know what made Paul tick. Here he says it straight out. To me, to live is Christ.

The Corinthians thought he was a little bit crazy. Others have shared that same opinion down the years. Well, this is Paul's craziness, if that's what we're going to call it.

To him, to live was Christ. And that explained everything about him, everything at the level of purpose, everything at the level of practice, everything which made folk who watched him scratch their heads and wonder what on earth he was up to.

All of it is to be understood in terms of the deep truth that he reveals here, that to him, to live was Christ.

[2 : 40] It is in Philippians clearer, I think, than in any of the other letters, what it was that made Paul tick.

You hear his heartbeat more directly in this letter, because it's an informal letter. He isn't writing to settle debates and answer questions that the Philippians have asked him.

He isn't consciously laboring as a teacher to remove error and resolve problems. No, this is a letter in which he's simply expressing fellowship with his converts at Philippi, giving them encouragement, writing a word of thanks for the gift that they sent him through Epaphroditus, and telling them how things are with him, giving them news, which Epaphroditus, in fact, will be able to amplify, for Epaphroditus is going back, carrying this letter, and he'll be able to explain everything in detail to the Philippians when he arrives.

It all sounds very friendly and very relaxed, doesn't it, when you put it that way? But in fact, Paul's life was not altogether relaxed when he wrote this letter.

He was, believe it or not, in jail, and he was facing the real possibility of summary execution.

[4 : 19] He was living with the sword of Damocles, you might say, hanging over his head. He thought that his death might very well come very soon.

He didn't know what they were going to do with him, but he feared the worst. And this, of course, was a moment of truth for him.

As Dr. Johnson, the sage of Fleet Street in the 18th century, said, when a man knows that he's going to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates the mind wonderfully.

And it's always like that. When you suddenly find that there is a real likelihood of your life ending very soon, it is something of a crisis, and it's crises that show the quality, and indeed the identity, of a person who makes a Christian profession.

It's a crisis of this kind, which shows whether you're real, or whether, despite all the motions that you've gone through, you're not really real as yet.

[5 : 35] The way that Paul reacts to this crisis shows that he, at least, is real, marvelously real. For here he is in jail with this prospect of death sentence being pronounced on him very soon, and as everybody who speaks about Philippians and who reads Philippians knows and says, joy, yes, joy, is the temper of the letter from first to last.

But that's not the only thing, in fact, that ought to be said. Because that wouldn't have been so, as we're now going to see, unless something else was true of the letter.

And true of the man who wrote the letter. And that is, that Jesus Christ was his focus. Paul's focus in life, and Paul's focus, in fact, in this letter.

The prospect of being executed for his Christian testimony very soon, has made Paul more explicit, more forthright, than he is perhaps anywhere else in his writings, about how much Christ means to him personally, and how being Christ makes sense of his life, even if it leads him into a life shorter than it might have been otherwise.

If you look at the letter, you very soon realize that Christ is the focus. In the first 15 verses, which I guess you studied last week, Christ is named 10 times.

[7 : 27] In the passage that we've just read, he's named again and again more. Let me show you this. Verse 1.

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to the saints in Christ Jesus. Verse 2. Grace to you and peace from the Lord Jesus Christ.

Verse 6. God will, God who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

I know that, says Paul, and I'm glad about it. Verses 8 through 11. God is my witness. I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.

Christ loves you through me. And I love you through him. That's what that phrase means. And I pray for you, he says, verse 9.

[8 : 26] I pray that, look at verse 10 now, you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruits of righteousness which come through Jesus Christ.

And then verse 13. I want you to know, he says, my imprisonment is for Christ. Now into tonight's passage.

There are people preaching Christ, says Paul. They do it from varied motives, but they preach Christ, verse 15. They proclaim Christ, verse 17.

Christ is proclaimed, verse 18, and in that I rejoice. Verse 19. Yes, and I shall rejoice. I know, he says, that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance.

I'm confident, verse 20, that now, as always, Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. Afford to me to live is Christ, our text.

[9 : 37] And then verse 23. My desire is to depart and be with Christ. That's far better. But I think I shall stay in this world.

I think I shall be released because you need me. I think I shall come to you and minister to you again so that, verse 26, in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus.

But remember, verse 27, let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ. Remember, it's been granted to you, verse 29, for the sake of Christ, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for his sake.

Christ, Christ, Christ. And it doesn't stop, I may say, in the first chapter. If you just turn over the page and look at that marvelous bit of testimony in chapter 3 from verses 7 through 14, you see Paul saying even more clearly what Christ means to him.

I want you to look at this actually before we go on with the verse that I've taken as our text because this is really part of its meaning. Look at chapter 3, verse 7, and then on.

[11 : 01] Whatever gain I had, everything that really was in human terms gained to me, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. That is, I counted it as something which I could lose and could happily lose in order to gain him for I would gain on the exchange.

Indeed, that's what's happened, says Paul, verse 8, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ, Christ Jesus, my Lord. For his sake, I've suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him not having a righteousness of my own but the righteousness that is through faith in Christ.

Verse 9, that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and share his sufferings becoming like him in his death, that wonder of wonders I mate, then thus attain to the resurrection from the dead.

And then verse 12, second half, I press on to make it my own because Christ Jesus has made me his own. And then verse 14, I press on towards the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Paul faces the possibility of an early death and it prompts him to realize just how much he focuses his life on Christ and when he comes to write a letter to his friends in Christ, well he tells them all about it and that's what you've got in Ephesians and you wouldn't have Paul's joy in Ephesians if you didn't have Paul's Christ-centeredness.

[12 : 54] Did I say Ephesians? I should have said Philippians and now I say it again. if you didn't have Paul's Christ-centeredness in Philippians because it's out of the Christ-centeredness that the joy comes.

If we want joy like Paul's, we must understand what he meant when he said, to me, to live is Christ and enter into that life which Paul knew and out of which his joy came.

to me, to live is Christ. I live through Christ, I live for Christ, I live with Christ, I live in Christ.

Just as we live in Vancouver and fish live in water, so Paul lives in Christ. Wow, you say, and so do I.

it's a marvelous thing for anyone to be able to say and it's a precious, precious secret to learn. Let's be quite sure that we crack the code.

[14 : 06] First question to ask here is who is Christ anyway? We need to ask that question because a lot of people, especially in evangelical churches where doctrine is thrown around a great deal, we get into the way of referring to Christ as certainly the key to a lot of truths, but he becomes a theological symbol, a kind of X.

We think of where he fits in in the plan of God rather than focusing on who and what he is in himself. Paul, as a matter of fact, in this very letter helps us to get clear again in our minds who Christ is.

Just stay on page 186, no, wait a minute, at the bottom of page 185 right-hand column, look at verse 5, where Paul tells us who Christ is.

He says, Christ Jesus, you see there the last words of verse 5, Christ Jesus, though he was in the form of God, that's a phrase which means he was actually personally divine, though he was in the form of God, he didn't count equality with God, equality in honor and glory and joy, a thing to be grasped, that is a thing to be held on to when the Father proposed to him something else that the Father wished him to do.

No, at the Father's will, verse 7, he emptied himself, emptied himself of glory and joy, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, that's the incarnation, being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on the cross, that's the atonement.

[16 : 14] And for that, because he fulfilled the Father's will in thus humbling himself to the point of his atoning death, God, God the Father, highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, the name of Lord.

Every tongue, verse 11, is to confess that Jesus Christ is now Lord to the glory of God the Father. So, what can we say in answer to the question, who is Jesus Christ?

Three things. One, he is the Jesus of the Gospels. The Jesus whose nature, character, mind, wisdom, we may learn through reading the Gospels.

That's who he is. Not the wimp of the last temptation film, but the Son of God come down from heaven to offer himself as a ransom, atoning for our sins on Calvary's cross.

God's love. You may have heard me say, for I often do bring this in when I preach, that at the British Coronation Service, Commonwealth Coronation Service, the moderator of the Church of Scotland gives a Bible to the monarch who is being enthroned with the words, these are the lively oracles of God, this is the royal law, this is the most precious thing that this world affords.

[18 : 05] And indeed, the Bible is the most precious thing that this world affords, and it's in order to make that point that I quote this little bit of ritual. But now what I want to say is this, that within the most precious thing that this world affords, the Word of God, our guidebook to glory, the most precious elements are the four Gospels where we actually meet the Savior.

We watch him at work. We learn who he is. We see him in action. We Christians don't do enough of this. Jesus should never be a kind of undefined X in our theological formulae, because Jesus should always be the well-known person with whom we're acquainted through reading and rereading those four Gospels.

Of all the books in the Bible, the Gospels should be read most frequently, and read as books. It takes between two and three hours for an ordinary reader to get through one of the Gospels.

Brothers and sisters, it's a good and health-giving discipline. Anyone who has tried it will tell you, why not make it part of your life?

You'll be amazed at the glory and joy that it brings you to get used to seeing Jesus in action, hearing his words, accompanying with him in the pages of the Gospels.

[19 : 45] So that's the first thing to say, the Christ of whom Paul is talking is the Jesus of the Gospels. And the second thing to say is that he's the Lord of the universe. God has given him the name of Lord.

That means God has given him the position of Lord. And the third thing to say is that he is the Savior of sinners. Paul never tires of celebrating that.

In chapter three, verse nine, did you hear the words? I want to be found in him, said Paul. I don't think I read them actually, but I'm going to read them now, not having a righteousness of my own, but having that which comes through faith in Christ.

The righteousness that washes out my sins. The righteousness that comes to me through the cross. The righteousness of acceptance that Jesus shares with me.

The Father accepts him, and when I'm one with Jesus, the Father accepts me too, and my guilt is gone. Jesus then is Savior from the guilt of sin.

[20 : 55] He saves us too from the power of sin. In chapter four, verse 13, you see Paul saying, I can do all things, all the things I have to do, in him who strengthens me.

That's Jesus. And as he strengthens me, so sin's grip is broken. and one day, he'll set me free, as he was going to set Paul and all other saints free also from the very presence of sin.

And Paul says that explicitly in chapter 3 and verses 20 and 21. From heaven we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will change our lowly body to be like his glorious body by the power which enables him to subject all things to himself.

And when that happens, sin, sin in the sense of what I call the murky urges which we all of us find inside us and which distress us more than usually we're willing to say, those will be no more.

And frankly, I look forward to that day, and don't you? He's the Savior of sinners, from the Savior from the guilt and power and presence of sin, that's who he is.

[22 : 20] And says Paul, to me, to live is Christ. This glorious Savior, what does he mean? I'm sure that what I'm going to say now doesn't get anywhere near the heart of what Paul is expressing here.

You could preach a number of sermons on this text and still not have said it all. But here's three things quickly for us in our understanding of Paul and in the lives that we have to live where there are challenges that we have to face.

What does Paul mean when he says to me to live is Christ? At least he means this. One, that he gets help from Christ.

He says that actually in verse 19. I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, Christ helping me through his Spirit, this will turn out for my deliverance.

What he's talking about is his imprisonment and the legal process he faces. He doesn't really think, although he has to allow for the possibility, but he doesn't really think that his ministry is going to be curtailed just now.

[23 : 46] Though he has to reckon with the fact that it may be, he doesn't believe it will. And he says that the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ is going to contribute to that effect.

What does he mean? Well, the Spirit of Jesus Christ will help him, this is his thought, to speak wisely and well and cogently when he's put on trial and when he's made to answer for himself.

He speaks in other places of the help that he receives from the Lord to do just that. In Acts 26 and verse 22, for instance, witnessing before King Agrippa, that's what he says, he's giving an account of himself and his ministry, and these are his words, having received, he says, the help that comes from God right to this day, I stand here testifying both to small and great, saying nothing but what the prophets and Moses said would come to pass, that Christ would suffer and be raised from the dead, and so on.

Having received the help that comes from God, I testify, one of the areas at any rate in which the Lord helps Paul is in bearing a faithful testimony, both as preacher and teacher and pastor and counselor, and when he's up against it, when he has to give account of himself, as now he's going to have to do, as a man put in jail for some alleged offense against the Roman peace, which is the reason why he's in jail, he looks to the Lord to help him to speak well when he comes to trial.

It's interesting, later on he was put in prison again. This is not his final imprisonment, this imprisonment was probably in 60 A.D., and there was another one probably in 65 or 66 A.D., and that really was very near the end of his life, and it was out of that final imprisonment that he wrote his pastoral letters to Timothy and Titus, and in the very last letter he wrote, 2 Timothy chapter 4, he talks about the trial, I mean the legal process, that he's being put through, and he says this, it's verse 16 and 17, it's the same thought and the same experience and the same witness that he bears.

[26 : 39] At my first defense he says, no one took my part, all deserted me, but, verse 17, the Lord stood by me and gave me strength to proclaim the message fully that all the Gentiles might hear it.

No man stood by me, but the Lord stood by me. I received help from Jesus my Lord. And this is something that ought to be true for you and me also, just as it was true for Paul.

As you drive from the airport up Granville, I don't know whether you've noticed, there's a hoarding on the left just where the street straightens into the Granville Strait, and on the hoarding it says experience Jesus.

Have you seen that? If you're not driving, look out for it next time. It's a dangerous phrase in one way because it suggests that Jesus might be experienced as feelings and thrills and this, that, and the other tingle up and down the spine are experienced and of course it's not like that.

But nonetheless it's a good phrase and there's a deep truth at the heart of it. Christians do experience Jesus as the one who helps them to do what by nature they never could have done.

[28 : 11] Stand firm for Jesus and speak faithfully for Jesus under pressure sometimes which, without the Lord's help, would simply have cowed them and buckled them up and brought them to silence.

That's one way in which help from Jesus should be coming on a regular basis for us to us. There are other ways too, though I haven't time to speak about them.

But just notice before we go on, how Paul develops his thought about expecting that he'll be released in verses 25 and 6.

Having said that to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account, he says, convinced of this I'm sure that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus because of my coming to you again.

what's he looking forward to? He's looking forward to Christ ministering help to the Philippians through him. It had happened before and he rejoiced in that, to be a channel of the Lord's help to others and he's looking forward to that happening again.

[29 : 38] I want to ask you before we move on, not only whether you know what it is to experience the help of Christ, I trust you do and will more and more, but who is it who ministers Christ to you?

I hope you've learned to thank the Lord for them. As Paul envisaged the Philippians glorying in Christ because of the help that he would be able to give them when he returned to them.

So that's one thing he means for sure, he gets help from Christ. The second thing he means for sure is this, that he gives honor to Christ and that's what his life is all about.

Living in a way which pleases because it honors the Savior whom he worships and loves. See how he says that in verse 20.

It's my eager expectation and hope, he says, that I shan't be at all ashamed, but with full courage, now as always, Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or death.

[30 : 54] Christ will be honored. That's what I want, he says. And I look to the Lord to give me courage and confidence so that I'm not ashamed of him, so that I may be consistent and now as always honor Christ in the way that I live.

You know what it meant in the palmy days of the British Empire, a hundred years ago, shall I say, for pioneers to represent Her Majesty the Queen, as it was, Queen Victoria in those days, and to think of themselves as carrying the honor of the Queen and the country in the way that they behaved.

And in the same way, Paul believes that they will judge his master by the way that he behaves. And he is very anxious, therefore, to behave in a way that brings honor to the Savior all the time, every way.

And it's because that's his concern that he's able so amazingly to cope with the situation he described in verses 15 through 18. Some folk are preaching Christ out of what he calls partisanship, verse 17, thinking to afflict me, that is to make me feel rotten in my imprisonment.

One supposes that what they are doing is trying to make Paul feel frustrated because he's in prison and he isn't free to go out and preach as he loves to do.

[32 : 44] They are doing it. He isn't. And their chief motivation in doing it is to make Paul feel bad. Isn't it incredible that an apostle should be handled in that way?

But Paul is saying that that's how it was. But still, Paul refuses to let them choose his emotions for him. They want to make him feel bad, but he refuses to do it.

What then, he says, verse 18? Every way, whether in pretence or in truth, whether out of good motives or out of bad, Christ is being proclaimed, and in that I rejoice, he says, and will rejoice.

He chooses to be glad that the gospel is going out rather than to feel bitter and self-pitying because he can't, at that point, being in prison, you see, join the company of those who publish it.

Christ is being preached. That makes for his honor. That's all that I care for, says Paul. I rejoice in that. And here again is something that we are called to learn from Paul, as he labored in every way he could, by his loyalty to Christ, to bring honor to Christ, so he says, must the Philippians, and so he means, must we.

[34 : 16] Look what he says to the Philippians. You, verse 27, you must live in a way that's worthy of the gospel.

You must because otherwise Christ is dishonored. And that must not be. I want to hear of you, he says, verse 27, that you're not fleeing from your task, but you're standing firm for Christ and his truth.

I want to hear of you, he says, that you're not fighting each other, but that you're standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.

And I want to hear of you that you're not frightened by the opposition, as by Christ's, through Christ's help, I'm not frightened by the opposition that I'm up against at the moment.

You see that in verse 29, sorry, verse 28, not frightened in anything by your opponents. I want my experience of Christ's help enabling me to honor him, to be reproduced in you, says Paul.

[35 : 32] Because you, after all, last words of the chapter, verse 30, you're engaged in the same conflict which you saw and now hear to be mine. you, too, have been privileged not only to believe in Christ but also to suffer for his sake.

I want you to honor Christ as by his help I honor him. You must, says Paul, or he's dishonored.

You see what it meant to Paul in this matter to say that to him to live was Christ? It means that the whole purpose of his life was to honor Christ in the manner described.

Now we have to ask ourselves the same question. Is this our purpose? Could we say what Paul says at this point? And third and last and quickly, when he says to me to live in Christ, he certainly means that he grasps hope in Christ.

Hope that goes not simply through this life as long as it lasts, but hope which goes beyond this life. To me to live is Christ, he says, and to die is gain.

[36 : 57] Because death means leaving this world to be with Christ. See that in verse 23. He says, my desire is to depart and be with Christ.

That's far better. If you ask Paul what life is for, one of the answers that he might very well have given is, well, it's preparation for that eternal life when we shall be with Christ.

In the fullest sense, seeing him, close to him, like him, enjoying him more richly and more fully than ever we could down here.

This life is like engagement, that life will be like marriage. This life, we're close to him, in that world we'll be closer yet. So says Paul, this hope, which extends beyond this world, this hope is rich, this hope is glorious, this hope is the best thing that I could envisage.

I love my Savior, he says, I long to be with him. If the choice was mine, that's really what I would choose. I wonder if we could echo that.

[38 : 21] During this past week, a person whom I admire very much mentioned and close to, has discovered that he's almost certainly got terminal cancer and he has to face this in a very personal way.

I have no doubt that Paul's answer, Paul's testimony here, Paul's answer to those who ask him what his life is all about, is glowing in my friend's heart.

He too has grasped hope in Christ, which is a happy thing in the circumstances, you will agree. All of us need that same hope.

The one thing that's certain is that it will come to us one day. Life is going to stop. That's the only thing that's really certain about it. I like to talk of the heart stop day as my third birthday.

I was born physically, that's birthday number one, that was rather a long time ago. I was born again at age 18. I don't know what age I shall be when my third birthday comes, but that's the way to think of heart stop day.

[39 : 39] That's clearly the way that Paul is thinking of it here. If the choice was mine, I would depart to be with Christ, which is far better, he says.

And if you've learned to love him as your savior, well, you'll resonate with his words there. A good old Puritan said it all in one of the hymns in our hymn book, actually.

The Puritan's name is Richard Baxter, and the hymn starts like this. Lord, it belongs not to my care whether I die or live.

To love and serve you is my share, and this your grace must give. If life be long, I will be glad that I may long obey.

If short, then why should I be sad to soar to endless day? My knowledge of that life is small, the eye of faith is dim, but it's enough that Christ knows all, and I shall be with him.

[40 : 44] that's what it means to grasp hope in Christ as Paul had done. If God put his stethoscope to our heart, would he hear our heart, I wonder, saying what Paul's heart said and what Paul verbalizes for us all to hear when he declares, to me, to live is Christ.

Oh, brothers and sisters, we need to face that challenge. I'm sure Paul's words mean more than I've said, but I'm sure they don't mean less. Day by day, are you getting help from Christ?

Day by day, are you living to give honor to Christ? Each day, are you living as one who has grasped hope in Christ, the hope of glory?

It should be so. And while I should apologize, I suppose, for having gone on too long, I often do, I'm afraid of this evening service, I'm not going to apologize for pressing that challenge on your conscience as I press it on my own conscience.

learn by God's grace to say, yes, to me too, to live is Christ. And then God will bless you indeed.

[42 : 23] Amen. For him to respond to the message of the sermon, please turn to 135, five verses, the ones that are specified as being the ones to sing first if you can't sing all 11, 1, 3, 7, 9, and 11.

Those are the ones that I'll sing, that we'll sing. This is praise to the Christ who, by God's grace, will increasingly be our life.

Numbers 1, 3, 7, 9, 11, of 135. band, like, 155.

Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen.

[45 : 18] Amen. Amen.

We kneel to pray.