

To Live Is Christ

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[0 : 0 0] All right. Hey, welcome everybody. Welcome to City Grace. My name is Elliot. So good to be with you today. So we have started a series in the book of Philippians, and we're going to be continuing that where we left off in chapter 1. So if you have your Bibles, you can turn to chapter 1. If not, no worries. It's going to be on the screen behind us.

And so we look at these passages today. One of the questions, like we're going to start to get some more insight into what's happening with Paul here. And one of the questions I think would be really helpful to have in our mind from the outset is this. Who is really winning and losing in life? So whether you realize it or not, one of the things that any place you live in or any culture you are part of is doing kind of necessarily is painting you a picture of who is really a winner and who is really a loser. I mean, I can't open up any app on my phone, any type of social media without it showing me all kinds of Instagram and TikTok and social media feeds of some internet hero trying to convince me I need to be like them, right? Like if I was really on it, I would have a business like theirs. I would be out there making it happen. If I was really on it, I would have a physique like theirs. My fitness regime would be like dialed in. They've got the answers to life, right? Like they are a winner. And then of course advertisers pick up on that, right? And then they try to like sell you on it. It's sort of the classic, hey, if you buy this car, then you'll get all these things you're not going to get. Like what you're going to get is debt. That's what you're going to get if you buy a car, right? But in this passage today, we're going to see an image of a man who in a lot of ways doesn't look like someone who's winning. In fact, one of the reasons he's writing this church is because he knows that they're concerned for him. He knows that they're concerned about the situation he's in. And through that, we're going to see like just this really different picture of who the Bible thinks is winning and losing. So we're going to pick up the story in Philippians chapter 1 verse 12. And it says this, Paul writing, he says, I want you to know brothers that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. So it's become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are now much more bold to speak the word without fear. Some indeed preach Christ with envy and rivalry, but others from a good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I'm here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim

Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, but thinking they'll afflict me in my imprisonment. But what then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or truth, Christ is proclaimed.

And in that, I rejoice. Yes, I will rejoice. For I know that through your prayers and the help of the spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance. As it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be ashamed, but that with full courage now, as always, Christ will be honored my body, whether by my life or by my death. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. And if I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which shall I choose? I can't tell. I'm hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and to be with Christ, for that's far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. And so convinced of this, I know that I'll remain and continue with all of you 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, this is God's word to us. So a little quick context on what's going on here. The church at Philippi, Paul had founded that around 50 AD on his second missionary journey. And at the time of this letter, it's probably somewhere between five to ten years later. We don't know exactly when, because we don't know exactly when he's a prisoner. And we don't know exactly where. The common understanding is probably in Rome, but there's also some evidence he could have been in prison in Ephesus. So we don't know exactly when it is. But what we do know is it's right in the middle of his ministry. And we know that this church that he's planted at Philippi is concerned about him. And they've sent a messenger and a gift, and now he's writing back. But because they know that he's been put into chains, they're worried about him. And so what's interesting is when Paul writes back, he doesn't seem to view his situation in the same way that we might, or that he thinks they might be. Because for all external purposes, it looks like Paul is losing. I mean, put aside for a minute, just in terms of worldly things, Paul was a person who was rapidly ascending in prominence in the social circles and Jewish culture he was in. And then he meets Jesus and turns it, like puts all of that aside, right? So forget about that. But you say, okay, he's traded that for Jesus. And now this is a guy that is like literally blazing the gospel into places it's never been before. I mean, he's going into cities, staying there for a little while, and like a new community of believers is being birthed. Like the good news is going forth. He's establishing churches. People are coming to Jesus in a way that everybody thought was laughable. And then right in the middle of that, it's just going to stop? Like this is his end in some ratty Roman jail? But Paul lets you know in no uncertain terms that just because it looks like you're losing, you might not actually be losing. So that's what we're going to do today is peel that apart a little bit. And I think the first thing that this verse shows us is that you're not necessarily losing in life when it takes an unpleasant detour.

So one of the first things that Paul wants his church to know is that even though this is a detour he didn't plan on, and even though he is now suffering, and even though he would very much prefer to be doing something else, he can with confidence state that this has not been in vain. He says one of the reasons for that is just the side effect of being in chains and possibly just actually chained to a guard himself is that the whole imperial guard now knows he's there for Jesus. I mean, just side road, can you imagine being chained to Paul?

[6 : 43] Like I'm not really sure who's in prison there, right? Like Paul also says that because he's in prison, the other believers have now become much more bold to preach. Like the gospel's going out farther. And what he says is interesting because he says all of these things have really served to advance the gospel. That word advance is really interesting because it's a word in Greek that kind of carries this idea of you making headway in spite of taking repeated blows. You making headway, making progress in spite of difficulties.

And I think that actually frames a little bit of how Paul sees this, right? So, you know, obviously Super Bowl Sunday, right? And on this day there's a lot of people that don't watch a lot of football that are going to kind of culturally gather around this event.

But even in that, most people understand what football is and what it's about. But can you imagine if you'd never seen football before? You had no idea what the game was, what the goal was, what the purpose was. And I just showed you a clip of somebody running with the ball. And then this big, huge guy just comes in and boom, like hits him on the side. And then somebody else comes in and boom, tries to take their legs out. And then there's guys reaching in and they're like punching at the ball and clawing. Maybe you even see their own teammate come from behind and like shove them forward. This guy's just getting beat to death. If you had no idea what football was, you had no understanding of it, you might just think, man, that poor person. Like what is happening? They're just getting beat to death. But for that person, while they certainly may not enjoy taking hits, if they are gaining yards, they're excited to get back out there. They might actually say it to you like this, I want you to understand that the hits that I have endured have actually served to advance the football.

He's got an eye on a goal that matters. And that's Paul too. Paul is really great about just keeping his eye on the prize. Like he's got a discipline built in him to do that. And that's certainly part of what's happening. But it's not just the advance of the gospel that Paul has his eyes on. Paul also says that this imprisonment is serving for his own good. And it's interesting the way he says it. He says in verse 19, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance. Deliverance is a really interesting word because it's not actually the word deliverance. Like the word there in Greek is actually the word salvation. And it's the same word, it's the exact same word you use for salvation. You see rendered as salvation in other parts of Scripture, like when it's talking about how Jesus saves you. And there's a few translations you'll even see it still rendered as salvation. Now one of the reasons I think in some versions the translators go with deliverance is because it's not entirely clear if Paul means he expects to be delivered from this situation, which he kind of indicates later in the verse, or if he's just saying more broadly sensed. But I actually think salvation, the idea of that word, makes a lot more sense here. And I think the key to understanding that is to realize that just like our language, Greek has tenses in it. So the word for salvation there is in the present tense.

And here's why that's important. So I would argue to you that in Scripture, the picture you see of Jesus' salvation for you is total salvation. And that's why I think there are tenses of it in Scripture. And here's what I mean. So there is definitely a sense that you see a lot in Scripture, and the word has rendered this, of past tense salvation, right? Jesus has saved you from the penalty of your sin. Which means while there may still be consequences to what you've done, while there may be things to lament and make recompense for, you can never again be condemned for your sin.

[11:07] No one in heaven and earth can ever lay a charge of condemnation. Your fate is certain. Jesus has made your record clean, and that is settled from the day you put your faith in him.

But there's also this present tense version of salvation, where not only have you been saved from the penalty of sin, Jesus is actively saving you from the power of sin. And that's why it uses the present tense here. See, I think that means that while sin is still afflicting you, like you're not perfect like you're going to be, day by day Jesus is saving you from that too. You are becoming less and less under the power of sin. I mean, how many things in your walk with Jesus used to be a really big problem for you, and now they're not? And how many things right now are a really big problem that you think you're never going to get around, but somehow you know day by day, even in the hard things, Jesus is getting you through that. And then there's actually a future tense where God says, one day I'm going to save you from the very presence of sin. There will be no sin in you, and there will be no sin anywhere around you. It will be total salvation. And that's why I think

Paul can say right here that while this is unpleasant, I know this is a part of how Jesus is actively saving me. Now, this might be a good place to pause and just admit, like this is really hard. Like I've actually heard this called advanced Christianity. This is kind of like PhD discipleship, right? Because it's not something that comes on day one, right? Like if you look at this and go, man, that is really hard to do. You're right. It is. Like to see the process in this world by which God takes lead and makes it into gold through the fires of hard things, like that's a really hard thing to do. It's something that you grow in the spirit. So if you feel like you're not there yet, it's okay.

Like Jesus is growing you into, but it is where he wants you to go because once you get there, you can realize that just because when life does take a detour, you might actually be winning if it advances the gospel or you know it's saving you. Paul then takes a little side road and gives us something that I think is even more counterintuitive. He says, you're also not necessarily losing when others try to steal the spotlight. Now Paul has built a reputation over these past few years of these missionary journeys. I mean, I guess the easy way to say it is he's become famous throughout this part of the world, right? Like because of the things Jesus has done through him, because of the things that have been accomplished, he's just gained a lot of notoriety and there are no shortage of people who want in on that notoriety. Like they are boldly preaching Christ, but they also have some little thing inside them that really just wants to steal Paul's thunder. Like they're tired of it always being

Paul, Paul, Paul, right? And unfortunately, that impulse is no different today. So you may not know this, and I certainly hope in breaking this illusion, I'm not making you cynical, but preachers being envious of each other and preachers trying to be famous and preachers trying to build a big church so they can brag about their big church, that is a thing. And I think certainly our aspiration should be that we don't care who God uses in big or small ways. Like as long as people are being brought to Jesus and God is glorified, but that's just simply not the case. Like in every era that I've followed Jesus, there are people that God is using in big ways and growing big churches, and it seems like everybody that gets in ministry wants to be like them, right? That's what they want God to call them to is the big thing where everybody listens to their podcast, right? Like that's the thing they want

[15 : 28] God to call them to. You know, one of the things that drew me to One Harbor when we started going to Moorhead years and years ago, and frankly one of the things we've done at this site and plan to continue to do as City Grace, is that you will not see the same person in the pulpit every week.

And that's really intentional, and it serves a lot of purposes. One is not, you know, to just kind of check the egos of anybody who would want to stand here, right? One is to try to prevent us from building any kind of culture or cult around the best speaker, the most gifted orator. Part of that is to help us together as a body, not to come in. I mean, it's, I think it's perfectly fine to love people and encourage them when they're using their gifts, but like if your favorite singer, if your favorite preacher's not there, you know, it's just to teach us to come in and expect God to be here, no matter who's bringing it. I mean, one of the things, but really at the root, what it's intended to do is just help us cheer for each other and root for the gospel. Like, it can be really easy not to give up something. Like, we're talking about a pulpit, but it could be a pulpit, it could be a ministry God uses you in, it could be a Bible study, it could be a community group. Like, it can be really easy to not want to let somebody else take the reins of that because, well, then they might get some praise for serving Jesus, but it's good and right to do it, and that's not the attitude we see from

Paul at all. Paul is probably one of the most famous evangelists in the world, and he says, I don't care if other people get the glory. He says, I don't even care if their motives are bad.

If I know somebody's hearing the message about Jesus, I can find a place to rejoice in that. And that's not Paul giving a license to sin. Like, your integrity, particularly if you're a teacher of God's Word, matters. Like, it matters to how the Spirit will use you, but the Spirit can use the good news to change a life. And Paul is saying, if that is happening, I'm good. Now, one important side road here that I just kind of think is important to say, because I think some of you might have experienced this. Look, it is not an uncommon thing that a person who shared Christ with you, or someone that God used to teach you something really important, or someone who is just a really important part of your spiritual journey, later turns out to be a really flawed human. Like, you might find out at some point, some preacher, some person that God used in your life, just a really abusive person.

Maybe they weren't faithful to their wife. Maybe they actually went on to fall into heresy. Like, they preached the good news, and then later they preached another gospel. Maybe it even becomes apparent, sadly, to you that you're not sure if they belong to Jesus at all. If you've had any experience like that, I want you to hear me. Like, it is right to lament and feel sad about that. Like, the loss of a testimony or a ministry to sin is a tragedy.

[18 : 51] But don't you ever feel ashamed of how God brought the gospel of truth into your life? Like, don't ever question whether you belong to Jesus just because the person who told you about Jesus turns out to be a scoundrel. I mean, if you need to learn a lesson, like, there might be a lesson to learn there, like a wisdom thing about, don't put any man or woman on too high a pedestal because they will disappoint you. Like, then learn that lesson. But at the end of the day, don't ever forget the one who saved you was Jesus. Not some man, not some woman, Jesus. The Spirit can use the gospel.

You are not saved by the integrity of the messenger who brought you to good news. You were saved by Jesus and His grace. And if you know that, then you can know that if someone seals the spotlight, you might not actually be losing if you can know that God is ultimately the one in charge and you can rejoice in the gospel going forth.

Lastly, you're not necessarily losing when the outcome looks really bleak. Paul is not unaware of what this imprisonment might mean.

Paul's not unaware of what following Jesus might mean in the Roman world he's in. He knows that today or someday in the future, it might cost him his life.

But Paul's reflections on that really don't look like a lot of our reflections might. So, I would say, how to view and handle the idea that everyone in this room is going to die is something that frankly you just have to wrestle with as part of the human experience. And frankly, that applies whether you're a follower of Jesus or not. If you are of the human condition, you have to wrestle with the reality of death and what it means for your life. And there's no shortage of thoughts on how to do it. I actually like kind of looking at pop culture in this regard because I think sometimes music and movies and stuff kind of help flesh out what a lot of people are thinking and believing, even if you don't know how to say it. So, like, if you look through things, you see some common themes. One of the common themes, I think, is to, like, while we acknowledge that death is inevitable and it's part of life, really what being human is is to kind of shake your fist at it and kind of press back on it to, like, resist the inevitable to the end.

[21 : 37] It's kind of embodied in that poem by Dylan Thomas where he says, do not go gentle into that good night. Rage, rage against the dying of the light. You know, it's this idea that part of what makes you human is to resist even though you know you're doomed.

That's one thought. There's another theme that kind of says, you know, true wisdom is found in kind of embracing your mortality, kind of accepting it as a helpful part of the journey. Like, at the end of the Harry Potter books where there's a story about three brothers and it's like the one that is presented as the most wise is not the one who resists death or tries to cheat death, but it's the one who kind of greets death as a friend. You see that idea in a lot of movies, too, where it's like death is not some monster that's chasing you down. It's like a friend that goes with you to remind you to just cherish each moment while you're here.

Sometimes the idea is just to ignore it. Like, uh, really modern sort of pop songs and club songs will say things like this, we're gonna be young forever! Newsflash, you're not.

So that's gonna be disappointing. But, uh, but it's just carpe diem, man, right? It's like the idea of like, it's a terrible thought, dying, so let's just not think about it, right? Like, all I've got is today, so I gotta seize this day for all it is.

And I think the thing, the reason those things resonate is one, because you can't get around thinking about it. You gotta do something with this idea of your own mortality, because it is confounding and ominous, and makes you think about what is even the purpose of all this, right?

[23 : 26] But I think the other reason we gravitate to stuff like this is because I think all of these actually have an element of the truth. They're just missing the big picture. So here's the deal.

In the Bible, death is considered an enemy. And that's really counterintuitive, like if you want to just look at the world from a purely scientific standpoint, like death is just natural, right?

Like it's just this natural part of life, but even to the person who is just purely a naturalist, death still feels wrong. It feels violative.

It feels like it shouldn't happen. Which is why we feel compelled to rage against it. I was not meant, there's something in me that feels like I was not meant to cease.

The Bible says God's put eternity in your hearts. There's a reason you feel like that. But on the other hand, the Bible doesn't call us to fear death either.

[24 : 29] Like, trying to avoid dying at all cost is not the goal of a follower of Jesus. In fact, if that is your primary goal, you could wind up in some really bad sins.

If your only goal is to try to avoid death at all purposes. And here's the difference. The Bible tells us that death is an enemy.

But an enemy that has been rendered impotent by King Jesus. An enemy that has no power over the sons and daughters who are called by his name.

I mean, look at how the Bible describes what Jesus has done to death. In Isaiah 25, 8 it says, He will swallow up death forever. And the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces.

In 1 Corinthians 15, famous kind of chorus, death is swallowed up in victory and almost as a taunt. Death, where's your victory? Death, where is your sting?

[25 : 35] I don't know why, but I had this silly image every time I read that of that scene from like Rudolph where like, you know, they take all the teeth out of the abominable snowman, right? And then he's just kind of like a cuddly teddy bear.

What a thing to say about the most horrible thing in the human experience. Revelation 21, He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more.

And there'll be no more mourning or no crying or no pain for the former things that passed away. And that is exactly the balance that Paul shows in his letter to the Philippians when he writes one of the most well-known phrases in Scripture, for me, to live is Christ and to die would be gain.

And that's the balance of Paul showing, you know, while I know it is better to long, like I want to go be with Jesus because that is the best.

But, I am not ungrateful for what I have in front of me today. I am not ungrateful for the opportunity for fruitful blessing. You know, there's a version of Christianity that just sort of acknowledges the cultural good it could bring.

[26 : 57] Maybe it even kind of gives a nod to God in heaven, but it really doesn't like focus on the fact that there's a resurrection life. It's kind of bound in the idea that like the only good we have to do is right now and if this world is going to be anything good we have to make it that.

And can I just say I really think that's a powerless creed. Like, honestly, if Jesus is not crucified and risen, if there is not some resurrection life waiting on us, this whole thing is really stupid.

I mean, really, it just is. Do something else. Like, if you're a believer, let me just go ahead and tell you, like that means you believe Jesus came back from the dead. You're already a kook. Like, you're already in the supernatural just like go all in.

Okay? But, but, there's another person in the Christianity that I think is also unhelpful because I think Paul also shows us this is not just let's hang on until the sweet bind by.

Like, it's not just let's suffer through until Jesus comes. It's not, you know, Jesus is going to burn this whole thing down anyway. So, I'm not really that worried about what happens to the world, the people around me, my city.

[28 : 18] Like, that's not what Paul says. he longs to be with Jesus but he does not despise the opportunity for good here. So, my grandmother who is 103 years old is now probably in the final stage of hospice and she's likely not going to be with us much longer.

And I'm really grateful that in the last several months we had an opportunity to move her closer and so I've been able to see her a little bit more and talk with her. And in the moments when, you know, she's been lucid and can talk, like, we've discussed a lot of stuff like her medical state and her opinion of what food is going to be served at lunch today.

That's a common thing. But there's been a few things when we'll cross into something a little profound and she asks a question which, like, frankly, I would probably ask at 103 too which is like, I'm not really sure why God even still has me here.

Like, what is the purpose of me? What am I supposed to do? And I hope it doesn't disappoint you to tell you that even as a pastor I don't have the answers to all those kind of questions.

But one thing I do think is really helpful and I think is true that I can speak into a situation like that is to simply say, you know, maybe it's just there's one more prayer to pray.

[29 : 45] Maybe there's just one more blessing that God wants you to give out to somebody. Maybe there is one more person to shepherd towards Jesus Christ.

You know, I think it's just a natural part of life that as you creep closer and closer to the end you start to long more and more for Jesus, right? Like, as the stuff of this world is kind of gradually stripped away, you just get more and more of that vision for Jesus.

But can I just say, if you're still here, if you're still breathing, there is an opportunity to be a blessing. Maybe it's just one more prayer. And so I really kind of just, friends, I pray that we would do that.

Let us resolve to labor well while there is light to labor. And then one day, you'll close your eyes and you'll be with Jesus. And regardless of what the world around you says, that will have been a life well lived.

Because at the end of the day, you're always a winner if you belong to Jesus. So as the band comes up, if you're here and you're not a follower of Jesus, again, it's always just a great blessing for us for you to be here.

[31 : 04] Like, we really do. It's hard to walk into a church. It can be kind of weird. One of the things I guess I would say to you after a message like this is, Jesus often considers, like invites us to consider what our life is built on.

And Scripture gives a lot of really simple pictures. One of them is like the foundation of a house, right? Like you can build a house on a really unstable foundation like sand, or you can build it on a rock.

And when Paul in this verse is saying for him to live as Christ, it's not just a religious sentiment. He's expressing that the foundation of his life is unshakable. That's why he's not worried about it.

It's not because he doesn't hurt. It's not because he doesn't, you know, feel the things you feel. And I don't intend any offense to you, but can I just say as someone who's spent a lifetime looking at the human condition, a life that is built wholly on your career, or some creed, or even your family is not a solid foundation.

But it could be. You could have a solid foundation, and Jesus is no respecter of persons. Wherever you're at, whatever you have, you're welcome to come. If you're interested in that, there'll be a prayer on the screen.

[32 : 23] You could pray, maybe you just want to say, Jesus, help me know that that's true. We'll have some people you can talk to. It's a day for you. If you look forward and that foundation is shakable, it doesn't have to be.

If you are a follower of Jesus, maybe you've been tempted to feel like you're losing because your life's not going like you thought it should. Maybe this is just a day to see that that's not how Jesus sees you.

Repent and believe that you're a winner because of Jesus. Maybe you've just been tempted like you're in that place where it's so hard to see what the purpose is, like you just wish Jesus would come.

I get that. Paul wanted it too, but repent and believe that you can labor while there's light out to labor. Whatever that is.

If you're a follower of Jesus, after you've done that, there's a moment for communion here. I'm going to go to the table, take the elements back to your seat, and again, it's just a moment to remember and fellowship with Him.

[33 : 30] Jesus knows what it looks like for the world to think you're a loser. Be under any illusion. He didn't die in fame.

He died as someone that people just thought, well, he caused a ruckus and he lost his life for it. Just one more guy that Rome put on a cross.

you're tied to Him. You can take that moment, just pray and be with Him. Father, this moment is yours.

Holy Spirit, I pray that you would convince the hearts of the saints of the sons and daughters of God of the weight of how much they matter.

That you might show them a vision both of the day to come with you that if they're hopeless, they know there is a day where the veil of this world will pass away and all the sad things will come untrue.

[34 : 33] But I also pray you would convince us that what we do matters. That every soul in here carries the weight of sharing your glory and that you would show us every day just the places in front of us, the one more prayer, the one more person, the one more thing we can do.

And then one day we'll celebrate all that in your presence, Jesus. Holy Spirit, have your way. We ask in Jesus' name.