

## To Live is Christ

Series: Philippians

Date: 3 August 2025, 7th Sunday after Trinity

Location: St George's Battery Point

Texts: Mark 8:31-38, Philippians 1:12-26

*For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.*

This is the theme verse for our text today. It's a pretty personal verse for me. When my Mum died, this is the verse Dad and I chose to put on her plaque. Her Bible was full of underlined passages, but this one stood out because it reflected her life. From Bible college in Launceston to decades recording the gospel in minority languages through Global Recordings, her life was focused on Christ. She disciplined younger women, visited older saints, and quietly poured herself out for the kingdom.

*For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*

What is your ambition in life? What are you going to spend your life on?

In our text today Philippians 1.12-26, we see that Paul's ambition is Christ. He shows us that if Jesus is our goal—our highest joy and hope—then we can live with purpose, endure suffering, and even face death without fear.

We're going to look at the text in 3 sections. Verse 12-14 - In Chains for Christ. Verse 15-18 - Proclaiming Christ. And then the main section, 19-26 - To live is Christ. Let's dive in.

### 12-14. In chains for Christ

Paul is in prison, most commentators think he is in Rome under house arrest, awaiting trial before Nero. In verse 13 he mentions the "palace guard". The word is literally the *Praetorian*. This was the *Praetorian Guard*, the elite soldiers protecting the emperor. Paul wasn't being guarded by all 6000 of them, but as they rotated shifts, many heard about why he was there. And as they heard, word spread.

Remarkably, Paul doesn't see his chains as a hindrance. Instead, they've become a megaphone for the gospel. His imprisonment has made the message of Christ known to the guards and has encouraged the Roman Christians to proclaim Christ more boldly. This is despite the persecution they were facing under Nero.

This fits with the pattern throughout church history. In the 3rd century, Tertullian wrote: *“The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.”* Persecution, even to the point of martyrdom, where people lose their lives for the sake of Christ, has not silenced the church. Rather, it lights a spiritual fire in the hearts of God’s people to boldly share the good news of Jesus. I think of the 21 Egyptian Christians martyred by ISIS a decade ago. Their death didn’t hinder the Gospel; it strengthened the witness of those who remain.

### **15-18. Proclaiming Christ**

*“Some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill.” (15)*

Some people, Paul says, are preaching Christ with mixed motives. They aren’t false teachers, but perhaps they’re seeking status or influence. That’s not unique to Paul’s day—leaders today still wrestle with pride, insecurity, and the temptation to build their own kingdom rather than Christ’s.

Yet Paul responds with humility. *“What does it matter? The important thing is that in every way... Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.”*

Paul’s focus is clear. He doesn’t need to be the centre of attention. He just wants Jesus proclaimed. Whether it’s through his suffering or others’ success, Paul rejoices whenever the gospel is going forward.

This is a challenge to all of us: Is it about us, or is it about Jesus? Can we rejoice when others succeed, even when we’re sidelined?

This brings us to section 3 and our theme verse. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

### **19-26. To live is Christ**

Paul now turns to his own uncertain future. He doesn’t know whether he’ll be released or executed. But either way, he sees only gain.

In verse 19, Paul is confident that, through the Philippians’ prayers and the Spirit of Christ, this will lead to his *deliverance*. He may mean literal release, or eternal deliverance through death into the arms of Christ. Likely both.

In verse 20 Paul tells us his hope for himself in the situation he finds himself in.

I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

Paul is a real human being. He doesn't want to shame himself by wobbling at his execution. He hopes he will have sufficient courage to face that moment, if that comes. But what is his deep desire? That "now, as always, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death."

How is it that Christ can be exalted in Paul's body by his death? If he is executed he will be a witness to the risen Christ who gave his life so that we might live. Witness is what the word martyr means. To be killed for the name of Christ is the highest honour a person can be given. Romans 8 and 2 Corinthians 3 say that God's purpose for us is to conform us to the likeness of his Son. That is, God wants to make us like Jesus. This is what it is to be truly human. The martyr is someone who is more like Christ than any other, who is completely identified with Jesus' death. They testify in their death to the one who is the resurrection and the life.

How then can Christ be exalted in Paul's body by his life? Paul expands on this in Romans 6. We are to count ourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ. As such we don't let sin reign in our bodies so that we obey its desires. Rather, we offer our bodies as instruments of righteousness to God, who has brought us from death to life. Or, as Paul puts it again in Romans 12, in response to God's mercy to us in Christ we offer our bodies to him as living sacrifices. This is how we worship God. That means saying no to sin. It means not letting our selfish desires rule us. It means rather, giving ourselves, heart, mind, soul and strength, to loving God and loving our neighbours. It is what Jesus says in Mark 8. "Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves, take up our cross and follow me." That is how Christ is exalted in our body.

And so we come to our key verse, one for you to memorise:

For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.

This is an inversion of how we normally approach life and death. We normally try desperately to hang on to life, and we're terrified of death. For Paul it is the other way around. Death is the gateway to being with Christ. To be with Christ is his heart's desire. It's not that he is suicidal. Far from it. But being with Christ is far better than being in this world full of suffering and tears. But for him, to live is Christ. That is, the old Paul, the Paul who was selfish, hostile to God, he has died. The Paul who lives now lives in Christ. Jesus is everything for him, and so to live is to belong to Jesus and to offer his body as a living sacrifice, to pour himself out in the service of Christ.

If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. (1.22)

And so Paul is genuinely torn.

Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! **23** I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; **24** but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

Because his life is now in Christ, he is content to lay aside his desire to be with Christ in order that he can serve Christ and those whom Christ has called him to serve.

How can Paul have such a radical trust in Jesus, such a radical confidence? How is he able to see death as the second best option, only because it means he will no longer be able to serve Christ? The answer comes in verse 19. It is by God's provision of the Spirit of Christ. The Holy Spirit gives him that radical courage to show radical love in giving his life in service, while giving a sure and certain hope in Christ in the face of death.

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Can you say this?

How are you facing your own death? With fear or faith? Is being with Christ your hope?

Some of you are closer to that day. Is dying going to be a gain for you? Later in Philippians Paul says that Jesus will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be like his glorious body. Surely you must long for that as you feel the aches and pains of aging?

Several weeks ago I preached at Roslyn Langlois's funeral. Many of you knew her. She was music director here and her husband was my predecessor. Just before the committal prayer the packed cathedral sang "He is exalted, the King is exalted." I said to her husband John afterwards, "We were in the throne room. The problem was we had to leave. Roslyn could stay." To depart and be with Christ is better by far.

For to me, to live is Christ.

Is this how you live? Jesus' call on our lives is radical. It is to deny yourself, take up your cross and follow him. The German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, himself martyred by Hitler, once wrote, "When Christ calls a man he bids him come and die." Jesus' promise is that if you give up your life for him, you will receive it back, but made new. To live is Christ. He is to be our great desire. His kingdom is our ambition. His glory is our great concern. For those of you who are younger, is God calling you to give yourselves to a life of ministry in church or mission? That will not be all of us, but for all of us, at whatever stage of life, your lives can be caught up in his story. To live is Christ, means that your life be one of fruitful labour for him. It means dying to self in order that others might live and grow. It means letting go of your desire for comfort and being willing to embrace hardship. It means spending yourself for the sake of his kingdom. Serving him with all the gifts and energy his Spirit gives you. In Christ you have the comfort of the Spirit. It means letting go of your need for recognition and

acceptance. Sharing Christ with those around you. Inviting them to church. Being ready to endure reputational damage, even scorn and ridicule. In Christ you have the Father's favour. It means letting go of your own safety and being willing to take risks for Christ. Your life is hidden with Christ in God, he is your shield and your great reward. It means giving up your need to be in control, and giving space for others to grow. It's Christ who gives the growth, he is the one on the throne. It means offering your body to Christ in worship, running in the way of his commands, using your body for his glory.

Now of course there is a place for Sabbath and rest. We're not God. Only Jesus is the Saviour. But God's call today is that our life's ambition be Christ. We work for his kingdom, not ours. My mum was shy and insecure. But she responded to Jesus' call. She spent her life serving him. With Dad she recorded the good news of Jesus in over 400 languages. Who knows how God might use you with the gifts and opportunities he has given you?!

*"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."* Can you say that with Paul?

Hear God's call to re-centre your life on Christ. Make him your ambition. Give your days, your gifts, your energy, and even your suffering to him. In the power of the Spirit, whether by life or death, may Christ be exalted in our bodies.