

TO LIVE IS CHRIST

SERIES: TENACIOUS TOGETHER



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Philippians 1:12-26
Second Message
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Philippians 1:12-26

Let's say you're a manager for a company. One of the managers of another group is a consummate back stabber and stair climber. There's nothing he wouldn't stoop to or no one he wouldn't step over, to get where he's going. You've worked hard to make your group and your company successful.

One day you're called into your manager's office, and he has some bad news for you. He says your group is being taken over by the back stabber and that your services are no longer needed. You're fired. The back stabber begins leading your former group and tells everyone what a crummy manager you were and that the company will be more successful without you.

What are you feeling?

Today we're going to explore what the apostle Paul was feeling when he wrote his letter to the Philippians. We will see his passion. Everyone seems to admire and to want passion these days. The word "passionate" often finds its way into corporate and church mission statements. Such and such a company or church claims to be "passionate" about its mission. Clearly, Paul was passionate about his mission. Where did this passion come from, and can we get some of it for ourselves?

Imprisonment for the Gospel

Philippians 1:12-14:

Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel. 13 As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. 14 And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel without fear.

Paul has been imprisoned by the Roman authorities for preaching the Gospel. Although it would seem

that imprisoning such a leader would impede the advance of the Gospel, Paul reports that it has had the opposite effect.

The Gospel has advanced in two ways. First, the reason for Paul's imprisonment has become clear, both to those charged with guarding Paul and to others where he is being held. Second, followers of Jesus in the city where he is imprisoned have been emboldened to "speak the word," which he defines as preaching, or proclaiming, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The Gospel has advanced in that non-believers have become aware of Christ and that believers are proclaiming Christ.

Paul doesn't report any conversions. The Gospel will do its own work. We can, therefore, be thankful anytime someone becomes aware of Christ or any time that Christ is proclaimed, regardless of how people respond.

Paul's imprisonment, intended to frighten followers of Jesus, has actually served to inspire them. They've been inspired to trust in the Lord and have thereby found more courage. Although the risk has become greater as they have become bolder, they are proclaiming the Gospel without fear. They are willing to be imprisoned for the sake of Christ, just like Paul.

Although Paul has been imprisoned, the Gospel is walking forward, unhindered. Paul's imprisonment is literally "in Christ," the Messiah, the Jewish king. The brothers (and sisters) who are proclaiming Christ are trusting in the Lord. Caesar would claim the titles king and lord. The Roman king and lord, the apparent king and lord of the whole world, could imprison the primary preacher of the Gospel, but the Gospel nevertheless is marching forward to penetrate the palace guard, where Caesar's power resides. It's a war between kings, a war between lords; and the Jewish King and Lord, the true King and Lord of all creation, is winning in a very strange way.

The kings and lords of the earth would imprison the Gospel, but it will not be imprisoned, and just as it advanced through what happened to Paul, it will advance through what happens to us. Paul specifically tells his

readers that he wants them to know about how the Gospel has advanced because of his imprisonment. The reason he wants them to know is so that they can learn from what has happened to him. They live in Philippi, a Roman colony, and they are also facing persecution (Philippians 1:28-30).

How do we learn from Paul's example?

Passion for the Gospel

Philippians 1:15-18a:

It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. 16 The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. 18 But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.

For Paul, the advance of the Gospel (verse 12) takes place as the word is spoken (verse 14), which he further defines as preaching, or proclaiming or announcing, Christ (verses 15, 17 and 18). For Paul, the content of the Gospel is the person of Christ. Paul speaks here not of proclaiming Jesus but of proclaiming Christ. "Christ" is the Greek translation of the Hebrew "Messiah," a kingly title. When the Gospel is proclaimed, the reign of Jesus Christ is proclaimed.

Although brothers and sisters have risen to preach the Gospel in Paul's place, the motives of some of them are less than pure. Some preach out of good will, love for Paul, sincerity. Others perceive Paul to be a rival and have reacted to his imprisonment in a different way. They've sensed an opportunity to discredit Paul and leap past him. They preach out of envy, rivalry, and selfish ambition. Perhaps they view Paul's imprisonment as God's judgment on him. They are hoping that their success will make Paul jealous. Those who preach because they love Paul *know* that he has been appointed by God for the defense of the Gospel. Those who preach because they consider Paul a rival only *think* that they can afflict Paul.

The plan to imprison Paul backfired. It was designed to contain the Gospel but instead advanced it. The plan of those who preach Christ out of rivalry also backfires.

They were hoping to afflict Paul. Instead, he rejoices. The way in which Christ is preached doesn't seem to concern him, even if that way is aimed at causing him difficulty. What concerns him is the advance of the Gospel, and if that comes at the expense of his own reputation, so be it. It can't be that he enjoys being treated in this way. It's just that the advance of the Gospel is more important to him than how he's treated.

In verses 12 to 14, we saw that Paul seemed unconcerned with the difficulties of his imprisonment in light of the advance of the Gospel. Such an outlook is remarkable. In verses 15 to 18, we see that Paul seems unconcerned that others see him as a rival and are hoping to defeat him, so to speak, and kick him when he's down. He's not only unconcerned by such a turn of events; he rejoices because of them. Such an outlook is stupefying.

What then?

Again, Paul is telling his own story in order to be instructive. Some in the city where he is imprisoned are preaching Christ out of "selfish ambition." Later in this letter, he tells the Philippians to do nothing out of "selfish ambition" (Philippians 2:3). His own story shows them how they should and shouldn't respond. How should we respond?

So, you're fired, the back stabber takes your place and tells everyone what a crummy manager you were and that the company will be more successful without you. Moreover, the company has become more successful. What are you feeling? You say, "What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or truth, the company is successful, and in that I rejoice." Well, you probably don't say that. You could only say that if the success of the company were more important than your feelings and your reputation.

How about the advance of the Gospel? How important is that to us? If I was thrown in prison for preaching Christ, and someone took my place and began preaching Christ and bad-mouthing me at the same time, and the church began to win more people to Christ, will you find me rejoicing? As of now, I don't think so. Then again, I haven't been thrown into prison yet, and I don't know what prison would do to me.

Travis Gray, a former member of our church, spent three and one-half years in prison, not for the cause of Christ but because of a drunken driving accident. Before going to prison, he met Christ in a big way, and in prison,

he studied the Scriptures every day. He emerged with a passion for the Gospel and, specifically, for a passion to start a recovery ministry—which he did here at PBC with the help of some elders. Prison changed him. What happens to you, whatever it is, can change you as well.

At any rate, I ask, where does this passion for the Gospel come from?

Passion for exaltation

Philippians 1:18b-20:

Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, 19 for I know that through your prayers and God’s provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. 20 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 told the Philippians that, despite his difficult circumstances, he was rejoicing because the Gospel was being proclaimed (verse 18a). Now he tells them he will continue to rejoice. He explains the reason for his ongoing disposition in verses 19 and 20. As it turns out, the reason he expects to continue rejoicing is the same reason he is presently rejoicing. He will continue to rejoice because Christ literally will be “exalted.” His source of joy is the proclamation of Christ and the exaltation of Christ, which amount to the advance of the Gospel (verse 12).

The prayers of the Philippians will result in the “help of the Spirit of Christ,” which is not what the Holy Spirit provides but the Holy Spirit himself. Paul expects the prayers to activate the Spirit. Then, he says, his imprisonment “will turn out for my deliverance”—literally, for his “salvation.” Here Paul uses the words of Job, who was responding to the contention of his “comforters” that his condition resulted from sin (Job 13:16, Septuagint translation of the Old Testament). Job anticipates taking his case to God, and he equates his mere ability to appear before God as “my deliverance,” for a godless man wouldn’t dare to appear before him. Paul sees himself in the Job tradition, as a righteous man suffering persecution but trusting in God’s justice.

What, then, is the “salvation” that Paul expects? It could be his anticipated release from prison (verse 25). It could be the vindication from God he expects to receive upon death. Although either or both

of these aspects could be in view, Paul seems more concerned with something else in verses 12 through 26: the advance of the Gospel.

Verse 20 is actually a continuation of the sentence that begins in verse 18. Paul knows that what has happened to him will turn out for his salvation literally “according to my eager expectation and hope” that Christ will be exalted. This will happen as the prayers of the Philippians and the subsequent provision of the Spirit strengthen him so that he trusts God and courageously defends the Gospel at his trial. Thus, Christ will be exalted in his body, whether he lives or dies—whether he is released from prison or executed. If Christ is exalted, Paul is saved, or vindicated, along with the Gospel. The exaltation of Christ is so important to Paul that he calls it “my salvation.”

In verse 12, Paul wanted the Philippians to “know” that his imprisonment had served to advance the Gospel. Now, he says he knows that his imprisonment will exalt Christ, which means that the Gospel will advance.

The verb translated “exalted” (*megaluno*) means “to make large” or “to magnify.” It is related to the word *megaleios*, which means “magnificent.” When Christ is exalted, he is shown to be large and seen to be large, so to speak. His magnificence is revealed and becomes evident. Paul eagerly expects and hopes that Christ will be shown to be magnificent by his release or his execution.

Passion for a person

In verses 18b-20, Paul’s passion narrows from the Gospel message to the person the Gospel features. He is passionate about the Gospel message because he is passionate about the exaltation of Christ. If you have a favorite artist or athlete, you might want him or her to be recognized. If you personally know him or her, you might want all the more for such recognition. And if you believed that such recognition would actually be life-changing for the people who recognized your favored person, then you might even become something of an evangelist for that person.

Are we passionate about the exaltation of Christ in this way?

Writer John Eldredge thinks not. He worries that Christ isn’t being exalted by his contemporary followers because they really don’t want anything very exciting:

*To be blunt, nothing about our lives is worth asking about. There's nothing intriguing about our hope... Not that we don't have hopes; we do. We hope we'll have enough after taxes this year to take a summer vacation. We hope our kids don't wreck the car. We hope our favorite team goes to the World Series. We hope our health doesn't give out, and so on. Nothing wrong with any of those hopes... Everyone has hopes like that, so why bother asking us? It's life as usual. Sanctified resignation has become the new abiding place of contemporary Christians.*¹

Ouch! Paul's passion for the Gospel can be at least in part be explained by his passion for the exaltation of Christ. But why is he so passionate about the exaltation of Christ? And, again, how can we get some of that passion for ourselves?

Passion for Christ

Philippians 1:21-24:

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 22 If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. 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

It's important to note that verse 21 begins with the word "for." Paul is explaining how Christ will be exalted in his body. His explanation is offered in two lines that are succinct and beautiful in their poetic structure. He says, "For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Transliterated, it looks like this:

to zen Christos (to live Christ)
to apothanein kerdos (to die gain)

There is no verb, demonstrating clarity of purpose, and there is assonance, or a near rhyme, between *Christos* and *kerdos*, demonstrating a connection.

But what does it mean? Paul explains what it means in the ensuing verses. "To live is Christ" means fruitful labor. The fruit is the Philippians' "progress and joy in the faith." "To die is gain" means departing and being with Christ. The word "gain" also appears in the following:

Philippians 3:7-11:

But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. 8 What

is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith. 10 I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

From Philippians 1, we see that Paul expected to gain Christ in death. From Philippians 3, we see that he has already gained Christ. From Philippians 1, we see that gaining Christ means being with Christ. From Philippians 3, we see that gaining Christ means knowing Christ. So really, Paul is saying the same thing in each line. To live is Christ and to die is Christ. To live is gain and to die is gain. To live is to gain Christ and to die is to gain Christ. To live is to know Christ, and to die is to know Christ. For him, life and death are all about knowing Christ. In life, he knows Christ in part; in death, he knows Christ fully (1 Corinthians 13:12). It's just that in Philippians 1, Paul spells out what he does in this life as a result of knowing Christ: He does the work of Christ.

Paul desires to be with Christ. This desire to know Christ and to be with him, whether in life or death, is what exalts Christ. He expects that either his life or his death will reveal that he desires to be with Christ, to gain Christ, to know Christ. Paul exalts Christ by desiring Christ.

To be or not to be

Paul, of course, does not see himself as having a choice in whether he lives or dies. The Roman authorities, under the sovereignty of God, will make that decision. To explain how he exalts Christ, however, he speculates on which he would pick if he were given a choice. Death is "better" for him, but life is "necessary" for them. He's willing to give up what is better for him in favor of what's necessary for them. This is the Philippians paradigm—the giving up of privileges for the sake of others—modeled by Paul (Philippians 1:12-26, 3:4-14), Timothy and Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:19-30), and most supremely by Christ (Philippians 2:5-11). Life, then, is the scenario Paul envisions.

Hamlet, in the famous soliloquy authored by Shakespeare, is contemplating suicide: “to be or not to be.” If he is to live, he would have to continue suffering “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune.” If he is to die, he would leave “the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to.” Yet he is worried about the ills he may have to bear after death, “what dreams may come” in the “undiscover’d country.” As he contemplates his two options, Hamlet worries that he may be staring at a lose-lose scenario. If he lives, he loses. If he dies, he loses.

Paul, of course, was not contemplating suicide, but he was contemplating life and death, to be or not to be. Unlike Hamlet, however, Paul envisioned a win-win scenario: “To live is Christ and to die is gain.” This is the blessed scenario for all those who follow Jesus Christ. It’s win-win. If you live, you win. If you die, you win.

Desire for Christ

Where do Paul’s passion for the Gospel and his passion for the exaltation of Christ come from? It comes from his desire for Christ. Because he desires Christ, he is passionate about exalting Christ and is passionate about advancing the Gospel of Christ. We exalt Christ, and we advance the Gospel of Christ first of all by desiring Christ. That’s how we demonstrate the magnificence of Christ. Others see that Christ is so magnificent that he’s worth desiring. To live is not Christ plus a whole bunch of other things. To live is Christ.

When you say to live is Christ and to die is gain, you’re saying that you want Christ not for what he gives you but for himself, because you know that intimacy with him is the best gift he could give you. You’re saying you want him so that you may know him. And when you say that, you exalt Christ. If we adopt Paul’s poetic motto, we will find a succinct and beautiful purpose for our lives that brings glory to our Lord.

Isn’t the best and even purest reward for loving someone is simply being with that person—sharing thoughts, sharing lives? You get married because you want to be with that person, right?

Asaph writes of the Lord in Psalm 73:25: “Whom have I in heaven but you? / And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.” Nothing? Well, he probably desires food, clothing, and shelter, at the very least. But maybe he has discovered that everything he wants, even needs, is somehow connected to and representative his desire for the Lord.

Paul is not only passionate for Christ; he is also passionate for the work of Christ.

Passion for people

Philippians 1:25-26:

Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

Paul somehow knows that he will remain alive. He doesn’t specify how he knows this, but he does suggest that the knowledge that he will remain is connected to his awareness of their need. Perhaps God has told Paul that he will be released from prison so that he could continue serving people who need to hear the Gospel or be nurtured in the Gospel. God first led Paul to Philippi by giving him a vision of a man from Macedonia, the region of Philippi, who begged him, “Come over to Macedonia and help us” (Acts 16:9). In that case, God showed Paul the need, and he carried the Gospel to Philippi.

For Paul, life means knowing Christ and “fruitful labor.” He expects his labor to be fruitful among the Philippians in that it results in their “progress and joy in the faith,” which is the “faith of the gospel” (verse 27). This is the faith that the Gospel espouses, which is faith in Christ. To progress in the faith and to rejoice in the faith is to want Christ more and to know him better.

Paul also expects to be released from prison literally so that the Philippians’ “boasting may abound in Christ Jesus” through his coming to them again. When they see that Paul has been released from prison, they will be able to boast in Christ, or praise Christ, for what he has done for Paul—and for them, in bringing Paul to them again.

Passion for others

If we’re going to live, what are we going to live for? To live for the sake of knowing Christ is primary. But if you live for the sake knowing Christ, something is going to happen as a result of that relationship. You’re going to want to engage in the “fruitful labor” of the kingdom. You’re going to want to live for the progress and joy of others.

When Lord Shaftesbury, who campaigned for social improvement in England in the 19th century, approached death, he said this: “When I feel old age creeping upon

me and know that I must soon die—I hope it is not wrong to say it—I cannot bear to leave this world with all the misery in it.”

He didn’t want to escape the misery; he wanted to help others in their misery. How unlike Hamlet, who thought of killing himself to end “the heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to.” But how like Paul, who wanted to depart this world not to escape it but to gain Christ but who also saw his continuance as necessary for the sake of others.

There is enough misery in our little corner of the world to break our hearts a thousand times over. Let us not run from it. Let us enter it with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Let us awake each morning with the knowledge that God has given us another day to move toward Christ and to help others move toward him. If you are a follower of Jesus Christ and you are alive today, God sees your life as “necessary” for others. Who are those others? Seek them out, and show them the love of Christ.

Be honest

Do you resonate with Paul? I’ll be honest here: I don’t. I don’t feel that I desire to be with Christ this way. I don’t feel that I desire to serve Christ in this way. But you know what? I think that’s all right, provided I’m honest about it. You can’t manufacture passion. You can’t be who you’re not. You are who you are when you are. Who knows what lies ahead?

In any event, pursue Christ now and do so honestly. Be real. Be authentic. Be honest with yourself and with God. Every day I make it a practice to present myself to God in an honest way. I try to be honest with him about what I’m feeling—about life, about him, and about what I see him doing (or not doing).

David was called a man after the Lord’s own heart. How can a sometimes-abusive king and completely derelict father be called a man after the Lord’s own heart? We discovered in our study of David two years ago that he was a man after the Lord’s own heart because of his honesty: his willingness to be honest with himself and with God.

Be honest with God, and watch what he does.

Endnotes

¹ John Eldredge, *The Journey of Desire* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers) 64.