

The Only Way to Live and Die

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Scripture: Philippians 1:12–26

“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”—
Philippians 1:21

The apostle Paul did not have an easy life. He endured many a trial for the sake of Jesus Christ. One of those trials was imprisonment. Twice he was imprisoned in Rome. We read of his second and last imprisonment in 2 Timothy, written when he was expecting to soon be executed.

But during his first imprisonment in Rome, about 60 A.D., Paul had a certain degree of liberty. He was allowed to live in his own rented house. And it is from that house that he wrote the Epistle to the Philippians. Paul, who had persecuted the church of Christ for many years, is now a prisoner of the very Savior whose followers he once cast into prison.

Of this Savior he now says in our text, “He is my life.” Paul the prisoner has become a free man in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ has freed him from the law of sin and death. So he writes to Philippi with joy. While he is in prison he writes this epistle, often called *the epistle of joy*. Paul says to them, “Rejoice...and again I say, Rejoice.”

The church at Philippi had a special place in Paul’s heart. This church was founded by Paul on his second

missionary journey. It began with the conversion of Lydia and the Philippian jailer and his family. So Paul writes this letter full of reminiscence, affection, and gratitude. He thanks the Philippians for ministering to his physical and temporal needs, which was quite remarkable because the Philippians, in terms of earthly treasure, were rather a poor congregation. But he knows that these gifts show their love for him.

In Philippians 1:18 he speaks of his joy in the Lord and in verse 19 he says, “For I know that this shall turn to my salvation through your prayer.” He knows that even his imprisonment must be subservient to his salvation through the Philippians’ prayers and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ (cf. Heidelberg Cat., Q. 1). He says in effect, my imprisonment is going to work together for good, for Christ will be magnified even in this, “whether it be by [my] life or by [my] death” (v. 20).

And then he says with great confidence, boldness, and simplicity—and this surely is the apex of this opening chapter of Philippians—“For to me to live...Christ, and to die...gain” (v. 21). Notice the word “is” is in italic print in the Authorized Version; it is only added to make it a complete sentence since the Greek text has no helping verbs. Paul says, “What is my life? When I look to the future, to the past, and to the present—why am I here? What is my life all about? For me to live,” and you can see him pausing here with his pen, and he writes, “Christ.” And then he says, “and to die...gain.”

That is what we need today and every day as we look to the future. May this be the model for your church and your family. May this be your goal. May this be something you not only post on your refrigerator, but something you know, something you live, something you experience. May this be what all your prosperity and all your

adversity looks toward: for me to live—Christ; for me to die—gain!

And these two are connected. When for us to live is Christ, then for us to die will be gain, because to die is to be with Christ forever.

Let's look more closely, then, at the words of our text in Philippians 1:21, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Under the theme, "The Only Way to Live and Die," let us consider, first, how Christ can be our life, and second how death can be our gain.

How Christ Can Be Our Life

What does it mean to be able to say, "To live is Christ"? I would like to suggest four things to you, revolving around the words link, life, love, and likeness.

We Are Linked with Christ

When Christ is our life, we have a special linkage with Him. As theologians say, we are united to Him. This union with Christ is foundational. We must be in Christ by faith. In a word, we must have a relationship with Him.

Someone was speaking with me this week and they said about a friend, "I'm connected with him." That is a popular word today. People want to feel connected with other people. When you are in Christ, when your life is Christ, you are connected with Jesus Christ.

Of course, that had not always been the case with Paul. Originally, as a Pharisee, he persecuted those who were connected with Jesus Christ. For Paul, prior to his conversion, to live was Moses. He did everything right, according to the law, and he would have said, "For me to live is the law," for he gloried in legalism and man-made righteousness.

But on the way to Damascus all that changed (Acts 9). A light shone from heaven; Paul fell to the earth trembling, astonished, blinded, and conquered by God. And you know the story—his friends brought him into Damascus.

For three days he could not see, nor did he eat or drink. He could only pray.

And there in “the street which is called Straight” the Holy Spirit showed him who he really was in the mirror of the holy law of God (Acts 9:11). Paul saw that “for me to live is sin.” That was something he never learned at the feet of Gamaliel. But now he learned that he was a stranger to God, a stranger to grace, a lost sinner before a holy God. His uncircumcised heart was humbled, and there Paul accepted the punishment of his iniquity.

But there too in the street called Straight the Holy Spirit led this persecuting Pharisee to Jesus Christ. The scales fell from Paul’s eyes and he says, “It pleased God... to reveal His Son in me that I might preach him among the heathen” (Gal. 1:15–16). His life was henceforth linked to the life of Jesus Christ. He entered into a real and vital relationship with Jesus Christ. He came to love Jesus Christ, and in Christ he was filled with the peace that passes all understanding. Christ became his life.

From that moment on Paul is determined to know nothing, save Jesus Christ and Him crucified (1 Cor. 2:2). Acts 9:20 says that just after Paul was converted and came to know Christ, “Straightway he preached Christ in the synagogues, that he is the Son of God.” He says to the Philippians, “What things were gain to me, those I counted loss for Christ. Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord...and do count them but dung, that I might win Christ, and be found in him, not having my

own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ” (Phil. 3:7–9). That is the way to live, linked up with Jesus Christ. He is our life. He is our righteousness. He is our foundation.

What is your life? Just fill in the blanks for a moment; think autobiographically about yourself. Don’t think of anyone else. For me to live is ... what? Is it Christ? The way you are living right now—is Christ your life?

What if you have to say, “For me to live is work”? Or, “for me to live is friends and popularity”? Or money? Or reputation? You fill in the blank. What is the highest point in your life? What is the lowest point? What is the foundation? What is your life? Can you say with John 17:3 that this is life eternal, to know God and Jesus Christ whom He has sent? Could you live without Jesus for a week? A month? A year? Are you linked with Jesus Christ?

We Have Life in Christ

When Christ is our life, we are not only linked to Him but we have life in Him. We are linked to Him and united with Him for our justification, finding atonement and forgiveness in Jesus Christ, but Paul’s concern here is the living of our daily life. He is saying, “The aim of my daily life, the means and the content of my daily life is Christ.” In other words, Paul is discussing our sanctification.

He wants to know Christ better in His person, better in His natures, better in His offices, and better in communion with Him. “For me to live—Christ,” says Paul. “Day by day He is my teaching Prophet, and my sacrificial, interceding High Priest, and my ruling and guiding King. The aim of my life is to commune with Him daily. If I don’t have contact with Christ in a day it is an empty day, a sad day. But if I have union with Him, and

communion out of that union through His Word, the means of grace, and the pursuit of other spiritual disciplines, I rejoice! For me to live is truly a life in Christ.”

For Paul everything outside of Christ is death. Only Christ gives real life. Sin means death for Paul. So Christ and sin are antithetical to each other. That is why Paul is so grieved about his indwelling or remaining sin. It is a sorrow for him. He wages war against it and cries out, “O wretched man that I am!” (Rom. 7:24). He grieves when he sins because he knows that to sin is not to live in Christ.

What about you? Do you see the emptiness of all of life outside of Christ? Do you see death in all that is not Christ? When you look back over the last year is this what you valued? Did you grow in Christ in this past year? Did you commune with Christ? What is all the rest of life if you haven’t had communion with Christ? It is empty, isn’t it? Empty at best, and it will condemn you at worst. Oh, to live truly is to live in Christ, by Christ, for Christ!

We Have Love for Christ

To live Christ means not only to have linkage with Christ and life in Christ, but to have love for Christ. Paul loved the Lord Jesus Christ. If you love your earthly life partner so much you say, “I love you so much, I can’t put it into words. I think you are so special!” That is the way true Christians feel about Jesus Christ, and they say, “I love Him so much.”

To the Ephesians Paul says he yearned for them to know the love of Christ in all its depth, height, and breadth, asserting that it passes all understanding (Eph. 3:17–19). To the Corinthians he writes that the love of Christ constrained him to preach the gospel and to warn

against sin (2 Cor. 5:8–15). The love of Jesus Christ was Paul's greatest motivator. It is what made him get out of bed in the morning, so to speak. It is what made him tick all day long; it is what filled his mouth, filled his heart, and filled his life. It was the engine that moved him to do whatever he did. That is why Christ is everywhere in his letters.

I love what Luther said: "Paul could not keep Christ out of his pen because the Holy Spirit kept Christ in his heart." An old saying is that all roads led to Rome. For Paul, all matters large and small lead to Christ because Christ is all. "For I am determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor. 2:2). That is Paul's great theme. He said to the Colossians, "Christ is all, and in all" (Col. 3:11). That's it; everything we believe, and have, and are as believers, we believe and have and are in relationship to Jesus Christ. He is our only theme.

What is amazing about Paul is that even in practical areas of daily life, mundane things, or everyday problems, he is always taking us back to Christ. Are there divisions in the church in Corinth? He points them to Christ. He writes, "Is Christ divided; was Paul crucified for you?" (1 Cor. 1:13). If the problem is an immoral man in the assembly, he points to Christ again. "Purge out therefore the old leaven, that ye may be a new lump...for even Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us" (1 Cor. 5:7). If the problem is immoral temptations, Christ crucified is once more the answer: "And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:11).

What about living in the home as Christian wives or husbands? Again, he points to Christ. "Wives, submit

yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord” (Eph. 5:22). “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Eph. 5:25). “Children, obey your parents in the Lord: for this is right” (Eph. 6:1).

For every aspect of life, every relationship, everything practical, everything spiritual, Paul takes us to Christ. When he tells us to forgive each other he reminds us of Christ who forgave us (Col. 3:13). When he exhorts us to be generous in our giving he reminds us of Christ who gave so much for us (2 Cor. 8:9). When he exhorts us to humility he says, “Put on the mind of Christ” (Phil. 2:5). When he exhorts us to everyday holiness it is on the ground that we are crucified and risen with Christ (Rom. 6:3–5). Christ is the answer to every human problem. To the lost or to the saved, it is all Christ. He is all I preach. He is the sum and substance of my ministry. For me to live is Christ; I love Him with all my heart, says Paul.

Do you love the Lord Jesus Christ? I know when you compare yourself to Paul you feel that you come up short. But can you say with Peter this morning, “Lord, although I don’t love Thee as I should, Thou knowest all things. Thou knowest that I love Thee. I love the Lord Jesus Christ”?

We Have Likeness to Christ

Finally, when our life is Christ we don’t only have linkage with Him, and life in Him, and love for Him, but we also have likeness to Him. If we really love someone we start to become more like that person, don’t we? It is such an intriguing thing to see an elderly couple who are still ravished with each other, still on their first honeymoon, as it were, fifty years after they are married. They are so close to each other. They think together, they speak

together, they walk together, they talk together, they pray together, and they read together. They just love each other. They become like each other, even in physical appearance. After a while they almost look like sister and brother.

And so it is in a believer; when his life is Christ he becomes more like Christ. There is a savor of Christ that oozes out of him, says Paul elsewhere (2 Cor. 2:15). The fruits of Christ are the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, humility, temperance. All those fruits listed in Galatians 5:22–23 are really nothing but a moral profile of the Lord Jesus Christ. The believer begins to exercise these graces more and more. We become more like Christ, so that in the great day we can be fully like Him when we enter into glory and see Him as He is. As John says in 1 John 3:2, “We shall be like him,” perfectly like Him on that day.

To become like Christ involves chiefly three things.

First, it involves developing, by God’s grace, *a servant heart*, thinking not of myself and what *I* want, and what *I* like, and what *I* wish for, but to think in terms of God and His people, and to think corporately in terms of *we* as believers, and in terms of *we* as God’s family, and living a life of service to others in Christ’s name.

Second, it involves developing *a loving heart*. Christ had such a loving heart. He was a people person. He loved people. He took up little babies in His arms. He healed the lepers, and dared to touch them though they were unclean. There was nothing that held Christ back from loving people. To be like Christ is to love as Christ loved.

Third, to be like Christ is to have *a humble heart*. He was meek and lowly. The more we are like Christ, the more humble we are. You know the famous story about when someone approached Augustine and asked, “What

are the three most important Christian graces we need?” His answer was, “Humility, humility, humility.”

This is what Paul means then when he says, “For me to live is Christ.” It means linkage with Christ, life in Christ, love for Christ, and likeness to Christ, all flowing out of knowing and experiencing Christ’s love to us.

But then he adds these amazing words: “To die... gain.” This brings us to the second part of Philippians 1:21.

How Death Can Be Our Gain

Is death gain? Why does Paul tie death to life? Because the two belong together. It reminds us of Question 1 of the Heidelberg Catechism: *What is thy only comfort in life and in death?* The world and our natural hearts try to separate the two. I will live the way I want to; I will live for myself. I’ll worry about death later. Paul says no; because I live in Christ, to die in Christ—that shall be gain to me. The two belong together; the one truth implies the other. What an amazing confession—death equals gain.

Death is a heavy loss by nature. We have to leave our husband, wife, father, mother, and children behind. What a loss! We have to leave our work behind, our relationships behind, leave behind everything we have acquired and enjoyed. We say to each other, and rightly so, “You have my sympathy in your loss.” Paul says, “For me it is not a loss, it is a gain.” It is not a loss for the people of God. For me to live is Christ and therefore death is gain, for we both live and die in the Lord.

There are two things we need to look at here if we are to understand this text: what the apostle leaves behind, and what he receives when he dies.

What Paul Leaves Behind

So what will he leave behind? He will leave behind his beloved brethren in the Lord. He will leave communion with the people of God on earth. He must leave his beloved son Timothy. He leaves his brother and friend Silas. He leaves all that is on earth behind.

But he also leaves behind the body of sin and death. He leaves behind that earthly state or condition which he frankly acknowledged and lamented: "I am carnal, sold under sin. For that which I do I allow not: for what I would, that I do not; but what I hate, that do I" (Rom. 7:14b–15). He leaves behind the body of sin when he dies.

He also leaves behind a life which at best is only labor and sorrow. He leaves behind a life of afflictions. Twice he was beaten with rods. Once he was stoned. Thrice he suffered shipwreck. He was in the deep for a night and a day and had been in perils of waters, perils of the city and the wilderness and the sea, perils of false brethren, weariness and painfulness, and hunger and thirst. He underwent fastings and suffered cold and nakedness. He leaves it all behind.

And he leaves behind a life of temptation, a buffeting Satan, an enticing world—no more problems with the lust of the eye, with the lust of the flesh, or with the pride of life. He leaves behind that troubling thorn in his flesh. No more unanswered prayers, no more vexing riddles.

Death, dear believer, shall be gain for you as well. You will leave behind your sinful heart, the hardships of your difficult life, your temptations, and the thorns in your flesh. Think of it. There will be no more sin, no more Satan, no more worldliness, and no more old nature. All evil is walled out and all good is walled in. No more tears, no more pain, no more night, no more death, no more curse, no more temptation. For me to die is gain because

of what I leave behind! But even more, dying is gain because of what we will receive.

What Paul Receives at Death

David Murray has written a wonderful article on “Why do believers have to die?”¹ Consider his list of the benefits that a believer receives in death:

(1) “Dying brings us into communion with Christ’s sufferings.” That is a great benefit. Though our death does not pay the penalty for our sin, dying reminds us of how Christ died for us and connects us more deeply and lovingly to Him (Phil. 3:10).

(2) “Dying gives us a unique experience of Christ’s allsufficient grace.” Dying can be very difficult, painful, and fearful. Christ will help you through your death hours.

(3) “Dying transforms us into Christ’s image.” What a glorious thing that is! Death can intensify our sanctification so that as the outer man decays, the inner man is renewed in spiritual growth (2 Cor. 4:16).

(4) “Dying is our last and perhaps greatest opportunity to witness for Christ’s glory.” The deathbed is a pulpit. It may be our supreme test of faith, and the occasion for us to bear witness that Christ is enough. The Lord has saved many through the testimony of a dying saint. This brings us to the most important point.

(5) “Dying brings us into Christ’s presence.” That is what you will receive, and that is everything, dear believer. To be in His presence is everything you desire, everything you could hope for. This is the apex. This is heaven’s heaven—to be with Christ, to be His bride, to be in perfect communion with Him, to enjoy knowing Him

¹ . David Murray, “Why Do Believers Have to Die?” *The Banner of Sovereign Grace Truth* 20, no. 1 (Jan. 2012): 17.

and seeing Him and loving Him and praising Him and communing with Him uninterruptedly! What a life, what a future awaits the people of God! For me to die is gain because I will be with Jesus forever!

Of course, that involves so much more; so much surrounds being with Jesus. Let me unpack some of the blessings of going to be with Christ.

(1) Dying brings us to perfect eternal life with Christ. Our death is no satisfaction for our sins, but it is the abolishing of sin and entrance into the fullness of life. The eternal life that begins here on earth at regeneration shall now be made perfect. Jesus said, "Because I live, ye shall live also" (John 14:19).

(2) Dying grants us perfect knowledge of Christ. Believers know Christ here on earth. But in death that knowledge will be perfected. Now I see through a glass darkly, but then I will see face to face. Here I know in part, but there I will know as I am known (1 Cor. 13:12).

(3) Dying initiates us into perfect activities. As the Westminster Shorter Catechism (Q. 37) says, "the souls of believers are at their death made perfect in holiness." We will do all things well as "the spirits of just men made perfect" (Heb. 12:23).

We will worship God perfectly. Believers will "stand on the sea of glass, having the harps of God. And they sing the song of Moses the servant of God, and the song of the Lamb, saying, Great and marvelous are thy works, Lord God Almighty; just and true are thy ways, thou King of saints" (Rev. 15:2-3).

We will serve God perfectly. "Therefore are they before the throne of God, and serve him day and night in his temple: and he that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them" (Rev. 7:15). We will reign with Christ.

We will have perfect fellowship with the saints in glory. They “shall sit down with Abraham, and Isaac, and Jacob, in the kingdom of heaven” (Matt. 8:11).

(4) Dying welcomes us into a perfect home. We will enter into perfect mansions shining with the perfect light of our perfect God. We will perpetually feast with Him at whose right hand are pleasures forevermore (Ps. 16:11).

(5) Dying ushers us into perfect communion with the triune God in Christ. We will have more intimate communion with Christ than we have known in our highest peaks of spiritual joy on earth. We will have a clearer vision of Christ’s glory than our most lucid insights here. We will forever bask in His smile, bathe in His glory, and feast in His presence.

Death does more for us believers than anything this earthly life can do for us. Death is gain for it brings me to Jesus. Death is gain because it brings more of Christ to Paul and more of Paul to Christ. The whole Christ comes no more through a glass darkly. Every believer will be brought to Christ in heaven to be with Him forever. That is why Samuel Rutherford said that God could make ten thousand heavens full of good and glorious joys, but all of them together could not compare to Christ.² To die is gain, when to live is Christ.

But if Christ is not your life, your death is not gain. Your death is tragedy. Your death means hell. Your death means to live forever apart from God. Your death means being shut out of the favor of God, even the common grace you may have experienced in this life. So what we need to ask is this: Is my life Christ? Because only then when I come to die, will death be gain.

² . Samuel Rutherford, letter of July 6, 1637, in *Letters of Samuel Rutherford*, ed. Andrew A. Bonar (Edinburgh: Oliphant Anderson & Ferrier, n.d.), 413.

Death can't harm you, dear child of God. Death will only do you good; it will take you higher and farther than the Bible, and prayer, and the sacraments, and worship, and all the means of grace will take you in this life. It will take you right into the presence of Jesus Christ.

So Paul has this dilemma. He wants to remain here for certain reasons, but he also wants to depart to be with Christ. Here, as William Hendricksen observes, we have a "temporary residence," a mere tent; there, "a permanent abode." Here, "suffering mixed with joy"; there, "joy unmixed with suffering." Here, "suffering for a little while"; there, "joy forever." Here, "absent from the Lord"; there, "being at home with the Lord." Here, "the fight"; there, "the feast." Here, "the realm of sin"; there, "the realm of complete deliverance."³ To die in the Lord is great gain.

Are you ready to die? May I ask you that? Are you really living? That is the question. If you are living in Christ, you are ready; your house is set in order. If you are not living in Christ, you are not ready. Dear friend, you must be ready. You must be born again. There is no other way. The Puritans used to say that the way to get ready to die is to practice dying while you are here—dying to yourself, dying to everything that would draw you away from Jesus Christ.

Charles Spurgeon put it this way:

No man would find it difficult to die who died every day. He would have practiced it so often, that he would only have to die but once more; like the singer who has been through his rehearsals, and is perfect for his part, and has but to pour forth the notes once for all, and have done. Happy are they who every morning go down to Jordan's brink, and wade into the stream in

³ . William Hendricksen, *Exposition of Philippians*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1962), 78.

fellowship with Christ, dying in the Lord's death, being crucified on his cross, and raised in his resurrection. They, when they shall climb their Pisgah, shall behold nothing but what has long been familiar to them, as they have studied the map of death.⁴

I'm afraid that some of you are not ready to die, that some of you are still clinging to empty toys and trinkets of this world. For some of you to live is your possessions, your wealth, or your legalism, or maybe, God forbid, some of you even live for sin, or friendships, even things legitimate in themselves, but you are not living for Christ. You are not ready to die. You are not really living. You could die at any moment!

Rutherford wrote, "Build your nest in no tree here, for God has sold the forest to death."⁵ Repent, believe the gospel, and bow before the living God. Don't rest until you too can say, "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain." There was an Italian man named Galeacius who was converted at the time of the Reformation. He had to give up his estates in Italy and flee to Geneva. His loss was so considerable to the Church of Rome that he was offered a free passage back and restoration of his estates if he gave up his new-found Reformed faith. This is the note he sent back to Rome: "Let their money perish with them, who esteem all the gold in this world worthy to be compared with one hour's communion with Jesus Christ and His Holy Spirit."⁶ One hour with Christ is better than a lifetime with this world.

⁴ . C. H. Spurgeon, "Dying Daily," sermon 828, on 1 Cor. 15:31, *Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, Volume 14* (Pasadena, Tex.: Pilgrim Publications, 1976), 491.

⁵ . Rutherford, letter of Jan. 15, 1629, to Lady Kenmure, in *Letters*, 41.

⁶ . Cited in Thomas Watson, *The Duty of Self-Denial* (Morgan, Penn.: Soli Deo Gloria, 1996), 25.

I would also remind you of John Paton who went to the New Hebrides in the late 1850s on the Island of Tanner. He was beset by great difficulties. Cannibals there had never heard the gospel. His wife died after childbirth and his little boy died also. Paton buried his wife and his child, and then had to sit on the grave to prevent the cannibals from digging up their bodies and eating them. He was left alone. Then his house was burned down by one of the cannibals. He lost everything; he had absolutely nothing. He spent the night hiding in a tree, trying to sleep in that tree. He tells us that in the middle of the night as he sat in that tree the words were as clear to him as if they were written across the sky in large letters of gold, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world."⁷ That is the way to live.

For me to live is *Christ*, a Christ who is with me always until the end of the world. And to die is *gain!* Amen.

⁷ . See *John G. Paton: Missionary to the New Hebrides* (London: Banner of Truth, 1965).

