

To Live is Christ

A Study of *Philippians*, Sermon 2

Philippians 1:12-26 | November 12, 2023

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[See page 10 for small group discussion questions](#)

The mini-series *Band of Brothers* follows para-troopers Easy Company through their time in World War II. Their tour begins on the eve of D-Day when they are to be dropped into France by nightfall. They've studied maps of the area and know by heart the coordinates of where they'll be dropped. But their planes encounter heavy fire, and the drop turns chaotic. The men hit the ground in the black of night, many losing equipment in their dissent, and they have no idea where they are.

Slowly, they find each other, and soon one of their leaders, Lieutenant Winters. With the help of a map, Winters finds their location—"okay, we're here." With the help of a compass, he maps out where they need to go and how they'll get there—"we need to get to this beach, by this route, to take out these guns."

On the surface, their circumstances haven't changed—nightfall, foreign land, war. But now they understand them; they know where they are, and why they're there.

We all have an inborn need to understand our circumstances—where we are, and why we're there. To not understand them is to feel lost, aimless. We may look at our life circumstances—our job, where we live, how life is unfolding, our sickness or successes—and not really know where we are, nor why we're there. Or perhaps worse, we may think we're right where we should be, headed in the right direction, but we're not.

This does not need to be the case for the Christian. Though often we may feel lost, God intends for us to develop the skill to decipher where we are, and why we are there. This is precisely what Paul models for the Philippians, and for us, in our passage today. Please turn to Philippians 1:12-26.

Paul follows the typical pattern of ancient letter writing. In verses 1:1-11 he offers greetings and thanksgiving; now, in verses 1:12-26, he turns to a personal update—how's he's doing. Notice the phrase in verse 12, "what has happened to me." Paul is going to update the Philippians on his

circumstances. And as he does so, he takes what looks like a man who's been forced off course—into prison—and relocates him on the map of God's providence. And suddenly, seen in their proper, divine coordinance, Paul's circumstances are flooded with meaning.

Aim: We'll walk through three features of Paul's circumstances—(1) Confinement; (2) Petty Competition; and (3) Life and Death—and watch how he locates them in relation to Christ and the Providential working of God.

I. Circumstances That Confine (vv. 12-14)

What has happened to Paul is *imprisonment*, as he states several times, including here in verses 13 and 14. Paul gives us a few clues as to the specifics of his current chains.

- **In Rome**

It seems Paul is in Rome, as he mentions the imperial guard; "it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard ... that my imprisonment is for Christ (v13). Also called the *praetorium*, these were elite soldiers who protected Caesar.

Paul then closes the letter with greetings from Caesar's household, "All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household" (4:22).

- **On house arrest**

Not all imprisonments in the ancient world were the same—sometimes a prisoner was locked in a dungeon; sometimes forced labor; other times a prisoner was on a type of house arrest awaiting trial. This latter scenario is where we find Paul.¹ He's probably renting a room somewhere and has regular visitors such as Timothy—as he opens the letter with greetings from "Paul and Timothy" (1:1).

- **Facing capital charges**

Finally, it's clear that Paul faces an approaching trial, and has been charged with a capital offense which could mean execution. He is fearing for his life, trusting, as he writes in verse 20, that "Christ will be magnified in his body, whether by life or by death" (v20).

Paul's circumstances, then, could be described as *confined*. At first glance, Paul is not free, but shackled; not in a good place but—literally and metaphorically—prevented from fulfilling his desire missionary plans to travel and share the Gospel.

But this is not at all how Paul understands his circumstances. By looking at them through the lens of God's providence, Paul comes to see his confinement as strategic.

How impossible it must have seemed, to Paul, that a member of the Imperial Guard, or a member of Caesar's household, would ever come to his little house churches to hear him teach. But look at what's happened now—God has brought Paul *to them!*

A Praetorian guard would have been literally chained to Paul, so just a few feet away at all times. These men would have rotated on hourly shifts. Perhaps a dozen or more different soldiers were with Paul every 24 hours. And what did Paul do under these circumstances? What he always did—he shared the Gospel with them. With dozens perhaps hundreds rotating through, Paul eventually can say,

what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ (1:12-13).

The *whole* imperial guard. Estimates are that there were around nine thousand of them at the time. The news of the Gospel has spread to *all of them*, because of Paul's imprisonment. Paul isn't confined by Roman house arrest; Paul's a Trojan Horse inside the Imperial City.

Lesson One: Confining circumstances may mean strategic placement.

Here, then, is our first lesson: when viewing your circumstances through the lens of God's Providence, ask not only how they may be growing or teaching you—ask how they may be strategically positioning you... positioning you to share the Gospel.

You feel confined to your house with little children. Perhaps you're there to instruct those children about the Gospel. You feel confined by a job you dislike. Perhaps you are there to eventually invite a

co-worker to church. You feel confined at your public school with no Christian friends. Perhaps your God's missionary to those dear friends who don't know him.

God's people are where they are by divine appointment. Who has God "chained" to you to hear the Gospel?

There's a second lesson that Paul draws from his confining circumstances. This has to do with the impact of boldness:

And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear (1:14).

Lesson Two: Boldness is contagious.

Paul's courage when it's costly gives the timid a backbone.

I had a little friend group of four or five buddies from 2nd grade up through high school. We did everything together. But one of them just stood out, Justin. Justin was simply much bolder. At the pool, Justin was the first to try a backflip. When we went to the famed cliffs at Race Town Lake—and peered over their tarrying edge—it was Justin who hurled himself over. When we all started skateboarding in middle school, it was Justin first ollied down the 8ft wall by our local gas station.

But you know, something strange happened every time Justin went first. Even if he didn't land the backflip, or the sight of him making the 30ft drop scarred us, or his smashed into the ground on his first attempt at the ollie—Justin would pop up with a look on his face that said something like, "Hey, that was awesome. And what's the worst that can happen? You gotta try it." And every time, we all ended up doing it. Justin's boldness made us all bold.

This is what Paul's doing in his imprisonment. He's saying to the rest of us, "Hey, risking for Christ is awesome! Even if it leads to imprisonment, it's worth it."

I wonder if you are bold for Jesus. I wonder if you've thought of how your own boldness could be the spark that ignites a boldness in your family, your small group, your church.

That's the circumstance of confinement. Let's turn to a second circumstance: There are Christians in Rome who are preaching Christ, but out of bad motives.

II. Circumstances of Petty Competition (vv. 15-18)

In verses 15-18, Paul acknowledges that not everyone who is boldly speaking the gospel in Rome is a fan of his:

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.

Paul is not here speaking about false teachers: people he refers to later, saying, "Watch out for the dogs, look out for evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh" (3:2). Paul is introducing us to a category of Christians we need to consider carefully: Christians who have a biblically and theologically sound ministry but conduct it out of envy and rivalry.

This really hits home for me. I am competitive by nature. Whether I'm leading a basketball team or a church, I want to win. But what does winning mean when we serve Christ? It certainly does not mean us looking better than other Christians.

Our motives are like icebergs, much more is out of sight than above water. It's so easy for us to bring motives of competition, or rivalry, into ministries. A certain group prefers a type of worship style, another prefers a type of liturgy, yet another thinks a certain doctrine should be emphasized over another. But if in all these cases, the true Gospel is being preached, we should rejoice, not compete. And this is where Paul lands, as he sees his circumstances through the providential work of God,

What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

Lesson Three:

The more we care about Christ's glory rather than our own, the more we see other Christians as our teammates, not competition.

Let's turn to a final circumstance that surfaces for Paul as he turns to his future, his impending trial—this is the circumstance of *life and death*.

III. Circumstance of Life and Death (vv. 18d-26)

Paul turns to his future circumstances in verses 19-26, which forces him to face his approaching trial and possible execution. He seems confident he'll be released—"this will turn out for my deliverance" (v19). But at the bottom, he knows things could go either way:

it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, **whether by life or by death** (v20).

Whether by my life or by my death.

Life-and-death circumstances—like facing execution—cause one to take stock of their life. "What has my life really been about? What will happen if I die? If I do live, will I now live life with greater appreciation?" It's in such reflection that Paul writes verses 21-23, which include one of his most memorable sentences: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (v21).

"Live" and "die," these two words sum up the coordinates of every life: where are we, between life and death; where are we headed, from life toward death. They are the circumstances beneath all other circumstances.

How would you complete this sentence, "For me, to live is Fill in the blank?" And for you, can you say "that to die is gain?"

Here is what these coordinates mean to Paul.

For Paul, death has become a chauffeur, a butler, something to usher him to the presence of Christ. And for Paul, there is no intermediate state, no purgatory of preparation—just immediate entrance into total joy, as he writes in v. 23:

My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better (1:23).

To say that heaven with Christ is *far better* than this life is not to say the joys of this life are not wonderful. It's simply to grasp that life as it currently is, is not the life we are made for or destined for. Christians know we are destined for something far greater. This is a sure anchor of hope that has carried countless Christians through horrible pains in this life. Christians say to any circumstances at any moment, the best is yet to come and come it will.

Paul opens verse 21 with a striking phrase which literally reads, "For me, to live *Christ*."

Here we come to the core of Paul's theology and his self-understanding. Paul didn't believe in an idea, but a person—Jesus Christ. And Jesus Christ had won Paul—his heart, his obedience, his very life. Paul has been checkmated by Christ. Christ has arrested, confiscated, commandeered, overtaken Paul. For Paul, life *is Christ*.

This implies more than the fact that for Paul, life was about serving Christ—Christ's mission and purposes. It meant that Paul didn't belong to himself but belonged to Christ. We are not to picture Paul with *his Christ*. We are to picture Christ with *his Paul*. As Paul says in Galatians: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Galatians 2:20).

What a counter-cultural idea. Paul did not find his worth in how people loved him, nor in how Paul loved himself. Paul found his worth in how Christ loved him. He goes on in Galatians:

It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who **loved** me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:20).

And Paul did not orient his life toward serving himself, but toward serving Christ and Christ's mission: "If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me" (1:22).

For many of us, our most trying circumstance may be ourselves: our worries, our temperament, our sickness. And go where we may, we always bring ourselves with us. But don't you see what Paul is showing us here? We never need to be with ourselves, without Christ. We are ourselves, only in the arms of Christ.

What does it mean for Christ—another person—to be so close to you that they become your most defining circumstance? The only analogy I can think of is that of a long and loving marriage. A man and woman who have lived united for fifty, sixty, seventy years; shared everything with one another; truly become one flesh—they might understand something of what it means for your most important circumstance to not even be yourself anymore—but to be the lover of your soul. This is, in fact, the image Paul uses for our relationship with Christ elsewhere, in Ephesians.²

Lesson Four: Our most important circumstance is Christ.

Here, then, is the fourth and final lesson we learn from Paul's seemingly impossible circumstances. For the Christian, the most important circumstance is not your surroundings, nor those for or against you; it is not even your own self. The most important circumstance for the Christian is Christ. Christ is where you are. Christ is why you're there. He is your location, your path, your destiny.

And as Paul teaches, if you have Christ—or better, when Christ has you—, neither life nor death can bring you down; you are always and everywhere on that upward ascent toward God.³

Let me close with an image that might bring all this talk about circumstances and the place of Christ to a vivid point.

I lived in New England during seminary, and in fall the foliage was breathtaking. Trees were ablaze in neon orange, yellow, red. One tree in particular struck me. A large oak that stood alone in a sprawling field. I often stopped in summer and autumn to take pictures of it. Its leaves crowned it with glory.

Then the New England winter came—and seemed to kill everything. The grass browned. The leaves fell. The snow came. And now that great oak was stripped naked, not a hint of color, not a single leaf to crown its head. It stood black as night against the snow.

But if you stopped and looked long enough, you began to see in that tree yet another magnitude of beauty. There it stood, in the bitter cold, unflinching before icy New England wind. With its leaves gone, you now saw its true structure. Its powerful trunk upholding hundreds of branches in all directions. And that tree was not dead, far from it. Deep below the surface, it soaked up its nutrients.

The winter only served to lay bare to the eye what that tree ultimately was. And there against the dead of winter, it looked stronger, more beautiful, than in any summer or fall.

Such is Paul when we encounter him in Philippians. The summer is past. Winter has come, stripping away the leaves of earthly hopes. There is no glory of outer circumstances to adorn the Apostle's head. When you look at the man, all you see is what he truly is.

But do look closely. And see in the Apostle a life stronger than winter, stronger than death. A life that is thriving, growing, reaching to the heavens. Look deeper than these momentary circumstances of prisons and rivals, of sickness and fear, look until you see the silhouette appearing against the bleak winter—the silhouette of Christ. And there Christ stands, by Paul, for Paul, in Paul; Christ, the only circumstance that finally matters.

“For to me, to live is Christ, to die is gain.”

Questions for small groups:

Members of your small group are encouraged to listen to the sermon if they were not there on Sunday. We also encourage you to begin your small group meeting with prayer and then by reading Philippians 1:12-26. The below questions are suggestions for how to have a meaningful discussion about the passage—but you may have better questions that come up in your group.

1. Paul's circumstances—imprisonment—didn't make sense to the Philippians, but they made sense to Paul (Phil 1:12-13). Would you say that your current circumstances—job, relationship, where you live, your church—make sense to you? Where do you see God at work amid these circumstances? How might they be strategic for advancing the Gospel?
2. Paul's boldness made other Christians more bold (Phil 1:14). Can you think of a Christian you know that you'd describe as bold? What makes them bold? How might their boldness encourage you to be more bold?
3. Paul had Christian rivals—people who held biblical views but carried out ministry hoping to out do Paul, rather than support him (Phil 1:15-17). Are there things you do—in Christian ministry or life in general—that are driven by rivalry and envy? Our motives can be hard to plumb, but how might praying for Christians you compete with help heal that part of your heart?
4. Have you ever been in a life-or-death situation? How did that make you think about the value of life, or about the fact of death? Paul is facing such a circumstance, and it leads him to a wonderful statement (read Phil 1:21). How would you complete this sentence, "For to me, to live is....?" And could you say, "For me, to die is gain?"

Endnotes

1. Luke, at the end of Acts, finds Paul arriving in Rome and says the following: And when we [Luke and Paul] came into Rome, Paul was allowed to stay by himself with the soldier that guarded him.... He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance (Acts 28:16, 31).
2. In Ephesians 5 Paul likens the marriage relationship between husband and wife to the relationship of Christ to the church: "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.... "Therefore, a man shall leave his father and mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh." ³² This mystery is profound, and I am saying that it refers to Christ and the church" (See Eph 5:25-32).
3. As Paul says later, "I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:14).