



## ***BIBLE STUDY for the SEVENTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST***



**Focus Text: Philippians 1: 21 - 30**

**Additional texts: Exodus 16: 2 - 15; Psalm 105: 1 - 6, 37 - 45; Matthew 20: 1 - 16**

“For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” ~ Paul (v21).

For us who read from a context of relative ease, these words are jarring. Paul writes from prison (Philippians 1:7, 13-14, 17), uncertain whether he will die (verses 19-20), hoping only that “Christ will be exalted now as always in my body, whether by life or by death” (verse 20). The circumstances have not dampened Paul’s joy (see 1:18; 3:1a; 4:4, 10). Perhaps they have even clarified his focus. Regardless, Paul’s words in this passage crystallize two of the greatest takeaways from Philippians.

The centrality of Christ (1:21-26)

Christ is a big deal for Paul. And the letter to the Philippians showcases that. Christ is the one for whose sake Paul has deemed all past trophies and treasures “rubbish” (3:8). What is more, Christ exemplifies both the “mind” believers are to have (2:5) and the general pattern they are to live (2:1-4, 5-11).

Here in our passage, Paul attributes Christ with the significance of all living: “For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain” (NRSV v21). The verse’s brevity and alliteration, make for an emphatic point — one the original hearers would have noticed.

Later Paul professes a desire to depart “and be with Christ, for that is far better” (verse 23). Only the prospect of “fruitful labour,” invested in the Philippians’ progress and faith, keeps him contentedly present (1:22-26). Even so, between life and death, Paul confesses “I do not know which I prefer” and “I am hard pressed between the two” (verses 22-23).

However surprising Paul’s flippancy about death is, his point is not about death but about Christ — and his power over death. Paul writes as one seasoned in life-threatening situations for Christ’s sake (2 Corinthians 11:23-29), making this instance nothing new. Over the course of these hardships, Paul has embraced the motto: “to live is Christ and to die is gain” (v21; see also Romans 13:7-9).

One of the most striking features of Philippians is how it places Christ at the centre: at the centre of worthy pursuits (3:4b-14), at the centre of thinking (2:5), at the centre of ethical reflection (2:1-11), at the centre of life (1:21-26), and at the centre of worship (2:9-11). Whatever our reactions to Paul’s flippancy about death (Philippians 1:21-24), his aim is to glorify Christ (1:18, 20) and credit him with the meaning of life.

A life reflective of the Gospel (1:27-30)

Philippians 1:27 issues the letter’s primary appeal: “Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” The verb for “live” is not Paul’s typical word choice for patterns of living. It is the language of public citizenship or civic loyalty, with political overtones. Later Paul uses the same root to remind the Philippians “our citizenship is in heaven” (3:20). These word choices together issue a politically-laden charge to those in a city with strong Roman loyalties: “live in a way that honours the message of Christ” — a message that proudly calls him, not Caesar, but “Lord” (1:2; 2:11; 3:8, 20; 4:5, 23).

Paul observes “you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have” (Philippians 1:30). Given his circumstances, this must mean harassment at the hands of Roman authorities (see also 2:14-16; 3:2-4a). Elsewhere Paul reports “we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated at Philippi” (1 Thessalonians 2:2), and Acts records experiences of this kind (16:19-40). To believers in this city, Paul encourages standing firm, trusting that suffering for Christ’s sake is finally a privilege (Philippians 1:27-29).

Paul's positive spin on the Philippians' suffering does not condone suffering of all kinds — nor does it attribute it to God's will. He wants believers in Philippi to see their hardships for professing Christ as Lord, as proof of the certainty of their future hope: salvation (see also 2:14-16; 1 Thessalonians 2:14-15). Paul depicts this suffering for Christ's sake as a "privilege," given to accompany faith (Philippians 2:12-13), probably because it fosters conformity to Christ, who himself suffered and was raised (Romans 6:1-6).

Many of us today do not often suffer for the gospel. But Paul's charge to "live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" (v27) still stands. His appeal calls us to a faith that is public (vs. private), a witness that "strives side by side" with others for the gospel, and a devotion to Christ as Lord that governs all other loyalties — despite the consequences.

(From the Working Preacher website)

As we reflect on this passage, take time to apply the teachings to your own life.

Is Christ at the centre of my life? Is Christ at the centre of my thoughts, my actions, my words?

Does my life reflect Christ and His teachings, in times of suffering and in times of joy?

Can others see Christ in my life?

Let us pray

We praise your abiding guidance, O God,  
for you sent us Jesus, our Teacher and Messiah,  
to model for us the way of love for the whole universe.

May Christ always be at our centre  
May His love always be reflected in our lives.

Amen

