

Philippians 1:12-26 “To Live Is Christ, To Die Is Gain”

Last week we saw Paul’s concern for the church in Philippi.

He rejoices in their partnership in the gospel with him,  
but he is also concerned that their love  
“may abound more and more with knowledge and all discernment,  
so that you may approve what is excellent,  
and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,  
filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ,  
to the glory and praise of God.” (1:9-11)

Love is the foundation of the Christian life:

as Moses and Jesus both taught –  
Love the Lord your God with all your heart,  
and your neighbor as yourself.  
But this love is not a random love –  
it must abound with knowledge and discernment –  
it is love that is informed by knowledge  
and directed by wisdom.  
And the direction is the trajectory of holiness,  
as our lives are aimed eschatologically  
at the day of Christ.

And one piece of knowledge that is very useful in this trajectory  
is the progress of the gospel –  
both throughout the world,  
and in our own lives.

Indeed this idea of the “progress of the gospel”  
bookends our passage today.

Paul uses the same word in verse 12 (advance) as in verse 25 (progress).

The progress of the gospel throughout the world (v12)  
is intimately connected to “your progress and joy in the faith” (v25)  
because it is the same Lord, Jesus Christ,  
who is at the center of all things.

### **1. The Advance of the Gospel (1:12-14)**

*12 I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, 13 so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. 14 And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.*

Moises Silva points out that this is Paul’s “missionary report.”

The Philippian church has supported his labors financially,

and so he supposes they are more interested  
in the details of his work than he reports in most of his letters.

It appears that the Philippians expected  
that Paul's imprisonment would make it more difficult to preach the gospel –  
a reasonable expectation!

But in fact, Paul says, his imprisonment has “served to advance the gospel” in two ways:

- 1) the praetorian guard (the imperial guard) and all the rest  
has seen that Paul is imprisoned for Christ.

There is a grammatical point that is important in verse 13.

The ESV says that he is imprisoned “for Christ”  
and that is a perfectly good translation of the preposition “en.”  
But it is important to note that to be imprisoned “en Christo”  
is not the same as saying “for the sake of Christ.”

The phrase “en Christo” is Paul's favorite phrase  
for describing our union with Christ –  
that we are “in” him.

Now it would make no sense to translate this  
“that my imprisonment is in Christ” –  
that would be garbled English.

But Paul uses this phrase “en Christo” 10 times in Philippians,  
and so we need to see the connection he is making!

His suffering – his imprisonment – is part of his union with Christ.

He is not just suffering “for” Christ  
as I might suffer for a political cause.  
Rather he is sharing in Christ's sufferings –  
a point he will make forcefully in chapter 3, verse 10:  
“that I may know him and the power of his resurrection,  
and may share his sufferings,  
becoming like him in his death,  
that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

But Paul is not just concerned with his own understanding of what has happened.

He says that everyone – including the imperial guard –  
knows that he is suffering in Christ.

Please understand, brothers and sisters, how important this is!

Today you will find many people who *claim* that they are persecuted for Christ,  
when in fact they are political dissidents.

I know of some ministers who have been in prison for years,  
who are ostensibly “suffering for Christ.”

But if they had submitted to the government, when it asked for information,  
they would not be in prison today.

So, as far as the government is concerned,  
these ministers are *not* in prison because they are Christians –  
they are in prison because they violated laws regulating public assemblies.

I fear that much that goes under the name of “persecution”  
is in fact a political conflict regarding the modern doctrine of “rights.”

I have some dear brothers who understand this.

When their government came and told the churches that they must register –  
including the names and addresses of all the members of the church –  
they had a meeting to discuss this.

I think some of the younger folk were initially inclined against compliance,  
but then the older men spoke:

What do we fear?

Do we fear what the government might do to us?

What is the worst they can do?

They can send us to the One we love most!

Paul says to submit to the authorities.

The authorities have not commanded us to sin –

they have commanded us to confess our faith publicly.

How can we refuse?

And yes, from time to time they have suffered for this stand.

But everyone knows that they submitted to the government.

They cannot justly be accused of being political dissidents.

And from time to time the government remembers that,  
and grants them relief.

Everyone knows that when they are imprisoned,  
they are imprisoned for Christ.

Brothers and sisters,

there are fear-mongers out there who warn that the churches in the United States  
need to “take action” or our “rights” will be taken away.

Who are we afraid of?

What is the worst they can do?

To live is Christ – to die is gain!

I am not worried about my “rights” as a preacher of the gospel.

If I suffer for preaching Christ, I will rejoice!

But if I suffer for being a political dissident,

then I have confused the kingdom of Christ with the politics of this age.

Paul says that even the imperial guard understands clearly  
that he is no political dissident:

he is imprisoned in Christ.

2) And secondly, Paul says that his imprisonment has advanced the gospel by emboldening “most of the brothers” to “speak the word without fear.”

I’ve noticed that in Paul’s epistles he often speaks of “the brothers” when he is referring to his fellow ministers – his fellow pastors.

From Paul’s teaching in Romans and 1 Corinthians we know that Paul taught that there are a variety of gifts, and that *not* every Christian is a preacher.

So these “brothers” who are preaching would be the pastors and teachers in and around Rome.

And Paul says that *most* of them have become “much more bold” in their preaching of Christ.

This is often the case.

When we see others who have stood firm for the gospel, it encourages us to do the same.

But then we come to the problem:

## **2. The Problem: Rivalry among Preachers (1:15-17)**

*15 Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. 16 The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.*

There is a simple chiastic structure to verses 15-17:

Paul introduces the two kinds of preachers in verse 15, and then explains their motivations in verses 16-17.

There has been quite a bit of debate as to the identity of these preachers.

I won’t bother taking you through the debate, because it is pointless!

Paul does not identify anything about these preachers, and so it is fruitless to speculate.

One thing we do know:

the “rivalry” preachers are not full-fledged Judaizers.

As we know from Galatians, Paul says that the Judaizers preach “a different gospel” and therefore Paul would not say that they “preach Christ.”

So let’s focus on what we know from Paul himself:

All of these preachers have been motivated by Paul’s imprisonment to speak the Word without fear.

There is a bold proclamation of Christ that is going forth throughout the region.

And at least some of these preachers

“preach Christ ... from good will...out of love,  
knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.”  
Paul’s imprisonment has emboldened many.  
They see Paul’s suffering in Christ as model that they want to emulate.

This reminds us how important it is that ministers of the gospel  
*model* the Christian life.

That was one of the fun things about our travels:  
not only did we hear some really good preaching,  
but we also met some really winsome pastors,  
who live what they preach!

And Paul says that these faithful brothers  
preach Christ out of love –  
love for God, love for Paul, and love for the people of God.  
They preach Christ, knowing that Paul is  
“put here for the defense of the gospel.”

The idea of being “put here” (keimai)  
reminds us that Paul understands that *God* has put him here.  
These faithful preachers also understand that Paul is simply doing  
what God has put him here to do!  
What has God called you to do?  
What has God “placed you” here to do?  
I can tell you some things right up front:

If you are an elder,  
then Christ has put you here to shepherd the flock.  
If you are a deacon,  
then Christ has put you here to lead the church in showing mercy.  
If you are a member of the body,  
then Christ has put you here to love and encourage one another.  
If you are a husband,  
then Christ has put you here to love your wife and lead your family.  
If you are a wife,  
then Christ has put you here to submit to your husband.

What has God put Paul “here” in prison to do?  
Defend the gospel.

The phrase is “eis apologian tou euangeliou”  
for the defense of the gospel.  
This is where we get our word “apologetics” –  
and particularly here, “evangelistic apologetics” –  
or perhaps better “gospel apologetics.”

What does “gospel apologetics” look like?

We don’t know exactly what Paul said to Nero, when he finally stood before him.

But we know from the book of Acts what Paul said to the rulers in Caesarea.

We know what he said to various officials and groups.

I think sometimes “apologetics”

has been confused with proofs for the existence of God, miracles,  
and the whole question of the rationality of the Christian faith.

Certainly in the aftermath of the Enlightenment,

these questions were at the center of the apologetic project.

It was (and is) important to show that the Christian faith is not irrational.

But over the history of the church, the particular focus of apologetics has varied:

In the first centuries,

one main thrust was to show that the Christian faith  
was not a political threat to the Roman empire.

Another was to show that Jesus is the Christ,  
according to the Hebrew Scriptures.

And another dealt with pagan and philosophical challenges to the faith.

Much of medieval apologetics dealt with a variety of challenges from Islam,  
as well as the relationship between Christianity and classical antiquity.

Modern apologetics has focused on the Enlightenment challenge –  
but the postmodern turn has raised a new set of questions.

Today, people question whether there is such a thing as truth.

Many believe that morality is a matter of personal taste

and find the God of the Bible to be a reprehensible character.

We need to be wise in our responses to such people.

If our love is to abound in knowledge and all discernment

so that we approve what is excellent,

and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,

then we need to be ready with an answer for the hope that is in us!

We need to understand our culture – and be engaging it with the gospel of Christ.

Of course, Paul recognizes that we will face another challenge,

in some ways more frustrating than the world.

Because there are those who preach Christ “out of rivalry,

not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment.” (v17)

Paul is plainly frustrated by this.

It is not a good thing for people to be motivated by envy and rivalry.

And sadly, this is all too common today.

This is what happens when pastors preach “denominationally.”

One thing that I really appreciate about R. J. Breckinridge

is that he *never* spoke publicly against other evangelical churches.  
He would teach on the errors of Universalism, Roman Catholicism,  
and Pelagianism,  
but he never preached against Methodists, Baptists, or other evangelicals.

This is all the more remarkable,  
because this was during a time when Methodists frequently preached  
anti-Calvinistic sermons,  
and Baptists were decrying the validity of infant baptism.  
But Breckinridge rejoiced to hear of the growth of the Methodists and Baptists  
because he knew that in those churches, Christ was preached!

And that is Paul's first response to this problem:

### 3. Paul's Response (1:18-26)

#### a. Joy that Christ Is Preached (v18)

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

So what if they are preaching against me?

If they are preaching Christ,  
then in that I rejoice..

Do I wish that they would knock off the rivalry and envy thing?  
Of course!

But this is why we pray regularly for all churches where Christ is preached.  
Because in spite of the envy and rivalry that exists in modern denominations,  
we *must* rejoice that Christ is preached!

And this is why we confess "one, holy, catholic, and apostolic church."

Sure, we think that the Reformed confessions  
are clearer and more accurate in their statement of the Christian faith,  
but we may not engage in envy and rivalry against others  
who remain in fellowship with the apostles' teaching.

If an apostle can say that he rejoices

in the preaching of those who are trying to cause *him* trouble,  
who am I to complain about my fellow servants?

Christ has only one church.

And so if he is preached, I will rejoice!

But then Paul moves on at the end of verse 18 to his second reason for joy:

#### b. Joy that Christ Will Be Honored in My Body (v18b-20)

*Yes, and I will rejoice, 19 for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, 20 as 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.*

Two points here:

First, Paul is talking about *salvation* – not just “deliverance” from prison.

Most commentators recognize that Paul is reflecting on Job 13:13-18.

*13 “Let me have silence, and I will speak, and let come on me what may.*

*14 Why should I take my flesh in my teeth and put my life in my hand?*

*15 Though he slay me, I will hope in him; yet I will argue my ways to his face.*

*16 This will be my salvation, that the godless shall not come before him.*

*17 Keep listening to my words, and let my declaration be in your ears.*

*18 Behold, I have prepared my case; I know that I shall be in the right.*

It is possible that *soteria* (deliverance) includes the idea of release from prison (just think of the Exodus where the concept of salvation includes *both* the physical release from Egypt, *and* the spiritual deliverance to worship and serve the LORD).

But look at verse 20:

the deliverance here is one that will be accomplished  
*whether by life or by death.*

Verses 19-20 are all one sentence.

Paul’s expectation and hope is not merely that he will be released from prison. Rather, he expects and hopes that *whether or not* he is released from prison, he will not be ashamed, but that Christ will be honored in his body, “whether by life or by death.”

Besides, it is only in verses 24-25 that Paul will come to the conclusion that he will remain and continue in the flesh.

So the deliverance/salvation that Paul speaks of is more than just release from prison. But remember that salvation includes a past, a present and a future sense.

I *have* been saved  
I am *being* saved  
and I *will be* saved.

And this passage is especially talking about that future sense.

Paul’s salvation –

as he puts it in 3:11, his “attaining the resurrection from the dead” -  
is connected to “your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.”

After all, what would happen to Paul if he faltered here at the end?

What would happen to Paul if, under pressure from the emperor, he renounced Jesus Christ and returned to Judaism?

Paul appears to me to have a very robust sense of assurance!  
But even so, he recognizes that courage in the face of suffering is not a given.  
Being faithful unto death is no slight thing!

His salvation –  
his attaining the resurrection from the dead –  
his perseverance to the end –  
cannot be taken for granted.

And so he says that through *your prayers* and *the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ*  
this will turn out for his salvation.

We should not be surprised to see Paul juxtaposing the prayers of the saints  
and the help of the Spirit  
in our salvation.

After all, this is the same Paul who will say in the next chapter,  
“work out your own salvation with fear and trembling,  
for it is God who works in you,  
both to will and to work for his good pleasure.” (2:12-13)

Let me ask you,  
how often do you pray for me?  
How regularly do you pray that God will strengthen others in the church?  
Our prayers for one another are one of the divinely appointed means  
that God uses for our salvation.

Second, I want you to see the shame/honor distinction here.  
Paul says that he expects and hopes that he will not be ashamed,  
but that Christ will be honored in his body.

Everyone knows that Paul is imprisoned for Christ (in Christ).  
Therefore, if Paul fails to live like a Christian,  
then he has brought shame upon himself –  
and upon the name of Christ.

The Bible has several different ways of talking about this.  
We tend to focus on the guilt/innocence side of things.  
If Paul fails to live like a Christian, then he is guilty.

But that is not what he says here.  
If he fails to live as a Christian, then he will be ashamed.  
He will have brought shame upon himself,  
and he will have dishonored Christ.

What is the difference?  
Guilt and innocence are legal terms.

Shame and honor are communal terms.  
Paul's concern here is not just for what he does.  
He is concerned that what he does will have the right sort of effect on others.

Let me give you an example:

if I give an Iraqi boy a soccer ball,  
I may not be "guilty" of anything,  
but if his father was unable to get him a soccer ball,  
then I have just "shamed" his father.  
And because this boy was not the "leading boy" in the neighborhood,  
I have also shamed the "leading boy" –  
and so I have unwittingly alienated the father and the leading boy –  
all because I gave a boy a soccer ball!

I do not want my actions to bring dishonor to Christ.

This is not simply a statement "I do not want to sin."

This means, "I am concerned for the honor of my Savior"  
that he be honored – that his name would be valued –  
by those who come in contact with me.

And this honor/shame distinction helps us understand Paul's third point of response:

c. Your Progress and Joy in the Faith (1:21-26)

*21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. 23 I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. 24 But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. 25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.*

The last phrase there "have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus"

uses the word for "boasting" –  
that you may have ample cause to "boast" in Christ Jesus,  
because of my coming to you again.

This idea of boasting is closely related to the honor/shame paradigm.

Paul would dearly love to depart "and be with Christ"

but their progress and joy in the faith,  
requires him to remain in the flesh.

Therefore, Paul concludes,

it is necessary for him to remain,  
"so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus."

As Paul considers the possible outcomes,

he becomes convinced that greater honor would come to Christ Jesus  
through his release.

We'll come back to this passage next week in order to finish the chapter.

I will only say in conclusion that Paul is connecting “the progress of the gospel”  
in his own missionary endeavors  
with the progress and joy in the faith of the Philippians.  
As we contribute, as a church,  
to the advance of the gospel throughout the earth,  
that should be paired with our own progress and joy in the faith here.  
It seems clear from these themes in Philippians,  
that Paul was concerned that the church in Philippi  
was not progressing as they should.

Paul wants you to think the way he does:  
“to live is Christ; to die is gain”

Moses said “love the LORD your God with all your heart.”  
Jesus said “seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness”  
Paul sums up the same basic point: “to live is Christ”

All that you do,  
all that you say,  
all that you think,  
no, even that is not a sufficient way to put it –  
because that leaves *who you are* out of the equation!

To live is Christ.  
My very identity is bound up in him.  
He is my life – all that I am is consumed with him.

And if that is true –  
then to die can only be gain –  
because in death I will finally get what I have been longing for all my life!

Christ.