

Jesus Is Everything

Philippians 1:18b-26

John Piper, a pastor in Minneapolis, tells the story of an older gentleman whom his father had led to the Lord. The church had prayed for this man for years, yet he had been consistently resistant to the gospel of Jesus—to the message that our sin, our disobedience to God, really is sinful and deserving of just and eternal punishment, but that God's grace in Jesus Christ, who gave his life on the cross to rescue us from our sins—that God's grace is sufficient to forgive us our sins and reunite us to God if we will but place our faith in Christ, since the punishment we deserved has been poured out on him. This man had resisted that message for decades. Yet, now in his old age, he showed up one day while Piper's father was preaching, and as Piper writes, "God opened his heart to the Gospel of Christ, and he was saved from his sins and given eternal life. But," he continues, "*that did not stop him from sobbing and saying, as the tears ran down his wrinkled face . . . 'I've wasted it! I've wasted it!'*"¹ He had come to the end and now, seeing Jesus for the first time, realized how he had wasted his life.

That story left an indelible mark on Piper as a child—what will it take, when I come to the end of my days, not to have wasted my life? The Apostle Paul is interested in the same question in our passage, Philippians 1:18-26. And his answer is that *everything turns on treasuring Jesus*.

We've been looking at the book of Philippians for a few weeks now, a book that is consumed with the exhilarating prospect of partnering together *in* and *for* the gospel of Jesus—the good news of grace and salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. Paul wants God's people to be a community shaped by the gospel and serving together on mission for the gospel. And so he opened this book with a prayer for the Philippians' gospel partnership in 1:3-11, and then began discussing the ironic joy of gospel partnership in 1:12-26 (which includes our passage this morning).

There's an ironic joy in being bonded in and for the gospel—a joy that doesn't make sense. A few weeks ago when we looked at 1:12-18, we saw how what looked on the surface like failure and defeat—a travelling preacher and apostle being confined in prison and shut out from public influence, while at the same time becoming the target of a growing competition among fellow ministers of the gospel who thought they could take advantage of him in his confinement—how all this had actually been used by God to accomplish the very thing Paul was sent out to do—to advance the gospel of Jesus. The entire prison guard had become aware that Paul's imprisonment was for Christ (1:12-13), and more and more people, because of Paul's example, were being bold to preach that gospel (1:14), even if some did so out of false motives (1:15-17). So Paul looks at all this apparent failure, and he says in 1:18: "But what does it matter? The

¹ John Piper, *Don't Waste Your Life* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2003), 12 (emphasis mine).

important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this I rejoice.” That’s a joy that doesn’t make sense.

Paul continues this ironic joy in our section this morning, from the middle of v. 18 through 26—a joy *rooted in his confidence that God is going to deliver him*. Look at the middle of v. 18: “Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance” (1:18b-19).

Paul rejoices in the prospect of deliverance. So what kind of deliverance is Paul talking about? When someone’s sitting in prison—they’re supposed to be out there preaching in the synagogues and marketplaces, but their locked up in prison—and they talk about their confidence of being delivered, what’s it sound like they’re talking about (at least initially)? Getting out of prison. And Paul is quite confident that he’ll be released, if you look down at vv. 25 and 26, he’s convinced that he will continue to live, to avoid execution this time, and to come again to the Philippian church. And some readers understand the deliverance Paul speaks of in v. 19 as just that—getting out of prison.

But there are good reasons to think that Paul actually has something much bigger than getting out of prison in his sights. In fact, when we look at v. 20, we see that his joyful confidence in being delivered isn’t at all contingent on being set free from prison. He says in v. 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*.” Now what kind of deliverance can this be—a salvation that he can depend on whether or not his life is cut off in this world? Paul is looking toward the kind of deliverance that one finds when standing before the Lord on the final day and hearing the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant”—a *vindication* that our life and work (and the trials that characterize them) have not been in vain. Paul’s joyful confidence is that when he comes to the end, Christ will have been exalted, magnified, made much in him in all circumstances, such that he will not have wasted his life.

That’s a pretty bold confidence. Perhaps a bit cocky. How can he be so sure? Where does this joyful confidence come from? First, Paul’s not talking about a life of sinless perfection. When he writes 1 Timothy toward the end of his life and reflects back, he considers himself to be the chief of sinners (1:15). So he’s not talking about perfection. We’ll see that very clearly in Philippians ch. 3. He is, however, talking about a life of faithfulness to God—a life where our faith bears fruit in obedience. It’s not that we won’t make mistakes, but that when we do, by God’s grace, we correct our course. One author describes this as “a long obedience in the same direction.”² Faithfulness as a course of life—a life not wasted by anchoring it in or centering it on things that don’t last and don’t matter in the end.

Second, Paul’s confidence has nothing to do with his own strength. He is completely dependent on the prayers of God’s people and on the power of Christ’s Spirit. Look again at v. 19: “for I know that *through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ*, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance,” for my vindication in the end. Finishing well was not something Paul was capable of in and of himself.

² Eugene Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction: Discipleship in an Instant Society* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1980).

When Paul walked his own road, he was walking in the opposite direction of God. He describes his former life in Galatians 1, how he “persecuted the church of God violently and tried to destroy it” (Gal. 1:13). It wasn’t until God stopped him dead in his tracks, while on his way to Damascus to throw the fledgling church there into prison, that his eyes were opened to Jesus, though temporarily blinded by the vision of him. You can read about that in Acts 9. So, it’s the grace of God that Paul even knows Jesus and wants to walk with him. And it’s that same grace that enables him to walk with God. He attributes his strength to two things, which work so closely together that they look like one thing: the prayers of God’s people and the power of God’s Spirit. “Through your prayers and [more literally] the *provision* or *supply* of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.” Think about what he’s saying there: when God’s people pray, God’s Spirit is poured out and provided. Our prayers are not wishful thinking. It’s not just, “I’m sending positive thoughts your direction.” I’m calling on the Creator of the universe and the Savior of humanity, who alone has the authority and the power to do something about this situation, and who delights to do so through the Holy Spirit, and I’m asking him to do it. The prayers of God’s people unleash the power of God’s Spirit to accomplish God’s purposes in our lives.

When we pray for each other, do we pray that way? Do we really expect God to answer? Do we believe that his Spirit is at work? As we share together in the gospel of Jesus we have the privilege of praying for one another and seeing each other strengthened by the Spirit of God, that we might finish well.

So Paul’s confidence in finishing well is not about perfection, and has nothing to do with his own strength. Third, it has nothing to do with Paul’s own reputation, either. Rather, everything is about Jesus. For Paul, finishing well turns entirely upon *treasuring Christ*, and it’s on this point that we’re going to spend the rest of our time.

Treasuring Jesus was Paul’s singular goal, both for himself and for the people he invested in. It gave focus to his life and work. We see this in v. 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.” This is the criterion by which he evaluates whether or not his life can be counted as having been well-lived; not wasted: that his life would not be characterized by fear and shame, but rather with courage in every circumstance—whether pain or pleasure, imprisonment or freedom—that Christ be honored in his body.

Everything is about Jesus. Because Jesus is everything. For Paul personally, and for his ministry. If he lives, he wants his life to bear fruit for Jesus. He says so in 1:22: “If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me.” What does this fruitful labor look like? Helping others to make much of Jesus. Verse 25: “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*, so that through my being with you again *your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow* on account of me” (1:25-26). The goal of Paul’s ministry is that the gospel would advance among the Philippians and through them, *for their progress and joy in the faith*. That they would grow in their delight for Christ, that their joy in Christ would overflow, and so live a life that honors him.

Paul’s goal, for himself and for those he ministers to, is that Christ would be exalted, honored, treasured, glorified, made much of. That Jesus would be everything to us. Jesus is the goal.

And so we have to ask the question this morning: Is Jesus your goal? Is he my goal? Is he the goal of your career? Is he the goal of your business—to honor Christ and show off his beauty, kindness, integrity, and mercy? Or is it just to make money? To attain security and comfort? Is Jesus the goal of your recreation, to enjoy and make much of Jesus by enjoying his good creation? Students, is he the goal of your education—to honor him? Parents, is he the goal that you hold before your kids? Or is there some other goal? To be great at something—whether it’s school, or sports, or music, or art, or to just be well-behaved?

Here’s the question: How do I know if my life and relationships are bearing fruit that will last? How can I share in Paul’s confidence of finishing well (not perfection, but direction)? Here’s a clear criterion to evaluate our parenting, our discipleship, our evangelism, our career, our marriage, our friendships: *Does my investment in this person or this relationship help them to make much of Jesus?* Does my love for this person help them to love Jesus more—not necessarily to help them feel more loved, but to love Jesus more, to treasure him? Do the ministries of this church result in more and more people delighting in Christ? Does the way I parent help my children treasure Jesus more (not their own performance or accomplishments)? That, my friends, is fruit that will last. That is a life well-lived, and not wasted.

So what will keep us on the track of pursuing Jesus, for ourselves and for others? For Paul, Jesus is not only the goal for our lives, he’s also the motivation. Christ himself is the prize, the reward. We don’t make much of Jesus so that we can get something out of him—‘I’ll follow Christ and make much of Christ so that he’ll give me what a really want in life—happiness, success, health, and so on.’ No, Jesus is the goal *and* the motivation—I make much of Christ because I want Christ, and there’s nothing greater than him. So treasuring Jesus not only gives us focus, a goal, but gives us *freedom* as well, a motivation. If Jesus is our treasure, then we are truly freed to follow him, and Paul shows us what that looks like in two key ways according to our passage.

First, treasuring Jesus (as our motivation) frees us to pursue our goal (honoring him) *despite* our circumstances, even the circumstances of death. And this is a huge part of what Paul is dealing with in this passage, and why he can be confident in a deliverance or vindication that’s bigger than getting out of jail alive. Listen again, starting in the middle of v. 20: He expects that “. . . Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.”²¹ 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.”

As Paul sat in prison, he knew full well that execution was a live option for his captors. For to proclaim Jesus as King and Savior of the world was, to the Roman Empire, a treasonous claim that some king other than Caesar was in charge. He knew what the risks of following Jesus were; he knew that his life might very well be poured out as a drink offering, as he puts it in 2:17. And yet he still sought hard after Christ for himself and for others, because he was motivated by something greater than the risk. He was motivated by Jesus.

Verse 21, perhaps the most famous verse in Philippians, is the essence of Paul’s motivation: “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” Think about that sentence for a moment. “For to me, to live is Christ.” That means that whatever days the Lord gives me, are to be spent for him—

enjoying him, serving him in joyful obedience. And if we spend our days that way, they will not be wasted, because Jesus is worth it.

That does *not* mean that the Christian life is easy. It doesn't mean it was easy for Paul. Elsewhere he speaks of a suffering that drove him to despair of life itself (2 Cor. 1:8-9). Having Christ as our motivation doesn't mean life is easy or free of suffering. It does mean that *it is not in vain*. Should following Christ result even in death, it is not in vain, it has not been wasted, because as Paul continues, "to die is gain." Or in other words, to live is Christ, and to die is even more of Christ. As Paul says in v. 23, to depart this world and be with Jesus, in the joy and presence of his unveiled glory, is better by far. So much better that Paul honestly had a hard time deciding if, given the opportunity, he would choose to face execution and be with Jesus, or to stay behind and continue his ministry among the Philippians and other churches. Either way was a win for Paul.

Because death for the Christian is not the end. For we have a Savior who took upon himself the cause of death, our very sins, and bore in himself on the cross the full weight of God's anger against our rebellion, the death we deserved, in order to free us and to forgive us. And on the third day he rose from the grave and conquered death. Death is an enemy, and we grieve hard when it happens. But it is a defeated enemy, such that we don't grieve as those who have no hope. Jesus wrested us from Death's claim on us and brought new life and resurrection to all who believe. If you are a Christian, if you have placed the full weight of your hope and faith in Jesus Christ, and his life, death, and resurrection for you, then you have great hope in the face of death. The hope of eternal life with God, the hope of the resurrection, which all God's people look forward to on the day of Christ's return. As Paul says at the end of chapter 3: "But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, *will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body*"—his resurrection body (3:20-21).

In Jesus, death is gain. That's an ironic joy. Paul could face any circumstance with courage, because he knew that every circumstance, whether life or death, was an opportunity to make much of Jesus.

John G. Paton, a missionary to the South Pacific Islands in mid-1800's, captures this spirit. As Paton prepared to leave for the New Hebrides, he was warned by an aging Christian, "You will be eaten by Cannibals!" Paton replied, "Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms; I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honouring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by Cannibals or by worms; and in the Great Day my resurrection body will arise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer."³ In other words, to live is Christ, to die is gain.

Do we really believe that life is all about Jesus? That death is actually gain? Do we believe what we sang earlier—that it is not death to die? Do we believe this, not just for the dramatic

³ John G. Paton, *Missionary to the New Hebrides: An Autobiography Edited by His Brother*, ed. James Paton (New York: Revell, 1907, reprint, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1965), 56; cited in D. A. Carson, *Basics for Believers: An Exposition of Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1996), 31.

stories of missionaries and martyrs, but for the slow and unexciting death caused by age? For the painful death that comes by cancer and disease? For the sudden death that comes from an accident or a stroke or heart attack? Do we believe that for all Christians, death is *always* gain, *always* better by far, because it's not just more of Jesus, it's *all* of Jesus? And does that belief give us courage to face the most ridiculous and even perilous of circumstances in life?

So what is it that keeps us from this? I think the issue for so many of us, myself included, is that we complete the sentence, "For to me, to live is (blank)" with something other than Christ.⁴ We answer, "For to me, to live is family. To live is career. To live is to fish, to vacation on the Cape, to fornicate, to recreate. For to me, to live is to party with my friends. To live is my own righteousness, my own religious performance. To live is to recycle, to travel, ski. It's to succeed, to consume, to be made much of by others." And so Jesus isn't really our goal or our motivation. He's not our greatest treasure. And that means that we are in serious risk of coming to the end of our days and discovering that we've wasted the whole thing. For as Kent Hughes says, "if this be our life, then death is the loss of everything."⁵ But if Jesus is our treasure, our joy, our delight, the greatest thing this world affords, then to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

So treasuring Jesus frees us to pursue our goal despite our circumstances, even death. Finally, treasuring Jesus frees us to place the good of others above the good of self. And this is where Paul's wrestling ultimately takes him.

He knows that what's best for him is actually execution. To depart and be with Christ is better by far. And yet he knows in his bones that his work here is not done. He says in v. 24: "but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. 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, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me."

Now at the end of the day, Paul doesn't get to pick. God is the one who numbers our days. But because Jesus is his treasure, his goal, and his motivation, his desire to delight in Jesus is not only for himself, but for others, such that he's willing and eager to stick around longer and help the Philippians continue to grow in their faith, to help them become more and more enthralled with and obedient to Jesus. He is free to lay aside what's best for him in order to pursue what's best for them. And that's a value he calls us to do in ch. 2, as we saw last week: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (2:3-4).

Only Jesus can free us to think and to love that way. Only when we're satisfied in Jesus are we free to give with no concern for what we get in return. Only when Jesus is everything, are we free to lay aside everything else to make much of him, and to help others make much of him. Only in Jesus.

May Christ captivate our hearts in this way, that we might be free to live for Christ, even to die for Christ, and spend our lives on that which will last.

⁴ See R. Kent Hughes, *Philippians* (PTW; Wheaton: Crossway, 2007), 59-60.

⁵ Hughes, 60.

Discussion Questions

1. Paul seems pretty confident that when he comes to the end of his days, his life will not have been wasted before God. Is that kind of confidence possible? Arrogant? On what does he base it in this passage?
2. The question was posed: *How do I know if my life and relationships are bearing fruit that will last?* The answer was offered: *Does my investment in this person or this relationship help them make much of Jesus?* What do you think about this criterion? How do your present relationships measure up?
3. Think about v. 21: “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.” What would your life look like if this were your goal and motivation?
4. Think about your life. How do you normally fill in the blank in this sentence: “For to me, to live is _____”? How does what you put in that line affect your joy, your relationships, and your peace?
5. Paul claims that death for the Christian is “better by far” (v. 23). Why is this true? Does this reflect your present posture toward death? How does this truth help us in the midst of suffering?