

Sermon: 10-25-2015

Title: Perseverance Series: Philippians- To Live Is Christ

Text: Philippians 1:1-11

What do you picture when you think about the church? What words and characteristics come to mind when you think of that word- church?

If you have a pen and a place to take notes, I want you to write down your answers. What comes to mind, for you, when we talk about the church? What are the distinctive characteristics?

Maybe when you think about the church you think about a building with stained glass and pews (which means the first time you walked down the steps into this place you were in for a surprise). Or maybe you think about caring people who provide for those in need, so maybe you wrote down some of the qualities that have come to be expected in people of faith. Maybe you thought of Bible studies or prayer meetings. Or perhaps you thought of preachers or priests or pastors. My dad's a minister. I spent every Sunday of my childhood attending services, so sometimes when I think of church I remember my brothers and I sitting on the front row with my mom while my dad stood and preached.

Maybe some of us wrote down characteristics that are neither nostalgic nor positive. Maybe when you think of the church you think of sin and rules and judgment. Perhaps you think of scandal & hypocrisy. There are likely those of us here who think of myths and fables when we think of the church.

We all have different images and memories and expectations about what the church is or what it should be, and now we find ourselves seated in one. If you've been coming recently, you know we just concluded a sermon series that focused on the core vision and qualities that shape this church, Harbor of Hope. If you're curious about the characteristics of this group of Christ followers, then hopefully you learned that at Harbor, we try to help people find their way back to God and we reflect Jesus in our lives by Living Fully, Loving Deeply, & Giving Freely.

Today we start an entirely new series, but in some ways, it's simply a continuation of the quest to become the church that God wants us to be. You see here's the reality- though we can come up with countless descriptors, and qualities and characteristics- ultimately the church is you and me. The church is each of us- it's flesh and blood- we're the body of Christ.

Maybe the better question to ask today is not what we think of when we think of the church, but how can we- each of us- sustain a vital and healthy life in Christ? Because I don't know about you, but my faith drifts- it ebbs and flows. We can talk living fully, loving deeply, giving freely all we want, but sustaining a life like that is not easy.

What we need is an example of what that looks like. Thankfully, in Scripture we have one. Throughout the coming weeks we're going to examine what it means to be people of faith through the eyes of the apostle Paul. Specifically, we're going to read his insights as given to one church in a city called Philippi. It's in his letter to this church that Paul uses the phrase, "for me to live is Christ." We've chosen to use that as the title of our series. It's a bold declaration, so let's learn from the man who made it. Please turn with me in your Bibles to the book of Philippians and let's begin in chapter 1, verse 1.

*1 This letter is from Paul and Timothy, slaves of Christ Jesus.*

*I am writing to all of God's holy people in Philippi who belong to Christ Jesus, including the elders and deacons.*

*2 May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ give you grace and peace.*

*3 Every time I think of you, I give thanks to my God. 4 Whenever I pray, I make my requests for all of you with joy, 5 for you have been my partners in spreading the Good News about Christ from the time you first heard it until now. 6 And I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns.*

*7 So it is right that I should feel as I do about all of you, for you have a special place in my heart. You share with me the special favor of God, both in my imprisonment and in defending and confirming the truth of the Good News. 8 God knows how much I love you and long for you with the tender compassion of Christ Jesus.*

*9 I pray that your love will overflow more and more, and that you will keep on growing in knowledge and understanding. 10 For I want you to understand what really matters, so that you may live pure and blameless lives until the day of Christ's return. 11 May you always be filled with the fruit of your salvation—the righteous character produced in your life by Jesus Christ—for this will bring much glory and praise to God.*

*Philippians 1:1-11*

There's some good stuff for us in these verses, but before we study them, I think it's important that we learn a little bit about the man who wrote them.

The apostle Paul wrote over half of the New Testament Scriptures. He was a scholar and a thinker and his writings constitute the core principles of doctrine, Christian living, and discipleship for the church. Paul was also the first missionary of the church, taking a number of strategic trips throughout the Mediterranean in order to plant churches. He was an almost bionic believer. Paul was so relentless in his desire to see people transformed by the love of Jesus that he was willing to endure intense opposition. Paul was beaten for his faith. He was imprisoned for sharing the gospel. He was whipped and bloodied, shipwrecked and chased down, he was even stoned and left for dead.

But Paul was not always this zealous for the church. Actually, Paul was, but before he became known as Paul, he was Saul. Saul pretty much had the exact opposite approach to the church.

Before Saul became known as Paul he zealously and relentlessly attacked the early church. Saul was born and raised Jewish. He studied the Torah from his childhood into adulthood and ultimately became a religious leader and teacher. He was a Pharisee- a rabbi- and as such he felt a sacred duty to stamp out heresy anywhere he saw it. You'll recall that it was the Pharisees who violently opposed Jesus. The early followers of Jesus claimed He was the Messiah and began convincing Jews to follow Christ. In Paul's mind, this was an abomination, so he set out to destroy the church. He imprisoned members of the church everywhere he found them, even giving permission for executions. As a result, the followers of Christ scattered and went underground.

Saul would have continued to brutalize the church if not for his own encounter with Jesus. While en route to round up yet more Christians, Jesus appeared to Saul. The meeting changed Saul's life. The realization that Jesus was not a false teacher whose followers should be stamped out, but the Son of God, Savior and Lord- redirected Saul's zeal. It wasn't just Saul's name that changed. He was never the same after that encounter. His life did a complete 180. The man who had once been the church's greatest opponent became its greatest proponent and ambassador. That's the power of Christ at work in a person's life. He transforms enemies into missionaries.

Of this transformation Paul wrote, **12** *I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength to do his work. He considered me trustworthy and appointed me to serve him, 13 even though I used to blaspheme the name of Christ. In my insolence, I persecuted his people. But God had mercy on me because I did it in ignorance and unbelief. 14 Oh, how generous and gracious our Lord was! He filled me with the faith and love that come from Christ Jesus.*

**15** *This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners"—and I am the worst of them all. 16 But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life.*

*1 Timothy 1:12-16*

Paul's life is nothing if not an example of the redemptive power of Christ's love at work in a person's heart. He was the poster child for institutional religion's dysfunction and failure, but his conversion and the effort that followed it- to see the church grow and thrive- demonstrates the life giving power at work in the body of Christ when it is rooted and established in grace.

This is exactly what Paul is trying to encourage in the lives of the Philippians.

Of all the letters Paul wrote to churches, this one to the Philippians stands out as the most personal. Paul's words in these verses bear strong resemblance to the kind of sentiment a parent would offer to their children. He uses phrases like: *you have a special place in my heart*; and, *God knows how much I love you and long for you with the tender compassion of Christ Jesus*. Paul gives the Philippians some instructions, sure, and he appears to address some areas in need of correction, but his tone is tender. The entire letter is covered over in appreciation and favor.

Are you at all curious as to how Paul came to care for these people so much?

Here's a little background. Let's start with the city. Philippi was a major metropolitan area for its day. It was located on a major Roman trade route and the city was teeming with industry and trade and artists. Consequently it was a strategic place to plant a church. But that's not the only reason Paul went there.

We learn in the book of Acts that God called Paul to go to Macedonia (where Philippi is located) in a vision. He dreamed of a Macedonian man who was calling for help, and Paul determined to travel there with the Good News. He set out with Luke, Silas and Timothy and they arrived in Philippi (which is northern Greece today).

When they showed up, the group met with mixed results as they begin sharing about Jesus. A group of women came to faith, including a woman named Lydia and her entire household, but there was also opposition. In verses 16-19 of Acts 16 Paul delivers a young girl from an evil spirit. That seems like it would be a good thing, but the girl was a slave, and the spirit had allowed her to divine people's fortunes. This skill provided her owners with a sizeable profit. So when the young girl's owners realized that she could no longer make them any money they brought Paul and Silas before the Roman authorities claiming that they were disturbing the city. A crowd of people joined in the attack against them and in order to appease them, the Romans had Paul and Silas beaten with rods and thrown into prison stocks.

Now if you are thinking to yourself, "this seems more like a story about how Paul would never ever want to be in Philippi ever again," you wouldn't be alone. But Paul is never one to give up when things get difficult. In fact, that very night in prison, instead of moaning in pain from the beating he received, he and Silas begin praying and singing songs of worship. If you hated the Gospel wouldn't Paul be the most frustrating person of all time? It didn't matter what opposition he faced, the man loved God and continued to show it at every occasion.

As we progress through the book of Philippians we'll hear this echoed again and again. "For me live is Christ and to die is gain." "I don't count the present suffering as worthy even to compare with future glory."

If you want to kill him, Paul's ok with that, it means He gains the presence of Christ. Let him live, and he won't stop declaring the grace of God. Do you want him to rot in prison- no problem, so long as it makes him like Jesus- and while he's locked up, might as well sing and pray.

And it's at exactly this moment, when something extraordinary happens. (Acts 16)

*26 Suddenly, there was a massive earthquake, and the prison was shaken to its foundations. All the doors immediately flew open, and the chains of every prisoner fell off!*

*27 The jailer woke up to see the prison doors wide open. He assumed the prisoners had escaped, so he drew his sword to kill himself. 28 But Paul shouted to him, "Stop! Don't kill yourself! We are all here!"*

*29 The jailer called for lights and ran to the dungeon and fell down trembling before Paul and Silas. 30 Then he brought them out and asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?"*

*31 They replied, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved, along with everyone in your household." 32 And they shared the word of the Lord with him and with all who lived in his household. 33 Even at that hour of the night, the jailer cared for them and washed their wounds. Then he and everyone in his household were immediately baptized. 34 He brought them into his house and set a meal before them, and he and his entire household rejoiced because they all believed in God.*

In Rome, if a prisoner escaped or was lost, whoever was in charge of that prisoner would pay the price with his life. The jailor decided he would just get it over with, but Paul gives him not only a reprieve, he extends an opportunity to know new life- life to the full. First Paul explains that no prisoner has been lost. The jailor need not worry for his life. But then Paul shares the good news of Jesus, and as a result, the jailor's entire household finds salvation.

This is how the Philippian church begins. A group of Jewish women believe, followed by a demon-possessed slave girl, and then a Roman prison guard. It's probably not your ideal church plant team, but God works in mysterious ways sometimes as he transforms the lives of the unlikeliest people.

Now we understand why Paul speaks so fondly in these verses to the Philippians. It's because he knew them and they knew him. He's talking to Lydia and the slave girl and the Roman jailor when he says, "Every time I think of you I give thanks to my God."

Paul knows this church. He helped win them to Christ. He baptized them. He persevered through incredible hardship and opposition on behalf of these people and as a result he watched the power of the Holy Spirit poured out among them.

When the Good News of what Christ has done for us- His sacrificial love, His saving grace, His defeat of sin & death- when the reality of that takes root in our hearts, it creates a sense of resolve in us. It did in Paul. Paul's life was marked by perseverance. In fact, he wrote this letter to the church in Philippi from a jail cell, for crying out loud. Even while imprisoned he's passionately pursuing God's calling on his life by encouraging others.

And what is Paul's encouragement to the Philippians? He wants them to remain steadfast in their faith and love for Christ. He writes, <sup>9</sup> *"And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,* <sup>10</sup> *so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,* <sup>11</sup> *filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God."*

Staying power. Determination. Endurance. Tenacity. These are the hallmarks of people of faith, and Paul is fanning those flames because he knows that the church is the hope of the world. When the gospel takes hold of people's lives it transforms, it heals, it restores. Paul wants the church in Philippi to thrive because he knows that when it does the Good News is going to go out into the world, bearing fruit and growing.

So here's the question, has the Good News taken root in your heart? Has it? Have you encountered the grace of God as He has revealed Himself in Jesus and have you placed your trust in Him? If you have, then that same persevering Spirit that propelled Paul through adversity dwells inside of you. Let it flourish. Let it grow.

Some of us today are here and we're discouraged. We feel tired and worn down and we're inclined to want to give up. Don't do it!

Heed these beautiful words from Paul when he writes, *"... I am certain that God, who began the good work within you, will continue his work until it is finally finished on the day when Christ Jesus returns."* The translation I remember from my childhood says it like this, "He who began a good work in you will be faithful to complete it."

Our God is faithful. He finishes what He starts, and if He has begun a transforming work in your life, He will see it through to completion. Let Him. We have to let Him.

Listen, these verses have made quite a large impact on me this week. Can I be transparent for a moment? I have been wearing quite heavily the weight of this new role at Harbor. I'm not trying to fish for sympathy or anything like that, I just want to be honest about where I'm at right now, and the truth is I'm feeling more stress and burden lately than I am freedom and joy. Life is like this sometimes, right?

Sometimes we walk through seasons that challenge us and wear on us. That's the journey we're on in this life. And if you find yourself struggling through one of those seasons right now like I do, I hope you take the same encouragement from these verses that I have.

- The same God that broke open prison doors for Paul, can bring freedom into my life.
- The same power that transformed a Philippian jailor's life, can breathe new hope into my life.
- The same God who began a good work in you, will be faithful to complete it. He will!

Today, if you're like me and you're feeling overwhelmed, take heart from Paul's words. The hope of the Gospel deepens our understanding of the world and our place in it. That's what Paul is communicating in the book of Philippians. Paul is reflecting on the transformed lives he's witnessed and he wants to remind this dearly loved church of the soul-strengthening assurance that is ours in Christ, no matter what challenges are ahead- wealthy or impoverished; healthy or sick; in death or in life. And this isn't just hot air- it's not smoke and mirrors. It's foundational. You can depend on it.

Don't give up. Don't lose heart. In another of the letters Paul wrote, this one called Romans, he explains why we must persevere. Here's what he says in chapter five, verses three through five:

*3 We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. 4 And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation. 5 And this hope will not lead to disappointment. For we know how dearly God loves us, because he has given us the Holy Spirit to fill our hearts with his love.*

Rejoice in the midst of problems and trials?! That sounds ridiculous, but Paul isn't just pumping sunshine. He experienced the joys of perseverance personally- singing songs of worship while shackled in a jail cell.