

How can we sustain a vital and healthy life in Christ? With all the challenges we face is it possible to live fully, love deeply, give freely consistently? Last week talked about our need for 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.

20 For I fully expect and hope that I will never be ashamed, but that I will continue to be bold for Christ, as I have been in the past. And I trust that my life will bring honor to Christ, whether I live or die. **21** For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better. **22** But if I live, I can do more fruitful work for Christ. So I really don't know which is better. **23** I'm torn between two desires: I long to go and be with Christ, which would be far better for me. **24** But for your sakes, it is better that I continue to live.

25 Knowing this, I am convinced that I will remain alive so I can continue to help all of you grow and experience the joy of your faith. **26** And when I come to you again, you will have even more reason to take pride in Christ Jesus because of what he is doing through me.

Philippians 1:20-26

Paul is in chains as he writes these words to the church in Philippi. He was quite literally cuffed to one of the Praetorian Guard who watched over him in shifts day and night. He had no privacy. He couldn't even go to the bathroom in private. Paul is not only in a very demeaning and dehumanizing situation, but he's facing possible execution. And it's in the middle of these circumstances that Paul says, "I trust that my life will bring honor to Christ, whether I live or die." He's in prison physically, but rather than expressing a sense of defeat, Paul's declaring triumph. He's not in despair. Here's why, because Paul has a view of life that allows him to face anything. Paul is teaching in this passage that it's not the circumstances of life that matter (whether things are going well or going poorly), but it's the way we view life that matters.

What is your viewpoint on life? What are you living for? What is the most important thing for you—the thing that ultimately makes your life worth living regardless of what else happens? For most of us, the only time we ask a question like this is when something has gone wrong. Is that true of you? It is of me. (Lost my job, Meira, Ava)

Paul's facing a pretty terrible situation himself, but he has worked out a definition of life that allows him to face anything.

What gave Paul the confidence to tell the Philippians, 'Don't worry. I'm not discouraged. Even if I die, it doesn't matter, I'm not defeated in death'? If we can see Paul's view of life and learn how he triumphed, we'll learn how we can triumph.

In our scripture today, Paul shows us three distinct elements of his viewpoint on life. Let's look at the first.

Paul understood the difficulty of life.

He takes in stride the fact that life is hard. If you look at the top of the passage, in verse 12 of chapter 1 he writes, "And I want you to know, my dear brothers and sisters, that everything that has happened to me here has helped to spread the Good News. **13** For everyone here, including the whole palace guard, knows that I am in chains because of Christ. **14** And because of my imprisonment, most of the believers here have gained confidence and boldly speak God's message without fear."

The Philippians, his friends, are in danger of being tremendously discouraged. Why? They were in danger of discouragement because of Paul's circumstances. Remember what we shared last week. Paul was the architect behind the movement and spread of the early church. Paul was a great leader, an almost bionic follower of Christ, and here's the Philippians' leader and friend and all of his momentum and vitality have been brought to a full stop- he's in prison and maybe facing execution.

In some ways the problem of injustice and suffering is more difficult for Christians than anyone else. Those of us who have chosen to follow Christ face great difficulty in dealing with suffering and injustice. Everyone asks the question at some point, "Why does God allow pain and suffering to exist?" Why did my loved one die? Why did I lose all of my money? Why did my marriage fall apart? Everyone asks these questions, and they are hard to answer. Followers of Christ have an additional layer of added challenge.

Christians often make great sacrifices for the church and for the Gospel- they give up money and comforts, they plant churches or work among the poor- and when tragedy strikes *their* lives we start to say, 'Wait a minute! Suffering and evil is bad enough, but it sometimes seems like God finds the most strategic ways to undercut His own cause.' Why would God allow His own people to endure hardship and tragedy?

It makes you start to wonder, 'Is this His Cause? Is this His Gospel? Is this His church?'

If you choose to follow Christ with your life, do not be surprised when you learn, as the Philippians did, that not only does God allow evil and suffering in general, but sometimes God allows injustice to happen to even the most strategic people of His own cause.

The problem of evil and suffering and injustice is a huge problem for Christians. It is. Remember this, if you don't choose to believe in God, then you really don't have any place to talk about the problem of evil in the world. If someone says, I don't believe in God because why would a God allow so much pain and suffering?- As soon as a person voices that belief, you know what they've done? If there is no God, and this world is all there is, then evil is just a matter of opinion. If this world is all there is and there is no God, it means that when the strong eat the weak, that's just how it is. Good and evil only exists if there's an absolute objective standard of moral values. The closer one gets to God, the more challenged we are by the existence of evil and suffering in the world.

But Paul has solved this difficulty. Here's how he solved it, at least for himself.

Paul knows that life is hard but he also sees the power of God to transform life.

In verse 19 Paul writes, "*For I know that as you pray for me and the Spirit of Jesus Christ helps me, this will lead to my deliverance.*"

Paul is saying that, as bad as his situation is, it's working for his good- historically and personally. Here's what he means. In verse 12 he says 'I want you to see that what actually happened, though it looked bad, has turned out for good.' Why? The whole Praetorian Guard now knows about the Gospel.

Paul wants to plant churches, and he would never have planned for things to go as they have, but since his guards are a captive audience, he views his circumstances as an opportunity to share the Good News about Jesus with them. Two or three times a day, some hardened, awful, mean-spirited,

pagan guard was chained to the most persuasive evangelist that's ever lived. One by one they gave their hearts to Christ.

A man named Matthew Henry many years ago (1600's) wrote a commentary about these verses. In his commentary, Henry explains that when Paul claims God has transformed his unfortunate circumstances into a fruitful ministry to his jailors, it proves that God is the only true alchemist.

Do you know what alchemy is? Back in the middle ages, people were trying to find the secret for turning lead into gold. Lead, they thought, was a "useless" thing (insignificant & common). They hoped to find a process to transform this "useless" substance into something priceless. Nobody ever found a way to do it.

Matthew Henry writes that God is the only true alchemist. He wrote that Paul's words show how God does this all the time with the circumstances of our lives.

Think of Joseph. You remember Joseph from the book of Genesis? His brothers sell him into slavery to get rid of him. And Joseph asks God, 'why are you letting this happen?' But God turned lead to gold. In the end Joseph becomes Prime Minister of Egypt and saves not only his family- including his hateful brothers- but an entire people group. Here's Paul saying the same thing. When he endured this time of imprisonment Paul's asking the question, 'I wonder how God is going to turn these worthless circumstances into gold?'

Be careful. I don't believe that Paul thinks that the fact he is winning his guards to Christ is a sufficient reason for why he should be taken away from his career or possibly executed. That's not a sufficient reason for him to endure this difficulty. But the thing that's key about Paul is that he doesn't expect to see the whole picture. He comes into a difficult situation like this one and he asks, 'I wonder how God is turning this into gold? I wonder if I can just see a glimpse?' That's what Paul is looking for. He sees a little corner of God's alchemy- taking these unfortunate circumstances and working them for His glory.

If you go into difficulties in life knowing that God turns lead into gold- if you go in asking, 'I wonder how He's doing this now'- in a sense you're riding the wave instead of allowing it to send you to the bottom. It's not going to destroy you.

But Paul doesn't stop there and neither should we. Because most of the time when we encounter tragedy and pain and injustice, we don't see how God is turning the situation into something good.

In verse 19 Paul writes, "*For I know that as you pray for me and the Spirit of Jesus Christ helps me, this will lead to my deliverance.*"

That's not a great translation, unfortunately. In the Greek it literally says, "What has happened will result in my salvation." The reason why the word *deliverance* is unfortunate is because it looks like Paul is saying, 'I'm sure that I'm going to get out.' 'I'm sure I'm not going to get executed.' But that's not what Paul was suggesting. The grammar of the verse doesn't suggest that Paul thinks he will be saved in spite of the circumstances- he's being saved because of them.

In the very next verses Paul says, 'whether I live or die it doesn't matter.'

He wasn't selling the Philippians a false hope that he would be released. Instead Paul says, 'I rejoice because I know that these sufferings- whether I end up executed or not- they're saving me. It's making me the man I want to be. These difficulties are refining me. They're making me more like Jesus.'

Paul didn't view himself as a finished product. Even when Paul utters those beautiful words, 'for me to live is Christ and to die is gain' he wasn't suggesting that he perfectly represented Jesus with every breathe and movement. Paul understood that his life was in a constant process of refinement. Paul wasn't actually bionic.

This is the same man who wrote in Romans 7, '**21** *I have discovered this principle of life—that when I want to do what is right, I inevitably do what is wrong.* **22** *I love God's law with all my heart.* **23** *But there is another power within me that is at war with my mind. This power makes me a slave to the sin that is still within me.* **24** *Oh, what a miserable person I am! Who will free me from this life that is dominated by sin and death?*

When Paul says 'for me to live is Christ' he wasn't equating himself with Christ's perfection, as though he had somehow attained holiness. Paul finishes his thought by adding, "**25** *Thank God! The answer is in Jesus Christ our Lord.*"

In a few weeks we're going to read from Philippians 3 where Paul writes, "**12** *I don't mean to say that I have already achieved these things or that I have already reached perfection. But I press on to possess that perfection for which Christ Jesus first possessed me.* **13** *No, dear brothers and sisters, I have not achieved it, but I focus on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead,* **14** *I press on to reach the end of the race and receive the heavenly prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us.*"

Paul understood that the difficulties he was facing had the capacity to mold and shape his heart so that he would become more loving, more faithful, more humble. It's not just that Paul says God can turn his circumstances into gold, it's that God can transform us- you and me- into something that resembles Him more and more.

This is not an easy thing we're talking about. I'm not suggesting that you can simply take this message today and immediately turn around and deal with tragedy and pain as Paul does. But I want to show you how a great man, like Paul, dealt with difficulty. If you want to know what greatness looks like in God's eyes, take a close look at Paul. When he faces these terrible circumstances he is not defeated, he is not overthrown. It doesn't mean he doesn't grieve or hurt or get discouraged. But this is what Paul does, he acknowledges that God can turn these circumstances into gold, and even if He doesn't God is still transforming me.

Does this mean that, automatically, when bad things happen- God is purifying us? Have you observed people who face hardship and it doesn't soften their hearts- instead it freezes them? Maybe it's happened to you? It's not automatic. Paul notices the transforming work of God in his circumstances, and then he goes on to tell us how it happens. This is the secret.

Whether or not hard things refine you and turn you into gold depends on your definition of life.

Notice at the beginning of verses 20 how Paul says, "*For I fully expect and hope that I will never be ashamed, but that I will continue to be bold for Christ, as I have been in the past. And I trust that my life will bring honor to Christ, whether I live or die.*"

Why does he expect this? He's about to tell us how it's possible that bad things can save us; purify us. He's about to explain how we can face challenges in this life. Because in verse 21, "For to me, living means living for Christ."

That's Paul's definition of life. If you have the right definition of life you can face anything. If you don't have the proper definition of life you won't. Paul gives us his definition of life. "For me to live is Christ," is Paul's way of saying, 'this is what makes life for me. ' This is my bottom line. This is the most important thing to me. If I have Christ, I'm living, regardless of what else is taken from me.

There are alternative approaches, obviously.

Some people define life this way, 'For me to live is Happiness.' A person who lives this way might have a job and work hard, but that's not where they find meaning in life. They want enjoyment. A job simply provides the means for having fun. Pleasure, that's the thing. Take away the pleasure? No life.

Some people define life in this way, 'For me to live is to be strong and in control.' A person who lives life this way never wants you to see them sweat. But take away the control... no life.

Most of us are not easily lumped into one of these categories- we're not complete stoics or pleasure hounds- most of us have chosen something else: our family or our friends, our career or our kids. And we say, 'for me to live is to have *that.*' But when the tragedies of life arrive and go after our bottom lines- when circumstances challenge us or take away that which makes our lives worth living- unless you change your definition of life, you're inevitably going to collapse.

Paul says there's only one perfect definition of life. There's only one bottom-line that never fails- only one most important thing. He gives it to us. 'For me... living means living for Christ.'

Do you know what that means? It means, Paul's career is finished- he can't plant churches anymore- but his career was not his life! So he says, 'So what. I may live, I may die, it doesn't matter. Losing my physical freedom hasn't collapsed my life.' If your career is crumbling and as a result your whole life is collapsing, the problem is not the circumstances of your life it's the definition of your life. Do you see that?

Paul loves his friends. He loves the Philippians, but now he's separated from them, and will likely never see them again. But his friends are not his life. There are a lot of people who live for their children or for their spouse or their family or friends, that's a lot more noble than living for your career or for pleasure, but what are you going to do when they aren't there anymore? What are you going to do when your 'life' is laying there in a casket? Paul's friends were not his life.

If your life collapses when your loves collapse it means your loves were your life and your problem is not your circumstances, it's your definition of life.

Paul's life was defined by Jesus, and as a result he could face anything.

How can we ever get our hearts to place like that? How do we get there?

In John 17, in verse 19, Jesus prays to God in front of his closest followers and says, "*And I give myself as a holy sacrifice for them so they can be made holy by your truth.*" Do you know what that means?

Jesus says, 'everything about me, my life, it all serves one goal- your perfection and holiness.' Jesus set apart his life for us.

When Jesus gave his life on the cross He was saying, 'for me to live is YOU.' God in the flesh says, 'for me to live is *you!*' My life is to see you whole, forgiven, restored. Jesus was willing to do anything in order to restore the relationship between us and God.

Do you know what a follower of Christ says in response to that? We look at that and we think about it and after a while it simply changes us. Do you know why? Because we look and then we say, 'Jesus Christ my brother, my friend, my shepherd, my high king, my savior.' If He was willing to give everything so I could live, then I will choose to live for Him.

And if that's true of your life, then you can say that there's nothing that can be taken away from me that is life. You can say with Paul, 'whether I live or die, it doesn't matter. For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.'