



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

Sermons

“To Live Is Christ”

Philippians 1.18–26

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Introduction

The more we study Philippians, the more we see that there is more to this writing than is popularly thought. Because we are so familiar with it, know its reputation as a positive and joyful letter, and remember its various phrases that are often cited like bumper stickers, we may miss some of its richer lessons for a post-Christian culture (Thomson 2007, 298–300).¹ James Thompson elaborates, calling attention to the temptation to see Philippians as an epistle that is easily studied and preached.

Philippians appears to be a preacher’s dream. Unlike Romans or Hebrews, this brief letter contains no dense argumentation or esoteric exposition that demand explanation. Nor does it introduce ancient practices that are unintelligible to our audience. In our first naïve reading of the text, we discover that it serves up one memorable phrase after another that can be framed or used as bumper stickers [see note 1] ... Philippians seems to speak timelessly across the centuries, giving encouraging advice without reflecting historical distance. It is little wonder that, among many in the congregation, Philippians is “the epistle of joy” and a perennial favorite (Thompson 2007, 298).

In fact, the letter is often treated erroneously as a repository of “timeless slogans to encourage some positive thinking” (Thompson 2007, 299) and is thus often perceived to be a great read when we need to feel better. Furthermore, because many see it mainly a book of comfort, it’s considered a “safe” read, unlike those that challenge us with regard to doctrine or behavior.

To be fair, Philippians does not present us with the kind of detailed argumentation about doctrine that we find in Romans and Galatians. Nor does it confront life issues like 1 Corinthians and Ephesians. But if you recall our previous studies from its first eighteen verses, you should have begun to see that Philippians is not always “comforting.” In fact, it challenges the heart of our commitment in ways other writings do not. Think again about Paul’s introductory report on his prayers for the Philippians (1.3–8) and the way he goes straight to the matter of his imprisonment and defense of the gospel. Look again at his prayer for them

(1.9–11) and the fact that he does not even mention any of the things that often comprise our lists. Instead, he prays about things of eternal significance. Finally, recall his opening autobiographical section (1.12–18) in which he reassures them about his imprisonment and its effect on the spread of the gospel even as he tells them about some who were using his situation as an opportunity to try to discourage him. It makes no matter, he says; the gospel is being preached. *That* is what counts. In view of these ideas, we can affirm that *Philippians* is a positive letter, but the edification it provides comes from applying its call to commitment which is as challenging as any we will ever read. And we’ve yet to get to the letter’s teaching section which begins at 1.27.

The Call Continues: Analysis of 1.18–26

Beginning in 1.18, Paul moves slightly away from talking about his circumstances to focus on his commitment. In verse 19, he says that, through their prayers and the fact that the Spirit of Jesus Christ had been supplied to him,² he was confident about his “salvation” (KJV, ASV).

Regarding the word σωτηρίαν (*sōtērian*), despite the interpretation in some translations (cf. ESV, NIV) and commentators, there are good reasons to prefer “salvation” over “deliverance” and the idea of Paul being released from prison. “Salvation” makes better sense here in view of what follows. He does express confidence that he will be released from prison and allowed to rejoin the Philippians (v. 25), but before that he declares his hope that he will not be ashamed in his testimony “*whether in life or in death*” (v. 20). He also shares his struggle over whether it would be better to go ahead and die or continue to live for their sake (vv. 20–24).

In addition, the translation “salvation” fits with Paul’s common use of the term; every other time he uses the word (18 in all), including *Philippians* 1.28; 2.12, he uses it in the sense of theological salvation (cf. Rom 1.16; 10.1, 10; 11.11; 13.11; 2 Cor 1.6; 6.2; 7.10; Eph 1.13; Phil 1.19, 28; 2.12; 1 Thess 5.8–9; 2 Thess 2.13; 2 Tim 2.10; 3.15). “Salvation” also fits the word-for-word echo of the LXX of Job 13.16: “This will be my salvation [σωτηρίαν], that the godless shall not come before him.”³ Fee’s explanation of the connection is sensible:

Job 13 contains one of the more poignant of Job’s speeches, where he abjures [repudiates] the perspective of his “comforters,” who insist that his present situation is the result of “hidden sin.” Job knows better and pleads his cause with God, in whom he hopes and before whom he would plead his innocence. Indeed, the very hope of appearing before God in this way will be his “salvation” because the godless shall not come before God (v. 16). And “salvation” for Job means “I know that I will be vindicated” (v. 18). So with Paul, but in quite different circumstances (Fee 1995, 131).

As you evaluate Fee’s analysis, remember that Paul expects to be saved “*whether in life or in death*” (Phil 1.20). Consider, too, that he goes on to declare his hope that he “*will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored⁴ in my body, whether by life or by death*” (v. 20). The phrasing again echoes the Old Testament, notably the Psalms where “the man of God often prays that he will not be covered with shame before his enemies; instead he desires that he may be vindicated and the Lord exalted (μεγαλυθείη ὁ κύριος, Ps. 34 [35]:26-27; 39 [40]:15-17)” (O’Brien 1991, 114).⁵ Paul’s prayer is that, as he awaits trial, he will not be put to “a shame that has nothing to do with public opinion but relates to his

standing before God” (O’Brien 1991, 114). What matters is whether the Lord is glorified (exalted) through him.

This hope is heightened by the shift reflected in the main verbs in v. 20: “ashamed” (αἰσχύνω, *aischynō*) is a *first person* singular verb, but “honored” (glorified, exalted, made large—μεγαλύνω, *megalynō*) is a *third person* singular. “Christ becomes the subject (μεγαλυνθήσεται Χριστὸς [*megalynthēsetai Christos*]) and Paul is simply the instrument by which the greatness of Christ shines out” (O’Brien 1991, 115). Notice his hope that he will do this “with full courage now as always” (v. 20).

Bear in mind the emphasis of verses 19–20 as we move on to verses 22–26. Only a man consumed with the idea of magnifying Christ in all things would wrestle as Paul does with the decision elaborated in verses 22–24. “To live in the flesh ... means fruitful labor” in service to Christ (v. 22), something that is “more necessary” for the Philippians (v. 24). But “to depart and be with Christ ... is far better” (v. 23).

Having wrestled with that choice, he comes down on the side of staying on for the sake of the Philippians (vv. 25–26).⁶ “Convinced” (πεποιθῶς, *pepoithōs*; from πείθω, *peithō*) is a perfect passive participle—having been and remaining convinced. “Of this” points back to his deliberation in verses 22–24, and especially to his point in verse 24 that it is “more necessary” for him to “remain” (v. 25) with the Philippians. Notice also the word “progress” in verse 25; we last saw it in verse 12, where the ESV translates, “advanced” (προκοπή, *prokopē*). Paul’s point is that, just as he would do anything personally to see the gospel advance, so he would do what it took to see the Philippians advance in line with the blessings and demands of the gospel.

What led him to that conclusion? Notice verse 26 in anticipation of what he will later elaborate regarding the threat to the Philippians’ faith from persecution (1.28–29) and, more importantly, the strains in their interpersonal relationships (1.27; 2.1–4, 12–14). Whether or not they would shine as “lights to the world” who “hold fast to the word of life” (2.15–16) would depend on how well he could strengthen them in their commitment.

Clearly, 1.18–26 turns on verse 21 where Paul declares his deepest motivation. Verse 21 is far more than a “bumper sticker slogan,” and certainly entails much more than some sort of mystic connection Paul feels he has with Christ. “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain [profit]” reflects Paul’s priority. Christ is the one who sits on the throne of his heart. It is also an ultimate statement of practical ministry, as Carl Holladay observes:

Rather than understanding “to live is Christ” as an expression of his Christ mysticism, we should see it quite pragmatically: “for me to live means that Christ continues to be preached.” To die, however, is “gain” because it speeds Paul’s ultimate union with the risen Christ. Either way, Christ is “magnified” (1:20 κJV); his message is written in larger, even bolder, type (Holladay 2005, 374).

Applying Paul’s Priority

A friend of mine, a preacher, once told me that he had been accused of being a “fanatic.” The accusation came from his father-in-law, who was an elder in another congregation. My friend had other interests, hobbies, etc.; he lived a well-rounded life. But his was not a life devoted to

creature comforts and relaxation. Ministry was his calling, not his avocation.

I think of him as I read Philippians 1.18–26. I also think of the way so many approach Philippians, as a source of comfort, but not as a challenge to commitment. Please don't misunderstand. As we think about this passage, it can give us comfort; indeed, it begins with Paul's declaration that he "will rejoice" (v. 18). But don't miss the basis of his rejoicing. The passage comforts only if we have the same motivation for life that Paul had.

What does that look like in practice. First, let's note that it's tempting when asking that question to begin to list certain items that are associated with the modern church's ideas of faithfulness. That can quickly turn into an exercise in binding where God has not bound which tends to make "us" (or "me") the standard, not Christ. But having said that, it's hard to imagine that Paul would have an attitude about church and service that saw his ministry as something extra to get to after he took care of his own affairs.

When it came to serving Christ, everything else was secondary. It was all he thought about, his *life*. If necessary to advance the gospel, he was willing to go to prison or leave prison and return to the service that landed him there. He made tents when churches did not support him, but his focus was still on preaching the gospel (cf. 1 Cor 9.15–16). If he took a break, it's easy to imagine he would have imitated Jesus's example and used it to prepare for more ministry (cf. Mark 6.31). If he had married or been a dad, he would doubtless have been more concerned with helping his family know the Lord and be faithful to him than he would have been for their upward mobility. If blessed with a retirement income, he would have been looking to use it advance his service.

My point in mentioning these things is not to define what service will look like for all of us, but to stimulate thought by each of us as to what it should look like in our lives. We all have talents, responsibilities, and opportunities that are unlike anyone else's. Evaluating how we use them can begin by using Paul's example—which he ultimately rooted in Christ (Phil 2.5–11)—to ask two big questions and think how we should answer them in our lives.

- Would we rather die than keep on living if it means advancing the work of the gospel?
- As we live, do we reflect the attitude Paul expressed: "to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil 1.21)?

Think on these things.

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Works Cited

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Notes

¹ Thompson (2007, 298) notes "bumper sticker" quotations from verses including 1.21; 4.4; 4.6; and 4.13. Mention of the last—"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me"—reminds me of the number of pre-game locker room devotionals on my Christian high-school basketball team where that verse was quoted. Some of us even kept a copy of it ready in our wallets.

² The best understanding of the reference to the Spirit in v. 19. See Fee 1995, 133-134.

³ Both NIV and NET translate "deliverance" in Job 13.16. The Hebrew word is *יְשׁוּעָה* (*yēšū'āh*) which the LXX translates *σωτηρίαν* (*sōtērian*).

⁴ "Honored" translates *μεγαλύνω* (*megalynō*): (1) "to cause to be large, of either physical or nonphysical entities, *make large/long, make great*; (2) to cause to be held in greater esteem through praise or deeds, *exalt, glorify, magnify, speak highly of*" (Bauer 2000, 623).

⁵ Note that O'Brien uses the LXX chapter numbering here; I have supplied the English numbers in brackets. For similar themes, see Pss 25.3; 69.7; 119:80, 116; also Isa 1.29; Jer 12.13 [the latter Psalms references use the English numbering].

⁶ See O'Brien 1991, 138-139 for different proposals that have been made in an effort to explain verse 25, and also the good reasons he gives for taking it in the sense of Paul's having made a decision.