

STORY

One Sunday morning in early 1700's Germany, two men named John Leonard Dober and David Nitschman were sitting in church, just like every other Sunday. This particular week the preacher stood up and began to tell the congregation about a place where the gospel of Christ had never been spoken - an island in the West Indies where an atheist slave owner had about 3,000 slaves. Each one of these men, women and children would likely live and die without ever having heard the gospel message. As John Leonard and David listened intently, they knew they were being awakened to a matter of life and death. In turn they made what must have been the most difficult decision of their lives. To sell themselves into slavery. To bring news of liberation from sin and death, they themselves would take on the chains of bondage. For the sake of other's real, eternal lives the two would give up their passing, earthly lives. And as their friends and family stood watching as their ship began to drift from the shore, John Leonard and David lifted high their hands, clasped together, and shouted:

"May the Lamb that was slain receive the reward of his suffering!"¹

What would possess two young men to leave everything behind only for someone else's gain? A state of overwhelming joy in Christ. A joy that comes from continued obedience to the Lord. The joy that comes *from* obedience is the joy that leads *to* obedience. And the difficult thing that we Christians have to wrestle with is - Why do we find our emotions so moved by stories of saints suffering for the gospel, but find our bodies unmoved by the same message? How do we reconcile the fact that John Leonard and David were responding to the same Savior, the same gospel, that we're responding to today - and

yet our responses look so different? Listen, it's not that these guys had a more dutiful faith or more bravery than we do - but maybe they *did* have a joy that we don't have, the kind of joy that comes from faithful obedience to Christ. That's the joy that I want, and it's the one we're talking about today.

INTRODUCTION

If you have a bible with you, please open up to Philippians chapter 1. Today we are beginning a new series in the book of Philippians titled *Joy*, where we're going to learn more about that very thing, the thing I think we're all seeking after - true, deep, unchanging joy. Which I actually do believe exists, by the way. Joy that doesn't waver based on circumstances. When we read our bibles at face value and see "Rejoice in the Lord always," that must mean that there is a joy we can always access. The difficulty for me is that my life experience just doesn't match up with God's word in this way. But I'm growing more convinced that this imbalance between my life and God's word comes out of the way I *choose* to live my life - the things I do, and do not do.

I don't know if you go through this but I find myself regularly coming around to the question in my life, "Am I doing this thing right?" And I'm not talking about the tasks that are in front of me. I'm talking about the very way in which I live my life. The way I budget my finances, the way I budget my time, the way I measure success. What am I chasing after here?

- **Entertainment.** I don't think watching TV shows are bad, but are they contributing anything at all to my purpose in life? That may seem like a superficial pondering but it's really not. When I place devotion and entertainment on opposite ends of a scale, which one weighs more?

¹ The better delivery of this story comes from Matt Papa in his music video for *The Reward of His Suffering*

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- **Living Situation.** I don't think buying a house in a "good" part of town that is comfortable for my family is bad necessarily, but is that comfort the purpose of my living situation?
- **Church.** Even church, y'all. Is coming in every week, singing some songs and being encouraged by a sermon, *maybe* processing that sermon with some friends, and seeing my everyday life remain generally unchanged really all this is supposed to be?

I'm tired of my life not looking like what I see in my bible. It seems that I'm abiding by some different idea of what living means. But I want more than what I see right now. It really seems that God is worthy of more. And I could be wrong, but I don't think I'm alone in this. Christians, you read the book of Acts and say, "Why isn't this what life with Christ looks like for me?" Non-Christians, you look at Christians and say, "Why don't they look like Jesus?"

The passage we're looking at today in Philippians 1 is about this very thing, what living should actually look like. And in it we see one of the most powerful concepts of the New Testament: **To live is Christ.** The author of today's passage is going to suggest that all of life *is* Christ. That our lives should not just be *about* Jesus, but that they should *be* Jesus. What does that even mean? We have some work to do in understanding this, but I think we should want it because, when we get this, it makes the lives of people like Paul, the disciples, even John Leonard Dober and David Nitschman, make so much more sense.

- We'll be in Chapter 1, verses 21-25. In order to wrap our minds around this, we're going to read through the text twice. The first time through I want to show you a choice that our author is making, and the second time through we'll look at what that choice meant for him and for us.

PRAY. Lord, help us. Lord, help me.

Background. As we dive in I want to give you some important background on the book we're studying. An apostle named Paul helped start a church in the city of Philippi that grew into a faithful, flourishing body of believers. But some time after planting the church, Paul was locked away in a Roman prison for his continued preaching of the gospel. But even from far away, he's seen the faithfulness of the Philippian church. So the Holy Spirit leads Paul to write to them and say thank you for their faithfulness and to assure them of the great joy he has in Christ as he suffers imprisonment. Let's pick up in verse 21 and I'm going to point some things out as we read through them...

PAUL'S CHOICE

21. *For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*

- **Setting the Table.** A wildly famous passage for Christians, and it will be our main focus for the day. In this first reading, what I want you to see is these two realities that Paul has set up: **to live** (which he says "is Christ"), and **to die** (which he believes is gain). And he's about to talk about these two realities as two options, possible choices to be weighed.

22-24. *Now if I live on in the flesh, this means fruitful work for me; and I don't know which one I should choose. I am torn between the two. I long to depart and be with Christ—which is far better—but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.*

- Do you see this weighing process? **Option 1: To live.** Well that would mean work for him, which he knows would have good results. And it seems to him that his living, remaining on earth, is necessary for these brothers and sisters in Philippi - but it's certainly not necessary for him. Because...

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- **Option 2: To die.** That sounds good. And not because death is some sort of escape from what he's going through. We know that because Paul wrote separately to the church in Rome that we should rejoice in our sufferings, so he's not trying to escape those sufferings. Dying sounds good not because of what he gets to leave behind or lose, but because of what, or rather who, he gains. In death he gets to be with Christ. And that, in his mind, makes the option to die "far better" than the option to live.
- A beauty of these few verses is the way we get to peer behind the curtain of Paul's mind and see him truly wrestle with these realities. He says he's torn between the two, and that he doesn't know which he should choose.
 - Which, by the way, is not a matter of him actually getting to choose his fate. I want to be clear in this. Paul is not suggesting that he has the authority to choose his own death. That would fly in the face of Scripture, including his own writing in 1 Corinthians 6... *Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price.* He is, instead, torn between two choices of preference.²
 - Some more helpful context... Paul is in prison awaiting a trial that he knows could mean death. Does he want that death? Or does he want life? Those who want death stop living before they ever die. So does Paul want to give up and wait for death, or continue to live while God has him on earth? By the way, that may be some of you today. You're here and you're not sure if you want to see tomorrow. Listen, God loves you. God wants you. Here's what Paul chooses...

25. *Since I am persuaded of this* [that it's more necessary for the Philippians for him to stay], *I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith...*

- Paul chooses to live. Even though he considers death to be a "far better" option because he would be with Christ, he allows the needs of others (remember he said remaining is "more necessary" for the Philippians) to outweigh what he knows to be a better option. And not only that, but he shows us what he wants for them in his staying - *their* progress and joy in the faith.
- What a backwards choice! Don't miss what Paul has just done. He has seen two options, and both of them are God-glorifying options at that, and has chosen the one that is more necessary for someone else. He has died to himself by choosing to live. And the foundation for it all is where he began the passage. The reality by which he is constrained, and the statement that we're going to spend almost all of the rest of our time on...

TO LIVE IS CHRIST

21a. *For me, to live is Christ*

Rest of the Sermon. I wish we could spend several weeks on the entirety of this passage. But the rest of the sermon will revolve around this single statement because it's the choice that Paul has made and, in calling us to imitate him as he imitates Christ, is the same choice the Lord is calling us to make. So this statement - *To live is Christ* - is one that I want to understand. My goal for us is to leave this morning with a much clearer picture of what this actually means. And not just to come to a cognitive understanding. But to want the truth of this

² The verb used is *haireomai*, a verb used exclusively in middle voice and reflecting preference. Kent, H. A., Jr. (1981). [Philippians](#). In F. E. Gaebelin (Ed.), *The Expositor's Bible Commentary: Ephesians through Philemon* (Vol. 11, p. 115).

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statement to permeate our very being, to be displayed in all that we are. Again, God has more for us.

Deconstructing Our Understanding. I'm sure I heard this verse long before college, but I don't know that I began to pay attention to it until then. And when I started paying attention, I fell in love with it. What a beautiful statement - *to live is Christ*. I'm realizing, though, that part of what I've loved about it ever since is that it's *just* poetic enough that I can cling to it without actually obeying it. Which is why I think this verse has become so popular for us as Christians. But what does that statement even mean? To live is Christ? A lot of you have heard this so many times that it sounds normal to you. But is it really normal to say that to live is a person? To live is Alyssa. To live is Kenneth. When you say it that way it's just weird. I think some of us need to be confused by this again.

- There's something really significant here in this particular phrasing. For Paul the person of Christ and the act of living are so intertwined that they are inseparable. Christ himself makes up the very fabric of the living experience. In 3 other places in the New Testament, Paul calls us to live "as Christ" lived, that is, as an imitation of Christ.³ But here he points to something much deeper - that Christ must not only be our model, but our source for living. To live *is* Christ. And that leaves us with a couple logical issues to sort out... **1.** Who is Christ? **2.** What does it mean for life to be Christ?

Who Is Christ? The word *Christ* - which means messiah, or anointed one - shows up 17 times in the first chapter of Philippians alone. There are more verses in the chapter that contain this word than there are verses without it. The word

Christ is used more in this first chapter than in all of the Gospel of Matthew.⁴ Paul is sending a clear message here: we need to know Christ. Otherwise, reading Philippians is like those conversations you get into when someone brings up something you don't know but you act like you do because you don't want to look dumb. But the thing you don't know ends up being the *only* thing they talk about for the next 20 minutes. Luckily, Paul tells us what he wants us to picture when he refers to Christ in the next chapter. This is **Philippians 2:5-11** (**This can all go up at once**), one of the most beautiful passages about Christ in all of Scripture.

- 5**...Christ Jesus, **6** who, existing in the form of God,
- So Christ is Jesus, the man who walked the earth and shook eastern society to its core. He is also God - he is Yahweh, the God of the Bible who created the heavens and the earth, who delivered Israel out of Egypt, who set King David on his throne. The one who commands our worship and commands that we worship no other. This is Christ.

did not consider equality with God as something to be exploited.

- Or something to hold on to. But why? If he was in the form of God, is that equality with God not his to make full use of? This is really important - it's the theme of the following verses.

7 Instead he emptied himself by assuming the form of a servant, taking on the likeness of humanity. And when he had come as a man, 8 he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death— even to death on a cross.

- What? Christ, who is God, chose not to make full use of what was rightfully his - that is, his God-ness. His divinity.

³ Rom. 15:7, Eph. 5:2, Eph. 5:25

⁴ These numbers are based specifically on the ESV translation

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Instead he chooses this constant descent. Equal with God, servant of God, human, descends to earth, put to death, a criminal's death on a cross. Why would he do this? Well Christ himself tells us in John 10 that he came to lay his life down so that we may have life and have it in abundance. He came for our good. And the author of Hebrews writes that it was for the joy that lay before him that Christ endured the cross. What was that joy? This is where we see a shift - we see the reward of Christ's suffering.

9 For this reason God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow—in heaven and on earth and under the earth— 11 and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

- The reward of Christ's suffering is his glory. Jesus is taken from the humbled state that he chose and is lifted up to an even more celebrated state than he was in when he began. He is God in human flesh, who chose to suffer for our good and the joy of his glory. This is our Christ.

Our next question was, **What does it mean for life to be Christ?** This is a two-sided coin. On one side, we see how life was Christ for Paul. On the other side, we see how life can be Christ for us. And, because Paul is going to call us elsewhere in Scripture to imitate him, the two sides of the coin *should* look eerily similar. So first...

How Life Was Christ for Paul

1. By Fruitful Work

*21-22. For me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. [And what does he say now about life?] Now if I live on in the flesh, **this means fruitful work** for me; and I don't know which one I should choose.*

- Other translations read "fruitful labor." Paul is saying that when living is Christ, living is work. And this makes sense, right? That's what we see in the life of Christ. We see both Jesus' personal work and his desire for other workers in the gospels. We see his own work in his teachings, his compassionate miracles, and his death and resurrection. And his desire for more workers is clear, too. The calling of the disciples is a call for more workers. Even the acknowledgment that the harvest is plentiful but the workers are few (Matt. 9:37).
- Paul says that living will mean work, and that work is going to be fruitful - it's going to be productive. And what is the fruit that this work should produce? He writes about it earlier in verse 11. As he is telling the Philippians what he is praying for them, he tells them that he is specifically asking the Lord that they would be...

11. ...filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ to the glory and praise of God.

- The fruit of right living with God, which includes the fruit of the Spirit. Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control.

When living is Christ, living is work. And fruitful work at that. It is work that brings the fruit of righteousness. Both in ourselves and in others. How else was life Christ for Paul?

2. For The Progress and Joy of Others

*24-25. ... but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. Since I am persuaded of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you **for your progress and joy in the faith...***

- Again, why did Jesus make the constant descent that we saw in Philippians 2? It wasn't for his own sake - he was already in perfect unity with the Father. It was for *our* sake, for *our* good. And Paul joins in that chorus here by saying

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that his remaining is for the Philippians' progress and joy in the faith. And what exactly is this progress progressing toward? Let's look at the next verse...

26. so that, because of my coming to you again, your boasting in Christ Jesus may abound.

- This progress is toward greater joy in Christ, celebrating and boasting in the person of Jesus.

When living is Christ, living is for others' progress and joy in the faith. It is for their increase in the joy of who Christ is. Paul shows us one more sign of what it means for life to be Christ...

3. Through Dying to Self

23-25a. I am torn between the two. I long to depart and be with Christ—which is far better— but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. Since I am persuaded of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you...

- Dying to self must be a choice. This was the culminating concept of our first reading through the passage a few minutes back. Paul has two choices before him: live or die. Dying would be "far better" for him because he gets Christ himself. But, because it is more necessary for the sake of the Philippians for him to stay, he dies to his own preferences and chooses to live.
- This is Paul mirroring the image of Christ in Philippians 2. Christ, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count that equality with God as something to hold on to. Instead, for our good, he empties himself. And this is only the beginning of Christ dying to himself. At the pinnacle of his suffering, Jesus who knew no sin became sin for us, taking our place on the cross. He died the death that we deserved. But he is not dead. He rose to life, laid death in its grave, and has declared that it no longer carries any sting for us. And now, because we have no need to fear death, we can

joyfully die to ourselves in the power of the one who holds the keys of death.

When living is Christ, living looks a lot like dying. Living is dying to self, dying to preferences, desires, and, if the Lord so calls, dying altogether.

It becomes much easier to see why Paul is able to say with such joy in this passage why he considers it "far better" to die and be with Christ. But you can also see his joy in choosing to remain and work. The life of Christ is not an easy one, but it is certainly a good one. And it's the one that God has called us to.

APPLICATION

So what does this look like for us?

My most joyful seasons of life have been my most obedient - those seasons when I am most stubborn in obeying what Christ has in front of me, refusing anything else. Most of you don't know my story. I wasn't supposed to be doing this. I didn't want to work for a church, and didn't expect that I would ever preach at one. This time 3 years ago I was touring as a singer-songwriter, and I knew that it was what the Lord had called me to do. But God changed my heart, change my desires, and began to call me into full time ministry. It was really difficult for me to say yes to that, because it meant saying no to my dream. But he was gracious to take away my dream, because obedience to him has been sweeter than anything I had hoped for myself. The thing is, I have no idea what he's doing here, what he's calling me to next. And I'm not overly concerned with that. I just know I need to obey him everyday.

Tangibles. The call for life to be Christ will play out differently for each of us and, for most of us, it will never be vocational

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ministry. In fact, some of you need to be willing to die to your desire to step into full time ministry. Most of us need to be in the work place or at home, strategic spaces for the kingdom of God advancing. But what should we all be aiming for? Paul tells us in 1 Corinthians 11 to imitate him as he imitates Christ. We saw his imitation of Christ, so what would it look like for us to imitate Paul? Now we see...

How Life Can Be Christ For Us

By Faithful Work. What regular action has the gospel produced in your life? We need to begin *doing* what we hear in Scripture.

- In the context of today's passage, it seems that a good place for us to start would be the work of discipleship. The Philippian church existed because Paul lead people to faith and raised them up in the faith. It's the same command that Christ gives us in the great commission. How are you making disciples? Are you leading anyone to see and become more like Christ? Dads, are you leading your family into God's word? Young professionals - God has called you to the work place, so are you using that platform to share the gospel with the lost and call them to repent and believe?

For The Progress and Joy of Others. Paul's choice to live was for the progress and joy of the Philippian church. What life choices are you making for someone else's progress and joy in the faith? How does your calendar reflect a desire for someone else's increasing joy in Christ? What about your heart? Does it bring you joy to see others progressing in the faith? Or jealous that you're not experiencing the same? Christ went to the cross for us to have never-ending joy. In response, Paul took the chains of imprisonment for the Philippians to grow in that joy. What is your response? How does the reality of your life look different because of your desire for others to experience joy in Christ?

Through Dying to Self. This encapsulates it all. Paul chose to die to his greater desire of being with Christ in order to remain and work. Listen, if you take one thing away from Paul's example today let it be this: **He gave up what was better for himself and chose what was better for the gospel.** When living is Christ, living is dying. I'm afraid to go too tangible here because, at the end of the day, I don't think we have all that much difficulty seeing what God is calling us to do. I think the bigger issue is that we just don't want to do it. So we don't. We read that we should be constant in prayer but we'd rather get things done, so we pray a couple minutes in the car when there's nothing else we could do anyway. We hear the command to make disciples but we don't want to share the gospel. We call it the greatest news in the world and treat it like it's junk mail. So instead, we bring a couple friends to church a year and let the preacher share the gospel instead. We read of royalty dancing in the streets in worship of God but we want to look presentable on Sunday. So we hold onto our dignity as tightly as we hold onto our coffee cups or the back of the chair in front of us and say that we like to "worship reflectively."

When will we stop mourning the fact that our lives don't look like what we see in our bibles and finally change how we live?

Simple Obedience. Please don't be overwhelmed by this thought. I want to urge you to something painfully simple today. Faithfully take the step that God has before you. Can we forget our 10 year plans for a moment, even those of you who have 10 year plans that center completely around the mission of God? We hear stories like the one of John Leonard Dober and David Nitschman selling themselves into slavery and think, "Alright, if I really want to be obedient, that's what it looks like." For some of us, that very well may be true. But for others of us, do we really believe that the most faithful next step is to go across an ocean to share the gospel when we haven't even gone across the street?

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- Mercy Church, please don't stop dreaming of mighty works for the Lord all around the world, a gospel awakening in the city of Charlotte that reaches the ends of the earth. But let us refuse to equate dreaming with obedience. May we no longer be pleased only with great vision for the years to come, but let us also be stubbornly obedient in the hours that come before.

⁵A young missionary named John Allen Chau, who had been on mission in India, learned of a tribe who inhabited the North Sentinel Island right off the coast of the Indian Ocean. The tribe had encountered virtually no contact with any other civilization for tens of thousands of years, and had no access whatsoever to the gospel of God's great love for them. So John spent years studying more about the tribe and learned of others who were killed just for coming into their vicinity. But he knew that they had to hear about their created purpose. So John put together a gift basket, had some local fishermen transport him within a mile of the island, and canoed the rest of the way to reach this beloved tribe. He was met his first day with attack, an arrow hitting his bible. After escaping back to the fishermen, he returned the next day in hopes of eternity shifting. John gave the fishermen a few letters and instructed them to leave for good - he would get off of the boat to stay this time. We don't know for sure what John's last interaction was with the Sentinelese but what we do know is this... the very next day, the fishermen saw the body of John Allen Chau being dragged across the beach by the tribespeople and buried. This was last Saturday, November 17th. John was from Alabama and, among the letters he left behind for his friends and family, he wrote...

ProPresenter: Please put up photo of Chau's letter here

*"You guys might think I'm crazy in all this but I think it's worth it to declare Jesus to these people. Please do not be angry at them or God if I get killed - rather **please live your lives in obedience to whatever he has called you to** and I'll see you again when you pass through the veil."*

Just like John Leonard Dober and David Nitschman, John was compelled by an overwhelming joy in Christ that comes from continued obedience. God is worthy of what John chose and more, but it's not just about the action! It's about obedience, faithfulness to Christ. And he understood that, urging others simply to obey whatever God has called them to. So what is the next step that God is calling you to? And how can you most faithfully take that step? Let me pray for us.

⁵ This telling of Chau's story is a piece-meal of what is available at the time, particularly from [CNN](#), [The Washington Post](#), and [Newsweek](#).