

Dr. Matthew S. Harmon, Philippians: Rejoice in the Gospel of Jesus Christ,

Session 4: The Progress of the Gospel, Part 2,

Philippians 1:18b-26

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Welcome to session four in our course on Philippians.

We are continuing our look at the progress of the gospel. This is part two of a section that really runs from chapter one, verse 12 through chapter one, verse 26. And so by way of review, it would be good for us to think about what we saw in that previous session: the progress of the gospel. The focus in Philippians 1: 12-18a is on Paul talking about the progress of the gospel through his past and present circumstances.

And so we thought about how Paul comes to this point where he evaluates all of his life circumstances through the lens of how is this advancing the gospel? And that sets the stage for us to continue in this passage. And we'll pick up in Philippians 1 and the last part of verse 18 and read through verse 26. Paul writes, Yes, and I will rejoice for I know that through your prayers and the help of the spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now, as always, Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose, I cannot tell.

I'm hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary for your account.

Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith. So that in me, you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus because of my coming to you again. So The Progress of the Gospel, Part 2.

And these last eight or eight verses or so. So let's think a little bit about what Paul is doing here. Again, the focus shifts from his past and present circumstances to the future.

What does the future hold for Paul? And as he talks about this, if you look again at verse 19, he says, I know that through your prayers and the help of the spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance. So when you think about this word, because in Greek, this is the word Soteria, which everywhere else in Paul's letters is translated as salvation. And so the question is, what does Paul have in mind here? Is he talking about deliverance from

being in prison, or is he talking about salvation, about spiritual salvation on the last day? And so we'll start with a few things to think through this.

The first is to observe that every other place that Paul uses this Greek word, it does refer to spiritual or eternal salvation. And so that's a pretty significant observation to keep in mind, even as we think about how Paul is using it here. That doesn't mean that Paul couldn't use the word with a different sense, but it does tell us that his general pattern is very clear that this word has the sense of spiritual salvation.

A second thing to keep in mind is that Paul always uses the cognate verb, so-and-so, with the sense of spiritual salvation. That verb always has the sense of that. In fact, if Paul wants to talk about deliverance from physical danger or something else, he uses a different Greek verb to accomplish that.

And so that pattern is another piece of evidence in my mind that we should keep in mind. Third, I want you to notice the eschatological language in verse 28. So go ahead and look at that and listen as I read.

Paul says, it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not at all be ashamed. But that with full courage, now as always, Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. And so that language of eager expectation is often used in context to talk about eschatological realities, about the future, about final judgment or the final conservation of all things.

Also, that language of hope - you think about how that term is used in the context of eschatological realities. And then even that language of not at all being ashamed, we often gravitate towards the idea of shame as, oh, I'm embarrassed about something in the present. But regularly when the New Testament talks about the idea of not being ashamed, it has in view the last day, appearing before God in judgment and not being ashamed when we stand before him.

And so I think that eschatological language also contributes to what is in view here as spiritual or final salvation. Another thing to consider, Paul appears to be echoing the language of Job chapter 13, verse 16. That phrase, this will turn out for my salvation, is the exact same five words found in Job 13:16.

Where Job is talking about being vindicated before God when he stands before him in judgment. And so if Paul, as I think he is, intentionally borrows this language from Job, and in Job it refers to a standing before God on the last day, then it seems reasonable to conclude that in light of all of that evidence in terms of the word usage and this echo from Job, that Paul has in mind here is eternal spiritual salvation, not merely release from custody. And so when we go back to this verse, if we read it again, we could translate it faithfully as, For I know that through your prayers and the help of the spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my salvation on the last day.

In other words, Paul is convinced that he will persevere in the faith. That he will continue to maintain his trust in Jesus, and on the last day he will stand before the Lord and not be put to shame. And that the path to him persevering in his steadfast faith in Jesus is not something that is just left up to himself.

In fact, Paul lays out two different elements or means of him persevering in his faith to the very end. The first is the prayers of believers. So again, verse 19, Paul writes, Through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ.

So, this is striking when you think about this. Paul is saying that by the Philippians praying for him, that is part of the means by which God will use to preserve and cause Paul to persevere in his trust in Jesus all the way to the end, even in the face of being on trial for his very life. So that's the first piece of perseverance, of the means of perseverance.

But the second one is listed there as well. The help of the Holy Spirit. The help of the Holy Spirit.

And so, Paul is acknowledging that yes, he is responsible for trusting in, believing in, continuing to trust in Jesus. And yet, God uses the prayers of his people and the work of the Spirit to empower him to continue to trust in Christ to the very end. Now, here's something that's basically impossible to see in the English text, but the Greek text helps us out here.

In the Greek text here, the way that Paul writes this is to use one definite article to govern both of the nouns that he uses here. And so, what that means is he uses the word the to cover prayers and help. You say, well, so what? Well, in Greek, that's a way of closely linking two items together and saying they are essentially one unified whole.

They are still distinct, and yet they work together. They are to be understood together in partnership. And so, the idea that seems to emerge is that when we pray for our fellow brothers and sisters, God answers those prayers by giving the help of the Spirit to another believer to persevere.

And so, that's an incredible encouragement to us that our prayers are going to be answered. Our prayers are going to be heard by the Lord, and he is going to provide the help of God's Spirit to enable us to persevere to the end on the last day. And this is his confidence, regardless of how his trial turns out.

You notice that he says there in verse 20 that his expectation is that Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. That regardless of how his trial before Caesar turns out, he is confident that Christ will be honored. So, that is Paul's confidence.

He is confident that he will persevere to the end, in part because he knows the Philippians are praying and because God will supply the power of the Spirit to keep him trusting in Christ. And then, if you look at verse 21, that's one of those helpful connecting words in any passage. So, after he says at the end of verse 20, whether by life or by death.

And then he says, for. So, the idea there is the grounds or the reason for him having this confidence is, as he states in verse 21, for to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. And so, I want us to pause over this statement because if you're familiar with Philippians, you've probably heard this phrase before.

And yet, I think sometimes we don't stop and linger over what Paul means when he says to live is Christ? And in fact, in the Greek text, it's even more emphatic. It's to live, Christ. To die, gain.

That's a wooden translation of how the Greek text reads it. And so, it's very punchy. It's very emphatic.

It's almost proverbial in nature, the way it's being stated. So, what does Paul mean? Well, I want to be careful about stealing my thunder from when we get to Philippians 3. But I think there are some insights from Philippians 3, verses 7-14, that help shed light on what Paul means by to live is Christ. And so, I'm going to highlight four insights from Philippians 3, verses 7-14.

In those texts, in those verses, Paul is going to say that knowing Christ is the highest goal of life. He's going to emphasize that the ultimate goal of his life is to know Christ. And that knowledge is not just an intellectual understanding of who Jesus is.

It is relational; it is dynamic; it is an intimate knowing. It's along the same lines of when the Old Testament talks about God knowing his people. It's a relational dynamic.

And so, when Paul talks about to live is Christ, he has at least in part, I think, the idea of knowing Christ is the highest goal of his life. Number two, gaining Christ is worth the loss of all things. Including those things that were previously regarded as gain.

So, the idea of to live is Christ means that if he's the highest goal of our life, knowing him is our highest goal, then we must be willing to set aside everything else that might get in the way of gaining Christ, of knowing Christ, of knowing him more deeply. Even things that in and of themselves are good things. And we'll talk more about that when we get to Philippians 3. Third, knowing Christ means sharing in both the power of his resurrection and the shame of his sufferings.

So, knowing Christ means following in his footsteps in some ways, in terms of not just the power of his resurrection, but ultimately also being so identified with him that it might mean that in this earthly realm, we experience shame from people for being identified with him. And then fourth, in this passage that we'll see later in the course, Christ has laid hold of Paul, which prompts him to lay hold of Christ. So, I think all of those give us a little bit of insight as to what Paul means when he says, to live is Christ.

Now, I want to talk about two other passages that can shed some light here on what Paul is saying. The first of those is Galatians 2, verse 20, where Paul talks about being crucified with Christ. That we share in his death, and that he no longer lives, but Christ lives in him.

And as a result of that, the life he lives now, he lives by faith in the Son of God, who loves him and gave himself for him. And then one other text that can show a little bit of light is 2 Corinthians 5, verse 17, where Paul writes about the fact that being in Christ, believers are a new creation. So, I think all of these things kind of shed different angles of light on what Paul means when he says, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Now, we haven't talked about the to die is gain, we'll get to that in a little bit. But let's summarize what we've got here. When Paul thinks about to live is Christ, I think he has in mind these four basic things.

Christ lives in Paul. And because Paul is in Christ, he is a new creation. And the faith in Christ empowers the life he lives.

And that Christ is the ultimate purpose and goal of this life. I think that's at least a summary. It doesn't maybe capture every aspect, but when Paul says, to live, Christ.

That's what he has in mind. Now, he also says, to die, gain. And he explains that in essence by saying, look, if I die, I get to be Christ.

And so that is the sense in which to die is gain. But the focus in this section is very much on him continuing on to live his Christ. But that does introduce what he almost presents as this sort of dilemma.

This sort of, you know, difficult choice that he has to make here. He says again in verse 23, I am hard pressed between the two. In other words, living and dying.

He says, look, I'm hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ. For that is far better.

But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. And so, if we think about Paul's dilemma. Yeah, we might think, well, on the one hand, if he's acquitted in his trial, he will get to continue fruitful ministry.

And this ties us back to the previous section where Paul's heartbeat is the progress of the gospel. If I am able to be acquitted, I will continue in ministry, and the gospel will continue to advance. On the other hand, he says, if I'm executed, he gets to go and be with the Lord.

And that's even better. Because he will be directly in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. And so strikingly, what Paul seems to do here is, he doesn't frame this as a win-or-lose situation.

He frames it as a win-win situation. If I'm acquitted, great, more ministry, the gospel advances. I'll get to see more and more people come to faith in Jesus.

I'll get to see more churches established and planted and the gospel going forth to the nations. And if not, I get to be with Christ. Get to be directly in his presence.

And so this is what he presents as his dilemma. Now, I think it's important to step back and emphasize that I don't think Paul thinks that he actually gets to make the choice. I think he's talking about his personal preferences here.

I don't think he's saying God has delegated to me the choice. Paul, you get to choose either live or die. I don't think Paul is saying that.

I think Paul is simply saying, when it comes to my preferences, when it comes to what I want, what I want to even pray for in terms of an outcome, this is the dilemma that I wrestle with. And instead of framing it as a win or lose situation, Paul frames it as a win or even win bigger situation. And as a result, Paul makes his dilemma something instead of being overwhelmed by it, and instead comes to the conclusion that, regardless of what happens, I am going to end up on the winning side here.

So what does Paul conclude? Here's his conclusion. He says, first of all, before we actually get to his actual conclusion, I want you to notice how other-centered he is in thinking through this. He says again, you know, I could live with Christ to die as gain.

If I depart and be with Christ, that's better. In other words, selfishly, I could see myself enjoying that much more. And yet, he uses the language here in verse 24; it is more necessary on your account to stick around and to continue for your progress and joy in the faith.

And I want you to file this away because what Paul is modeling is actually what he's going to call the Philippians to do later in the letter. He's going to call the Philippians to not just consider their own interests, but the interests of others. And then he's going to talk about Christ modeling that.

And so Paul is already anticipating that sort of self-sacrificial mindset that puts the needs of others before his own personal preferences and comforts. So very others-set. So Paul does conclude that the Lord has more work for him, both among the Philippians and among others.

And so he sets out his goal. Notice again the progress of the gospel among the Philippians and their growth and joy in the faith. Now, again, sometimes our English translations can struggle to capture some of the connecting points.

But I want you to turn back to chapter one, verse 12. And when Paul writes at the beginning of this passage, what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel. That's really the same language as we thought in Greek, as we find here in verse 25, when he writes for your progress and joy in the faith.

So in effect, that's essentially like an *inclusio* or a bracketing effect where an author will introduce an idea at the beginning of a section or a passage. And then come back to it at the end as a way of marking it off as a distinctive literary unit. And I think that's what we have here in Philippians one.

And so Paul says he's going to remain for their progress and joy in the faith. He also, I think, notes here we can conclude from this that when it comes to the idea of progress in the faith, it's less about the quantity of one's faith than the growing awareness of the sufficiency of the person and work of Christ to forgive and transform us. I think sometimes we think about the idea of faith in too much of a quantitative sense, that we think what I need is more faith, as if it's a quantity, as if it's a liquid in a glass or a container that we need more to be poured in there.

And yet, you know, Jesus says things like, if you have the faith, the quantity of a mustard seed, you can tell that mountain to get up and throw itself in the ocean. Well, and so that seems to suggest that the issue is not so much the quantity of one's faith. It's the idea of a recognition of the sufficiency of the object of the faith that you're putting your faith in.

And so Paul wants to see the Philippians grow in their faith in Christ. And then lastly, his ultimate goal is the glory of Christ when he returns to see them again. If you look back at

chapter one, verse 26, he says, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus because of my coming to you again.

So what Paul seems to envision is that when he reunites with the Philippians, there's going to be this joyous reunion. And yes, there'll be joy that they're back together. But Paul is saying, I want you to boast or to glory or to delight in Christ because I'm back with you, because he's the one that's going to make it happen.

He's the one that is at the center of this. So that's Paul's conclusion. So let's take a step back and kind of think about the big picture of this particular passage.

So here in chapter one, verses 18b through 26, we can summarize it as the progress of the gospel must shape how we evaluate our future plans and preferences. So that's the emphasis that we get from the second half of this passage. What about then stepping back even further and looking at the totality of chapter one, verse 12 through verse 26? I think we can summarize it this way and capture the essence of what Paul is saying.

The main idea of these verses, we could summarize as the progress of the gospel must shape how we evaluate our circumstances. So past, present, future doesn't matter. The progress of the gospel should be the lens through which we evaluate our circumstances.

We can see this passage fall then into two distinct sections. The first is that the gospel advances when we preach Christ. So this is focused on Paul's present and his past.

And he stresses how the gospel advances when Christ is preached to the lost. And then secondly, the gospel advances when believers are emboldened to preach Christ. So the gospel advances when we preach Christ.

And then secondly, the gospel advances when we treasure Christ above all else. And so we see this as Paul is reflecting on his future possibilities. What's going to come next? And so I would see this breaking down in verses 18 through 21 as treasuring Christ above all else enables perseverance in faith to the very end.

And then lastly, treasuring Christ above all else enables self-sacrificial service to others. So that's the big picture overview of Philippians 1:12-26. And so I want to finish this particular session with some thoughts on application using our fourfold bridge here.

Number one, what does God want us to think or understand? That God is in control of my life and circumstances so I can trust Him. And again, I want to stress, Paul doesn't say this from the comfort of a nice cushy chair sitting by the lake or the beach with the waves just laughing at his feet. And he's just in a total state of relaxation and comfort.

He's saying this while he is chained to a Roman soldier. And he's awaiting his hearing before the emperor, who will decide on an earthly level whether Paul lives or dies. And so before we dismiss this sort of truth as, well, that's easy for Paul to say.

Actually, no, it wasn't. It was not easy for him to say. He is saying this in the midst of hard and difficult and life-threatening circumstances.

And so I think we can learn from Paul that God is in control of our lives and circumstances so we can know Him. Second, believe. We need to believe truly that to live is Christ and to die is gain.

It's easy for these sorts of memorable verses to almost lose their punch because they're just so familiar to us. So yeah, to live is Christ, to die is gain. Stop and think about the implications of that when it comes to what it means to truly believe that to live is Christ and to die is gain. How is that going to shape the way that I live my everyday life? Third, desire.

I think God wants us to long to see life in a way that Christ is glorified in anticipation of the last day. Did you notice in this passage how Paul is concerned about Christ being magnified in his body, whether through life or through death? And then when it comes to talking about being reunited with the Philippians, what's his concern? I want the Philippians to glory or boast in Christ. And so even in the midst of this, Paul's goal is to magnify the beauty and the glory of Jesus Christ.

So that when people hear what he's been through and see what he's been through and experience all of the hardships that he has gone through, as he experiences those realities, he wants people to walk away from that and say, isn't Paul great, but isn't Christ great? And I think this passage points us in that direction of what we should desire. And then finally, what should we do? I think it would be good for us to reflect on a specific circumstance in our lives and consider how the gospel might advance through it. That doesn't automatically mean we'll figure out exactly what God is up to and how he's going to advance the gospel through this.

But I think it's worth reflecting on whether it's an illness, whether it's an economic hardship, whether it's a relational conflict or whatever else it might be that the Lord has brought into your life. For us, spend time thinking about, Lord, how is it that you might choose to advance the gospel? Whether that'll give me an opportunity to share the gospel with someone who doesn't know Christ or maybe be an encouragement to others as they experience similar realities, whatever the case might be. I think from this passage, it would do our hearts and our minds and our souls good to reflect on a specific circumstance that especially is maybe hard or difficult and to pray and reflect on, Lord, how is it that you are going to use this specific circumstance to advance the gospel? So that is session number four on the progress of the gospel.

When we come back for session number five, we will see how Paul moves his argument forward and begins the body of the letter.

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