

# Clarifying Our Purpose

**Press On Series, October 3 & 4, 2020 | Philippians 1:18b-30**

**Senior Pastor Rob O'Neal**

## HAS A BAD LEADER EVER MADE YOU WANT TO GIVE UP?

**By the time Paul wrote to the saints in Philippi, Emperor Nero had already proven to be a bad leader.**

Nero's reign started out well. When he became emperor as a young man, he empowered the Senate, lowered taxes, and reduced executions.

Things didn't go well for long, though. Nero was an artist. He sang, played the lyre, and wrote poetry. The Roman people didn't like this from their emperor. They were used to confident military leaders who pushed them to excellence. Nero wasn't that guy.

Sensing his grip on power slipping, Nero became cruel.

First, he probably had his stepbrother killed.

Then he killed his own mother. Nero planned this murder so that it would look like an accident. He had a boat built that would fall apart and sink so that she would drown. She was surprisingly resilient, though, and survived by swimming to shore, so Nero had her killed on the beach.

He executed his first wife and kicked his pregnant second wife to death.

His reign of terror had begun.

**Shortly after Paul wrote his letter to the saints in Philippi, Nero would do much worse.**

The city of Rome caught fire, and the people blamed Nero.

He needed a place to deflect the blame, and Christians made an easy target. They were different and unpopular. Nero rounded many of them up and executed them violently.

Even the people of Rome were horrified by how he treated them.

The bloody end of Nero's reign had begun.

**Already when Paul wrote to Philippi, Nero's government was actively pressuring him to quit.**

The Roman world was a religiously diverse place with lots of gods.

People were free to follow many gods in the ways that seemed right to them.

However, they also needed to participate in certain religious rituals that bound them all together. They all prayed for the emperor and acknowledged that the Empire was absolute.

That was a problem for Christians. The Lord God is not one god among many; he is the one, true God. And Jesus his Son is Savior and Lord, not Caesar.

Romans considered Christians atheists, unpatriotic, and a danger to the Empire.

Paul was in prison, because he was being accused of atheism and treason. Whether he was found guilty or not, that was how Roman society thought of him. That's how they treated him. He was an outsider, under tremendous pressure to quit and conform.

### **Can you imagine the pressure Paul felt to quit?**

The emperor was behaving erratically.

Old values were being flaunted.

Society felt divided.

Resistance was organizing and turning violent at times.

Pressure was mounting on God's people to conform.

Can you imagine the pressure Paul must have felt to just stop?

### **How, then, do we press on day by day with that kind of pressure to quit?**

Last week we said that the Bible teaches us that God has a purpose even in our pain.

But what about living day by day? Sometimes living day by day, when there's pressure all around to quit, can be even harder.

If we're going to press on living day by day, then we need to know the purpose behind our lives!

Knowing our purpose for living can help us press on day by day.

## **PAUL CLARIFIED GOD'S PURPOSE FOR HIS LIFE.**

### **Paul was waiting for his case to be decided.**

Paul seems to have been through an initial hearing.

Paul himself seems to indicate that the next step would either involve judgment, along with possible sentencing, or a set of hearings before judgment.

Either way, Paul was waiting for the defining step in his case.

### **As he waited, Paul expressed concern in Philippians 1:18b-20 that he honor Christ with "full courage."**

*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.*

Looking back in verse 18, we see that Paul rejoiced that Christ was proclaimed even in his imprisonment.

Looking ahead he would continue to rejoice, because he knew that the prayers of the saints in Philippi would work with the Spirit of Jesus to produce his deliverance.

They would provide everything Paul needed in order to be delivered.

But what did Paul mean by being delivered? What he meant is shocking. He didn't mean that the prayers of the saints in Philippi, together with the Spirit of Jesus, would provide him with everything he needed in order to be set free.

Instead, Paul anticipated that he would stand before judges at least one more time. Because he was charged with atheism and treason for following Jesus, he would almost certainly be given at least one more opportunity to explain himself and recant, or change his mind.

Paul was worried about how he would handle the situation. He didn't want to be ashamed at the end of the experience by anything he said or did.

Instead, deliverance for Paul would be speaking with full courage his conviction about Jesus. If he could do that without dishonoring himself or Christ, that would be deliverance.

**Then in verses 21-23, Paul transparently mused about how he understood God's purpose for his life.**

*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 am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.*

Paul was realistic that he might be found guilty soon and quickly executed.

Consequently, he was thinking about life and death. He was wondering which one he wanted, and it got to the heart of God's purpose for his life.

He was blunt that he couldn't lose. As a follower of Jesus, Paul said that for him to live is Christ and to die is gain. The two were surprisingly equal outcomes in his life.

He started by saying that if he continued to live, then he would have fruitful labor ahead of him.

But if he were to die, then he would be "with Christ." He would be resurrected and glorified, and he would see Jesus face to face forever. He liked that idea too!

Shockingly, Paul would have chosen death if he were given the option.

**However, in verses 24-26, Paul's clarity about God's purpose for his life pointed him forward.**

*But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on 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.*

Paul realized that remaining in the flesh would be better for the saints in Philippi.

He could help them progress in their faith. (That's the kind of fruitful labor Paul talked about when he said that living would leave him with something important to do.)

His vindication and release from prison would bring the saints in Philippi great joy and bring glory to Jesus.

Paul knew that fruitful labor was part of God's purpose for his life, so he concluded that God would probably see to it that he was found "not guilty" and released.

**God's purpose for his life made Paul ready to press on despite distractions and better offers.**

We already knew that he faced great pain personally that could make anyone want to stop.

We find out today that Paul actively thought about and weighed life versus death.

We also discover that Paul considered being "with Christ" after death better.

However, knowing God's purpose for his life convinced Paul that God wanted him to press on. Having a purpose in life does that for us!

## PAUL CLARIFIED GOD'S PURPOSE FOR THE PHILIPPIANS' LIVES.

**In Philippians 1:27-30, Paul clarified God's purpose for the saints in Philippi.**

*Only **let your manner of life be** worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind*

*striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.*

### **He called them to live as citizens worthy of the gospel of Christ.**

It's right there in verse 27. Let's read it again, "Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ."

I know you don't see it in English, but it's there in the original Greek.

The word is built on the word "polis" or "city," the word from which we get "politics."

Paul was telling them to live like loyal, productive citizens.

But he wanted them to live as loyal, productive citizens of the Kingdom of God.

### **He called them to stand firm against their opponents.**

As citizens of the Kingdom of God, they were increasingly at odds with the Empire.

The citizens and leaders of the kingdoms of this world had become opponents, and Paul knew at times the Philippians would have to stand firm against them.

Paul didn't envision their going to war or engaging in any kind of violence.

However, he knew that they needed to continue sharing the good news about Jesus.

And he knew that they would need to continue saying "no" to the Empire.

Standing firm would say loudly and clearly to the citizens and leaders of the kingdoms of this world that Jesus reigns and that sticking with the Empire would lead to destruction in the end.

### **He also called them to work together for the faith of the gospel.**

The saints in Philippi were to be unified.

Paul knew that life, sin, and the kingdoms of this world would try to pull people apart.

Paul called them to do the difficult, Christ-honoring thing of sticking together.

If they could stick together, they would be stronger.

Plus, it would be a sign to them and to the world that they were being saved because only God can unite people.

He closed by calling them to celebrate the opportunity they were being given. He didn't just call them to "press on." He actually called them to celebrate the purpose God had given them.

## **PAUL CLARIFIES GOD'S PURPOSE FOR OUR LIVES: TO DIE IS GAIN.**

**Paul clarified God's purpose for our lives in the simple statement: To live is Christ, and to die is gain.**

This statement applies only to disciples of Jesus.

For those of us who are disciples of Jesus, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

However, this statement is still shocking!

We're talking about getting clarity about our purpose for living. How does saying "To die is gain" clarify our purpose for living? Very few of us actually want to die.

### **However, we can't fully know why we're alive until we know what we're missing!**

When we disciples of Jesus die, we get everything God has promised us.

We get the same kind of resurrection Jesus experienced. We leave behind sin and the impact that sin has had on our bodies and on our spirits. We get new bodies.

Most importantly, we get to see God himself face to face and behold him in all of his glory. We will not only see him, but we will be with him forever.

Why? Because we will live with him forever.

Resurrection. Glory. God. Forever. No wonder Paul said that to die is gain.

That's what we're missing out on right now.

### **And we can't fully understand why we're alive until we start living, looking forward to seeing Jesus.**

Death isn't the only way to see Jesus face to face! Jesus promised to come again.

Paul and the disciples of the first century expected that Jesus would return any day!

The same is true right now. Jesus is coming. We don't know when, but we know he is coming.

We can't understand our purpose in life until we are living, expecting Jesus to show up, looking forward to Jesus' returning, and ready for the day.

### **Don't let this sound morbid, but we're dead already.**

From 1979 to 1991, there was a series of Star Trek films, starring the original cast of the classic TV-science-fiction series.

One of them, Star Trek 2: The Wrath of Khan, featured a great battle scene.

After the battle, the Enterprise (their famous spaceship) was badly damaged. The engines didn't work, and the ship was unable to move.

Captain Kirk called down to the engine room and told them, "If I don't get phenomenal cosmic speed in three minutes, we will all be dead."

His friend, the first officer, Mr. Spock ran down to the engine room to help.

When he got to the engine room, the situation was bad. The "doohickey" was broken, and no one could get close enough to fix it because it was leaking radiation.

Mr. Spock went into the chamber with the "doohickey" to repair it.

He fixed the doohickey, and they rocketed to safety just in time.

But Mr. Spock had already absorbed a fatal dose of radiation.

Captain Kirk came down to the engine room to find his friend barely alive.

He lunged forward to pull his friend out of the "doohickey" chamber, but the crew stopped him. If they opened to chamber to take him out, it would flood the room with radiation, and they would all die.

Captain Kirk complained, "He's dying!"

And the engineer said, "Sir, he's dead already."

### **In a sense, if we're disciples of Jesus, we too have died already.**

Romans 6:6 tells us that when we become followers of Jesus, in a sense we die with Christ. Paul wrote, *We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin.*

Then in Romans 6:8, Paul adds that if we have died with Christ, then we also get to a resurrection like what he experienced. Paul added,

*Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him.*

He adds the implication in Romans 6:11 that we have consequently left behind our old lives and now live with exclusive loyalty to Jesus and filled with the life that God gives us,

*So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.*

To die really is gain. Death brings great clarity to our purpose in life.

It thoroughly reminds us that to live is Christ.

## **PAUL CLARIFIES GOD'S PURPOSE FOR OUR LIVES: TO LIVE IS CHRIST.**

What then does Paul mean for us to do when he says that to live is Christ? I think it's possible to pull out three very important phrases from Philippians 1:18-30 that help us to understand what Paul meant:

1. Paul's concept of **full courage** means: **Our purpose is to testify publicly to the gospel of Jesus.** Paul prayed that he would honor Christ in his next opportunity with full courage. The phrase "full courage" in his day meant that he would say what he needed to say about Jesus publicly, in a noble, compelling, convincing way, without any hesitation and with full conviction. If to live is Christ, then we are to talk publicly, and openly, and with conviction about our faith in Jesus.
2. Paul's concept of **fruitful labor** means: **Our purpose is to make and mature disciples of Jesus.** As he wrote to the saints in Philippi, Paul was acutely aware that he could encourage them as disciples of Jesus. He could help them make and mature disciples of Jesus. If to live is Christ, then we must realize that we are each intentionally responsible for making and maturing disciples of Jesus. It's not someone else's responsibility. It's our life.
3. Paul's concept of **heavenly citizenship** means: **Our purpose is to represent Jesus to the world.** Paul expected the saints in Philippi to show the character that citizens of heaven should have. Beyond showing that kind of character, like ambassadors, he expected them to forward the interest of the Kingdom of God. If to live is Christ, then we too must let godly character grow in us, and we must seek every opportunity we can get to advance the Kingdom of God.

If to live is Christ, then our days are going to be full of purpose!

However, we can't fully understand our purpose until we recognize what our purpose isn't.

### **To live is Christ. And nothing else.**

We've all answered this question so many ways: "To live is family." "To live is work." "To live is fun." "To live is wealth." "To live is relationships." "To live is pleasure."

That's not what the Bible says.

Our beginning is Christ. Our end is Christ. Our means is Christ.

To live is Christ. And nothing else. That's God purpose for our lives.

**When we know God's purpose for our lives, we can't help but press on.**