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Living the Jesus Life: What Matters Most

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TEXT: Philippians 1:12-26 (ESV)

I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

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 am 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. 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.

Dear friends,

Many years ago we started seeing t-shirts with a logo on them which said something like this: "baseball is life, the rest is just details" or "fishing his life, and the rest is just details" or volleyball, or soccer, you name it. And then favorite pastimes as well started showing up on these t-shirts: "reading books is life, the rest is just details", "science is life" ... They humorously are stating to those around us what matters most in our life. What's important to us, what we love. What would you put on your t-shirt? What matters most to you? That question, I imagine, can inspire a variety of responses. Some might say "well, my family is life" or "my job" or "my relationship with God" or "my integrity", "my reputation in the community", "my friendships", "my security", and the list would go on and on.

In today's passage Paul writes about what matters most to him as he lives out the Jesus life. He's reporting to the Philippians how things are going for him. Remember now, he's in prison, and prison's a nasty place to be. He knows that they're worried about him. But Paul, when he writes, he doesn't complain or ask for pity or sympathy from them at all. In fact, they hear some real encouragement. Let me just paraphrase the first part of Paul's report:

Yes, I'm in prison and I'm chained up to a soldier every day. I know on the surface this doesn't look good. But what matters most is the gospel of Christ Jesus is being advanced - were making some real headway. For instance, the whole Imperial Guard of Roman soldiers around the palace now know why I am here. It's because of the gospel. That's a whole lot of people hearing about Jesus. Others as well, who have come to visit me and find out why I go through all of this, as well as other prisoners, are hearing the gospel from me as well. The local Christians in Rome are actually becoming inspired by my boldness that they're seeing, and are talking up the gospel themselves without fear. There's all kinds of people hearing about Jesus.

Just as an aside, I'm reminded of a couple of my own congregation, Ron and Darlene, and their evangelistic boldness. Wherever they went whoever they talked with, all that mattered to them was getting the gospel message shared with people. Conversation always steered towards Jesus. And I have to tell you, they inspired me in my own witnessing of the gospel and my conversations. Just as Paul is talking about these Roman Christians that of been inspired by him. Well anyway, back to the report. Paul writes:

Some people are preaching the gospel for good reason, they are very sincere about it. But some are preaching the gospel from less than pure motives: out of envy and rivalry towards me. I don't know why, I guess I threatened them or

their prominence in the church, but there's a jealousy I can't figure out. I know some who preach very sound theology, good sermons, but they're filled with selfish ambition and they seem to only be interested in promoting their own status in the Christian community, as if it's a competition: who can get the biggest church. Oh well, I guess God can even use that - I believe it. What matters most is that the gospel is getting proclaimed in pretense and in truth. It's moving forward, and in that I rejoice. The gospel's getting out, that's what matters most.

Paul's T-shirt with say "the gospel is life, the rest is just details." And he's rejoicing because he sees God working in all these things, he's amazed by it. This God will take circumstances which are bad and use them for good. He's in charge. Paul could very well be thinking "I could whine and moan about this terrible situation, but I believe that I put here for a reason. It's the advancement of the gospel. So I better take advantage of every opportunity to talk about Jesus Christ. And now others are doing it as well, and I rejoice in that", Paul says.

Just another aside: I'm reminded of a friend of mine who was diagnosed with cancer. He's going to require a lot of chemotherapy, experimental stuff, make him very sick - it could kill him. He said to me early on "Steve, you know what I'm going to do? I'm going to use this to tell others of my hope in Christ as I go through this experience." Wow!

At this point we need to stop and ask: what is this gospel that matter so much to Paul, or to my friends Darlene and Ron and Rob. The gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ. Through Jesus, you see, God has done something wonderful for us that calls for a response on our part. While we were still God's enemies, sinners in His sight, God, out of love for us, sent His son Jesus into this world. You see, we were so lost in our sinfulness and in need of rescue. The wages of our sin is death - eternal separation from God. And we couldn't fix the relationship with the holy and just God who loves us but must punish sin. God, in His love and mercy, gave us Jesus (that's the good news) who lived the perfect life of obedience that we could not live. And He died for us on the cross as the perfect sacrifice for our sin. The wrath of God towards sin was poured out upon His son Jesus at the cross. The iniquity of us all was poured out upon Him. And God raised Him from the dead, exalted Jesus, and now He is Lord over this universe and Jesus holds your eternity in His hands. That good news calls for a response on our part; a response to turn away from the old life of sin and turn to Him in trust. And receive forgiveness for your sins and a new life with God that begins now and is everlasting. That's the gospel that Paul is so concerned about.

In the second section of the text, though, Paul goes on to address the Philippians' concern about what his future is. And again we're told what matters most. He says basically this (I'll paraphrase):

I know you're wondering if I'm ever going to get out of this prison. Well, I know that through your prayers and the spirit of Christ (the Holy Spirit) this will turn out for my deliverance in some way: whether it be a temporal deliverance or eternal deliverance. But here is what matters most to me: my hope is that I stand up for Jesus well as I face my accusers in court. That I will not at all be ashamed or causing shame, but be full of courage, so that now as always Christ will be honored and exalted with my whole being, in my living or in my dying.

And then Paul gives his mission statement that his life is about: "for to me to live is Christ and to die is gain." As he looks at the future, there you have it: "for me to live is Christ, to die is gain." Where he says "for to me to live is Christ" he is saying I have this unshakable faith that, regardless of the circumstances, I live for Christ. What controls his outlook? Jesus. It's not about Paul and his comfort, his safety, and his happiness, and his economic security, and his sense of well-being. It's all about Jesus Christ, and what He has done. Christ is the motive of Paul's actions, that the goal of his life and ministry, the very source of all his strength. His life is about serving Jesus. He says "I know to remain in the flesh, that that means more fruitful labor for Jesus - I can get some more good things done: serving Him in the world, and spreading the gospel to nonbelievers of what God has done for the world through Jesus Christ." And we know that it would not be an easy life, that it would continue to be filled with rejection and more jail cells and beatings and stressful situations. But Paul seems to be saying "but that's fine with me, to live is Christ. To share His sufferings - it's an honor, it's all joy to me."

And then he says "and to die: that's gain." Death does not bother Paul. Perhaps he sees death as something that can be used as his final testimony for Jesus. To really add wood to the fire of the gospel spreading. He doesn't fear it. Paul knows, you see, where he's going if he dies soon. He will be with Jesus, which will be wonderful beyond our wildest imaginations. That, to Paul, is gain. In fact, he says, "I'm kind of torn in thinking as to which I prefer. But it's not my choice to make. My desire is to depart to be with Jesus, that's far better, I know, but to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account." We see a strong faith expressed here that knows that God is in charge of his life and that he's in the palms of God's hands, and that his future rests in God's hands. He says "if I am to live in the flesh and continue ministry, that's up to God, but if I'm to die, as well that that's up to God. But I have to believe," he says, "God still has plans for me in this world. I'm convinced that, because of you and your prayers, the spirit of Christ, and the calling God has placed on my life, that I am to go on serving you and seeing to your spiritual progress, and give you a cause to boast in Christ all the more in His power when you see me again as a free man."

I'm reminded of one of my senior members of my own congregation, Joanne, a delightful, outspoken lady who led many people to Jesus Christ. She was contagious and she seemed to have nine lives. I was always being called to the emergency room because she was supposedly on her way "out". But she always ended up back home, it was amazing. So on one particular visit we were talking about that and she said to me "Steve, I'm ready to go be with Jesus. I can't believe I'm still here. But I guess that God still has plans for me to reach somebody else for Him, so that's okay with me. He's in charge of my life." The Gospel is life, the rest is just details. Turns out there was someone that Joanne led to Christ before she died.

So, I wonder how these Philippians felt when they first heard these words from Paul read aloud in their church service in Philippi. Were they moved? Were they inspired? This testimony is quite inspiring. The truth is, Paul's words are meant to be inspiring, to spur us on as well as encourage us as we live the Jesus life right where we are. They're meant to teach and reawaken the believer in Christ as to what matters most when you follow Jesus. It's the gospel, and its advancement in the world. What matters most is using every situation, every opportunity, every opening in conversations to point people to Christ. What matters most is using your life to bring others to Jesus. Oh, we so easily lose sight of that one, friends, as a vision for our lives. We live as consumers in the church, but not contributors to the spreading of the gospel, and that's not what Jesus had in mind for us. That's not the life he calls us to. Paul's testimony is simply reminding us of that today - of what matters most as we live the Jesus life: it's the gospel. The gospel of Christ is life, and the rest is just details. And friend, Jesus is counting on you and me to personally take part in bringing the gospel, to get inspired like those Roman Christians were when they saw his boldness. To tell the good news of Jesus, bring it into this world of ours to our family, our friends, our coworkers, our neighbors, people we like, people we can't stand; so that they, too, may live and experience the joy of the Jesus life.

Let me ask you: who has God placed with you? Who has God brought into your life that needs to hear the gospel, and who will tell them if you don't? GO! Tell the story of what God has done for us in Christ. Be bold, be of good courage, God will use you to advance the gospel when you stand up for Christ. The One who loved you first is counting on you to honor Him with your whole being, and tell others the old, old story of Jesus and His love. That, my dear friends, is what matters most. One of the great Christian leaders of the last century was John Stott. Os Guinness writes:

I knew him over many decades, but I will never forget my last visit to his bedside, three weeks before he died. After an unforgettable hour and more of sharing memories over many years, I asked him how he would like me to pray

for him. And lying weakly on his back and barely able to speak, he answered in a hoarse whisper, 'pray that I will be faithful to Jesus until my last breath.'

Oh, would such a prayer be your passion, and my passion, and the passion of our generation, too.

Amen