

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

(July 19, 2020)

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Sermon manuscript

Revolution

(Philippians 1:18-30)

Study #3

Sermon series: It's All About Jesus

(studies in Paul's letter to the church at Philippi)

Introduction: Atoms, planets, and you...

Everything revolves around something. In the physical world, the small submits to the *gravitas* of the big and circles it.

The smallest particles revolve around an atom's nucleus and the largest planets revolve around their sun. Our solar system revolves around an axis star, and minor galaxies revolve around larger galaxies.

This universal principle of revolution holds sway because of the irresistible force of gravity. Were it not for gravity, the sub-atomic and the solar universes would instantly fly apart.

As it is with atoms and planets, so it is with us. We don't work right unless we are caught up in the gravitational pull of something bigger than ourselves - and there is a nearly limitless supply of big stuff around which we might orbit.

Politics and possessions, career and savings, marriage and family - and on and on the list could go.

In the next few minutes, we'll all have opportunity to ask ourselves, "*Around what or Whom - does my life revolve?*"

We need to respond to that question thoughtfully. The answer could prove revolutionary.

Review...

Jeff has gotten us off to a great start in our study of Paul's letter to the church in the ancient Greek city of Philippi.

He told the story (from Acts 16) of how the church began¹ when the Apostle Paul and his friend, Silas, took the Gospel to Philippi, were beaten and thrown into prison for preaching and casting out a demon from a slave girl,² and were then set free by an earthquake.

A Philippian jailer was won to faith in Christ when Paul told him that if he believed in the Lord Jesus, he would be saved. Others also believed and formed the nucleus of a church.

From Philippi, Paul and Silas traveled on to other cities to share the gospel. And Paul eventually made his way - in the custody of a Roman soldier - to Rome to stand trial before Caesar.

While awaiting trial, and while under house arrest, he wrote this letter to his good friends back in Philippi.³

He wrote to thank them, both for their financial support and for their partnership with him in the work of Jesus' gospel.

Paul and the Philippians were teammates who agreed that no matter what happens in life - shipwrecks, beatings, jail time, or fellow-Christians who try to make life harder - life is all about Jesus

[18] What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and in this I rejoice. Yes, and I will rejoice.

¹ This happened on what we refer to as Paul's Second Missionary Journey.

² She was making a lot of money for her masters by fortune-telling; with the demon gone, she couldn't make them money, so they were mad at Paul and Silas.

³ While under house arrest in Rome, Paul was chained to soldiers from the Praetorian Guard. Historians tell us that the soldiers were rotated on this duty every few hours. So, two, three, or four times a day, a different soldier from the Praetorian Guard was chained to Paul to ensure that he didn't escape. No doubt Paul shared Jesus with the soldiers who were fortunate enough to guard him.

Paul's life revolved around Jesus. If Jesus' Gospel was proclaimed, he was a happy man. Period. Even if he suffered for it.

Today, you and I hear how caught up in Jesus Paul was, how single-minded he was. We're intrigued.

We're not used to someone who is so focused on one thing. And we're more than intrigued. We're attracted. We're drawn to it.

All kinds of troubles may come our way, and they may have nothing to do with prison or beatings.

It may involve COVID-19, something that's brought hardships to us all. For some it has meant the loss of a loved one or health or a livelihood. For others, it's the loss of access to friends and family.

We're seeing all around us how easy it is to be overwhelmed by troubles. Today, Paul is going to show us that it is also possible to be so overwhelmed with Jesus that even when suffering, we are not overwhelmed.

He had a solid confidence that God was good, that God knew what He was doing, and that what God was doing for him was good.

An Eternal Argument for a Here-and-Now Investment (vv. 19-26)

Life = Christ (vv. 19-21)

Paul's certainty of freedom - one way or the other (v. 19)

[19] for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ...

One way to read this is to say that Paul was confident that the Philippians' prayers for him would result in his release from house arrest in Rome. He would soon be free again to proclaim Christ.

But it's not real clear that this is what Paul was saying. The next words we read make clear that his ultimate goal was *not* that he be released from jail.

Paul's expectation and hope (v. 20)

[20] according to my earnest expectation and hope, that I will not be put to shame in anything, but that with all boldness, Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

In a Roman prison or a Philippian jail, on Mars Hill in Athens or on the road with friends. "Where" didn't matter. His aim was to exalt Jesus, and nothing could block that goal. The same is true for us.

We set ourselves up for frustration if our life goals consist of being respected by others, getting bigger and more expensive stuff, and being influential and affluent. All these goals - and lots more like them - can easily be blocked.

But there is nobody and there is nothing that can block your goal to exalt the Lord Jesus Christ. No matter what happens you can continue to exalt Christ.

You can exalt Christ in prison or out; in a delightful or in a hard marriage; in an unfulfilling job or a great one; as a millionaire or in poverty; as a single adult or married; as a straight "A" student, or as a "struggling to get by" student; as a person with no health problems to speak of or as someone with significant health challenges.

If you're now thinking, "I want to have what Paul had. Being laser-focused on Jesus and being possessed by an unblockable goal sounds great, but I'm not there yet. So, how do I get there from here?"

Listen.

Paul's worldview (v. 21)

[21] For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.⁴

That, in one phrase, was Paul's worldview.

⁴ Eugene Peterson's The Message renders this verse: "Alive, I'm Christ's messenger; dead, I'm his bounty. Life versus even more life! I can't lose."

Now, the first phrase doesn't lend itself to easy translation from Greek to English because, in the original language, there is no verb.

Literally, the phrase reads, *"For to me, to live...Christ."*

Inserting "is" makes the sentence work in English. But omitting it gets across the idea with Paul's original "punch".

So, let's just leave it, *"For to me, to live...Christ."* Everything else is just details.

Life isn't a bigger paycheck and it isn't comfort. Life isn't a good TV show at the end of a long day. It isn't hanging with good friends or a fulfilling marriage. Life is not health, politics, or social justice.

Life? Christ!

Paul's life orbited around Jesus which impacted everything in the here-and-now. And having believed in Jesus, that second part of the verse is, without question, true - *"to die is gain."*⁵

You and I routinely hear that death is the ultimate tragedy. No, it's not. For Paul and for anyone who believes in Jesus, *"to die is gain."*⁵

Carlos Garza (died, December 2019) knows that now. Isaiah Cooke (died, May 2020) knows that now. Shirley Jones (died, June 2020) knows it, too.

I was with someone recently who is currently in very poor health. I quoted this verse, reminding this dear friend, *"to die is gain."* My friend got it.

Knowing *"to die is gain"* enabled Paul to face life and death with calm courage. Faith in Jesus teaches us how to live *and* how to die.

Preparing this message has surfaced some emotions in me. That is because I have spoken from this passage, before.

⁵ I love the last words of Dwight Moody, spoken from his death bed, "Soon you will read in the newspapers that Moody is dead. Don't you believe it. I shall be more alive than now." (The Last Thing We Talk About, by Joe Bayly p. 99)

Most notably, for me, was the first time, August 4, 1985. That was the Sunday after my good friend, Joe Johnson (Laura's husband and father to Zachary, Aaron, Rachel, and Micah), died of brain cancer.

Joe's suffering and death taught me how a Christian faces death.

Joe certainly didn't want to die. He wanted to stick around. He wanted to live for his Lord and to love and to provide for his family.

But Joe was not afraid to die. He told me so, when to say it was more than hypothetical or theoretical. He was actively dying, and he assured me that he was not afraid to die.

He was confident that His Lord would take care of him on the other side. He knew that for him, *"to die was gain."*

If he lived, he would enjoy the presence of Christ and the richness of this life. If he died, he would enjoy more of the presence of Christ and the richness of that life.

The same is true for all who have placed their trust in Jesus.

Lots of people we know who don't know God through faith in Jesus are afraid of or uncertain about or disturbed by death.⁶

The gospel speaks to those fears and uncertainties.

Today, we tend to be absorbed with how to use our faith in Jesus to live better. I get that. And there's nothing wrong with wanting to live better. It's good to apply biblical wisdom to life's challenges.

But earlier generations of Christians knew that the Gospel does more than help us live better. It helps us die better.⁷

⁶ From Robert Bern, Greek Thinking about the Modern Mind, Harvard Press, 1964, p. 92, "Only Christians and idiots are not afraid to die." (Seneca)

⁷ On May 29, 1914, the ocean liner, Empress of Ireland, went down with 130 Salvation Army officers on board, along with many other passengers. Only 21 of those workers survived the wreck - an unusually small number. Many of the survivors told how those brave people, seeing that there were not enough lifebelts,

There's nothing morbid about that. The reality is that the way we view the life to come and the way we view our inevitable death vitally impacts the way we live day by day.

Knowing that ***"to die is gain"*** helped Paul immeasurably when he was in jail for serving Jesus. It will help you when you face trials.

It will help your friend who doesn't yet know Jesus to know that if they believe in Jesus, ***"to die is gain."***

Knowing that heaven was waiting for him, Paul felt the magnet of Jesus pulling him there. Because ***"to die is gain"***, for Paul, ***"to live...Christ!"***

To die was also to go "home." And he wanted to be home.

Now Paul never considered taking his own life to get home sooner, but what he says reveals with what clarity he saw the issue. Just listen to his internal tug-of-war.

Paul's Internal Tug-Of-War (vv. 22-24)

[22] But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. [23] But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; [24] yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.

What could Paul look forward to by staying put?

Well, he would enjoy walking by faith, bearing fruit for God, making disciples, investing his life in people, seeing folks trust Christ, and building up the Body of Christ.

And he would suffer. More beatings and imprisonments and rejections and shipwrecks and dangers and concerns and losses.⁸

He knew that the churches of his day needed him. To which he could have thought, ***"So, they need me. Big deal."***

Paul wanted to depart and be with Christ, because, like he says, this would be better - for him.

If he dies, he will immediately find himself in a real place with no downside. No pain, suffering or fractured relationships, no heartache or tears, no COVID-19 or cancer.

He will enter an eternity of joy and peace with His Savior and with the redeemed of all the ages. No more beatings, no more stonings. It really would be very much better to depart and be with Christ.

But, in light of eternity, he chose to stay put and invest in the here-and-now.

When Life Revolves Around Jesus (vv. 25-26)

[25] Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, [26] so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again.

Paul was orbiting Jesus and here's how he sized it all up.

While he only had a few short years on earth, he knew he had endless ages to look forward to in heaven.

Service in this life would give him a unique opportunity to express gratitude to Jesus for grace received. Earthly service would give him the only chances he would ever have to, as Jesus advised, ***[Matthew 6:20] "store up treasure in heaven."***

These were opportunities he didn't want to pass up. So, he chose to make ongoing investments on earth, knowing that he would eventually get heaven.

Now, that was where Paul landed in the first century, which was a pretty unsettling time. Like 2020. Unsettling.

took off their own life preservers and strapped them onto others, saying, ***"I know Jesus, so I can die better than you can."***

⁸ See 2 Corinthians 11:23-29 for a catalogue of Paul's sufferings for Christ.

And it is just as true now as it ever was: *“To live...Christ!”* We’re in the middle of a global pandemic. It’s still the case: *“To live...Christ!”*

It may seem like a jarring combination of thoughts, but get this: We’re in a global pandemic, so, ***“Go, make disciples!”***

The church of Jesus was made for times like these. We who have nothing to fear (***“to die is gain”***) have no reason to retreat.

Now is the time to love boldly and to serve sacrificially as we lift up Jesus. Let’s be on the lookout for ways to serve people in Jesus’ Name in creative, out-of-the-box ways.

Let’s make the fullest use of the days we have to make our lives count for Him. Let’s give these years to helping others take next steps with Jesus. Knowing what’s in store for us after this life is over, let’s all be all in for Jesus, regardless of what the here-and-now brings.

In what remains today, Paul writes to help us handle the here-and-now, where we face headwinds that would blow us off course before we arrive home.

A Gospel Argument for Living as King Jesus’ Citizens (vv. 27-30)

Gospel Citizenship, 101

Conduct becoming a citizen of the Gospel

[27a] Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm...

The word that is translated ***“conduct”*** comes from the Greek word from which we get our English word “politics.”⁹

Paul was telling his Graeco-Roman audience in Philippi - and us - to take our marching orders from Jesus and His apostles and to submit to the set of policies we find in the New Testament.

So...

- ...be a peacemaker.
- ...don’t repay an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.
- ...don’t lust for what isn’t yours to enjoy.
- ...love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.
- ...pray and give in secret, without fanfare.
- ...practice trust in God when the world is in chaos.
- ...serve, encourage, and bear burdens for those God puts in your path.
- ...clothe yourself with humility.
- ...forgive as you have been forgiven.

That’s how you are to conduct yourself. That’s being politically correct - for Jesus.

Conduct yourself this way and you’ll stick out like a sore thumb. God will transform you into a uniquely crafted Jesus-follower as you march to the beat of a different Drummer.

The idea, too, is that you don’t march alone.

Fellow Citizens

[27b]...I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit; with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.

This is Paul giving us his vision of church, working as it was intended by God to work.

There’s going to be a lot more about the theme of “church” next Sunday when we turn to the second chapter of Philippians. So, I won’t say too much here.

But notice the focus on unity (***“one spirit”***) and mission (***“striving together”***).

Love flows from one person to another *and* service flows to the world outside. We bear each other’s burdens *and* join arms to share the love of Christ. We pray for each other *and* meet needs in Jesus’ Name.

Next Sunday will bring a focus on Jesus’ church and a call to order our church life on the example of Jesus’ life.

⁹ Greek: *politeuesthe*

We'll wrap up this morning, though, getting Paul's wisdom on one more part of conducting ourselves well for the Gospel of Christ.

When Citizenships Collide

[28] IN NO WAY ALARMED BY YOUR OPPONENTS - which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you,¹⁰ and that too, from God. [29] For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to SUFFER FOR HIS SAKE, [30] experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me.

Alarm-proof faith

Paul didn't say here who these "**opponents**" were who were disturbing the Philippians.

They may have been Gentiles - either Romans or Greeks. Or, they might have been Jews who opposed Christians for worshipping Jesus, a man who was put to death on a cross.

But, his instructions to them about how to deal with the opposition is eye-opening. "*Don't be alarmed.*"¹¹

That they were not to be alarmed by opposition means that, in a broken world, opposition for following Jesus is to be expected.

The Philippians may have thought that they wouldn't be opposed. We may think the same thing.

Paul corrects that thought. "*Don't be surprised if, when you take a stand united for Jesus or when you strive together for the Gospel, you are opposed.*"

¹⁰ Paul is not saying that suffering for Christ is the way to be saved. No one goes to heaven because of having suffered for Christ. But "salvation" in the sense of deliverance from a useless life, deliverance from a lukewarm life, deliverance into a meaningful, fruitful life is certainly in view.

¹¹ The Greek word we translate "alarmed" was a word used to describe horses that had been startled into a panic and were stampeding. The thought is of a wild-eyed, foaming-at-the-mouth frenzy.

Paul had the credibility to talk about this, since he and Silas had been the ones who had brought the Gospel to Philippi in the first place.

Opportunity costs (vv. 29-30)

The privilege of faith

[29] For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake...to believe in Him...

Not every place in Paul's day was as privileged as Philippi was. Not every city had heard about Jesus. Today, two thousand years later, there are lots of places where people still have not heard.

Just think of the amazing grace that's been poured out on you that you know the story. You have heard. You understand that faith alone in Christ alone saves.

Paul and Silas told the Philippians. Someone - parents, some friends, a Sunday School teacher - told you. Somebody went the extra mile to make sure you know. And knowing, you placed the treasure of your trust in the Lord Jesus Christ - and you are His. Forever.

We don't take for granted the privilege we have received of living in a place and at a time when we been granted the opportunity to believe in Jesus.

The Philippians had been granted the privilege of believing in Jesus BECAUSE Paul and Silas brought the good news to them.

Those two men gave the Philippians a priceless gift, and that priceless gift was given at great cost. Paul and Silas laid it all on the line to bring the gospel to Philippi.

Those reading this letter would have remembered the conflict they endured when they were in Philippi. Arrest. Beating. Jail time.

So, Paul now writes that just as surely as we and they have been granted the opportunity to believe and to receive the gifts of forgiven sin, eternal life and much, much more - so we have been granted another opportunity from God.

The privilege of suffering

[29] For to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake

I suspect that Paul is combating an idea common to the 1st AND the 21st centuries - that the mark of the blessed Christian, the mark of the obedient believer, is a trouble-free life.

He is clearly contradicting that idea. The truth is that the normal experience of the obedient disciple will, from time to time, include suffering, opposition, and even enemies.¹²

The opposition may vary in intensity, and in degree. It may come at us from different directions and it may show itself in highly individualized ways.

But, as we identify with Jesus, who was exposed to all the risks and wounds of a cruel world, we can expect opposition.

In writing what we read in verse 29, Paul has removed one of the most pernicious barriers keeping us from a worthy walk there is.

He has liberated us to freely evangelize and to stand firm and to be bold and courageous for Him. Did you catch it? Did you hear the barrier that was just knocked over?

It is the barrier of unrealistic and unbiblical expectations.

In this age, we are deceiving ourselves if we believe we can live an opposition-free life for Jesus. Paul points to himself, reminds the Philippians of their own history, and writes, *"No, you can't."*

Over the centuries that the church of Jesus has existed, its growth and progress has very often been matched by its suffering.

And where the suffering has come, it hasn't come because the Christians are combative. It's simply true that the gospel, presented as lovingly and as clearly as possible, will bring a response.

Those who see it as the good news it is will respond with faith and will be saved. Those who don't see that it is good news reject it. Opposition often follows.

If and when it comes, in whatever form it comes, don't be alarmed. Don't be surprised. Don't assume you've done something wrong. Opposition may well be the sign that you're doing it just right!

When opposition for lovingly living for Jesus comes, or when it appears that it might come, don't fall for the temptation to go dark and silent, to change directions, and stop openly talking about Jesus.

Lots of our brothers and sisters around the world are not allowing the threat or the reality of opposition to deter them from ***"striving for the faith of the Gospel."***

They are staying the course, ***"standing firm together"***, understanding that it has been granted to them, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.

If Paul had withheld his apostolic power and not exorcised that pesky demon in Philippi from that slave girl, he might have had a longer, more peaceful time there.

He would have avoided arrest and a beating and jail time. But if he had refused to give that slave girl the loving, liberating touch of Jesus, a jail keeper and his family wouldn't have heard the Gospel.

Today, you and I can choose to withhold the love of Christ by not sharing the Gospel of Christ. If we don't share it, we may succeed in avoiding opposition and rejection.

But, if we veer off course and choose the path of least resistance, others may not ever feel the touch of Jesus' loving power.

¹² I think it would be a great idea to develop a theology of enemies. We need to realize that some will become our enemies because of our faith in Jesus. And we need to then think carefully and biblically about how to redemptively love our enemies.

Conclusion:

Trusting in Jesus guarantees that the end of this life leads to eternal gain in the next - *"to die is gain."* Between now and then, let's enter into what Paul says, *"To live...Christ!"*

Life really is all about Jesus. And when we resolve to revolve our lives around Jesus, the results will be revolutionary.