

AIM

- To explain that everything in Paul’s life serves one aim – to “advance the gospel”. Nothing – not his circumstances, nor his reputation, nor his uncertain future – is allowed to interfere with that aim. In fact, all these things are used by God to fulfil that aim.

EXPLORE

- *What questions do you have over the Follow-Up from Session 1?*
- Read Philippians 1:9-11
 - *What does Paul pray for the Philippians Christians? (1) That their love for God and other people may grow. (2) That this love will be shaped by knowledge and depth of insight.*
 - *Why does he pray for these things (v. 10)? So that they would know how to live in a way that honors God. Notice the logical sequence: as our love grows, we are able to “discern what is best,” and thus be “pure and blameless.”*
 - *What does Paul hope will be the result of this (v. 11)? That they would be full of the fruit of righteousness (i.e., righteous fruit), pleasing to God in every way, so that God gets the glory and praise.*
 - *How might Paul’s prayer shape the way we pray for other Christians? We can use these verses as a basis for our prayers for ourselves and for our Christian friends throughout the week.*

LISTEN (DVD)

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21).

This is a newspaper report of a true story:

A car crashed into Gordon White’s living room last week – exactly a year after the same car, driven by the same driver, crashed into the same room. Eric Williams, 60, is believed to have suffered a blackout both times, leaving the road at the same spot in Cleckheaton, West Yorkshire. It took White nine weeks to clear up the mess last time, and a full year to redecorate. “I’ve only just finished getting the house how I want it,” he said. “If I’d known this would happen, I would have used cheaper wallpaper.”

If we know what is going to happen in the future, it changes the way we live in the present.

Paul is writing to the Philippians from prison. His circumstances look bad, and everything has been taken from him. There are people who call themselves Christians, but who are deliberately trying to get him into trouble and ruin his reputation. His future looks uncertain as he doesn’t know whether he is going to live or die.

And yet Paul rejoices. Why? Because everything in Paul’s life serves one aim – to “advance the gospel” – and nothing is allowed to interfere with that aim. It’s as if the things that most of us live for—comfort, career, cash, sex, status, security, fame, family, friendship, even life itself—are not the most important things to Paul. It’s as if he’s living for something much, much more satisfying—something that can’t die, or be damaged, or be taken away. The most important thing to him is Christ and helping other people hear about Jesus.

When someone is living this way—living simply and only to gain Jesus—it changes his perspective, because his only concern is that the gospel be advanced.

1. His circumstances are bad, but the gospel is advanced.

Many people who go through difficult times assume that God has abandoned them. Paul sees that God has not abandoned him, but has placed him where he is so that the gospel message may be advanced. What seems like a disaster is actually God at work, bringing the good news to others. Even though Paul is in prison, he makes use of his situation to advance the gospel.

Not only has Paul been able to talk about Christ to the palace guard (v 13), but his example has encouraged others to be more courageous in the way they talk about Jesus (v 14).

- *Add your own illustration here: share from your own experience how something that might seem tragic or painful has brought an opportunity to advance the gospel.*

Application: When somebody in an office, a school staff room, or on a college campus says something about Jesus, it encourages other Christians to say something as well. That was the effect that Paul's imprisonment had on other Christians.

Application: It would have been very easy for Paul to say: "I'll just wait until I get out of prison, then I'll be able to get on with my work for the Lord". But he doesn't do that. No matter what the circumstances, he is looking for opportunities to tell others about Jesus. It's very easy for us to think: "Well, I'll really be able to serve the Lord Jesus better when I've got the job right, when I've got my house sorted out, when my relationships are settled...". We don't wait for our lives to get just right. They never do. God will use you to advance the gospel, whatever circumstances you're in.

2. His reputation is attacked, but the gospel is advanced.

It's clear from verses 15-18 that Paul's imprisonment has provoked different reactions in the Christian community. Some understand that Paul has been put in prison "for the defence of the gospel" (v 16), but others see it as an opportunity to "stir up trouble" for him (v 17).

Verse 18 is important. Paul says: "What does it matter?" The gospel is being preached; Paul's reputation is secondary.

Application: Following Christ may have a negative impact on your reputation. Some people may dismiss you as being "religious" or "holier than thou" or "narrow minded" or "weak". Can you say with Paul: "What does it matter?" Is the gospel so important to you that your own reputation is unimportant?

3. His future is uncertain, but the gospel is advanced.

Paul doesn't know whether he is going to live or die. Paul hopes that through the Philippians' prayers and with the help of the Spirit (v 19) he will have enough courage (v 20) to exalt Christ, whether he lives or dies.

Verse 21 sums up Paul's joyful attitude regarding the future: "'to live is Christ'—if I live, I get to continue treasuring Jesus in knowing him and serving him; and 'to die is gain'—if I die, I will be with Jesus." If living for Christ is what gives you most joy—not fitness or food or family or fun or physical relationships or financial solvency or freedom from prison—then nothing can take that joy away from you. The worst-case scenario—death—is actually a best-case scenario, because it actually brings you closer to Him. So whatever happens, Jesus is the object, motive, inspiration and goal of all that Paul does.

Application: As Christians we need not fear death. For us, like Paul, death is "gain": we will be with Christ for eternity in the new heaven and the new earth.

Application: As Christians we need not fear life. Whatever happens to us, God is in control and we should make the most of the time we have to advance the gospel.

Application: As Christians we often don't feel like Paul expresses here. We often think: "For me to live is finding the perfect partner or career, and to die is losing them": "for me to live is owning the dream home, and to die is trading it all in for a small wooden box"; "for me to live is enjoying good food, and to die is becoming good food for worms"; etc. There is no way of living that death will not take away and turn to nothing, except one. There is one way to live that death cannot touch, and that is to live for Christ; death will only succeed in giving you more of Jesus.

Conclusion

How would you finish Paul's sentence: "For me to live is ..." What? For Paul it is Christ. What is it for us?

DISCUSS

- *Was there something in particular that stood out or struck you from the DVD?*
- *Paul's greatest ambition was for the gospel to spread. What is your greatest ambition? (Be honest!)*
- *What pressure did Paul face that may have led him to put his own desires first (cf. Philippians 1:13, 15-17, 23)? What was his attitude to these pressures and why?*
- *How might our circumstances, reputation, or future plans affect our desire to tell others about Christ?*
- *How would you put Paul's motto in verse 21 (i.e., "To live is Christ and to die is gain") into your own words?*
- *How would your friends or colleagues finish this sentence: "For me to live is..."?*
- *How would you finish this sentence: "For me to live is..."?*

FOLLOW-UP

See the document entitled "Session 2 Follow-Up." Please note that these follow-up questions differ from the ones in the *Discipleship Explored Handbook*.