

## **Philippians 1:21 For to me, living means living for Christ**

### **Introduction**

If you had to write one sentence only to state what mattered most to you; what motivated you for living and what you were most passionate about in life –what would you say? Many people would find a paragraph easier to write than a phrase or a sentence but honing it down to one sentence is the task in hand. Give it a moment or two to sink in at the start of another New Year. Our verse for the year in the New Living Version is a short one but it is an incredible statement of what motivated the greatest Christian missionary to the non-Jewish world in the first century AD. Paul wrote in Philippians 1:21: *For to me, living means living for Christ and dying is even better.* This letter was not written from the comfort of a nice armchair with a beautiful view on a sunny evening in the Mediterranean, instead it was probably dictated to a Christian scribe who could write for Paul, whose arms were chained to a Roman soldier or more probably to one on either side, who were on guard duty for their work shift with this political prisoner sent from the province of Syria (which included modern-day Israel, the Palestinian territories together with the western part of Jordan). The apostle is in prison for his faith but this is problematic territory for the Romans who were thoroughly confused as to how to treat someone who was a Roman citizen and loyal to the Government on the one hand, but who was practising a form of a legal faith (Judaism) that was not accepted by its official religious leaders. Almost certainly Paul would be released the first time he was imprisoned in Rome, but he was later executed the second time a few years later when the Emperor Nero, by then suffering from serious mental health issues, was executing as many Christians as his forces could conveniently arrest in the capital city of the Empire between 64 and 68AD, at which time Nero committed suicide. After thirty years of steady growth throughout the Roman Empire the 60s AD were extremely difficult for the young Christian Church. However, despite all the killings its growth continued, even if for a time it was underrepresented in the capital city. This is the backdrop to Paul's words in his letter to the Church in the Roman colony of Philippi in Greece. *For to me, living means living for Christ and dying is even better.* The Roman army like Islamic State in Iraq and Syria ruled by terror. The majority of subjects in occupied countries simply wanted to live and so put up with whatever rules the occupying power had imposed. However, the Christians were not afraid to die and what is more had different priorities to the majority population of the empire. Significant numbers of them were prepared to say with Paul that *For to me, living means living for Christ and dying is even better.* What would your personal mission statement say? Our Church statement is: Building a Christ centred church: Looking to Christ –growing in Christ – sharing Christ. Can each of us identify with this declaration of our convictions as we start 2015?

### 1. **It means something personal** to me

(a)**The context of his claim** Anyone can make theoretical claims about their convictions but it is only when they are tested and especially when put under severe pressure that we find out whether we truly hold to them or not. Here it is the apostle's testimony based on what he has experienced that is the basis for this extraordinary statement. It is the highpoint of his reflection on a most difficult set of circumstances. He has been seeking to contextualise what he has gone through in relation to its impact on the Christian house-based church or churches in the vicinity of Rome. Philippians 1:12 states: *Now I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.* Personally he has been disadvantaged by the loss of his liberty and although he doesn't know it he actually has

very little free time left before his execution in Rome. However, Paul's mindset is more focussed on what is happening to the Christian Church as a whole rather than any hardships which he may personally have had to endure. In II Corinthians 11:23b-28, written late 55 or early 56AD, he gives a quick summary of the kind of pressures he has endured year after year as a 'free' man. *I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.*<sup>24</sup> *Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.*<sup>25</sup> *Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was pelted with stones, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,*<sup>26</sup> *I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my fellow Jews, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false believers.*<sup>27</sup> *I have laboured and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked.*<sup>28</sup> *Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.* The letter from prison in Rome to the Philippians was dated probably between 60 and 62AD, only four or five years later. It is in this context that Paul writes: *For to me, living means living for Christ and dying is even better.* It was, therefore, no theoretical declaration of his convictions in a Western democratic state, rather it was in the midst of oppression and deliberate physical persecution that was designed to demoralise and ultimately to destroy the newly formed Christian congregations in the first century AD. At the start of this New Year what do Paul's words mean to you and to me? Do we share his passion for the cause of Christ? Have we come to faith in Christ or is that the step you need to take at this time? Are you here as a Christian but your enthusiasm and passion for Christian service has been dimmed in recent years? If so this is the ideal time to ask for prayer for a fresh empowering of the Holy Spirit to reinvigorate you in His service.

(b) **Illustrating his claim** This passion is not only for Paul but for each and every believer in each and every generation. In the eighteenth century in Saxony, Germany, lived a young Lutheran nobleman, who encountered Jesus Christ in a way that not only transformed his life but led through an extraordinary ministry amongst Moravian Christian refugees for whom he cared on his estates and through whom the Moravian missionary movement was formed that took the Gospel to many countries in the eighteenth century, decades before William Carey and the formation of the Baptist Missionary Society. What motivated Count Zinzendorf to undertake ventures that took over his life? He declared: 'For me living is Christ'. In effect nothing matters more to me than my faith in Him and my desire to give Him my very best in daily life, in my priorities and in all that I am and seek to do. Years earlier as a young man Zinzendorf had seen a picture of Jesus on the cross with a caption underneath it that said something like this: 'All this I have done for you –what are you doing for me?' If that question was being addressed directly to you today –what answer would you give? Would it be one that you were comfortable with? Are there changes needed in your life so that you could live in the way that you believe Jesus would have live today? Putting Jesus first and living for Him personally does have a cost in terms of our time and gifts and finances; it may also affect career choices or marriage partner or social habits. To say that 'Jesus is Lord' of every area of my life means something profoundly special; you could never be the same person again after grasping that truth. The message of the Gospel is intensely personal as no-one else can be converted for you; no-one else can make those big choices for you. Each step of Christian discipleship from believers' baptism to a commitment to church membership or to a new form of Christian service is something that no-one else can do for you. It is between you and Jesus. What is the Lord saying to you **personally** at the start of this New Year? It is so easy to be incredibly generous with the Gospel and think about how it applies to someone else sitting near you, but each of us has to make a personal response to trust in Jesus for salvation; a personal response to commit to Christian service; and a personal response to

dedicate our lives to prioritise living for Jesus. Can you say these words of Paul, with Paul, and mean them: *For to me, living means living for Christ...?*

## 2. It means something practical living

(a) **Overcoming Obstacles** Sometimes people profess allegiance to a cause but there is little evidence to show for their claims. Each football team has different levels of support from the dedicated few who travel to all the games; a greater number who attend home fixtures; a larger number who watch their games on television and a significance number of others who notionally support them ahead of any other team looking out for their results most weeks. We are all well aware that in every area of life and workplace there are different levels of commitment on display by the people associated with that activity or workplace. (i) **By personal example** Here it is very clear that Paul is modelling a way of life that is centred on His relationship with and service for Jesus Christ. In fact his dedication has been inspirational for other Christians in Rome. In Philippians 1:13-14 it states: *As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. <sup>14</sup> And because of my chains, most of the brothers and sisters have become confident in the Lord and dare all the more to proclaim the gospel **without fear**.* What amazing words these are. All of us have our concerns about how we witness whether our words are adequate, appropriate or even whether we will have the courage to say anything at all when opportunities arise. Yet Paul's boldness under challenging circumstances had so encouraged his fellow believers that they had been inspired to more effective levels of witnessing through his example. The apostle is honest enough to admit that it was not all good news from Rome. The Christian community in the city did have its tensions and times of disunity and in fact there were Christians who didn't agree with some of Paul's views or practices and possibly were glad he was not in their congregation (see Philippians 1:15-18a: *It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. <sup>16</sup> The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defence of the gospel. <sup>17</sup> The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains. <sup>18</sup> But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached.*) The New Testament is very open and honest about life in the Early Church; about their successes and their failures; their unity and their times of disagreements. The Church at Philippi was by all accounts a happy and united body one with whom the apostle had strong links. However, even that cause had its moments. (ii) **By collective resolve** Later in this letter Paul will ask his friend loyal Syzygus to assist two experienced Christian ladies to resolve their differences. Philippians 4:2-3: *I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. <sup>3</sup> Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.* We know nothing of the problem but if Christians in another city across the Roman Empire knew they were not getting on then it clearly was a significant problem. For whatever reason Euodia and Syntyche had forgotten the main thing that ought to have been central to their thinking; what was it they ought to have remembered? Paul's words here in Philippians 1:21: *For to me, living means living for Christ.* When our priorities are set in order we are then able to assess the context in which we are working and invest our time and other resources in a way that reflects our priorities both individually and as a church.

(b) **Making spiritual investments** (Philippians 1:18b-20) *And because of this I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, <sup>19</sup> for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. <sup>20</sup> I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.* There are always forms of ministry that each one

of us cannot do. However, it does God's people no good at all to dwell on such things as our heavenly Father expects us instead to focus on what we can do for Him and on what He has called us to do. There are countless examples of Christians who accomplished far more for the Lord than their fellow Christians thought was possible in both home service and overseas mission. The majority of the China Inland Mission workers who served as pioneer missionaries amongst the vast numbers of Chinese who had never heard the Gospel in their native land would have been rejected as unqualified by existing Christian agencies working in that country. We have to be honest and say that some were overwhelmed by the contextual challenges and did not last very long in the work, but far more of them were effective servants of Jesus Christ. The two provinces of China in which they focussed are the most strongly Christian areas of China today. Gladys Aylward, who served in the last century in the same country was another example of someone turned down as unsuitable, but God's call enabled her to accomplish a specific work for Him in that land. **How did Paul believe that the ordinary Christians of his day through their work and witness for Jesus could accomplish their work for Him?** Philippians 1:19 gives the answer: *<sup>19</sup>for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ...* Are these resources open to us as well in 2015? Yes they are! In 2013-2014 because we were faced with some major challenges, both within the ranks of the Deacons and as a church we established additional times for prayer. Did God meet our needs last year with respect to the big issues we were facing? Yes! Did He through His people provide the financial resources to fund the work to which He has called us? Yes He has. Have we accomplished all that we need to do in St Vincent Street or in Panmurefield? No! We need to pray just as earnestly because we are involved in a spiritual battle that is won primarily in the spiritual battlefield before it is visibly played out in the physical realms as we go forward in faith with Him. Every Christian and every church says that earnest intercessory prayer is an essential aspect of God's work – the question is for us this year will we be as serious about it in seeking to make advances for God's kingdom in the mission-field to which He has called us? The second resource Paul highlights is given in the same verse: *God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ...* It is not simply God's people giving every ounce of effort and energy in His service that will make the difference. We do need to work hard and offer dedicated service for the Lord, but the honest reality is that neither you nor I can convert a single person. However, if we are available to the Holy Spirit then what we might accomplish is far greater than we might even be praying for or expecting to happen. Remember Paul's amazing words of prayer for the Christians in Ephesus in Ephesians 3:20: *Now to Him who is able to do **immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine**, according to His power that is at work within us, <sup>21</sup>to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever!* If you can quantify what that means then I am seriously impressed! However, it is what Paul was praying for the members of that congregation because it was in the light of *His power that is at work within us* (Ephesians 3:20b). Do you need to seek a fresh empowering of the Holy Spirit at the start of this New Year or a renewed confidence in God that He can work in and through you in extraordinary ways in the coming year? Paul, in prison and facing only a short period of further work and liberty before he was later executed by Nero, has an unshakable confidence in the God whom He serves; who has stood by Him and strengthened him through all the astonishing number of trials he has experienced. In I Corinthians 11:1 he wrote: *Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.* Our faith is not a matter of theory; nor is it merely assent to an abstract series of beliefs – it includes an acceptance of foundational doctrinal convictions, but it is a way of life centred on Jesus Christ and empowered by the Holy Spirit. Have you set out on this journey of faith? Or do you need to begin the year by taking that step today? As a Christian how are you walking on the pathway of faith? Do you need to take time

today to renew afresh your commitment to walk as a Christian disciple in the coming year? There are members of the prayer team on duty today who as usual will be happy to pray with you after this service. May we start the New Year on the right footing with the Lord at the centre of our lives.

### 3. It means something possible for Christ

(a) The equal desirability of life and death (Philippians 1:21-23) <sup>21</sup> *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.* <sup>22</sup> *If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!* <sup>23</sup> *I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far;* In our relatively comfortable lives in Broughty Ferry we struggle to identify with Paul's words here –if we are honest. Unless we are extremely old or seriously nearing the end due to a major health condition we are likely to have an overwhelming preference for life rather than death. Yet in a world where many Christians live with a realistic possibility of serious discrimination, imprisonment, torture or death for themselves or a family member how they might view life might be very different to us. Yet although Paul had faced some very serious trials and pressures, had he chosen a different way of life then he might have had a relatively comfortable life as a devout Jew in Turkey or Israel. However, his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus changed everything. In that city after the encounter with Jesus, a church leader Ananias was called by Jesus to go and pray with Saul and in effect commission him for his new missionary calling. Ananias was convinced the Lord had made a mistake as this man was one of the most fanatical opponents of the followers of Jesus. <sup>15</sup> *But the Lord said to Ananias, 'Go! This man is My chosen instrument to proclaim My name to the Gentiles and their kings and to the people of Israel.* <sup>16</sup> *I will show him how much he must suffer for My name'* (Acts 9:15-16). More than twenty-five years later with an exemplary record of missionary service across the Roman Empire Paul has reached the capital city from which this letter has been written. He has lived out what he is commending to his readers in Greece. His words in each generation come across as a challenge to us. Am I truly open to God and willing to be wholly available to Him? Will I acknowledge His lordship over my personal affairs; my family, my career or work, my social life –everything? To say 'yes' and mean it is to take a radical step that many Christians took in the Roman world and this meant that the growing Church outlasted the empire which expired a few centuries later. God You are sovereign please direct my life in whatever way You choose; help me to live in a way that enables me to be the best I can be for You in this coming year. Please direct my path and correct it if I am heading in the wrong direction. Most of all if I have not truly placed my life into Your hands help me to do so today.

(b) The reason why life had to be embraced (Philippians 1:24-26)

<sup>24</sup> *but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.* <sup>25</sup> *Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith,* <sup>26</sup> *so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.* However, Paul was consistently pro-life and entrusted his life into God's hands. While God grants me the gift of life I will embrace it because there must be things I can do for the benefit of other people by remaining alive. What is more, he declared: *I can do all this through Him who gives me strength.* You know what circumstance you are currently going through; what pressures you may be facing; what trails may be coming your way in the coming months. Or even what tests of your faith might arise. Can you declare this same conviction as Paul that *I can do all this through Him who gives me strength?* (Philippians 4:13) If you share with Paul his core conviction that *living means living for Christ* then it is entirely possible through the equipping and enabling power of the Holy Spirit. Paul recognised that God puts His people into church families so that we work together to build His Church and extend His kingdom in the locality

in which He has placed us. Paul had that unshakeable conviction that Jesus was building His Church and the gates of hell –or anything else for that matter- could not stand against it. Paul had endured some of the hardest trials possibly having been shunned by some of his extremely orthodox Jewish family; at different times in his work he was abandoned by colleagues who found the going too tough, and so much more. Throughout it all he retained the conviction that what God had promised He would deliver on, even if he did not expect to see it in the short-term. In 1812 Adoniram Judson (1788-1850) and his wife Ann (d. 1826) became the first long-term career Christian missionaries in Burma. Fourteen years later his beloved and devoted wife Ann and their children are all dead and buried in that inhospitable land. He had suffered persecution and imprisonment with the only certainty of more to come if he continued with his work. A handful of people had professed faith but it was incredibly slow progress. Was he tempted to throw in the towel and go back to America? He wrote these words: ‘If I had not felt certain that every additional trial was ordered by infinite love and mercy, I could not have survived my accumulated sufferings!’ For what was Judson praying at that time? He ‘prayed that he might live to translate the entire Bible into the native language; and to preside over a native church of at least one hundred members.’ (Paul Rees, *The Adequate Man: Studies in Philipians*, p. 30.) Judson and his three wives (the first two died in Burma) had an unshakable conviction of their calling to proclaim Jesus Christ in the mission-field of Burma –whatever the cost. How could they do so? For the same reason that Paul could continue his work and I trust is the same reason why we will continue faithfully to carry out our calling here in Broughty Ferry throughout this coming year. It is for this reason alone as Paul wrote in Philipians 1:21: *For to me, living means living for Christ, Amen.*