

STUDY GUIDE

LETTERS FROM PRISON: PHILIPPIANS (Week 3)

A MESSAGE SERIES AT NEW CITY CHURCH

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Philippians 1:12-22

12 Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, 13 so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, 14 and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear. Yes, and I will rejoice, 19 for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, 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. 21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 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. (NASB)

Background

Many commentators call this letter the “Epistle of Joy.” Since we know that Paul was locked in a prison cell when he wrote this letter, it is safe to say that joy is NOT related to circumstances. Joy is a gift from God to those who believe in Jesus. Joy is produced by the Spirit in people who, focused on eternal purposes, obey the word of God in the midst of trials. (See [Galatians 5:22](#) for more on the “fruit of the spirit.”)

What is Life?

There are many ideas about exactly what life is. Whether scientific or philosophical, people have asked the question, “what is life?” since time began.

David Deamer, a University of California - Santa Cruz biochemistry professor, is one of the leading experts trying to create life. Deamer says, “We’re all sort of thinking that the next origin of life will be in somebody’s lab.” But when asked what life is, and he responds by saying it’s “*best to describe it, not define it.*” Rene Descartes famously stated, “I think. Therefore, I am.”

These descriptions, or definitions, while interesting, do not do us much good when trying to make sense of the day-to-day. We need a more concrete answer and we will get to that. But, before we go further, let’s address a couple of foundational questions.

Questions for Reflection

1. Have you ever attempted to define life? More specifically, have you defined YOUR life? Take a few minutes to do so right now.

Life’s Difficulty.

12 Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances...

In this passage of the Bible Paul is teaching us that sometimes life just does not make sense. Paul was perhaps the greatest evangelist and church planter of all time yet he ends up in

prison chained to a Roman guard. It would seem that God would keep Paul away from difficulty like this. But, sometimes difficult times come and they don't make sense to us. What's even more remarkable is that these events don't even appear to be in concert with God's mission and movement in the world.

Most people understand that life can be difficult, even when it does not seem like it should be. Unforeseen events can come out of nowhere and reek havoc on our lives.

Questions for Reflection

2. Describe a difficult time in your life. Do not edit it. Just be honest about a time of difficulty that you have experienced. Also, do not try to explain the outcome yet. We will get to that soon.
3. Have you ever been mad at God for allowing something "bad" to happen in your life? Describe that time.

The Alchemy of Life

In Our Circumstances

In the middle ages, [Alchemists](#) were thought to possess a magic solvent that could turn base metals, typically lead, to gold. Alchemy was the process. While no one was ever found to possess such a potion, Paul claims that God is the great alchemist.

12 Now I want you to know, brethren, that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, 13 so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well known throughout the whole praetorian guard and to everyone else, 14 and that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord

because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear.

Paul states clearly that what the Philippians' need to understand is that alchemy is God's business, that God turns "base (or useless) circumstances to gold." This definitely was not how Paul would have drawn up the plans for his church planting mission, but Paul is faithful in his service and as a result sees the alchemy of life. For another great example of God, the Alchemist, see the story of Joseph in [Genesis 39-45](#).

In Our Lives

Yes, and I will rejoice, 19 for I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ,

The Alchemy of life does not just stop at our circumstance, but this passage teaches us that God uses difficulty to turn **us** to gold! The word here for "deliverance" is *soteria*, which is most accurately translated as "salvation." Paul is NOT saying that he will be set free in a physical sense (we know this because he says that he might actually die) but Paul IS saying that this difficulty is in fact *saving* him! Paul understands that God uses difficult times to draw us closer to Him and to "save us from" a life lived without Him.

Questions for Reflection

4. Have you ever witnessed God turn a bad situation into something good?
5. Do you think difficulties in life have actually helped "save" you? Explain.

The Definition of Life

While there may be times where we understand the difficulty in life and even the alchemy of life, we will not have the proper perspective until we have the proper definition of life.

Paul says that for him: “*to live is Christ.*” v. 21. Notice how this verse is constructed. Paul says, in verses 19 and 20, that he knows this will turn out for my good FOR, or BECAUSE, to me “to live is Christ.” But for Paul’s proper definition of life, he would not be able to make sense of the difficult times he is experiencing.

Some Alternative Definitions

A life can be defined by Christ or it can be defined by many other things. For instance, we may define our lives in these ways:

- For me to live is pleasure. This is what is known as the [Epicurean](#) approach.
- For me to live is honor. We might call these the “stoics.”
- For me to live is to be moral. A great literary example of this definition is [Javert](#) from Les Miserables.
- For me to live is my job.
- For me to live is to be married.
- For me to live is to have successful children.

All of these definitions are common today but the thing about these definitions is this: these things can all be taken away. We can lose our jobs, our money, our spouse and even our children. But, we cannot lose Christ. (see John 3:16, John 4:14, John 10:28, 2 Tim 2:19, 1 Peter 1:4-5)

Questions for Reflection

6. Have you ever had your “definition of life” removed from you? If so, how did you respond?
7. Can you say “for me, to live is Christ” with confidence? What can you do this week to begin to understand what it means to have Christ define your life?