

Philippians 1:12-26, What is the purpose of life?

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 22 September 2024

Preacher: Steve Palframan

[0 : 00] I've been preaching through the book of Philippians for a long time, not like literally now, but what I mean is that over the years, I've preached through Philippians a lot. And I don't think I've ever quite satisfied myself with the sermons that I've preached on Philippians.

And I am sure that this evening is going to be another one of those cases. But I want us to try and work through verses 18 to 26 of chapter one. And instead of working through verse by verse, what I want to try and do is give you a picture of what it's all about and then pull out a couple of ways that Paul talks about that.

And then we'll think about the applications together. The book is so dense. Every sentence carries so much weight that it's almost impossible for us to fully exhaust it.

So let me read to you from Philippians chapter one. I'm going to read from verse 12 down to verse 26. Now, I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has actually served to advance the gospel.

As a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I'm in chains for Christ. 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.

[1 : 18] It is true that some preach Christ out of envy and rivalry, but others out of goodwill. The latter do so out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel.

The former preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I'm in chains. But what does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached.

And because of this, I rejoice. Yes, and I will continue to rejoice. For I know that through your prayers and God's provision, the spirit of Jesus Christ, of the spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.

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.

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose?

[2 : 30] I don't know. I'm torn between the two. I desire to depart, to be with Christ, which is better by far, but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.

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. So through my being with you, again, your boasting in Christ will abound on account of me.

I want to start off this evening with a simple but profound question. What is the purpose of life?

What is the purpose of life? If I was to ask you that, what would you say? Maybe you don't like questions like that. We've had my nephew staying with us for a little bit and he loves questions like this.

In fact, he would rather you talked about that than talked about anything else. He loves thinking deeply and so we end up with really deep conversations around the dinner table. But perhaps you're thinking, oh goodness, Steve, please, it's, you know, what is it, 6.50 on a Sunday evening.

[3 : 32] Please don't ask me a complicated philosophy question. But run with me for a moment. What is the purpose of life? What is the purpose of life? I don't think actually it's that complicated as a Christian and it's here in our passage.

So Paul says that for the Christian, there is a great overarching purpose in our life that's unaffected by your age. It's unaffected by the stage of life that you're in. The purpose of your life is to make Jesus look great.

Make Jesus look great. That is the purpose of your life. Or you might want to put it in more religious sounding words. The purpose of your life is to glorify him. Glorifying God or glorifying Christ is literally going public on his greatness.

It is making him look great. Of course, I don't mean that we are making Jesus look better than he really is. What we're doing by making Jesus look great is literally exposing his greatness for others to see.

That's what I mean by making him look great. It's like, look at how great and amazing Jesus is. Pointing to it, showing it off. Now, before we go any further, let me try and prove that to you from this passage.

[4 : 43] Let me start with the verses that we've read and then I'll move on from there to other bits of Philippians and to a couple of other passages. So he says in verse 20, doesn't he? That Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.

Literally here, Paul's physical life makes Jesus look mega, look exalted. Even when his body dies.

The point he expands in verse 21 when he says, for me to live is Christ and to die is gain. Which is probably the most famous verse in the section. It means that Christ living for him, being with him, pointing to him is life for Paul and also death.

It's there again in verse 26, although he's not talking about himself here, but about the Philippians. When he says that through his ministry, the Philippian church will be able to boast about Jesus. So that through my being with you again, your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

Your making Jesus look great, your glorifying of Jesus Christ, your boasting in Jesus Christ will abound. It will not wither or die down. It will grow and expand and abound more and more on account of what Paul has said to them.

[5 : 59] You jump ahead to chapter 2 verse 21. You'll see that Paul is sending Timothy to them because Timothy is an outstanding member of his ministry team. Why is Timothy an outstanding member of his ministry team?

Well, chapter 2 verse 21, where everyone else looks out for their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. But Timothy is mostly interested in Jesus Christ.

Point being, looking to the interests of Jesus Christ, making Jesus look great, glorifying Jesus is the proper way to live. In chapter 3 verse 7, he says that he considers everything a loss compared to Christ.

Christ is his greatest treasure for whose sake he considers everything else rubbish. Chapter 3 verse 7. But whatever were gains to me, I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

Christ is my greatest treasure. What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus, my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage that I may gain Christ.

[7 : 04] Now, we can say a little more here because it's that making Jesus look great is the central obsession of Paul's life. Because Paul is persuaded that making Jesus look great, the glorification of Jesus is the obsession of history itself.

So if you look at chapter 2 verse 9, you see there that Jesus is going to be given a name that is above every name. Or is given a name that is above every name. And history is working towards a day when we're told in verse 10 and 11 that every knee will bow and every tongue confess that he is Jesus Christ the Lord.

And therefore, verse 9, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name. That at the name of Jesus, every knee should bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

And every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. In other words, he says history is flowing inevitably towards this point where everybody in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

Everyone alive and dead will acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. Everyone saying Jesus is great. It's the same as it was in Ephesians chapter 1 verse 10 that we read together earlier.

[8 : 16] When history is fulfilled and everything is then put under Christ, he made known to us the mystery of his will according to his good pleasure, which he purposed in Christ to be put in effect when the times reach their fulfillment to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ.

Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ exalted, glorified, made to look great. 1 Corinthians 15, 24 is the same idea. Then the end will come when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father after he has destroyed all dominion, authority and power.

But he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death, for he has put everything under his feet. History is the putting everything under the rule and the reign of the Lord Jesus Christ, destroying every other claim of dominion and authority and power, including death itself, submitting to Christ who is all in all, the King of kings and the Lord of lords.

History is working towards this great point when Jesus is revealed as King of kings and Lord of lords. And Paul says our lives now find their purpose in acknowledging that great reality.

Think about it like this. I'm not sure that this illustration quite works. You can tell me afterwards or just butt in if you like. Imagine a great river working its way towards a waterfall.

[9 : 38] The waterfall is one of those great majestic waterfalls that everybody likes to take a picture of. It's glorious and incredible. Everyone likes to have a selfie in front of it and that sort of thing.

And so you could say that the purpose of the river is to make the waterfall look great. So it flows over the waterfall and makes the waterfall look great.

And then you can say in turn, can't you, that it's not just the river as a whole, but each individual water droplet in the river finds its purpose in falling over the waterfall and making the waterfall look great.

I know that the illustration breaks down a number of different points. But anyway, think about it like that. History, if you like, is this great river. You and I are just simply water droplets. And the great culmination of history is the exaltation of Jesus Christ as King of kings and Lord of lords over God's glorious kingdom and his defeated enemies in judgment and hell.

So there are people that no one can number gathered by his death on the cross in their place, dwelling with him as their bridegroom for all eternity in a world transformed by his power. This is the end to which history is working, where everyone will say and confess that Jesus is Lord, even as a cry of anguish.

[11 : 00] And so history is heading here. And the purpose of our lives is to anticipate that day, to live today in the light of the fact that there is a day coming when we'll be over the waterfall and making Jesus look great and joining in with all of history and everything and everyone acknowledging that Jesus Christ is Lord.

Now, I know that the river and the waterfall illustration didn't work very well, but let me push it just a little bit harder if I can. Let me ask you, how can you be a happy water droplet in the river?

It's a dumb question, isn't it? But the other way of asking it is, you know, that a happy water droplet is one that is excited about the waterfall, right? Because they are anticipating, I get to be part of this great and glorious display called a waterfall.

Look at that, I'm going inexorably towards this waterfall. What a great thing. One who is looking forward to it, talking about it, jumping up and down in excitement. And that's it here in this passage. So the purpose of Paul's life is to make Jesus look great in anticipation of this day when Jesus will be known and revealed as great.

And he finds his joy in that. Okay? So the center of the passage, if you wanted to look at the structure of the passage, it swings around the end of verse 18.

[12 : 18] And he says, yes, and I will continue to rejoice. Everything before that is talking about his present circumstances, how he's currently in prison. He is working to advance the gospel by sharing it with the palace guard.

Other people are preaching, some for bad motives, some for good. And everything after that is about what he hopes might happen afterwards, after he's released and trying to work out whether it's better that he lives or dies.

And right at the center of the passage, the hinge, if you like, on which it swings is this, yes, and I will continue to rejoice. In other words, what Paul is saying is, in my present circumstances, in whatever my future circumstances might be, my purpose is to make Jesus look great.

And that makes me happy, he says. That brings me joy. The Westminster Catechism puts it like this, doesn't it? What is the chief end of man to glorify God and enjoy him forever?

And that's exactly what Paul is doing here in Philippians chapter 1. And that's what stands behind the passage. Let me just have a drink. Cold coffee is good for a bath, isn't it?

[13 : 28] They charge you extra for cold coffee at Starbucks, so it's got to be a good thing. Right. So this is what stands behind the passage, right?

The central purpose in Paul's life, make Jesus look great and find his joy in doing so. Now let me show you two things which are about how that works out in practice, and then we can think about the applications for us today.

Okay. Okay. Firstly, notice, and I've written these on your handouts that you can scribble on this. The gospel made known makes Jesus look great.

Okay, so it's all very well saying the purpose of life is to make Jesus look great. Well, how does one go about making Jesus look great? And Paul says, well, the gospel, the message of the gospel made known, is what makes Jesus look great to the world.

It's an obvious point, isn't it? It's the good news of what Jesus Christ has done that exposes his greatness. And notice in the passage that that function is almost automatic.

[14 : 33] It's almost that it is almost impossible to explain the gospel without making Jesus look great. You cannot explain the gospel truly without making Jesus look great.

So notice that although Paul is in prison, still the gospel is being declared, so Jesus is being exalted. So firstly, verse 14, the church members in Rome, where Paul is writing from, have become more confident in proclaiming the gospel because of Paul's chains.

So he considers that a win, right? This is a win because I'm in chains and people are growing in confidence and sharing the gospel. Preaching the gospel makes Jesus look great. And that's making me joyful.

This is the great purpose of life. And it's true, verse 15, even when those who are preaching the gospel are doing so in the hope of getting ahead of Paul while he's in prison.

So he acknowledges, doesn't he, in verse 15 and following, that some people are not preaching out of noble reasons. They're trying to make a name for themselves. They're trying to get ahead. They're trying to make trouble for Paul.

[15 : 32] Well, what does he say in verse 18? What does it matter? The important thing is that in every way, whether from false motives or true, Christ is preached. And because of this, I rejoice. He's obsessed with the preaching of the gospel because the preaching of the gospel is the thing that makes Christ look great and brings him great joy.

So he rejoices in the preaching of the gospel, even though it's been done to try and stab him in the back. Jesus being made to look great is making him happy. Now, of course, it's worth pointing out that these preachers must be sharing the gospel truthfully.

Right. So in other parts of the New Testament, Paul condemns people who change the gospel, even in very small and subtle ways. And so he's not that they must be preaching the gospel truly.

But actually, they're assuming, aren't they, that they can preach the gospel to make themselves look great. But there's sort of an irony here, isn't there, that Paul actually goes, no, they're trying to make them, they're trying to get themselves ahead by preaching the gospel.

But the gospel actually truthfully preached exalts Christ and not them. And I'm rejoicing that it exalts Christ and not them. It's bad for them to do it for false motives, isn't it? But it is good for Christ's glory because he's exalted in the message of the gospel.

[16 : 47] Now, let me just try and put this together in a sentence for us, if I can. I'll put it in the negative to try and make it more striking for us. I think what Paul is saying here, in effect, is something like this. You cannot keep quiet about Jesus and be a happy Christian.

You cannot keep quiet about Jesus and be a happy Christian. Because the purpose of our lives as Christians is to make Jesus look great. And we cannot make Jesus look great without the gospel.

And the gospel is a message that needs to be heard. We can't make Jesus look great without speaking about the gospel. And we cannot be a happy Christian without sharing the good news of Jesus Christ.

Now, that doesn't mean that we all have to do this in the same way. Does it? We're not all Billy Graham or Roger Carswell. We're not all street evangelists. We're not all going to go door to door. But the truth is, if you're not sharing Christ in the way that the Lord has made you, whether that's a quiet invitation to church or the sharing of your testimony with a colleague at work or the conversation after church with a visitor or whatever it is, if you're not doing that, you are robbing yourself of joy.

Because you were made to make Jesus look great. And Jesus looks great when the gospel is heard. So if you want to maximize that joy, not only do you need to speak about Jesus yourself, but you also need to delight in others speaking about him too, even if they're not doing it in quite the way you would.

[18 : 14] Do you know, I think this applies corporately, doesn't it? Miserable churches are churches that think that only they preach the gospel rightly. Right. There are lots of gospel churches in London that do things in slightly different ways to we would.

But they're preaching the gospel faithfully. And if we can pray for them and rejoice in the work that the Lord is doing in them, it will make us happy. Because the purpose of our lives is to make Jesus look great.

Jesus looks great when the gospel is heard. And that is what brings us joy. Secondly, though, the gospel is made known. So the gospel made known makes Jesus look great.

Whether it be believers or unbelievers listening. Okay. Whether it be believers or unbelievers listening. I want you to notice here that the gospel doesn't only make Jesus look great as it's heard by unbelievers.

In other words, he's not just talking about evangelism that makes Jesus look great. He is talking about evangelism, isn't he? That's what he's talking about in verse 13 when he talks about the gospel becoming clear throughout the whole palace guard.

[19 : 16] Seems as if he has been chained to different guards on some kind of rotation as they swap through their work duty rotor. And so that because of the rotation, he has explained the gospel to the whole palace guard.

And so they all know what he's saying. They all know that he's in chains for Christ. But then notice at the end when he says that he's confident he's going to live for longer and be released from prison and see them again.

In verse 25, that it will be for their progress and joy in the faith. In other words, the gospel doesn't just make Jesus look great as he's introduced to people who have never heard of him before.

But the gospel makes Jesus look great as he is heard about by those who already believe in him, but are encouraged to keep living for him and make progress in the faith and to grow in joy.

It seems that Paul's anticipation is that preaching the gospel in Philippi will lead the believers in the church to realize that Jesus is actually quite a lot greater than they first imagined.

[20 : 19] So that they will start boasting about Jesus in new ways as they find contentment, joy, satisfaction, purpose and life itself in Jesus Christ.

So it's not only that new people are introduced to the gospel, but it's that those who know Christ are growing in their estimation of the greatness of the Lord Jesus. That's what we're trying to do, isn't it, as we gather as church.

We want you, as you walk out these doors at the back, you want me, as I walk out the doors at the back, to be walking out with a bigger estimation of who Christ is than when I first came in. Jesus is actually more amazing than I thought he was when I arrived this evening.

His love for me is greater. His work for me is more astounding. His knowledge of me is greater. The fact that he will rule over all things is something that I hadn't really thought about before.

Imagine that everything and all things will be underneath his feet. Jesus is greater. Now, of course, it's really obvious when you say it like that, isn't it? Because the gospel will continue to make Jesus look great in eternity.

[21 : 22] We will spend eternity delighting in the greatness of Jesus for time without end. Jesus has risen and ascended in his physical body. He is present in heaven, in the glories of heaven, with marks in his hands and his feet from the atonement that he has provided.

And we'll be delighting in that. And it's not because people are coming to faith in eternity, is it? It's because as his children, we are marvelling more and more at what God has done in the person of the Son, in the power of the Spirit to bring us to the Father.

So I can return to those two sentences from earlier and say, you know, we cannot keep quiet about Jesus when I'm around my Christian friends and be a happy Christian. You know, I can't if I'm keeping quiet about Jesus, I'll be a miserable Christian, even whether I'm with my Christian friends or my non-Christian friends.

If I'm keeping quiet about Jesus, I'll be miserable. We cannot make Jesus look great without speaking about the gospel to one another. So much so that our joy as a church is a function of our excitement about Jesus, about living out this purpose together and making Jesus look great to one another and to the world.

If that's true, if the gospel made known makes Jesus look great, whether it be to believers or unbelievers, and our opening point was right, that the purpose of Paul's life is to find joy in making Jesus look great, then we can say that people hearing the gospel, whether they be Christians or non-Christians, is the purpose of Paul's life.

[22 : 51] That's what he lives for. That's what he is about. That's what this passage is about. It is because he is living like that that he can say for him to live as Christ, to die as gain. If he was living for any other purpose, you know that, don't you?

You heard this famous thing on this verse. If you live for anything else, dying is not gain, it's loss. It's only if you're living for Christ that dying is gain. If you live for education or family or money or career or whatever else it is, dying is loss.

But if you're living for Christ, for making Christ look great, then dying is gain because you're in his presence, enjoying him. So that's what this passage is about. Paul rejoices that people are hearing the gospel because the gospel made known makes Jesus look great, and that is the joyful purpose of his life.

Now, that hopefully is a reasonably simple explanation of the centre of this passage. Thank you. Thank you.