

“To Live Is Christ”: Paul’s Reason to Live (Philippians 1:21-24)

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On October 2, 2008, Korean popular culture was shocked at the news that the much-loved actress Choi, Jin-Shil committed suicide in her home.¹ Choi was rumored to be suffering from depression after being dogged by an alleged financial connection to another celebrity who had committed suicide a month earlier. Tragically, she left behind two young children. What was striking about this suicide was that Choi was a church member. News coverage of Choi’s funeral prominently displayed a cross, signifying a Christian funeral. The greater tragedy is that stories like Choi’s are far too common, not only among the celebrities but also among ordinary members of Korean society, especially the young. The news-making demise of Choi and numerous others demonstrate vividly that Korea is in the midst of a suicide crisis.²

Currently, there is a rash of new suicides occurring nearly every day from teenage suicides, the second leading cause of death in that age bracket, to Internet suicide rings that promote group suicides. According to news reports,³ South Korea has one of the highest suicide rates among developed nations (OECD) with suicide being the fourth leading cause of death in 2008. Moreover, suicide is the leading cause of death among persons in their twenties and thirties. Shockingly, more deaths in Korea are attributed to suicide than to diabetes and liver ailments.

1. The story of Choi’s suicide was carried internationally in TIME. TIME, Oct. 06, 2008, <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1847437,00.html> (accessed Oct. 30, 2008).

2. During the writing of this article, South Korea was once again traumatized by an even higher-profile suicide of former president Moo-Hyun Roh on May 23, 2009.

3. Jon Herskovitz and Junghyun Kim, “Economy woes may push up Korea’s high suicide rate.” Reuters, Oct. 22, 2008. <http://www.reuters.com/article/lifestyleMolt/idUSTRE49L0L020081022> (accessed March 5, 2009); Jason Strother, “South Korea’s Suicide Rate on the Rise,” Voice of America News, August 21, 2008. <http://www.voanews.com/english/archive/2008-08/2008-08-21-voa42.cfm?moddate=2008-08-21> (accessed March 5, 2009).

These troubling reports confirm that South Korea is suffering through a suicide crisis.

What is perhaps more troubling than the crisis itself is the lack of attention given to this problem by churches and Christian leaders. In my limited experience, Korean Christianity has largely approached this problem with simplistic teaching. One particularly common teaching is that those who commit suicide cannot go to heaven, presumably regardless of whether or not they have made a confession of faith or suffer from a mental illness. Such teaching is obviously designed to strike fear into those who might be contemplating suicide, especially for the young.⁴ But the overall lack of theological engagement of this issue is deeply troubling.

As a student of Paul the apostle, I propose therefore to engage the issue of suicide through a brief study of Philippians 1:21 in its historical, literary, and theological contexts. The point of contact between Korea's suicide crisis and Philippians 1:21-24 is that some interpret Paul to be suicidal in this text. The article will examine Paul's attitude toward life and death and what Paul meant by the expression, "to live is Christ." Through this study, I will consider a Pauline theology of life, death, and suicide, and conclude with a reflection of what Christians struggling with thoughts of suicide might consider as a matter of faith.

Contemplating Life and Death

Gordon Fee poignantly states, "While suffering is not the dominant motif in Philippians, it constitutes the church's primary historical context in *Philippi* and thus underlies much of the letter."⁵ The historical circumstances behind Philippians, namely suffering and struggle, are important to understanding Paul's words in Philippians 1:21-24 where he solemnly contemplates life and death. Fee rightly understands that the Philippians are in the midst of suffering, primarily at the hands of the Romans and that this is the main occasion for the letter. Thus, in brief, Paul recounts his own suffering in order to become an "exemplary paradigm" for the Philippian believers.⁶ This picture is largely correct, but Fee underestimates Paul's own suffering as part of the occasion for Philippians.

4. I make no claim that this is a universal teaching in the Korean church. However, I have personally verified that many Koreans and Korean-Americans have grown up with the same teaching from their Christian parents or pastors.

5. G. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 30. Emphasis his. Fee states, "The Philippians are in a life-and-death struggle for the gospel in Philippi" (p. 32).

6. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 30.

The Suffering of the Philippians

In Philippians 2:15, Paul expresses his hope for the believers that they may be found "blameless and pure . . . in a crooked and depraved generation."⁷ Interpreters note the borrowing of the language from the unfaithful wilderness generation of Moses' day (Deut 32:5). However, the historical referent is undoubtedly the Roman world with which the Philippian believers struggled. As O'Brien suggests, "The believers at Philippi live in the midst of a twisted, perverse society—a world that stands under divine judgment."⁸ Clearly, the Philippian church suffered persecution and opposition for their faith. Speaking of the Philippians' faith, Paul writes, "For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him" (Phil 1:29).

The suffering of the Philippian church may be in mind when Paul mentions the plight of the Macedonian churches in 2 Corinthians 8:1-2.⁹ There, Paul highlights the exemplary generosity of the Macedonians "out of the most severe trial" and "their extreme poverty" (2 Cor 8:2). It is not inconceivable that the Philippian believers were regularly imprisoned for their faith since Paul suggests that they are "partakers (*sygkoinonos*) with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel" (Phil 1:7b; ESV). This sharing of suffering was one aspect in mind when Paul mentions the Philippians' "partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (Phil 1:5). Their suffering entailed the same sufferings that Paul himself experienced, namely imprisonment and opposition. Indeed, Paul comforts, saying, "you are going through *the same struggle (ton auton agona)* you saw I had, and now hear that I still have" (Phil 1:29-30). Paul identifies with the Philippians in suffering and struggle, and this identification prompts Paul all the more to write to the Philippians, encouraging them to endure.

Paul's Life-and-death Struggle

Thus, it would seem that Paul's own sufferings have factored greatly into Philippians. While the Philippians' sufferings might be the main occasion, as Fee points out above, Paul speaks far more about his own struggles in the letter. For example, he does not fail to mention his imprisoned state several times in the first chapter (Phil 1:7, 13-14, 17). The specific circumstances of Paul's imprisonment are uncertain, apart

7. All Scripture quotations are from the NIV, unless stated otherwise.

8. P. T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 295.

9. Although commentators often highlight the suffering and persecution of the Thessalonian church, reflected in 1 and 2 Thess, as the primary situation in Paul's mind, the Philippians had their share of difficulties.

from that it was “in defense and confirmation of the gospel” (Phil 1:7b; ESV) and “served to advance the gospel” (Phil 1:12). While imprisonment was not a new experience for Paul (Acts 16, 22–28; Rom 16:7; 2 Cor 11:23), his focus with his imprisoned state suggests that this experience was extraordinary.

Historically, the imprisonment is likely in Rome in the early part of the 60s, although some suggest Ephesus or another city as a better option.¹⁰ The Roman imprisonment is where Paul’s story in Acts concludes. Acts 28:30 reads, “For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him.” These two years in Rome, generally believed to be AD 60–62, were a mixed bag. On the one hand, Paul freely hosted visitors, “boldly and without hindrance” engaging in ministry. Acts 28 does not particularly picture Paul’s situation as having been dire. On the other hand, his very presence in Rome was a life-and-death situation. Paul defensively answers the Jewish leaders of Rome in Acts 28:18, “[The Romans] examined me and wanted to release me, because I was not guilty of any crime deserving death.” It is also likely that Luke’s description in Acts 28 does not describe the personal difficulties and struggles of the apostle, but rather, in summary form, his Spirit-enabled ability to preach the gospel “without hindrance.” Thus, *Philippians* was written at a time when it was especially difficult for Paul, perhaps awaiting the final verdict in the face of intensified opposition.

The data of *Philippians* suggest physical struggle certainly, but also mental or psychological distress. The physical strain of incarceration that Paul must have endured is not easily perceived. However, there are hints that his situation took a physical toll. In *Philippians* 1:20, Paul speaks about having “sufficient courage” in order that Christ might be “exalted in my body” (*sōma*). In *Philippians* 3:21, he expresses the hope that when Christ comes, his “lowly body” might be transformed into a “glorious body.” The need for courage and the desire for a glorified body would seem to suggest a physical struggle. Further, his identification with Christ in *Philippians* 3:10, to “share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,” likely refers to bodily suffering.¹¹ Moreover, he con-

10. For a survey of various theories and commentators who conclude with the traditional Roman view, see O’Brien, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 19-26; Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 34-37; R. P. Martin and G. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, WBC 43, rev. ed. (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), xxxix-xlix; R. R. Melick Jr., *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, NAC 32 (Nashville: Broadman, 1991), 34-39.

11. Phil 2:8 upholds Christ as Paul’s model of humility and suffering: “became obedient to death—even death on a cross!” Physical suffering would be an integral part of Paul’s imitation of Jesus.

siders his efforts for the gospel as a "fight" (*agōn* in Phil 1:30).¹² Pauline usage of *agōn* may be more metaphorical,¹³ but in contexts of opposition, there would have been a physical aspect to the struggle.¹⁴

"Sorrow upon Sorrow"

Paul's struggle, however, was more internal than external. The physical threat of death likely caused internal anxiety. He admits that he needed "sufficient courage" to face what has happened to him even as he hoped for "deliverance" in answer to the prayers of the Philippians (Phil 1:19-20). These appear to be the words of someone facing great internal anguish (cf. 2 Cor 1:8).

Yet the situation is more complex than at first sight. Paul was troubled by opposition, perhaps at the hands of the unbelieving Jews in Rome (Acts 28:24). His *agon* for the gospel was quite literal. The whole contest, Paul says, led to an "inward experience of distress" (*thlipsis* in Phil 1:27).¹⁵ Opposition was one point of identification for Paul and the Philippians, who must "watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh" (Phil 3:2). There is no doubt that Paul is speaking from personal experience. But more than opposition from the outside, Paul experienced unpleasant competition and perhaps even betrayal from among fellow Christian workers.

In Philippians 1:15-17, Paul is inwardly distressed by those who preach Christ out of rivalry, "stirring up trouble" for him while in prison. This interesting statement suggests a sense of betrayal from fellow missionaries. While Paul's rejoicing demonstrates that these rivals were preaching correctly (Phil 3:18), their motivation was hardly genuine. Why such envious preaching should bring trouble for Paul in prison is uncertain, unless the preaching included a slander of Paul and his ministry, especially before the Roman authorities or before the Jewish leaders. Positively, however, some preached "out of love" for the apostle (Phil 1:16).

In Philippians 3:18, Paul is full of sorrow as he considers those who live as "enemies of the cross of Christ." The tears mentioned in this verse make best sense if these were personal associates of Paul, perhaps his own converts. Contrary to these who betrayed him, Epaphroditus is a refreshing inverse. Yet, his illness and possible death remain a source

12. BDAG 17; cf. *agōn* in 1 Thess 2:2.

13. Cf. *agōn* in 1 Tim 6:12 – "Fight the good fight of the faith" or 2 Tim 4:7 – "I have fought the good fight."

14. Cf. *agōn* in Col 2:1 – "how great a struggle I have for you" and 1 Thess 2:2 – "in the midst of much conflict."

15. BDAG 457.

of anxiety and distress. That God spared his life was a demonstration of mercy on Paul himself, “to spare me sorrow upon sorrow” (Phil 2:27). This phrase suggests, on the one hand, that Paul’s care for Epaphroditus and the Philippian church is taking an emotional toll. Sending him back to Philippi in good health would lessen his anxiety (Phil 2:28). On the other hand, Paul’s current situation is a state of sorrow (thus, “sorrow upon sorrow”), perhaps referring to his incarceration or his impending execution, but also to his distressed state as one who had been betrayed and had many opponents.

Paul, the Suicidal Apostle?

Thus far, this study has argued that the main context of Philippians is struggle, both of the Philippians and of Paul. Further, the struggle Paul faced had a strong internal dimension. In this study of Philippians 1:21-24, understanding Paul’s internal struggles is critical. His predicament has led to a serious contemplation of life and death for which he desired “sufficient courage.” He desired that Christ be exalted in his body, “whether by life or death” (Phil 1:20). The genuineness of the struggle is perhaps intimated in his confession, “Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!” (Phil 1:22).

Two initial observations must be noted concerning Philippians 1:21-24. First, Paul is clearly speaking of physical life and death. He writes, on the one hand, of “living in the body” and on the other hand, of “departing” and being with Christ. Second, he clearly prefers death when he states “to die is gain.” In Philippians 1:23, Paul supposes that death and the subsequent “being with Christ” is literally “much more better” (*pollō mallon kreisson*).

Death Is Far Better?

As much as Paul had compelling reasons for internal struggle and preferred death in Philippians 1:21-24, a few scholars have suggested that Paul seriously contemplated suicide in these verses. From a study of ancient theories of suicide, Arthur Droge argues that Paul was suicidal especially because the ancients did not readily distinguish self-murder from self-sacrifice or martyrdom.¹⁶ Through a study of the ancient literature from Plato to Seneca, Droge argues that suicide was a legitimate option for Paul as a man of his time. Further, the reason why Paul considered death a “gain” is because, like others of his time, death was a release from the troubles of life. Droge cites an interesting parallel in

16. A. J. Droge, “*Mori Lucrum*: Paul and Ancient Theories of Suicide,” *NovT* 30 (1988): 263-286.

Antigone of Sophocles: "And if I am going to die before my time, I count it gain (*kerdos*). For death is a gain to one whose life, like mine, is full of misery."¹⁷ To a large extent, Droge builds on the earlier study by D. W. Palmer who similarly argued that Paul preferred death because it was release from the troubles of this life.¹⁸ To both Droge and Palmer, Paul was essentially suicidal because of his great distress over his situation.

Seeking to explain Paul's morbid confessions apart from Palmer's and Droge's picture of a suicidal Paul, N. Clayton Croy argues for an altogether different interpretation of Philippians 1:21-24.¹⁹ Paul does not necessarily prefer death, nor desire release from troubles. Rather he is merely engaged in the "rhetorical technique of feigned perplexity."²⁰ Croy suggests, "Paul's dilemma is chiefly to be located in his rhetoric, not in his legal predicament or his psychological state."²¹ He suggests, furthermore, that the reason why Paul was able to use such rhetoric in this way is precisely because he has rejected "departing" as a viable option. Croy has offered a plausible interpretation against a suicidal Paul and certainly Paul was rhetorically astute enough to have used such a technique.²² However, the undesirable result of Croy's hypothesis is that Paul's personal struggles must have been less than genuine. In fact, if Croy is correct, his intensely personal language²³ in Philippians 1:21-24 would have been disingenuous.

Paul genuinely believed that death was "better by far" for theological reasons. Thomas Daily argues that Paul has a "Christocentric preoccupation" and that this is the "hermeneutical key" for understanding life and death in Philippians 1:19-26.²⁴ Thus, far from death being a gain because it is merely a release from life's troubles, death was a gain for Paul because it meant a more direct communion with the resurrected

17. Droge, "*Mori Lucrum*," 281.

18. D. W. Palmer, "'To Die Is Gain' (Philippians i 21)," *NovT* 17 (1975): 203-218.

19. N. Clayton Croy, "'To Die Is Gain' (Philippians 1:19-26): Does Paul Contemplate Suicide?," *JBL* 122 (2003): 517-531.

20. Croy, "'To Die Is Gain,'" 529.

21. Croy, "'To Die Is Gain,'" 529.

22. Most commentators note the superb use of rhetoric in one form or another in Phil 1:21. See, e.g., Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 140-141; M. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, BNTC (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998), 87; C. Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000), 43.

23. O'Brien, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 118, notes that *emoi* in v. 21 "draws attention to an intensely personal confession."

24. T. F. Daily, "To Live or Die: Paul's Eschatological Dilemma in Philippians 1:19-26," *Int* 44 (1990): 20.

Christ. "Gain" in Philippians 1:21 must be related to "departing and being with Christ" (*syn Christō*) in Philippians 1:23.²⁵

Being "with Christ" suggests a more intense communion, already assumed in the Pauline idea of being "in Christ" (*en Christō*).²⁶ Paul does not abandon the idea of being "in Christ" in death since he uses phrases like "the dead in Christ" (1 Thess 4:16). Furthermore, in addition to more intense communion with Christ, Paul is motivated by a desire for greater identification with Christ, to which he later confesses in Philippians 3:10: "I want to know Christ . . . the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death." In light of his desire to "exalt Christ in life and death," Paul also considers martyrdom a gain for the sake of witness, which makes good sense in the immediate context of preaching the gospel (Phil 1:12-14). As a third-century African commentator remarks, "It is not death itself that is gain, but to die in Christ."²⁷

Paul's sincere theological reasoning for preferring death should not be confused with a suicidal tendency. On the one hand, his struggles were real and genuinely distressing. Thus, his contemplating of death was sincere, leading him to consider the benefits of struggle and death as a believer "in Christ" (cf. Phil 3:14). On the other hand, Paul clearly rejects suicide as an option. In fact, the rejection is all the more ardent in the light of his potent theological preference for death. In other words, Paul's actions speak much louder in the light of his words.²⁸

25. O'Brien, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 123.

26. For a greater understanding of the preposition *syn* (with Christ), see M. J. Harris, "Prepositions and Theology in the Greek New Testament," *NIDNTT* 3:1207. Harris cites an interesting parallel usage of *syn* in an ancient address to the dead from A. Deissmann, *Light from the Ancient East*, trans. L. Strachan (New York: G. H. Doran, 1927), 303 n. 1: "I would that I were soon in fellowship with you" (*syn soi einai*).

27. Marius Victorinus, *Epistle to the Philippians* 1.21, cited from M. J. Edwards, *Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians*, ACCS NT VIII (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999), 227.

28. The question of whether or not Paul was suicidal has much to do with a precise definition of what it means to suicide vs. self-sacrifice. It seems to me that, on the one hand, we must reject overblown notions of Paul's saintly stature. Paul could sin and, given seriously distressing circumstances, we might assume that he was tempted by suicidal thoughts like other normal human beings in dire circumstances. In 2 Cor 1:8, Paul, distressed by his suffering in Asia, openly confesses, "We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired even of life." On the other hand, blurring the distinction between suicide and self-sacrifice, in Paul's day or in ours, is entirely unhelpful (*contra* Droge and Palmer). Was Paul or Jesus, for that matter, suicidal or self-sacrificial? It seems to me that Paul does not seek simply to escape life's troubles, even as he

“To Live Is Christ”

Even as Paul lays out his case for preferring death, his personal reasons for choosing life outweigh his reasons for choosing death. At the heart of his thought is a very succinct and powerful statement, “For to me to live is Christ” (*emoi gar to zēn Christos*) in Philippians 1:21. The position of *emoi* (to me) is emphatic, suggesting that this is Paul’s personal view as opposed to the view of others or more likely, that this is a “new perspective”²⁹ and a “purely personal reflection”³⁰ as opposed to the concern for the gospel that all believers must share. In this personal reflection, Paul genuinely weighs the benefits of continuing to live, on the one hand, and yielding to death, on the other.

The literary balance of Philippians 1:21 is tight, “to live is Christ” and “to die is gain” describing the benefits of life and death, respectively. The two articular infinitives, “to live” (*to zēn*) and “to die” (*to apothanien*), are the subjects of the two sentences where the equative verb “is” (*estin*) must be supplied.³¹ “Christ” (*Christos*) and “gain” (*kerdos*) are two separate corresponding predicates. Most English translations favor the infinitive forms, “to live . . . to die” (NIV; TNIV; ESV; NASB; KJV), while some opt for gerunds, “living . . . dying” (NRSV; NET; NLT) or noun forms, “life . . . death” (NAB; NJB; REB).³²

Commentators are divided over the meaning of *to zēn*, whether it refers to the life in the new age (or eternal life or life after death) or to the natural life in the body. In the former view, “Christ” is so central to the thought of the verse that it essentially serves as the subject.³³ When Christ is the subject (i.e., “Christ is to live”), then the first statement

sincerely found living difficult. Rather, while tempted normally by thoughts of giving up, he “pressed on toward the goal” (Phil 3:14) because he had profound reasons to live on, as this article argues.

29. O’Brien, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 117-118.

30. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 139.

31. In contrast to the noun forms of life and death in the previous verse, the verbal infinitives lay stress on the living and dying. As O’Brien, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 121, notes, “The verbs ζῆν and ἀποθανεῖν, in place of their cognate nouns refer to living and dying rather than to general considerations of life and death.”

32. The present active infinitive, *zēn*, can be translated in all three forms. The present tense, when compared to the aorist *apothanein* in the same verse, emphasizes the continuous “remaining in the body” of the apostle. The aorist probably sees the act as a whole. For a summary of the views, see J. Reumann, *Philippians: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AYB (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1964), 217-219.

33. Interestingly, some older commentators such as Calvin saw Christ as the subject of both life and death. See O’Brien, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 119.

becomes the basis of the second statement, “to die is gain,” which is only because “Christ himself is Paul’s life.”³⁴ Moreover, “and” (*kai*) in verse 21 is not adversative, while “but” (*de*) in verse 22 is. Thus, the contrast is not between life and death in verse 21, but between life eternal in verse 21 and life in the flesh in verse 22. Finally, this view has no need to consider the “gain” of death as something “over and above” Christ.³⁵

Despite some compelling elements to the view that “to live” must refer to the life of the new age, the latter view, that Paul is speaking of the bodily life on earth, is preferable based on the structure of Philippians 1:20-24.

v. 20	by life	v. 20	by death
v. 21a	to live is Christ	v. 21b	to die is gain
v. 22a	living in the body	v. 23	to depart and
v. 24b	remain in the body		be with Christ

In verse 20, Paul expresses his desire to glorify Christ “in my body, whether by life or by death.” Certainly, the contrast there is between bodily life and death. This contrast, furthermore, resurfaces in verses 22-24—“living in the body . . . to depart and be with Christ . . . remain in the body.” Thus, “to live is Christ” parallels “by life” (v. 20), “life in the body” (v. 22), and “remain in the body” (v. 24),³⁶ which suggest that Paul has in mind natural life on earth in verse 21. Grammatically, the adversative force of *de* in verse 22 need not apply to *to zēn* but rather to *to apothanien*, which immediately precedes it. Thus, the longer expression of “living in the body” (v. 22a) serves to define *to zēn* (v. 21) more precisely.³⁷ Finally, the “gain” of death is not something above and beyond Christ, but rather, as O’Brien points out, the “gain” is actually a more intense realization of Christ (i.e., being in Christ’s presence).³⁸

For Paul, then, continuing to live is equated to “Christ.” Commentators generally note the importance and comprehensiveness of the

34. O’Brien, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 120. Similarly, M. Silva, *Philippians*, 2d ed., BECNT (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2005), 74, notes, “precisely because his life finds its total meaning in Christ, his dying . . . must be viewed as an advantage.”

35. See O’Brien, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 119, for a review of the arguments.

36. While Pauline usage of *sarx* can be metaphorical to convey the idea of sinful nature such as in Rom 7:18, here in Phil 1:22, 24, the context does not warrant such a meaning. BDAG 914-916.

37. O’Brien, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 121.

38. O’Brien, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 121.

phrase, “to live is Christ.” For example, for Bockmuehl, this short statement is the “epitome of Paul’s whole life as a Christian.”³⁹ However, they also find the meaning difficult to pin down and often vaguely suggest something like “living *is* Christ”⁴⁰ or “living *means* Christ.”⁴¹ These statements offer little explanation and must themselves be unpacked.

In seeking to explain its meaning, a focus on relationship is helpful. Thielman proposes that the phrase “can only mean that Paul’s relationship with Christ was so close that his entire existence derived its meaning from his Lord.”⁴² Fee, citing what Paul says later in Philippians 3:12-14, contends, “Christ thus became the singular pursuit of his life. . . [and he] sums up for Paul the whole range of his new relationship to God: personal devotion, commitment, service, the gospel, ministry, communion, inspiration, everything.”⁴³ “To live is Christ,” then, is relational, denoting Paul’s complete devotion to Christ.

The complexity and depth of Paul’s devotion to Christ is further unpacked. Vincent explains, “For Paul life is summed up in Christ. Christ is its inspiration, its aim, its end. To trust, love, obey, preach, follow, suffer,—all things are with and in Christ.”⁴⁴ Hawthorne and Martin write,

Life, both physical and spiritual, is summed up in Christ. Life is filled up with, occupied with, Christ, in the sense that everything Paul does—trusts, loves, hopes, obeys, preaches, follows (Vincent), and so on—is inspired by Christ and is done for Christ. Christ, and Christ alone, gives inspiration, direction, meaning, and purpose to existence. Paul views his life in time . . . as totally determined and controlled by his own love for and commitment to Christ.⁴⁵

These explanations highlight the comprehensive character of the confession, “to live is Christ.”

Nevertheless, further clarity must be sought. Many commentators rightly note that Paul in the context is occupied with his service for the gospel and views his life purpose as service to Christ, especially in

39. Bockmuehl, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 87.

40. B. B. Thurston and J. Ryan, *Philippians and Philemon*, SP 10 (Collegeville: Liturgical, 2004), 63, suggest, “What Paul is saying is that his will is so conformed to Christ’s that, for him, living *is* Christ.”

41. Martin and Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 55.

42. F. Thielman, *Philippians*, NIVAC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 78. He suggests parallels in Gal 2:20, Col 3:4, and Phil 3:8.

43. Fee, *Paul’s Letter to the Philippians*, 141.

44. M. R. Vincent, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistles to the Philippians and to Philemon*, ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1980), 26.

45. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 55.

preaching. Lightfoot is fond of Bengel's paraphrase, "I live only to serve Him, only to commune with Him; I have no conception of life apart from Him."⁴⁶ Marshall keenly explains that for Paul "life means serving Christ, since for him life has no other meaning. . . . The accent then is on life as a means of serving Christ – which is enjoyment of Christ."⁴⁷ O'Brien argues that Paul is "wholly Christ-centred" and for him, "living can be nothing other than the faithful preaching of Jesus as the crucified and risen Lord."⁴⁸ Melick writes, "'to live is Christ' must mean that Paul so totally wanted to glorify Christ that as long as he lived everything about him was to point people to Christ."⁴⁹ Service and witness to Christ were foremost in Paul's mind in the statement, "to live is Christ," since Paul's singular purpose in life was to proclaim Christ (1 Cor 1:23) and serve him in this way. Thus, living means "fruitful labor" (Phil 1:22) and Paul has given himself fully to the work of the Lord (1 Cor 15:58).

As stated above, Paul believed that death was a "gain" and "better by far" because it was a greater realization of communion, already enjoyed by believers who are "in Christ." Similarly, "to live is Christ" cannot be understood properly apart from union with Christ. Osiek even suggests, "Paul says that continuing to live means union with Christ."⁵⁰ While the explanation is probably overstated, it rightly understands the importance of union with Christ in "to live is Christ." Philippians as a letter begins and ends with an address to the "saints *in Christ*" (1:1; 4:21). At several key points in between, Paul draws upon the idea of being "in Christ." His imprisonment and struggle is "in Christ" (1:13), the humble mind that Christ models (2:6-11) belongs to believers "in Christ" (2:5), Paul's upward call is "in Christ" (3:14), and peace guards the believer's hearts and minds "in Christ" (4:7). For Paul, "in Christ" forms the foundation of the believer's relationship to God.

Romans 6 most explicitly conveys Paul's theology of union with Christ, symbolized in baptism. There, the believer's death and life are united with Christ's death and resurrection. Paul writes, "If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection" (Rom 6:5). The union with Christ, through which the believer proleptically enjoys the life of the resurrected

46. Cited in J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians*, rev. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953), 92.

47. I. H. Marshall, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (London: Epworth, 1992), 27.

48. O'Brien, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 122.

49. Melick, *Philippians, Colossians, Philemon*, 84-85. Melick suggests that Gal 2:20 and Col 3:4 "differ in context and concern" and so implies that "to live is Christ" must be understood apart from these passages.

50. Osiek, *Philippians, Philemon*, 43.

Christ, is conveyed by the "in Christ" formula. Seeking to outline the ethical demands of union with Christ, Paul exhorts, "Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God *in Christ Jesus*" (Rom 6:11). Theologically, union with Christ is at the core of Pauline soteriology.

The union with Christ forms the foundation of several Pauline passages concerning life and death, including Philippians 1:21. Scholars regularly look to Galatians 2:20 to shed light on Philippians 1:21. For example, Silva sees a "genuine correspondence between 'to live is Christ' here and 'Christ lives in me'," based on Galatians 2:20.⁵¹ Paul's life belongs to Christ and he no longer lives. While the contexts are not identical, Paul is deeply christocentric in both texts and both confessions flow from being "in Christ." Thus, behind Paul's powerful motto, "to live is Christ," lies the idea of union with Christ, the other side of which is "I no longer live . . . Christ lives in me." Paul's life *belongs to Christ* and living is for the sake of *servicing Christ*. From the believer's union with Christ comes Paul's reason to live.

Conclusion: Christ, the Reason to Live

A careful consideration of Philippians 1:21-24 in its historical and literary context has shown that Paul had genuine reasons to contemplate life and death. First, the situation of his Roman imprisonment and of intense opposition to his ministry shows that Paul truly knew sorrow, suffering, and emotional and physical distress. He could identify with those who experience distress and are tempted by suicidal thoughts. Second, Paul believed that death was indeed a "gain" and "better by far" because more than release from his current sufferings, it meant greater fellowship and identification with Christ. In spite of these potent reasons to choose death, Paul chose to live on, not yielding to despair and death. The basis of his choice to live on is succinctly and powerfully stated in the phrase, "to live is Christ." By this, he means that through union with Christ, his life belongs to Christ and is wholly dedicated to serving Christ. For Paul, Christ is the reason to live.

Paul's exemplary model and belief that Christ is the reason to live have implications for the Christian today, in Korea and elsewhere, who might be contemplating suicide. First, as one who is united with Christ, a believer's life is not his own to take. Committing suicide then is actually taking a life that belongs to Christ. Further, the believer who com-

51. Silva, *Philippians*, 74. Bockmuehl, *Epistle to the Philippians*, 87, suggests parallels ideas in Gal 2:20 and Col 3:3-4. D. E. Garland, "Philippians 1:1-26: The Defense and Confirmation of the Gospel," *Review and Expositor* 77 (1980): 334, suggests a connection to sacrifice and suffering in Gal 2:20 and 2 Cor 2:10-11.

mits suicide does not end his own life, but in essence, the life of Christ who lives in him (Gal 2:20). Living for Christ means both giving one's life to Christ as his possession and yielding to Christ's right to live in the believer. Second, that a believer is united to Christ in death (Rom 6) means that he is already dead. And thus, it would be absurd for anyone to kill what is already dead. Furthermore, the believer is already dead to sin, including the sin of suicide, because "the old self was crucified with him" (Rom 6:6) and he must count himself "dead to sin" (Rom 6:11).

Third, a believer must not rob Christ of service as one whose purpose in life is to serve Christ. For Paul, "to live is Christ" meant "fruitful labor" in service to his Lord by preaching faithfully in the midst of a difficult life. By ending his life, he would have lost the opportunity to serve Christ faithfully in this life and bear witness to God's love in Christ Jesus. The believer, tempted by suicidal thoughts, must conclude with Paul that faithful service to Christ is the only choice, even when death is a gain and life is utterly difficult. Further, by ending life short, a believer destroys God's work (Eph 2:10) and robs Christ of enjoyment over his service, losing reward in the process (Col 3:24). Fourth, as one who is called to witness to Christ and proclaim the gospel, a believer must not cut short the opportunity to influence people for Christ and deprive the church of edification. By ending life, a believer may lose the opportunity to lead someone to saving faith and eternal life. Thus, Paul concludes, "It is more necessary *for you* that I remain in the body" (Phil 1:24) and "for *your* progress and joy in the faith" (Phil 1:25). Paul understood that his remaining alive meant a greater benefit to the Philippians and probably others who needed to hear the gospel and be encouraged by his spiritual gifts.

In conclusion, I refer those believers struggling in life to a well-known hymn by Frances R. Havergal, written in 1874 after evangelizing an entire household during a visit, which exemplifies a life belonging to Christ and is given in service to him.

Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee.
 Take my moments and my days; let them flow in ceaseless praise.
 Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of Thy love.
 Take my feet, and let them be swift and beautiful for Thee.

Take my voice, and let me sing always, only, for my King.
 Take my lips, and let them be filled with messages from Thee.
 Take my silver and my gold; not a mite would I withhold.
 Take my intellect, and use every power as Thou shalt choose.

Take my will, and make it Thine; it shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart, it is Thine own; it shall be Thy royal throne.
Take my love, my Lord, I pour at Thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself, and I will be ever, only, all for Thee.⁵²

52. The source of the story and lyrics of this hymn is <http://www.cyber-hymnal.org/htm/t/m/tmlalib.htm> (accessed May 28, 2009).