



# Central Peninsula Church

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Philippians 1:18b-26  
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## Wanted: Dead or Alive

*SERIES: Philippians: A People and A Place Transformed by the Gospel*

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Let me begin by telling you the story of the man that changed my life on a night that I'll never forget. In the summer of 2000 I was 21 years old and had just graduated from college. I took a job for the summer as the Staff Advisor at Forest Home, a large Christian camp in Southern California. My job was to care for and teach the Bible to the college students who worked at the camp.

I'll never forget one man and one night from this summer. All summer long I lived in a cabin with 15 other guys. Most of them were lifeguards who supervised the man-made lake at the center of the camp. One evening, just before midnight, a call came in to the head lifeguard of the camp, a guy named Ben, whose room was next door to mine. He was told that there was an emergency and that he and the other lifeguards needed to assemble at the lake right away. Ben filled me in on the situation and I decided to go along and help. Five minutes later we arrived at the lake and were briefed on what was going on.

A 21-year-old named Samson Washington had gone missing. He hadn't been seen for 12 hours. Samson Washington had just arrived at camp the night before. He was a junior high youth group leader from a church in inner city LA. He was here at camp volunteering a week of his life to work with junior high kids. Samson was last seen by some of these junior high boys after lunch, swimming in the lake. It was now a few minutes after midnight and an hour or so earlier search teams had been sent into the mountains and forests surrounding the camp. The leading theory was that Samson, being from the inner city and all, had gotten lost or hurt while hiking in the mountains. Some of the kids had heard him say he wanted to explore the mountains.

The other theory was that Samson may have never left the place the junior high boys last saw him—the lake. So the male and female lifeguards and I assembled to do a precautionary search to see if Samson might be in the lake. About 20 of us lined up, arms length apart, on the shore of the lake. I was with four others on the deep end of the lake. We were given instructions. We were all to wait for the signal and then, in unison, take two big steps into the lake and feel around for anything. Then we'd stop, receive the signal,

and do it over again. After a few minutes of this the five of us in the deep end of the lake reached a point where we could no longer touch bottom and we were now diving in search of any sign of Samson.

What we would do is this. When the others were given the signal to take their two big steps forward, the five of us would dive underwater, swim until we touched bottom, then we'd take two big strokes forward, combing the ground for anything. Then we'd shoot back to the surface and tread water until it was time to do it again. After about 20 minutes of this we were tired and cold. And most of the people around me, especially the female lifeguards, were scared and afraid. Some of them were crying. And I remember praying, "Lord, if there's a body in here, don't let one of these sophomore girls find it; let me be the one to find it."

So, tired and exhausted, we were given the signal again. I kicked my legs, dove down, and touched the sandy bottom. Nothing. I shot back to the top of the water. Immediately after I surfaced, Steve, the guy next to me, surfaced and screamed at the top of his lungs: "Everybody get out of the water! Everybody out! Now!" Everyone panicked and got out of the water. It looked like a scene from *Jaws*—everyone lost all swimming form and just flailed their bodies towards shore. I was the only one who stayed in the water. I stayed right next to Steve. I stayed because Steve was shaking. I stayed because Steve was holding another man's wrist. Clutched in Steve's left hand, just barely sticking out of the water, was Samson Washington's right hand.

I grabbed a hold of Samson's upper body. We were about 50 yards from shore. Steve and I yelled to everyone on shore, telling them to turn around and leave so they wouldn't have to see what we were seeing. Together, Steve and I tugged Samson's wet, lifeless body towards shore. Once we could touch bottom, we turned Samson onto his back. Steve took Samson's legs and I cradled Samson's head and torso and we carried his stiff-as-a-board body up out of the water and onto shore. What I remember most was the sight of Samson's stiff black hands. Rigamortis had set in and so Samson's arms were cemented in this crisscrossed position and his hands were in this immovable half grip. His green camp bracelet was still around his wrist. Steve and I reached shore and laid Samson down on a patch of grass. I

covered him with a towel. And many hours later, I finally fell asleep.

Two days later, late at night, I returned to the spot where I had laid Samson—the man who was my same age. I'd learned as much as I could about Samson Washington in those 48 hours. I learned about how he used to be a drug addict but how, a few years earlier, Christ had gotten a hold of him and transformed him. I learned that he had become a man who lived for Christ and loved life.

I must've spent an hour sitting there in the grass. I stared at the spot in the lake where I'd first touched Samson. Then I found myself staring up at the sky. And you know what I did? I sang. I couldn't help it. All I could do was sing.

Why? Why did I sing as I sat where Samson died? Because of Philippians 1:18-26.

### **I. To Live is Christ and to Die is Gain.**

Every religion answers two questions: 1) what is life? 2) what is death? These two questions are inseparable and inescapable. People asked these questions 3,000 years ago and people ask them today. If you're a mentally healthy person, you really can't live much beyond your 10th birthday without, in some way, asking these two questions.

Many different answers are given to these questions. Buddhism, for example, explores these two questions and answers: To live is to achieve good karma and to die is to hope for a better reincarnation. Islam says: To live is to obey Allah and, depending on how obedient you've been, to die is to enter a personal paradise.

But the average person who you bump into here on the Peninsula isn't a Buddhist or a Muslim. Most likely the people who live next door to you and work with you are quasi-atheistic, quasi-spiritual people who, more or less, believe that: To live is self and to die is loss.

Christians believe the exact opposite of what most people here on the Peninsula believe. Christians answer the two big questions the way Paul answered them: To live is Christ and to die is gain.

Raise your hand if you own a T-shirt, bumper sticker, license plate holder, poster, coffee mug, or refrigerator magnet that has a Bible verse on it. Okay, chances are that some of your Christian gear has verses from Philippians on it. I think that Philippians supplies more taken-out-of-context, Christian-gear-life-motto verses than any other book of the Bible. Think of those mugs and magnets that you own. Does any of it say: "Rejoice in the Lord," "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me," "Do not be anxious about

anything," "Work out your salvation with fear and trembling," or, "To live is Christ and to die is gain"?

This morning, at the heart of our text is a verse, a sentence, that's unfortunately best known as a refrigerator magnet. The goal of this sermon is to help change that. So there are two things I want to accomplish in today's sermon. First, I want all of us to memorize this verse, Philippians 1:21. We won't worry about the first three words of the verse ("For to me"). I want us to focus in on the core nine words of this verse. Let's try it.

Now, the second thing I want to do today is unpack the radical meaning, the radical implications, of this verse. It does us no good to memorize what we don't understand. We've got to understand the meaning behind the magnet.

This verse is Paul's answer to life's two biggest questions. Paul answers life's two biggest questions in just nine words. And what I want us to come to grips with today is that these nine words have radical implications for how you live your life here on the Peninsula. These words, if you really believe them, will affect your behavior in a huge way. All of Paul's behavior, everything that he says, thinks, and does in today's passage is a direct result of these nine words. This whole passage orbits around the nine words of verse 21.

So today we're going to look at six marks of a Christian in light of Philippians 1:21. These all come straight from the text, straight from Paul's own behavior—six ways in which our lives are to be markedly different from the world around us as a result of believing that to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Now, I'm breaking a major preaching rule here. Apparently there's a big rule that as a preacher you're never supposed to have more than three, maybe four, main points. And here I have six of them and I've already been talking for 15 minutes. So I'm breaking a rule today, but don't worry. These will be short main points. I'm going to hit most of these pretty quickly, with very little illustration and I don't think I have any funny stuff for us today. This is going to pretty much be just explanation and application as I take us on a tour of this passage and of what it might look like to live out this passage here on the Peninsula.

**a. Mark #1: Joy.** Mark #1 is joy. Look at verse 18. This is a transitional verse. We looked at the first half of verse 18 last week as Paul gave his prison report of what had happened to him. Now Paul transitions and gives his prison plans. He begins to speak about his future. We learned last week that

Paul chose to rejoice over what'd happened to him. Now we're learning that Paul's also approaching his future with joy. Paul does more than repeat himself here. He's sharing his resolution to rejoice whether his future holds release from prison or death in prison.

Now it's important for us to know that so much of the New Testament, so much of Paul's letters, are arguments. Much of Paul's writing is tightly reasoned argumentation. We see that here. He says: Yes, and I will rejoice, "for"... Paul's always linking sentences with the words "for" and "because" and "if." Paul says his life will be marked with joy "for," and then he goes on to give a few reasons, but ultimately all lines of reasoning in this passage travel back to verse 21. To live is Christ and to die is gain, therefore, Paul's marked by joy in the midst of uncertain and uncomfortable circumstances. Paul's chained up in Caesar's prison. He doesn't know if he'll continue to suffer in prison, if he'll be released from prison, or if he'll be killed by Caesar. Yet, he's got joy.

The only way that you could have joy in such uncertain circumstances is by believing that Christ is certain. The only way that you could have joy when faced with the discomfort of your own death is by believing that death would actually be a gain.

This is radical! The average person here on the Peninsula doesn't have joy. Your neighbors might have some happiness when their circumstances feel certain and comfortable. But there's no joy. And there's certainly no joy when all of the sudden the future looks uncertain and when all of the sudden circumstances become uncomfortable. How could it be any other way if you believe that to live is self?

And the average person here on the Peninsula comes nowhere close to being marked with joy when faced with death. How could it be any other way if you believe that death is loss?

Here's a reality that Christians and non-Christians are both well aware of: everybody dies. You know this fact, but take it in and feel it for a moment: everybody in this room, everybody who lives on the Peninsula, every single person in the world who's breathing oxygen right now will one day quit breathing and die. Do you feel the weight of that?

When your neighbors take in this reality they are crushed because they believe that death is loss. Let me ask you, are you any different? Though you might've memorized that "to live is Christ and to die is gain," do you believe that? Is your life marked by joy only when your circumstances are certain and comfortable, only when death seems far away?

Paul is reminding us of what's said throughout the whole Bible: joy is not optional in the Christian life. Joy is the inevitable fruit that grows from knowing Christ. If

you're a Christian and your life isn't marked by joy, the solution is simple: quit fixating on your circumstances and begin to fixate on Christ. Think less about your circumstances and more about Christ who is with you in your circumstances and who will be with you in and after your death. As you behold Christ, joy will come.

The grief and the tears that come with discomfort and death are still there. You've gotta grieve. You've gotta cry. It's just that in beholding Christ the grief and the tears become infected with a God-given joy.

Just like Paul's letters, your life is an argument for your neighbors. As your neighbors see that you're marked by joy in the midst of uncertain and uncomfortable circumstances, they will wonder, "where does that come from?" What an attractive way to witness to your neighbors. You can show them that your joy comes from, it travels back to, the nine words of Philippians 1:21.

**b. Mark #2: Community.** Mark #2 is community. Look at verse 19. Paul began this letter with a prayer for the Philippians, but now he's relying on prayers from the Philippians. Paul believes that the Philippians' prayers will result in his "deliverance." By "deliverance" here Paul isn't talking about being released from prison because in the next verse Paul shows that his deliverance isn't dependent on life or death. Paul is speaking of his ultimate deliverance before Christ.

What's so significant here is that Paul's spiritual growth and well being are dependent on his church community. Paul isn't a lone ranger Christian. Paul knows that he can't live life and he can't approach death without his church community. He needs their help. He needs their prayers. Paul knows that the nine words can be lived out only with the help of a church community.

Friends, do you see that your spiritual well being is connected to your church community? Many of you do see this, and many of you don't. Here's a great place for me to get some of you mad at me because I want to address a problem that we have here. One thing that's been clear to me in my short time here at CPC is that a number of you have taken on a casual approach to Christian community. You don't think that your spiritual well being depends on the church. You aren't connected here. You show up only on the Sundays that are convenient for you. And some of you, when you do show up on a Sunday, you think it's no big deal to just stroll in 25 minutes late.

What's that all about? Man, the whole show

up late thing here is pathetic. Listen, Jesus Christ died for the church. Jesus didn't die so that we could casually date the church. Jesus didn't die so that we could show up on Sunday mornings fashionably late.

If it's true that to live is Christ, then our lives ought to be marked by a great love for and commitment to Christ's church. And on Sunday mornings, the main time for being together as a church, we oughta wake up and say: "Man, I feel kinda tired today. I feel like sleeping in or doing something fun with the kids, but life isn't about me. It's about Christ. Christ is great, so I'm going to go worship and enjoy him with all my friends. My well being depends on this community."

See, our Peninsula isn't going to discover the true answer to the two big life and death questions until they see a true community. Our Peninsula is full of so many lonely, disconnected people. Everybody's got cell phones, email, and the internet, yet everybody's so lonely. Perhaps the most winsome way that you could get your co-workers to see Christ would be by showing them that your life is marked by Christ's community. Show them that your life depends on a community of people who love you and help you and pray for you and support you as you navigate the twists and turns of life. Our world doesn't know community like this. The only place you can find community like this is in the church.

**c. Mark #3: Courage.** Mark #3 is courage. Look at verse 20. Paul hopes and prays that God will give him courage. This is so encouraging, to know that the heroic "apostle to the Gentiles" had to pray for courage. Paul's life wasn't automatically marked with courage. Paul felt the fear of death and so he hoped and prayed for courage.

Do you remember from last week who ruled as Caesar at this point in time? Nero. Nero was the most brutal and sadistic of all Roman Caesars. Paul needs courage to face him. Just a few years after Paul wrote Philippians a massive fire ravaged Rome and in order to expunge his own name and blame someone for the fire, Nero began to blame and punish Christians. Tacitus, a historian who lived during the time of Paul, writes this about Nero's torture of the Christians:

"Besides being put to death they [the Christians] were made to serve as objects of amusement; they were clothed in the hides of beasts and torn to death by dogs; others were crucified, others were set on fire to serve to illuminate the night when daylight failed. Nero had thrown open his grounds for the display, and was putting on a show in the circus, where he mingled with the people in the dress of a charioteer and drove about in his chariot. All this gave rise to a feeling of pity, for it was felt that they [the Christians] were being destroyed not for the public good, but to gratify the cruelty of an individual."

Paul's in Nero's prison. Yet Paul's not afraid. He

has Christ and so he has courage.

What are you afraid of right now? What Neros are you facing? Whether you're facing big fears or small fears, when you're reminded that Christ's in charge of life, you can't help but be marked with increased courage.

This will not go unnoticed here on the Peninsula. Just think, do you know very many courageous people? This last week, most people who you passed on the freeway on your way to work were consumed not with courage, but with fears and insecurity. Fear is common. Courage is rare.

It makes sense. You can't have courage if you believe that life is self and death is loss. But if we believe that there's more to life than self and more to death than loss, we can show our neighbors something they rarely ever see: courage. And once they see our courage we can show them our Christ.

**d. Mark #4: Body Magnification.** Mark #4 is body magnification. Look at verse 20 again: "Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death." The word "honor" here shows up in many translations as "magnify." That's a good translation of this word. Paul wants his body to "magnify" Christ. It's not that Christ is small and needs a magnifying glass to be seen, it's just that to live is Christ and so Paul wants his body to be a magnifying glass that shows Christ off to the world. Paul wants to magnify Christ through what he does with his body in life or in death, in public or in private.

So, let me ask you: What are you doing with your body? Some of you in this room are doing terrible things with your bodies. Some of you are using your bodies to have sex with someone you're not married to. Some of you aren't taking good care of your bodies. Some of you, and I want to talk about this for just a second since we just had a seminar on this here yesterday, are using your bodies to look at pornography. Let me be real clear on this. This is to all of you men. Men, if you're a Christian and you're looking at pornography, you need to stop. You need to stop today. If you're looking at pornography you're breaking your body, you're breaking your loved ones, and most of all, you're not magnifying Christ, you're mocking Christ.

Jesus didn't let his body be broken so that we could go on using our bodies to play with sin. Jesus broke his body so that we could quit breaking things with our bodies. If to live is Christ, then our bodies are for Christ. Our bodies are a gift given for the showing off of our Savior. And we show off our Savior, not by wallowing in guilt for yesterday's sins, but by receiving his grace and letting that grace make us stop and

change what we do with our bodies.

CPC, if our neighbors are going to see Christ, they need to see him magnified in our bodies. The world knows how to use their bodies to magnify sin and self. Let's show the world a far larger and more pleasurable purpose for the body. I get excited about this. This week, whether you're eating, drinking, hugging a friend, jogging, doing yardwork, whether you're in the bedroom with your spouse or alone by yourself, in your body you get to magnify Christ!

**e. Mark #5: Selflessness.** Mark #5 is selflessness. Look at verses 22-26. An interesting question to ask is "why are these verses here?" In this second half of the text you've got Paul thinking out loud: "What should I do, I'm hard pressed, should I depart and be with Christ because that is far better or should I stay alive because the Philippians need my help?" This is such an interesting series of verses because Paul doesn't really have a choice here. Paul isn't the one who decides whether he lives or dies, whether he's released from prison or not. So, what's Paul doing here? It seems that Paul needs to talk about this life or death tension and the church needs to hear him wrestle through these issues. Nowhere else do we get such an exposure to the deepest motives of Paul's life.

Paul clearly says that he desires death more than he desires life, yet he chooses to stay in the flesh to help the Philippians. What Paul's doing here is saying: "if I had a real say in the matter, I would decide not to die, but to stay and help you." The key thing to see here is that Paul makes an entirely selfless decision. Paul would prefer to die and be with Christ, but instead he decides to help others. Paul puts others before himself.

Why does Paul exhibit such selflessness? Because unlike most people here on the Peninsula, Paul believes life isn't for the self, it's for Christ. And who is Christ? He's the one, the only one, who's ever lived a truly selfless life and died a truly selfless death. That's the gospel: the selfless one died for us selfish ones. To live, Paul believes, is to follow in the footsteps of the selfless one.

Here's a confession: my life does not exhibit the mark of selflessness. I'm a very selfish man. Being married to a selfless woman has taught me this. My wife is constantly thinking about my needs and so am I—I'm constantly thinking about my needs! And having a child soon is going to expose my deep rooted selfishness even more. I've got room to grow in all of these six Marks, but when it comes to selflessness I'm a pretty big failure. As I studied this passage this week I found myself feeling overwhelmed by the kindness of my Savior in saving a selfish man like me. I don't deserve it. I'm so thankful that my Selfless Savior's at work, changing me and

making me more like him.

**f. Mark #6: Desire for Death.** Our final mark, Mark #6, is desire for death. Paul is talking about death so much in this passage because he's preparing the Philippians for the fact that he might die soon. And by preparing the Philippians for his death, Paul's also preparing them for their own deaths. This is what pastors do—they prepare people to die. And what pastor Paul wants to make so clear is that death is actually desirable, because death is a gain. Paul isn't seeking to postpone death like our culture does. If you view death as a loss, of course you're going to try and postpone it and avoid it. But if you believe death is gain, a part of you desires death.

Look at verse 23. Why does Paul desire to "depart," to die? For the same reason he lives life: Christ. Paul says that to die is to be with Christ. Death is gain because in death you gain more Christ.

To live is Christ and to die is more Christ. Paul knows this and so Paul feels a tension, a tug, towards death.

Do you feel this tension, this tug to depart and be with Christ?

Let me ask another question. Would you be happy in heaven if Christ weren't there? As Christians I think we sometimes think that to die and be in heaven is to simply enter a shiny place where everybody's nice, you have lots of friends, and nobody gets cuts or broken arms. But that's not heaven. Heaven is heaven because heaven has Christ! Heaven is an eternity of enjoying Christ. For Christians, death is desirable because in death we gain more of what we already cherish most down here: Christ. And if we cherish Christ, our lives here on the Peninsula will be increasingly marked by a desire for death, selflessness, body magnification, courage, community, and joy.

## CONCLUSION

Paul answers life's two biggest questions in nine words. But Paul speaks these nine words only because someone else first spoke a different nine words. From the cross, Christ spoke nine words of a song. You know the first nine words of the song, but you might not know the whole song. From the cross Christ quoted, Christ sang, Psalm 22:

*My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?  
Why are you so far from saving me, from the words of my  
groaning?  
O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer  
I am a worm and not a man,  
Scorned by mankind and despised by the people.  
All who see me mock me;  
Be not far from me,  
For trouble is near;  
And there is none to help  
I am poured out like water,  
And all my bones are out of joint;  
My heart is like wax;  
It is melted within my breast  
My strength is dried up like a potsherd,  
And my tongue sticks to my jaws;  
You lay me in the dust of death.  
A company of evildoers encircles me;  
They have pierced my hands and my feet.  
I can count all my bones—  
They stare and gloat over me;  
They divide my garments among them and for my clothing  
they cast lots.*

On that summer night as I sat on the shore where Samson died, all I could do was sing. I sang on the shore because Christ sang on the cross. Christ sang nine bitter words so that we could sing nine beautiful words: To live is Christ and to die is gain.