

For Me to Live is Christ
Acts 9:1-9 and Philippians 1:21

Why do new Christians seem to be more excited about their faith and more anxious to share it than those of us who have been Christians for decades? Read Paul's testimony in Philippians 1:2. Philippians was written toward the end of his life and may have been his last letter, reflecting his commitment late in life.

Those words had been the motivating factor behind all Paul had done for many years. They expressed his reason for living and his hope for the future. They had been a central part of his thinking and preaching as he traveled throughout the Roman Empire visiting city after city to declare Jesus as the answer to the deepest needs of everyone. Paul had been through it all. He walked hundreds of miles, been shipwrecked, thrown into prison, whipped and stoned but nothing slowed him because of a commitment to Jesus expressed so succinctly in **"For me to live is Christ."**

Those words, however, had not always been on the heart and mind of Paul. In fact, there had been a time in his early life when he had strongly condemned the very Jesus whom he later served so intently. There was a time when Paul considered Jesus, who became the center of his every action, to be a blasphemer, liar, lunatic and deceiver of the people.

Paul set out one day from Jerusalem heading to Damascus with the sole purpose, and with official permission, to seize any Christian, putting him in chains and if necessary, destroying him. So determined was young Saul to stamp out those who followed Jesus that he was willing to make the long and lonely journey all the way to Damascus just to persecute the Christians there. It seems incredible, knowing where he was at that point in his life, to think that Paul, who was sitting in a damp, cold, smelly prison in Rome would later write, **"For me to live is Christ."**

The single event changed his life recorded in Acts 9. Read Acts 9:1-9. Note what Jesus said to Saul and Saul's question to Him.

The answer came immediately, **"I am Jesus whom you persecuted."** Acts 26:14 includes the fact that Jesus said, *"It is hard for you to kick against the goads."* An important truth is revealed in those few words. The goad was a sharp stick that a mule herder used to drive a mule train along. He would poke the animals with the point, inflicting pain, sometimes severe pain. If the animal began to stray off the path the herder jabbed him to motivate or force it back to the right way or speed it up. Jesus said that Saul had been prodded by God over and over in an effort to turn Him, but he had refused, even when it hurt. Read Romans 5:8). How thankful we should be that God sought us out, perhaps not just once but many times, and brought into our lives experiences, some perhaps even painful, that led us to a commitment to Jesus.

God made no effort, apart from the reminder of how much he was hurting, or to convince Saul that his life lacked something he longed for and knew he needed. And as we read the letters of Paul, we discover just how much he knew he was missing without Jesus.

Without Jesus, Paul had no real joy or peace. He was a sad, lonely, frustrated and dissatisfied young man. He wrote later that, in the eyes of the world, he had everything the world considered important from family and education to position and being religious. He was a leader in the religious community, respected by all. But he had no real peace. Although Saul was deeply religious, he did not have a personal relationship with the living God through faith in Jesus. But on that road to Damascus Saul discovered that peace comes not through religion or works or dogma but through the living Jesus.

Not only had Saul not found peace, he had not found any real satisfaction in life. He had set at the feet of probably the greatest teacher of his day, had climbed to heights in Judaism that few reach, had assumed tremendous responsibility as a member of the Jewish Sanhedrin, and even had the opportunity to really inflict persecution on the Christians whom he hated. He found no satisfaction in any of it. He was a man driven by that inner force that can never be satisfied regardless of what one achieves in life apart from Jesus. Nothing Saul had brought satisfaction to his life. It was not until he met the living Jesus on that road to Damascus that he could declare, again as written in the Philippians 4:11, **“I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.”** Contentment comes not from what we have or have achieved but from a walk with the One who created us in His image so that we might have fellowship with Him. Contentment and real meaning in life come with a commitment to Jesus who declared, **“I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”** (John 10:10)

Saul not only did not have peace or contentment, he did not have any eternal hope. He did all the right things as far as he was concerned. To the Philippians he wrote that he was a Pharisee of the Pharisees, meaning he kept the letter of the Law, still he had no assurance for eternity. One who depends on works to secure salvation can never know if the good outweighs the bad, although in the final analysis that is not the issue anyway. When one is faced with his own eternity and at that time one needs to know, not hope, where it will be spent. Saul knew all too well that the Bible spoke ultimately of judgment for sin. He knew the Bible declared that God was just and must judge sin to be true to Himself. Early in Saul's life he had stood by as a group of religious zealots stoned to death a young man named Stephen. He had seen on Stephen's face and in his actions the assurance of eternal life that he himself lacked. Undoubtedly that was one of the goads that Saul rebelled against. Stephen was, in Saul's eyes, a heretic but he had a reality that Saul, who tried to be so religious, lacked. Saul had no way of knowing that assurance until his experience on that road changed his life forever. After that encounter and commitment to Jesus, he could write, **“for me to die is gain.”** Read II Timothy 1:12.

Saul had it all as far as the world was concerned but in his own heart, he knew he lacked everything that was really important. Then on that road to Damascus he met the living Jesus and

gave his heart and life to Him. On that day Saul said for the first time, “**Lord, what do you want me to do.**” And from that day on he could say, “**For me to live is Christ.**”

What can we learn from Paul’s experience?

First, if one has never made that personal commitment to Jesus, he is on a road that is as meaningless and hopeless as that of Saul before he met Jesus. It does not matter how successful one thinks he is, how popular one is, how one’s family and friends view him, he knows deep within that there has to be more to life than he has. That something more is exactly what Saul discovered on that road 2000 years ago. Real life, meaningful life and a life of peace begins with a personal commitment to the Jesus.

Second, this reminds us of where we were and what we have now because of our commitment to Jesus. If you made that commitment to Jesus before you really had strong empty feeling, this is a reminder of where you would have gone had you not made the decision early to follow Him. Sometimes when we have been Christians for a long time we forget where we came from or don’t stop to think about where we would be today without Him. It is in remembering all we have been saved from as well as all we have been saved for that we can truly say and seek to live as Paul did, declaring, “**For me to live is Christ.**” It is when we see Jesus and all He has done for us and remember how great a salvation we have that we remember how we must live.

Third, this reminds us that our family, friends, and neighbors, even though they may look and act like they have the world by the tail, if they do not have Jesus are lost. Regardless of what positions they may hold, what toys they may have, they have no peace, no meaning in life and most of all have no hope for eternity. Those who live for themselves live a meaningless life and die alone even in a crowded room. Those who live for Jesus know what real life is all about and die with God’s hand in theirs and His promises on their lips. That makes all the difference. We need to share that good news even if they, like young Saul, see no need of it because at some point God is going to get their attention one way or another, perhaps through us, and they will find Him whom to know aright is life eternal.