

Paul's Example No. 2 -- Dying, Living, Battling

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Date: 10 July 2022

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we're going to turn now to our Bible readings, and you'll find our reading this morning in the New Testament in Paul's letter to the Philippians. Edward Lobb began a new series in this letter of Paul last week, and we're picking up towards the end of chapter 1, reading from the end of verse 18, the beginning of that new paragraph there, and reading from there to the end of chapter 1. Paul has just been speaking about how, despite being in prison and many bad things happening to him, he rejoices because Christ is proclaimed, even through his chains. And so he says, yes, and I will rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance.

As it's my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but with full courage now, as always, Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.

For me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I'm to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Which shall I choose? I cannot tell. For I'm hard-pressed between the two.

My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus because of my coming to you again. Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you, that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake. Engage in the same conflict that you saw that I had, and now hear that I still have. Amen, and may God bless to us his word.

Amen. Well, good morning, friends. Very good to see you all and to be here with you, not least for this baptism of little Zoe. Well, now we're continuing in Philippians, and if you'd like to open your Bible at Philippians chapter one, it's very helpful if you can get sight of a Bible, because what I'm about to say will make much more sense if you can see the words that I'm seeking to expound. So Philippians chapter one. My title is dying, living, and battling.

[3 : 3 0] The year is 62 AD. The place is a small house in central Rome. Inside this house sits a man, Paul, aged 58, a bondservant of Christ Jesus, as he describes himself in chapter one, verse one, but experiencing another kind of bondage, because he is bound by the wrist to a Roman soldier, a member of the emperor's personal bodyguard. Now, Christian friends of Paul are allowed to visit him and bring him things, food, a clean shirt, perhaps a bar of soap. One of his friends sits beside him from time to time, writing on parchment as Paul dictates this letter. Paul's thoughts are very much with the Christian church at Philippi, some 600 miles away in northeastern Greece, the church which the Lord had started some 12 years previously in 50 AD through the gospel preaching of Paul and his missionary companions, Silas and Timothy and Luke. And Paul's purpose in writing this letter is to bring sustaining encouragement to the Christians at Philippi, because he knows that their life as a

Christian community is under real threat. You'll see in chapter one, verse 28, that they have opponents, they're enemies. So Paul's main message to them throughout this letter is, because of this conflict, stick together, be of one mind. Look at verse 27 here. He says, whether I come and see you or I'm absent, I want to hear of you that you're standing firm in one spirit with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel and not frightened in anything by your opponents. So Paul's main message to them is stick together. Don't give an inch. Now the verses we're looking at today run from the end of verse 18 through to verse 30. And the thought that holds them together is this. There's a question in Paul's mind. Will Paul's prison sentence end with his acquittal and

release or with his execution? That's what he's thinking about. That's the question that is shaping everything he writes from verse 18 to verse 30. And let's notice a striking feature of this section. Verses 18 to 26 are all about Paul. Look at the pronouns and the adjectives. Verse 18, I will rejoice. Verse 19, my deliverance. Verse 20, my eager expectation and hope that I will not be ashamed, that Christ will be honored in my body. Verse 21, for me to live is Christ. Verse 22 contains three eyes. Verse 23, I am hard pressed, my desire. Verse 24 doesn't say I or my or me, but it's still all about Paul. Verse 25, I know that I will remain. Verse 26, in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ because of my coming to you again. So it's all about Paul at one level. And yet he's writing like this about himself entirely for their benefit. It's not look at me, don't you admire me? No, it's look at me for your benefits because my example will help you in your battle for the truth of the gospel. Now, if the thinking is all about Paul in the first paragraph, it's all about the Philippians in verses 27 to 30. Again, perhaps you'd follow it through with me. Verse 27, let your manner of life be such and such that I may hear of you that you are standing firm. Verse 28, your opponents, your salvation. Verse 29, it has been granted to you that you should suffer. Verse 30, it is you who are engaged in the same conflict that I'm engaged in. And the link between these two paragraphs can be very simply expressed. First, learn to live like me so that, second, you will be able to stand firm. Now, friends, we must not misunderstand Paul's motives in writing like this. We would get him completely wrong if we were to think of him as some kind of a big head. The famous boxer, Muhammad Ali, died a few years ago. He was a remarkable fighter. When he was young, he fought under his real name, which was Cassius Clay. And his motto was, I am the greatest, which wasn't far wrong in terms of boxing.

[8 : 28] He was a bit of a poet as well. He wrote this, if you want a good day, just bank on Cassius Clay. Now, we might initially think that Paul is saying, I am the greatest Christian.

But the truth is the exact opposite of that. In fact, he describes himself in Ephesians as the very least of all the saints. Saints simply means Christians. And in 1 Timothy, he describes himself as the foremost of sinners. And he thought of himself like that because, as he says in 1 Timothy, I was a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent, violent man. Paul had been a religious terrorist, responsible for the deaths of quite a number of Christians. Until the moment when the Lord Jesus, terrifying in his risen glory, had met him on the road to Damascus and said to him, Saul, why are you persecuting me? And it was that meeting which had traumatized Paul to the marrow of his bones. It was that that defined everything that followed in his life. He was humbled in a way that you and I never have been. And there was only one thing that he could do, and that was to follow the Lord Jesus and serve him with every ounce of his strength. And following the Lord Jesus meant following the pattern of Jesus's life, which was to preach the truth about God, to expect and experience the world's hatred and rejection, rejection which could only end in death, but death followed by a glorious resurrection. And Paul quickly perceived that this pattern of Jesus, preaching, rejection, unjust execution, and then resurrection, that was to be the pattern of his own life, and must be the pattern of every Christian's life. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer once said, when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. Now Jesus had said just that. If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross.

That means prepare for death and follow me. Jesus also said, the one who seeks to preserve his life is the one who will lose it. But whoever loses his life for my sake is the one who will find it. So when Paul writes to the Philippians about his own view of life and death, his life and his death, his thinking is entirely shaped by the teaching and pattern of Jesus. Far from saying, I am the greatest Christian, Paul is saying to the Philippians and to us, this is the deal. This is Christianity. I'm going to help you to live for Christ, and I'm going to help you also to die for Christ. Now this is the thinking that lies behind our verses for today. The question going round and round in Paul's mind is this, will my imprisonment end in my release or in my execution? I'm prepared for either, for both.

[11 : 39] And my Philippian friends, I'm going to open up my thinking to you now so that you will be prepared for life and for death. So we'll take the passage in two sections. First of all, verses 18 to 26, we have Paul's teaching about life and death. The first thing to notice is that Paul is really expecting to be released from prison. If you'd asked him to put a percentage on it, he would probably have said 80-20 in favor of being released. Just see how he expresses this in verse 19.

I know that through your prayers and the help of the spirit of Jesus Christ, this will turn out for my deliverance. And then verse 24, he tells the Philippians, but to remain in the flesh, in other words, to

continue in this life is more necessary on your account. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus because of my coming to you again, to Philippi.

So he's pretty much convinced that he's going to be able to get back and see them in the fairly near future. Look on to chapter 2, verse 24. 2-24. I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also. Now just to peep for a moment behind the curtain of history. In the book of Acts, chapter 25, Paul, when he was on trial, had lodged his appeal to Caesar. He was being tried at Caesarea on the coast of Israel, and it was that appeal which obliged Festus, who was the governor of Judea, to send Paul to Rome. Paul was a Roman citizen, so on trial he had the right of appeal to Caesar. Now the reigning Caesar in 62 AD was a vicious and immature man called Nero. Nero was in his early 20s at the time. He was quite unfit to rule a huge empire, quite unfit for anything really. But it's likely that Paul's case was not heard by Nero in person. He tended to delegate real work. One of the most senior administrators of the empire living in Rome in 62 AD was a man called Seneca. And Seneca was a brother of Gallio, who was proconsul of Greece and who appears in Acts chapter 18 and gives a ruling in favor of Paul and his mission in Corinth. You may remember the story. But Gallio had ruled that Paul, the Roman citizen, had not acted against Roman law and custom in establishing an alternative type of

Christian synagogue in Corinth. Now that was back in the early 50s AD. But we can be pretty sure that when Gallio returned to Rome in the mid-50s, he would have discussed Paul's case with his brother, the influential Seneca. And it was probably Seneca's colleague, a man called Burrus, who would have heard Paul's case and whose view of Paul would have been influenced by the advice of Seneca and Gallio.

So purely on human grounds, the grounds of Paul's knowledge of how strings were pulled in the upper levels of leadership in Rome, Paul would have had much confidence that he would very likely be released.

[15:05] But he could not be certain. And that's why he writes as he does in chapter 1, verses 20 to 23. So let's look at these key verses, because they're so instructive to us. They train us in how to view our own life and our own death. Now, as we've seen in verse 19, he speaks of his confidence that he will be released. He says that this, in other words, the trial that he's about to undergo, that this will turn out for my deliverance. But then in verse 20, it's as though he's imagining himself in the courtroom, facing examination by Nero's delegate. And he says in verse 20, it's my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed. Paul is picturing himself standing there in the courtroom, having questions fired at him by the prosecutor. For example, this is the kind of conversation that he's preparing for. Paul, do you believe that this Jesus whom you say you worship was divine?

And that after his crucifixion, he was raised from death? Yes, sir, I do. Now, to speak like that is to be unashamed, isn't it? And are you aware, Paul, that the glory and majesty and even deity of our beloved Caesar, all blessing be upon his noble brow, could be threatened, indeed undermined, by a sect of our people worshipping a rival king whom they call their Christ? Yes, sir, I'm well aware of this. And do you not tremble, Paul, to bring dishonor to the name of our most revered emperor?

I have no wish, sir, to dishonor the name of the emperor. Indeed, my fellow apostles and I teach our people to submit cooperatively to the authority of the empire. But we do regard Jesus as lord and king of the whole universe. It was he who taught us to render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. But it is to him that the worship of the world is due. Now, just leave that imaginary court scene and return to the thinking that lies behind it. Verse 20, Paul's expectation, his hope, is that he will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage, now as always, Christ will be honored in his body. Courage, courage only needs to be exercised in a situation of real threat. You don't need courage to settle yourself down in a deck chair on the beach and eat a prawn kebab. But courage is needed where there are real grounds for fear.

Now, it's very helpful for us in 21st century Britain to have Paul writing in verse 20 about what he is going to say and what attitude he's going to have in court. There are parallels with today. You see, ministers and preachers today, we may well find ourselves in court in years to come charged with some kind of hate speech. Imagine you're a preacher in 2030, 2035, and your recorded sermons, these sermons all get recorded, let's imagine they're being investigated by the police.

[18:29] And imagine that you are taken to court and you're charged under the law. And the examining barrister questions you. So imagine a modern court scene. Imagine that you're the

Reverend Mr. Smith. Okay.

He says to you, is it true, Mr. Smith, that you have asserted in your sermons that marriage in God's sight can only be contracted by a man and a woman? Yes, sir. I frequently said that and I do believe it. And is it true, Mr. Smith, that you have also asserted that transgenderism is a self-deception? Yes, sir. I've not only asserted it in the past, but I assert it today in this courtroom, that those who attempt to change their gender are not only deceiving themselves, but are denying the givenness of their biological reality.

Are you not aware, Mr. Smith, that you're flying in the face of a weighty accumulation of modern opinion? I'm well aware of it, sir, but my position is not determined by modern opinion, however weighty, but by the teaching of the Bible. You are an anachronism, Mr. Smith.

On the contrary, sir, the Bible is always contemporary. Now, friends, this is just the kind of thing that is likely to happen to Christian leaders and preachers in the near future. So let's learn from Paul how to prepare for that kind of testing.

[20 : 03] Paul says here, it is my hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage, Christ will be honored in my body. But Paul hasn't finished that sentence. He goes on in verse 20, honored in my body, whether by life or by death. You see, he hasn't dismissed the possibility entirely that he's going to be executed. Bible history experts tend to think that Paul was released after his trial, but his freedom was fairly short-lived because he was later rearrested and almost certainly executed in 64 or 65 AD. Now, verse 21, perhaps you'd look at that verse particularly. It's wonderfully helpful and instructive to Christians in any age because it teaches us the meaning of living as a Christian and the meaning of dying as a Christian. Here's the verse.

To me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Now, let's look at each of those phrases. What does he mean when he says, for me to live is Christ? He means something like this.

Christ is my life. He is the source of my life. He and he only gives meaning to my life. All my energies are directed into loving him, serving him, and passing on the good news about him to others.

He's my joy. He's my delight. He's my savior. He died for me, and that's why I live for him. More than that, he revealed himself to me on the road to Damascus, and he commissioned me, charged me to preach him and to suffer for him. How can I do anything less than that?

He's my lord and king. I am his bond servant, and he has captured my allegiance. Now, we might ask, but didn't Paul have to do the ordinary nuts and bolts of life as well?

[22 : 01] Didn't he have to wash his shirts, make himself another pair of shoes for those thousands of miles that he walked? Didn't he write thank you letters to kind ladies who'd invited him to dinner?

Didn't he have to pay tax? Well, of course he had to do all those things. He was an energetic man, and he loved people. He had hundreds of friends. He mentions many of them by name in his letters. Certainly, he spent time with them. He enjoyed meals with them, and he was educated. He had read a great deal. He even quoted some very minor Greek poets in his address to the Athenian elders in Acts 17. But for him to live was Christ. The Lord Jesus filled his screen everything. Everything he did was for Jesus. His priorities were shaped by Jesus's priorities.

Now, you and I are not Paul. Very few of us, certainly not me, are going to have the same levels of vitality and energy that Paul had. But this phrase is for us too. It's for our instruction.

For me, to live is Christ. Let's ask the Lord Jesus to get that phrase into our bloodstream and to get it pumping around our systems. Well, now the second phrase, to die is gain, which almost means to die is Christ. Look on for a moment to chapter 3, verse 8, partway through the verse. 3, 8.

For his sake, I've suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish in order that I may gain Christ, gain Christ and be found in him. Now, we might ask, but had not Paul already gained Christ?

[23 : 49] Is he not already a Christian? Well, yes, he is indeed. But in one very important way, while writing this letter, he had not already gained Christ. Just look back to chapter 1, verse 23. 1, 23. My desire is to be with Christ. I'm not there yet, but that is far better.

You see, he's in Christ while still a man on earth, but he's not yet with Christ. And that's what he longs for. And it's his death which is going to bring him into the very presence of Christ. He's not there yet, but he knows that if he is condemned to death by the Roman court, it is going to bring him nothing but glorious gain. And when he writes to die is gain, we mustn't think that he has a romantic longing for death. There's nothing romantic about dying for Paul. In 1 Corinthians 15, he describes death as the last enemy. Paul knew the book of Genesis. Paul knew from Genesis chapter 3 that

death is the sentence imposed by God on the human race for our rebellion. Death is not a natural process, as the world would have us believe. It is a supernatural judgment. Now, I don't look forward to the process of dying, lying in a hospital bed with hardly strength to raise one of those little plastic cups to my lips and drink lukewarm tea out of the spout. To Paul, there's nothing pleasant about death. It's what lies beyond it that thrills him, to gain the very presence of Christ.

This verse 21, it's a dramatic and powerful summary of what it means to be a Christian. It deals with our present and our future. It shows us how to regard Christian living and Christian death. To me, to live is Christ. That's the present. To die is gain. That's the future. Well, here's a practical suggestion. I wonder if you have one of those little blackboards in your kitchen with a small piece of chalk beside it.

The blackboard normally reads things like this. Instant coffee, bird's custard powder, for the dog, wolf and bark mix, three large tins. You know that sort of board. Why not write at the top of that board, for me to live is Christ and to die is gain. And then don't rub it out when you rub out the other items. Let it sit there for a long time until it has worked itself right into your system. Now let's return to Paul's line of thought.

He's contrasting two immediate possible futures. Acquittal and release or condemnation and death. And he weighs them against each other in verse 22. If I'm to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose, I cannot tell. I'm hard pressed between the two. My desire, is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. So what he's saying there is that release and acquittal, verse 22, means more opportunity for fruitful labor. That is preaching and teaching and strengthening the churches. And he specifically wants to return to Philippi. Why? Well, he tells us at the end of verse 25, for your progress and joy in the faith. But he would rather leave this world.

[27 : 23] Verse 23, my desire, what I really want, is to depart and be with Christ. That's better by far. And it's hardly surprising to read those words. Think of how Paul had suffered, beaten many times, lashed with the 39 lashes, stoned, shipwrecked on several occasions, often hungry, worn out by hard labor and by dangerous travel by sea and land. He was in his late fifties, but he must have felt and probably looked far older. To leave the world, which had caused him so much suffering, must have been a delicious prospect. To depart and be with Christ, to know that there would be no more beatings, no more stonings, no more fierce mobs, baying for his blood, no more chains. But, verse 24, to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. I'm more than happy to keep on living, to keep on breathing, and to come back to you, my beloved Philippians, for your progress and joy in the faith, to build you up so that you will not be frightened by your opponents, as he puts it in verse 28. Now, friends, I need to add a very serious note on verse 21. To die is gain. That is wonderfully true for the Christian, but it's not true for those who are not Christians. There's a view around in the world, we have to call it a false and sentimental view, that everybody goes to heaven after they die. Now, that is not what the Bible teaches. The Bible teaches heaven and hell. It's not, do listen carefully to this, it's not heaven for good people and hell for bad people. That's another myth. We're all bad people. We're all sinners. The Bible teaches heaven for those who repent of living without reference to God and who then turn to Christ, but eternal ruin and condemnation for those who persist in a life without God, a life that is simply shaped by their own desires and pleasures. So we mustn't think that Paul's assurance about eternal life with Christ is an assurance that everybody can have. Every Christian can have it. It's a glorious assurance for every Christian.

But it may be that there are some here today, perhaps some who are watching on their screens at home, who have never turned to Christ, have never capitulated to him. Now, let me tell you, friend, it is perilous to be in that position, gritting your teeth against the Lord Jesus and holding on to your idea of self-determination. Come to him while you can, while there's still time. Submit to his loving authority. Eternity lies before all of us. Any of us could step into eternity this week.

But any of us, even if we have remained aloof from God for many years, can come to him right now, confessing our hardness of heart and our need of a savior. And then we shall be able to say, with Paul, for me to live is Christ and to die is gain.

Well, let me move now from Paul's teaching about life and death to our second section. I want to be briefer on this. Verses 27 to 30, where Paul calls on the Philippians to engage in the great conflict. Look at verse 27. It's a key verse here in this letter. Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ. Now, what on earth does that mean? Well, Paul is describing the manner of our conduct. He's not describing us. He doesn't say that we or the Philippians are worthy of the gospel.

[31 : 23] That would be a contradiction in terms, because the gospel, by definition, is good news to people who are not worthy of it. We are thoroughly unworthy of the gospel. But once we've received it and have submitted to Christ, we're called upon to develop a manner of life which is worthy of such good news.

So what is this manner of life worthy of the gospel? It's a life, Paul says, of unitedness, so as to engage in conflict. He spells it out there in verse 27. So that whether I come and see you or I'm absent, I may hear of you that you're standing firm in one spirit with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel and not frightened in anything by your opponents.

That's the lifestyle that is worthy of the gospel. There has to be firmness, oneness, oneness, and a willingness to do battle and to engage in conflict. So let's just think about these ideas. First, there needs to be firmness, stability. Verse 27, I want to hear that you are standing firm. Standing, not knocked over, not swaying in the wind, standing firm. And that firm stance comes with growing conviction. And our convictions grow as the teaching of the Bible is fed into us again and again and again. The Christian life is a life of ever deepening conviction about the truth of God and the truth of the gospel. Now the world tends to value perpetual open-mindedness.

I'm keeping my options open, somebody says. I don't want to commit myself to any particular position in life. The author, G.K. Chesterton, who wrote the Father Brown series, was a big man and he had a very good appetite. And he used to say this, the reason for having an open mind is the same as the reason for having an open mouth. Namely, to shut upon something solid. Paul is saying, learn firmness and practice it and help each other to practice it. Then secondly, there must be unity, oneness. Verse 27 again, one spirit, one mind, side by side. Now our culture today promotes a rampant individualism.

It says to us, be your own person, do your own thing, blaze your own trail. You're amazing, you're a star, you're unique. Now Paul would give short shrift to that kind of talk. He's not suggesting that we become clones of each other, certainly not that. The church has always had a glorious variety of personalities in it. I mean, just look around this building, how different we all are. Tall and short, young and old, black and white, extrovert, introvert, tensed up, laid back, musical, sporty, arty, working class, toffee nosed. The church has always been varied like that. Our oneness consists in this. We believe in one God, in one Lord Jesus, in one and one only way of salvation. We unitedly believe in the necessity of repentance, in battling with sin, in battling with sin and in telling the good news to the world.

[35 : 02] We believe in the radical distinction between truth and falsehood. Our unity also consists in the great love and support that we give to each other, which is precious beyond words. Firmness, oneness, oneness, and thirdly, a willingness to engage in conflict. Verse 27, striving side by side, battling for, for what? For the faith of the gospel. Now how do we battle for the faith of the gospel?

By stating it, by defending it, and by exposing the folly and emptiness of all other systems that seek to capture the allegiance of men and women today. But it's this stating and defending and exposing of folly which inevitably brings us into conflict. The gospel is not neutral. Preaching the gospel is not by giving a lecture on the flora of Dumbartonshire. You will never arouse hostility by lecturing on the flora of Dumbartonshire. The gospel arouses opposition because it challenges men and women so deeply. It penetrates to the depths of the human heart. It's backed by the tender love of God who wants nothing for any of us but our salvation. But the gospel has to expose the reality of our natural hostility to God, our sin, our rebellion, our determination to be self-determining.

Paul gave himself to this conflict right up to the moment when he was executed. He knew that it was almost certain to end there with his execution, just as it happened to his master Jesus some 30 years before. But he kept on battling for the gospel because he loved people. Like God, he wanted nothing but their salvation. Like Jesus, he was willing to lay down his life if that would mean eternal life for many others. And that is the conflict that he called the Philippians to engage in and us too who read his words today. It's the great pattern of life. Jesus pioneered it. Paul followed his footsteps and we follow today in the same pattern, laying down our life so as to bring salvation to many others.

And if we develop this firmness, this unity, this willingness to strive and battle for the faith of the gospel. We will not, verse 28, be frightened in anything by our opponents. In fact, as Paul says in verse 28, this will be a clear sign to them of their destruction. In other words, those who hate the gospel will see the firmness and unity and battle willingness of the church and they will tremble.

They'll never tremble in the face of a church that is disunited and doesn't know what it believes. A church whose lifestyle is indistinguishable from the world's lifestyle. But where the gospel is clearly and lovingly proclaimed from a basis of stability and unity, those who have been despising it will begin to wonder if their worldview might, after all, be folly and emptiness.

[38 : 28] It's very challenging for Christians to think of strapping on our armor and going to war against the falsehoods of the world. It's challenging to think of little Zoe Irvine being committed today by her parents and by all of us to engage in battle as a soldier of Christ. Did you notice Willie used that phrase in his prayer, a soldier of Christ? At the moment, this little baby, her life is all cuddles and sweetness and love and softness and safety. But what kind of world will she be facing when she's 20? And what kind of world are all of us facing today? It's actually the same world that crucified Jesus and executed Paul. Modern Britain is an increasingly unsafe place to live the Christian life and to be part of a purposeful church. But friends, there's a huge encouragement for us in verse 29. For it has been granted to you, gifted to you by God, that for the sake of Christ, you should not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had, and now here that I still have. The suffering and the battling are not some kind of mistake, not a ghastly error on God's part. They're his gift to us, his grant. They are his loving way of conforming us to the image of Jesus, making us more like Jesus. The battling brings us into line with Jesus. So let's engage gladly in this conflict, standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by our opponents. The scars of Christians are the gift of God to us.

But through our warfare, by the grace of God, many more people will find forgiveness and eternal salvation. Let's bow our heads and we'll pray.

Dear God, our Father, we want to thank you again for the example of Paul and his teaching. We find it very challenging, but we know that it's right. We know that it's true. And therefore, we ask you to give us grace to be prepared to fight battles on behalf of the gospel so that many more should be saved. And give us, we pray, increasing firmness, increasing unity, increasing love and joy as we stand together for our Lord Jesus. And we ask it in his name. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.