

Reeks: Letters to live by

Titel: ... Focus

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Good morning, friends, it's good to be with you. We start a series today, as you've already heard. It's going to last for four weeks. We're going to journey through the letter that Paul wrote to the Philippians. I wonder if I can encourage you to stay with us as we journey for these four weeks. I'll do the first week, Johan will do the second week, I'll do the third, and then Johan will finish it off in three weeks' time, so come along.

It's also an opportunity for us to really wrestle with one specific letter in scripture, to try to understand what God is saying to us through it, and to help you with that there is a resource which you can get straight afterwards. This resource will give you readings, a thought for the day, and some background material for understanding the text. It'll be immensely helpful, so I want to commend that to you. I think there are 400 left, so the first 400 people can get it. Otherwise you will have to download it from mosaic.com on the homepage. That's where you'll be able to find it.

We're going to start today. I'm going to read a portion from chapter one. I hope that during this week you'll read chapter one over and over and over again. It really is an incredible letter, and I want to just read a few verses to you, so if you can reach out for that leaflet, which is just on the inside of your bulletin, it's also a place where you can maybe make one to two notes if you think I say anything that's helpful, and there we have the reading for today. Let me read it to you, Paul, writing this letter to the church in Philippi.

Yes, and I will continue, he says, to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and the help given by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me; he is in prison so that is what's happened to him; what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance. He really believes that God is going to work out this very painful situation for his deliverance. I eagerly expect, I love that word, I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but I will have sufficient courage so that now, as always, Christ will be exulted in my body, whether by my life or by my death.

For me to live is Christ. For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body this will mean fruitful labour for me, yet what shall I choose? I do not know. I'm torn between the two. I desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is better by far, but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this I know that I will remain and I will continue with all of you for your progress and for your joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me, and so we thank God so much for Paul's letter. It's just incredible that we have it today, a letter that he wrote almost 2,000 years ago, to a congregation in Philippi. We're able to read it today and study it, and look at what God is saying to us.

Friends, I want to do something this morning that is really quite simple. I want to bring to the table today a question for you. It's a question which I think is important. I hope that you will think it's important as well. It's a question that I really would like to ask each one of you personally. Whatever age you may be, whether you're in your teenagehood, whether you're a young adult, whether you're in your 30s or 40s, whether you're over the age of 60, I want to ask you this question.

And the question is this: what is the focus at this moment of the one life that you've been given? What are you living for at the moment, really? Now, I think it goes without saying that focus is really critical to

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effectiveness. Those of you who run companies and businesses and organisations, you would tell me, Trevor, if you want to run an effective business or organisation you really need to have a clear sense of focus.

Those of you who are part of a successful sports teams, you will say to me, Trevor, if you want to succeed on the field you need to be focused. Effective congregations that make a difference are congregations that have a very clear sense of focus. Today, all I want to say, friends, is that what is true organisationally, what is true for team sports, and what is true for congregations is also true at a very personal level. It's true for your life and it's true for my life.

It's absolutely essential of us to have a clear sense of focus. When we have a clear sense of focus we know what to invest our time and energy in. When we have a clear sense of focus we know what we say yes to and we know what to say no to. When we have a clear sense of focus we are able to work out the difference between what is good for our life and what is best for our life.

When we have a clear sense of focus we are able to live a life that's not distracted and fragmented. When we have a clear sense of focus we are saved from that terrible thing called double-mindedness. This is why I want to bring this question to the table this morning. What is the focus of the one life that you have been given by God? What are you living for? And it's against this backdrop of focus that I want to come to Paul's letter that he writes to the Philippians, and look at a little bit of the first chapter, but I want to pay attention especially just to one verse.

Now, let me give you some background, first of all, to the letter. Paul is writing to a church in Philippi. You may not know this, but Philippi was the first city in Europe that opened its heart and mind to the gospel of Jesus Christ, and when you read this letter you will pick up very quickly that Paul loves these people. He really has a tender place in his heart for these people in Philippi.

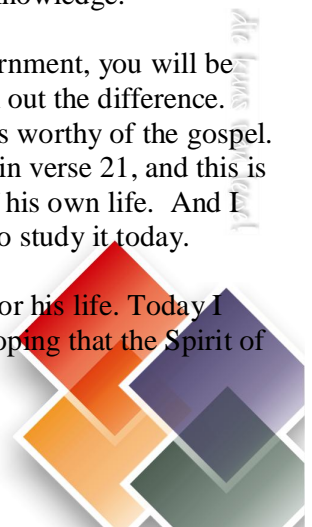
When he writes this letter he is in prison, most probably in Ephesus, and when you were in prison in those days prison authorities didn't feed you and they didn't give you clothes. You had to get that from people beyond the prison walls. And Paul was so grateful to these folk in Philippi because they kept sending him money and clothes and things that he needed while he was in prison, so when you read this letter you'll pick up immediately, almost from the word go, as you read through the first chapter, Paul is really, really grateful for these people.

He says to them, I remember you with joy. And then he says to them, and you can look at this in the first few verses, he says I am absolutely convinced that what God started in your life God is going to finish. And then in verse nine; and you can study this for yourself; I don't have time now to look at it in depth and you are glad I don't have time, but in verse nine he prays for them. He says I pray that you will have an intelligent love. I love that, that you will have a love that is full of insight and knowledge.

And then in verse ten he prays for them and he says I pray that you will have discernment, you will be able to suss out what is good and right, and wrong and bad. You'll be able to work out the difference. And then in verse 11 he says to them I pray that you're going to live in a way that is worthy of the gospel. And then, from verse 12 onwards he talks about the situation that he's in, and then in verse 21, and this is my focus for today, in verse 21 Paul shares with the Philippian church the focus of his own life. And I want you to look at it, friends, very carefully this morning, because I want us just to study it today.

He says to them for to me to live is Christ and to die is gain. That is Paul's focus for his life. Today I want us to see what Paul meant by that focus, and as we look at Paul's focus I'm hoping that the Spirit of

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God will encourage us today to work out our own focus. We may not use those exact words. We may use different words, but I'm hoping that Paul's focus is going to help us to refocus and to become very clear about what the focus of our one life is. So I'm going to just ask you to notice a few things about Paul's focus, and you may want to make a note of these few things. I've found them very helpful.



Will you notice, first of all, that Paul's focus has a very simple clarity about it? Look at it again. For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain. Notice the simple clarity. It's not wordy, there are not many big words, it's not a whole paragraph; it's just one sentence. Notice that a 12 year old could understand a little bit of what Paul was on about. If Paul was speaking to a person of almost any age group, they would be able to understand. It's very simple. Notice also that it's something that Paul could most probably remember quite easily. It was also something easily embedded in his memory. I think if you bumped into him and asked him, hey, Paul, what are you living for, he'd say, for me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. He'd be clear.

Now, would you agree with me if I were to say that we live today in a very complex world? Political complexity, economic complexity, psychological complexity, scientific complexity... this world is complex, and I think one of our deepest needs in a complex world is to live with a focus that has a simple clarity about it. It just helps so much.

I never forget, about 30 years ago Debbie and I went to Kempton Park to begin a new congregation. It was very small when we got there. We met in a hall. It was exciting days for us. I was about 30 years of age. We had just gotten married, and this was our first congregation, and I can still remember the first Sunday that I preached. I preached in the morning, and then, in the evening, I preached with about 30, 40 young people that were there, and I think I wanted to impress them, so I used big words. I used the Hebrew and the Greek. I wanted to be impressive.

After the service I was at the door shaking hands, and then, when everyone had went, I went to the pulpit to go and get my Bible, and on the pulpit there was a big piece of paper, and there was just one word written on that piece of paper: KISS I thought to myself, oh, the people here are warm and welcoming; they want to kiss me in welcome. During the week I discovered the guy that put it there wanted me to learn something. K I S S. You know what? Keep It Simple Stupid. He wanted a simple clarity in my preaching.

Now, let me speak very quickly. There are two kinds of simplicity. There's a simplicity that really can be stupid. Whenever someone says, Trevor, here are three easy steps to happiness I'm a bit cautious about that. We live in a very complex world, and sometimes you can't reduce things to three easy steps.

But there is also another kind of simplicity that some people have. They've dealt with the complexity of life. They've wrestled with the big questions. They know that life is mysterious, but in spite of all the complexity they have a very simple clarity about what is absolutely essential. They have a simplicity on the other side of complexity. Paul is one of those people. Paul is not a stupid man. Paul was brilliant. Paul was very aware of all the complexities, and yet, when you asked him about the focus of his life there was this simple clarity. For me to live is Christ and to die gain.

Can I ask you, friends, what are you living for? Do you have a simple clarity of focus for your life at the moment, or are you all over the place, double-minded, don't know what's important, don't know what's best? Do you have a simple clarity? Notice, secondly that Paul's focus is Christ centred. It is centred in Christ. That's why I loved our song that we listened to from our soloist this morning, the Christ centeredness of it. For me to live is Christ.

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Paul was absolutely convinced that Jesus Christ was God's Messiah. He was absolutely convinced that God had sent Jesus Christ into this world, that Jesus had lived, had died, had risen again, had ascended into heaven and was now living as part of the Triune Godhead. Paul was convinced that Jesus Christ was God's unique Son. In East Rand English, if I were to put it very simply, Paul was convinced that Jesus Christ was the One, that Jesus Christ was absolutely key to human life, that it's impossible to understand human life without Jesus Christ. Paul was convinced about that.

And so for Paul, and you can notice this, his highest priority is his relationship with Jesus. He wants to get to know Jesus, he wants to get to love Jesus, and he wants to get to serve Jesus. He wants to bring his whole life into a focus in Jesus Christ. He says later, and I love it, in the fourth chapter he says through Christ I can do all things.

Now, friends, would you agree that whatever our focus is today, we are going to put something or someone at the centre? Who or what are you going to put there? Some people put their partner there. I think that's dangerous. Don't ever make a god out of your partner. Sometimes we put our work there. That's dangerous. Sometimes we put our sport there. I think that's dangerous.

What do you put at the centre of your life focus? All I want to ask is this question; is it wise to do what you're doing? Is what is at the centre of your focus worthy of the one life that God has given you? Paul challenges us to think deeply about this. At the heart of his life focus was Jesus Christ.

Notice one more thing. Notice that Paul's life focus has an eternal perspective. It's not only for this life. It's also for the life to come. Look at the second part of his life focus. For me to live is Christ and to die is gain. To die is gain. Paul is absolutely confident that his relationship with Jesus Christ will not be broken by death, and he knows that when he dies he will be moving into a fuller and deeper relationship with Jesus Christ whom he has known in this life. He's absolutely confident about that. That is his eternal perspective.

I can almost imagine the prison warden coming up to him and saying, hey, Paul, you better stop talking about Jesus. You better... you know, you just better stop talking about Jesus or else, and I can imagine Paul saying, I'm sorry, sir, but for me to live is Christ and to die gain. If you kill me I go to be with Christ. You can't frighten a man who says that. You can't threaten a man who says that. You can't scare a man who says that. A man who says for me to die is gain is unstoppable.

What perspective do you have in your focus for your life? Perspective, you know this, is critical. You must have heard about the UJ student who during her first year sent an email to her parents and said dear mom and dad; I just want to let you know how it's going. I have fallen in love. I have moved in with another first year student. You are going to be grandparents because I'm pregnant. I want you to know that I've thrown in my first year studies. We are going to get into a caravan and we're going to travel around South Africa, my new boyfriend and myself; your loving daughter, Michelle. PS, all the above is not true, but I failed mathematics, and I just want you to have a sense of perspective.

Perspective is really important. I was standing with a 20 year old the other day in Benoni, in our congregation. He comes up to me. This is what he says. He says, hey, Trevor, what's it like to have most of your life behind you. Cheeky, hey? What's it like to have most of your life behind you? And I was quiet for a moment, because I knew this was a God moment, and I said to him, hey buddy, most of my life is still before me. It's still before me.



That is my perspective on life. My perspective is not that most of my life is behind me. My perspective is that most of my life is before me, and that brings a radical difference to how I live in this moment, a radical difference. It affects my mood, it affects what I live for, it affects how I live, what I give time to, what I give energy to. It affects everything.

So let me bring things to a close. Has this been helpful at all? Paul has a focus. It has a simple clarity about it. It puts Jesus right at the centre. It has an eternal perspective. I want to end with a challenge and an invitation. Are you ready? This is my challenge. Will you take time sometime today and maybe you'll talk about this with your family or your children, just take some time today to make a note of what you're living for at the moment. Try to be honest. What are you living for at the moment, really?

If I were to gather ten of your best friends, if I were to come to your house this afternoon, and you are so glad that I'm not coming to your house this afternoon, but if I were to come to your house this afternoon and we were to sit in the lounge with ten of your best friends, and I were to say to ten of your best friends, hey, you know this man, you know this woman, tell me, from your observation, what does this person love for, how would they answer? How would they answer?

This person lives for career advancement. This person lives to make more money. This person lives for beers and braais and boobs. This person lives for their sport. This person lives for their family. What would they say about the focus of your life? That's the challenge. Can I honestly face up to what I'm living for at the moment?

Here's the invitation. Can I invite you today to refocus? Can I invite you to come up today with a simple sentence that will refocus your life wisely? You don't have to use Paul's words. Come up with your own sentence. You might say, my focus is to use my gifts to the glory of God. That's a wonderful focus. Or, my focus is to get to know the love of Jesus Christ and to share the love with every person. That's wonderful focus. Or, my focus is to love my family and to do business to the honour of God. That's a wonderful focus.

Come up with a one sentence focus that is clear, that puts Christ at the centre, and has an eternal perspective, and then, can I ask you to send it on email to Mosaic? Will you do that, so that on the homepage we can put your focus, and it would be wonderful if we could put up 50, 100, 200, 400, 1,000 one sentence life foci, with your first name. Let's interact around this as a community. One sentence that refocuses your life to the glory of God.

Eight years ago Debbie and I bought our first home. It was a wonderful moment. We had an estate agent who always used to say to us, Trevor, location, location, location, very important, location. I want to say to you, friends, we're talking about something more important than buying a house. We're talking about life. I want to say this: focus, focus, focus.

Let's pray together. Dear God, we thank you for this incredible letter that Paul writes. And we thank you for the incredible focus that he had for his life, that shaped his life, and we ask, Lord, that your Holy Spirit today will work very deeply in our hearts and our minds, and that you will help us, Lord, to really refocus our lives in whatever season we're in, whether we're 12 years of age, whether we're 60 years of age, that you will help us today, Lord, in a new way to refocus, to refocus. So come, Spirit of God, be with us today as we talk about these things, as we reflect on them very, very deeply.

Help us, Lord, to come... to come... to have a focus that just has a simple clarity about it, that puts You at the centre, and that has an eternal, eternal perspective. Will You help us, Lord, as we deal with our lives,



the one life that you have given us? Help us. This is our prayer and we offer it to You, Lord, with all the love and with all the faith of our hearts, in the name of Jesus or Lord, amen.

Friends, may the joy... may the joy of Jesus Christ be with you. God bless you, and take care, hey, and please, get hold of a resource. God bless you. Take care.



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