What people are saying about

TO LIVE IS CHRIST
TO DIE IS GAIN

“The church has been blessed by the book of Philippians ever since Paul wrote it, and this presentation of it is fresh and powerful. Matt mines the riches of this great Bible book to teach us to never be content with stagnant Christianity.”

Kyle Idleman, teaching pastor at Southeast Christian Church and bestselling author of Not a Fan

“Matt’s words will kick you in the tail in the best way. We don’t want to live numb, and we often need a kick to remember life isn’t a game and God is no myth. You will find yourself craving God again and craving everything else a little less.”

Jennie Allen, author of Anything

“To know Jesus is the essence of life, and I love how Matt Chandler stirs up our affections for Him in his book To Live Is Christ, to Die Is Gain. Matt’s beautiful, practical, and straightforward unpacking of Philippians will nudge you toward maturity … and a more robust walk with the Savior. Get it, and dive in today.”

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“I trust Matt Chandler to speak on any biblical issue, but especially on discipleship. This book will help you live as Jesus would if He were in your place.”

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“Few men whom I have personally known have truly suffered. Even fewer have I known who have suffered well. Matt Chandler is one of them. Matt has written an excellent book reminding us that one of our primary callings as followers of Christ is to die to ourselves and that only through that death can we truly live.”

**Matt Carter**, pastor of preaching and vision at the Austin Stone Community Church and coauthor of *The Real Win*

“Matt Chandler has offered readers rich biblical wisdom in his writings thus far, and *To Live Is Christ, to Die Is Gain* is no exception. This book calls us to follow Jesus with everything we’ve got. It’s as simple and as profound as that. This powerful new work cuts through all the trappings and goes to the heart of the gospel: Jesus. Highly recommended!”

**Mark Batterson**, lead pastor of National Community Church and New York Times bestselling author of *The Circle Maker*

“Matt Chandler is a man captivated by Jesus, the gospel, and grace. In this, his latest book, he takes us on a journey into the depths of Paul’s famous letter to the Philippians and reveals the full beauty of a life so centered on Jesus that all else pales in comparison.”

**Larry Osborne**, pastor of North Coast Church and author of *Sticky Church*
TO LIVE IS CHRIST
TO DIE IS GAIN

MATT CHANDLER
WITH JARED C. WILSON
To Audrey, Reid, and Norah. My prayer is that by the grace of God you might see that He is life and there is nothing to fear in death.
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INTRODUCTION

Our house is a lot of fun these days. Audrey is ten, Reid is seven, and little Norah is four. It’s busy and can be a bit chaotic, but our home, by God’s grace, is mostly filled with laughter (and occasionally the tears that follow discipline). Like most parents with children my kids’ age, I am almost daily freaked out by how big they are getting. Gone are the days of changing diapers and burping babies after they eat. Compared to what they once were, all three of my kids look like Olympic athletes. There is no comparison between newborn Audrey and ten-year-old Audrey. She’s almost a completely different person. She runs, rides her bike, roughhouses with her brother, and loves to have her girl-friends come over to play. I sometimes feel sad about how big she’s grown, but the alternative would be something much more serious and scary.

What if she didn’t grow up at all?
What if, instead of maturing and growing, she just stopped or reverted? What if as she turned two she still couldn’t walk or talk? What if by age eight she couldn’t read or dress herself? What if at ten she still needed me to carry her around and wipe the milk off her mouth?

Now don’t get me wrong—if those things were necessary, I would gladly serve her and God in this way. But isn’t this immeasurably more heartbreaking a thought than me not being able to hold her like an infant or enjoy her saying “hostible” instead of “hospital”? God created her to physically, emotionally, and mentally mature, and by His grace she has done just that! Our other two children are doing the same: growing. There are some parallels here to what we read about ourselves in Scripture. The Bible calls us to pursue maturity in Christ.

Consider just a few verses:

Therefore let us leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God. (Heb. 6:1)

Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking be mature. (1 Cor. 14:20)

Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we
may present everyone mature in Christ. (Col. 1:28)

But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil. (Heb. 5:14)

I could go on, but I think the picture is clear. God wants us to grow from being infants in Christ to being mature in Christ. That’s what this book is about. How are we to mature, and how can we spot any “developmental delays”? My prayer is that as you read this book, prayerfully applying its challenges to your heart, God would use Paul’s letter to the Philippians to show you what maturity looks like and to call you to pursue it all the more with all your might under His grace.
I thank my God in all my remembrance of you. (Phil. 1:3)

The gospel absolutely drove Paul.

A missionary church planter, Paul’s primary field of ministry was major metropolitan areas. If Paul were around today, he would be going to places like New York, Los Angeles, Dallas, and Chicago, and he would be planting churches. After developing a community of believers in these places, establishing leaders, and grounding them in the gospel, he would then move on to begin the work again in another area. But, a good shepherd, Paul tried to stay in contact with the churches he had planted. The churches would write to him with questions they had or about difficulties they faced, and Paul would write back with instruction and encouragement. The New Testament book we call Philippians is one of these encouraging missives, but it’s fairly unique among Paul’s letters.
Philippians is the only letter that we have in the Scriptures in which Paul is not trying to correct bad teaching or rebuke bad behavior. Instead, the letter highlights Paul’s personal affection for the Philippian church and his commendation of (and exhortation toward) their Christian maturity. We see in this little letter what it looks like to be a mature man or woman in Jesus Christ.

Maybe you’ve already realized that Philippians is filled with what we might call “coffee-cup verses”—passages of Scripture that have so stirred the hearts and minds of believers over the years that we’ve thrown them on coffee cups, T-shirts, and bumper stickers. As a quick survey, we see in Philippians 1 that “to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (v. 21). In chapter 2 we get the famous proclamation of Jesus’s sacrificial and humble self-emptying, learning that this humility makes Him worthy of all honor and glory but led Him to lay all of that aside to exalt God in service to sinners. In the third chapter, Paul says that he counts all things—even good things—as rubbish compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Jesus Christ. And finally, in the fourth chapter, we find the epic and well-known declaration, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me” (v. 13).

Clearly, Paul has a lot to teach us about life—by which I mean he has a lot to teach us about Jesus.

If you read any of Paul’s other letters, you will always find him saying, “Do this, don’t do that, stop this, start doing that, quit going there, now act like this, get right, act right, be right.” He grounds these commands in the finished work of Christ in the gospel, but they’re still there. Paul apparently feels that these other
churches have a lot of work to do. But Philippians is different. Paul gives the Philippians some instructions, sure, and he appears to address some issues needing correction, but he does so implicitly. Overall, the letter to the Philippians is colored with favor. It may be, then, that this letter is the best New Testament picture we have of what a maturing church looks like and what maturing people do.

As a result, the letter to the Philippians overflows with Paul’s heart of affection for them. He considers the Philippians not just sheep in his care but friends in his heart, and in this book he wears his heart on his sleeve. You can glimpse the depth of his love for these people in his introductory remarks:

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace,
both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. (1:1–8)

That last sentence may give the more stoic among us a bit of concern: “I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus.” Of course, from what we know of Paul, he’s a pretty tough guy. A man’s man, perhaps. But he is moved enough by his connections with these friends of his to say that he “yearns” to be with them again, and this yearning is characterized by deep affection. How deep is his affection? It is affection sourced in the Lord Jesus Christ Himself.

This is the affection that took Jesus Christ to the cross. It is the affection that led Jesus to submit to arrest, to torture, to death. This is obviously a deep and abiding affection. And Paul is telling his friends that all this affection that is in Christ Jesus is in his own heart, which yearns for them.

Now, Paul loves all the churches to which he has written. He loves them all with the love of the Lord, and he has different kinds of connections to each one, which elicit varying degrees of personal affection. Remember in Galatians, for instance, how exasperated and angry he is. That’s an expression of love as well, because he loves them enough to correct the church’s acceptance of heresy. It’s a loving shepherd who disciplines the sheep. In Ephesians, Paul reminds the Ephesian church that they were predestined before the foundation of the world. He tells them about God’s feelings for
them and about God’s love for them. But he doesn’t say, “I yearn for you.” You are not going to find that language in Paul’s letters to the other churches. You will find him often referencing who they are in Christ and what Christ did for them. He wishes them well, and he expresses love to them. But not like this. There is a serious affection here.

How did he get to feel this way about these people?

THE BLESSED BACKSTORY

Philippi was what we might call a major metropolitan area. Located along a major commercial road for the Roman Empire, the city teemed with industry and intelligentsia, agriculturalists and artists. Since it was a well-populated city with lots going on, it made sense that a missionary church planter like Paul would want to go there and preach the gospel. So to get a fuller picture of the affectionate connection revealed in his letter to the Philippians, we need to look further back at the roots of his relationships there. We will start in Acts 16.

So, setting sail from Troas, we made a direct voyage to Samothrace, and the following day to Neapolis, and from there to Philippi, which is a leading city of the district of Macedonia and a Roman colony. We remained in this city some days. And on the Sabbath day we went outside the gate to the riverside, where we supposed there...
TO LIVE IS CHRIST TO DIE IS GAIN

was a place of prayer, and we sat down and spoke to the women who had come together. One who heard us was a woman named Lydia, from the city of Thyatira, a seller of purple goods, who was a worshiper of God. The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul. And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, “If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay.” And she prevailed upon us. (vv. 11–15)

Previously, Paul received a vision in which he saw a Macedonian man calling for help, which Paul took as a spiritual calling. Without delay, he and three companions—Luke, Silas, and Paul’s young protégé, Timothy—set off for Macedonia, which brought them to Philippi.

The fact that the group is looking for a synagogue but finds instead what is basically a women’s Bible study shows not only the lack of Christian presence in Philippi but the lack of Jewish presence. Typically Paul and his cohorts sought out a Jewish house of worship in which to proclaim the good news of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, but Philippi was such a densely Roman city that there were not even enough Jewish males to constitute a place of worship. Instead, where the missionaries expect to find a “place of prayer,” they come upon a group of religious women having their own riverside Sabbath service. This is where Paul first meets Lydia.
THE BUSINESSWOMAN

Lydia is from the city of Thyatira. This tells us that she is likely ethnically Asian. But she has a house in Philippi. So this tells us that economically she’s very wealthy. Both Thyatira and Philippi are major metropolitan areas. The portrait we see developing of Lydia is that of a woman who’s in the fashion industry—think “fashionista”—essentially the CEO of her own fashion empire. Thinking in today’s terms, she’d have a house in Los Angeles, a house in New York, and a house in Paris. This is a woman who has done very, very well for herself.

But Lydia is also what the Bible calls a God-fearer. Here’s what that means: She has rejected paganism. She has rejected polytheism. She does not believe that there are dozens of gods—that there’s a god of the wind, a god of the rain, a god of the purple cloth, or a god of the fashion world. She’s worshipping the Father, not Prada. Lydia has come to believe that there is one God. She listens to the teaching of the Jews, trying to grasp what it means to live a God-fearing life; she wants to live out her faith in the context of her family and her business.

This is an important point in the story of Lydia’s conversion: she is an intellect and, by all indications, a seeker. She has gathered with a group of women to hear the Scriptures explained. Lydia, by listening to the Torah, knows that God gave His people the law. She knows that God gave the Ten Commandments. She understands that she does some of those things well, but she also understands that she’s broken some of those laws and commandments too. She
likely has some concept of the need for atonement. But without the good news of Jesus, she’s confused. It is into this setting that Paul shows up and starts to fill in the spiritual framework through which Lydia has operated up to this point.

This is like a Tuesday-morning women’s Bible study! This is like a bunch of women doing a Hebrew precepts study, and Paul shows up, says, “Hold on a second,” and presses pause. Paul begins to explain to the women’s Bible study that God gave us the law to reveal that we all have fallen short of God’s glory and that atonement was made only by Christ’s work on the cross.

Paul engages Lydia’s reason, engages her intellect—and it is through the impartation of this knowledge that she becomes a believer in Christ. In fact, she immediately believes and gets baptized, her whole household gets saved and baptized, and then she invites Paul to stay in her home. I’m guessing she’s got a nice joint. For Paul the bi-vocational missionary and blue-collar tent maker, this is a pretty sweet deal. His time in Philippi is a refreshing respite from the glorious grind of faithfulness to the gospel call.

THE SLAVE GIRL

This is how the church in Philippi began: the conversion of the high-society businesswoman Lydia through intellectual engagement with the gospel. But the story, like the church, becomes more complex. As Acts 16 continues, we see how the mission in Philippi reveals the diversity of the church being planted there:
As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. She followed Paul and us, crying out, “These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation.” And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, “I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her.” And it came out that very hour. But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. (vv. 16–19)

This little girl stands in absolute contrast to Lydia. Where Lydia is Asian, this girl is Greek. Where Lydia is in control, an intellect, this little girl is impoverished, enslaved, and exploited. Where Lydia is a seeker, this little girl proclaims the way of salvation. Of course, she’s doing it perhaps unwittingly, under demonic control, but she believes that salvation is available the same way the demons do. While Paul and Lydia meet in the context of a formal, orderly group meeting, Paul and the slave girl meet as she follows the missionaries around, screaming her head off. She is disruptive. As in control as Lydia is, this little girl is out of control.

Now watch how God goes after her. Paul doesn’t turn around and say, “I’m doing a seminar Saturday on ‘Crazy.’ I would like
for you to come because I think you have crazy in you.” He does not invite her to a Bible study, and he does not appeal to her intellect on any level. He doesn’t appeal to her reason. She’s irrational. No—instead, in an act of Holy Spirit power, he rebukes and exercises the spirit that rules her and enslaves her on the inside. In an instant she finds the salvation she’s been demonically mocking.

The contrast between these two Philippian conversions is startling and instructive. With Lydia, the gospel gets at her heart when Paul engages her intellectually. With the slave girl, the gospel gets at her heart when Paul engages her spiritually. In both instances, the Holy Spirit grants new birth and repentance, of course, but the deliverance of the gospel takes on the context of the personal need. Paul shows how he as a missionary is willing to become all things to all people (1 Cor. 9:22).

But the conversions aren’t done.

THE BLUE-COLLAR JOE

The deliverance and conversion of the possessed slave girl is an exciting scene, but the story intensifies as we continue reading in Acts 16:

And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, “These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice.” The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them
and gave orders to beat them with rods. And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks. (vv. 20–24)

As Westerners, when we think of “the stocks,” we picture New England in the 1700s, the embarrassment and shame of having your head and hands stuck in a public contraption. But that is not what first-century Roman Empire stocks were like. These devious contraptions would contort the prisoner’s body into all sorts of excruciating postures, locking limbs and joints in place to the point of making the entire body cramp. The prisoner’s body would seize up with searing pain, and then the Romans would just leave the person there for days.

Notice that the jailer is not commanded to treat his prisoners this way. The magistrates simply ask him to keep the missionaries safe, and instead he tortures them. So we aren’t dealing with a very nice man at this moment. This jailer is very good at his job, and he probably likes it more than he should.

But when it comes to taking pride in one’s work, this guy could not out-enjoy Paul. “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them” (Acts 16:25). If you hated the gospel, wouldn’t the apostle Paul be the most frustrating human being alive? It did not matter what anyone did to this man, he loved God and continued to show it in every possible way.
We see Paul’s gospel fixation echoed throughout his letter to the Philippians. He is the man who when threatened says, “Well, to die is gain.” In response his captors will say, “We’ll torture you, then.” He says, “I don’t count the present suffering as worthy to even compare to the future glory.” You can’t win with a guy like this. If you want to kill him, he’s cool with that because it means he gets to be with Jesus. If you want to make him suffer, he’s cool with that, so long as it makes him like Jesus. If you want to let him live, he’s fine with that, because to him, “to live is Christ.” Paul is, as Richard Sibbes says of everyone united with Christ, a man who “can never be conquered.”

Paul’s stubborn fixation on Jesus is reminiscent of these words from the early church father John Chrysostom, who apparently was threatened with banishment if he did not renounce his faith:

If the empress wishes to banish me, let her do so; “the earth is the Lord’s.” If she wants to have me sawn asunder, I will have Isaiah for an example. If she wants me to be drowned in the ocean, I think of Jonah. If I am to be thrown in the fire, the three men in the furnace suffered the same. If cast before wild beasts, I remember Daniel in the lion’s den. If she wants me to be stoned, I have before me Stephen, the first martyr. If she demands my head, let her do so; John the Baptist shines before me. Naked I came from my mother’s womb, naked shall I leave this world.
Paul reminds me, “If I still pleased men, I would not be the servant of Christ.”

Sounds a lot like Paul, doesn’t it? In response to his bold missionary work in a hostile place, the Romans put him in the inner prison and lock him in the stocks, and he basically says, “I’m going to sing and pray while I’m down here.”

And as he and Silas are singing and praying, something extraordinary happens.

Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s bonds were unfastened. When the jailer woke and saw that the prison doors were open, he drew his sword and was about to kill himself, supposing that the prisoners had escaped. But Paul cried with a loud voice, “Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.” And the jailer called for lights and rushed in, and trembling with fear he fell down before Paul and Silas. Then he brought them out and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” And they said, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” And they spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. And he took them the same hour of the night.
and washed their wounds; and he was baptized at once, he and all his family. Then he brought them up into his house and set food before them. And he rejoiced along with his entire household that he had believed in God. (Acts 16:26–34)

This is one more utterly unique conversion story to help us develop a portrait of the Philippian church. The jailer is not like our first two character studies. The jailer is basically a blue-collar ex-GI manning the jail cells. He is not interested in the incessant banter of the intellectuals, and he’s not invested in the charismatic hoopla of spiritual power. He is like the guy who just wants to put in his time at work so he can go home, have a beer, and watch the game. He is probably not a guy who sits around a lot thinking about the meaning of life. He’s duty bound. He just wants to do his job well, honor his imperial employers, and get back to his well-ordered house. On the scale of Lydia to the slave girl, the jailer is middle class. Not super rich and not poor.

How does the gospel grab hold of him?

In Rome during this period of time, if a prisoner escaped or was lost, whoever was responsible for that prisoner would pay the price with his life. Like a lot of blue-collar Joes of today, this jailer has come to identify his life with his job. There are people today who cannot think of themselves except by what they do, and perhaps this man is no different. So when he sees that he might be about to lose a lot of what has been entrusted to him, it’s an automatic leap for him to think of taking his own life. He immediately yanks
out his sword and gets ready to kill himself. But Paul shows him a better identity, a more fulfilling reality, and a greater duty that transcends everything this guy has previously known.

He shows the jailer this reality first by example. After being tortured, the missionaries sing and pray. After becoming free from their bonds, even though the opportunity for escape and revenge is before them, the missionaries stay to share the gospel. When they have the chance to run away, they stay. And the jailer is blown away. While Paul engaged Lydia through her intellect and the slave girl through spiritual power, he engages the jailer through a living witness to a miracle.

This is how the Philippian church begins—with a Jewish fashionista businesswoman, a demon-possessed slave girl, and a blue-collar ex-GI duty bound to the Roman Empire. Probably not exactly your dream church-planting team, but the Spirit works in strange ways to utterly redeem the unlikeliest and most diverse people. We see in the backstory of Acts 16 the beautiful reconciliation that the gospel achieves, not just of unholy individuals to a holy God but superficially incompatible people to each other! Jesus takes strangers and makes them a family.

THE GOSPEL’S NEW COMMUNITY

Now we see that when Paul writes to the Philippians, “I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus,” it’s because he was there. He’s talking about Lydia. He’s talking about this little slave girl.
He’s talking about the jailer. When he says, “I thank God in all my remembrance of you,” these are the people he remembers.

By the time Paul writes to the Philippians, how old is the little girl? What sort of young woman has she grown up to be? It’s been roughly ten to fifteen years since the planting of the Philippian church. Is the young girl married? Does she have children? What about Lydia? What has Lydia done for the good of the gospel with all her wealth? What about the jailer—has he softened, or is he still rough around the edges?

Paul knows this church. He has won the souls of this church. He baptized them. He was the conduit through which the power of the Holy Spirit poured out. This is why he’s yearning for them with the affection of Jesus Christ.

It is from his experience with the Philippians and other missionary journeys—stemming from his own stunning conversion from Jewish persecutor of the church to proclaimer of Jesus Christ to the Gentiles—that Paul has adopted the position that the gospel cannot be stopped by the socioeconomic, racial, or religious walls we fallen humans build up. In these incredible instances, the gospel defies race, defies class, defies status, and even defies aptitude.

If we’re honest with ourselves, we will admit that we tend to prefer to do life with people who are similar to us. We live in neighborhoods and associate with people who look like us and act like us. Most of us go to church with people similar to us. This is the natural tendency of all people. But the gospel is not natural. As we see here in the odd beginnings of the Philippian church, the gospel blows the doors off our tidy little hegemonic communes.
and creates a whole new community that never would have formed without it. Apart from the supernaturally reconciling ministry of grace, rich fashionistas are not doing life with poor demoniacs. It just isn’t happening. But because Paul is willing to put skin in the game, risking his own life to bring the message of life in Christ, what was once divided is now unified in love.

This is the kind of thing that emboldens Paul. This supernatural community makes him bolder in ministry because it gives him a clearer picture of the gospel’s effects among people. He really sees the gospel going forth into the world, bearing fruit, and growing (Col. 1:6). And it bears fruit within people too, not just among them.

The gospel creates a new reality that deepens our understanding of the world and our place in it. This is where Paul is going in the book of Philippians. As he remembers the powerful conversions he’s witnessed, he wants to bring to their minds the soul-strengthening assurance of life in Christ day-to-day, wherever they may find themselves—rich or poor, healthy or sick, alive or dead. And he isn’t just blowing smoke here. As the roots of the Philippian church plant reach to Paul’s time in prison, his affectionate remembrance in the letter comes from a prison too. You see, Paul wrote to his friends in Philippi from a jail cell.