

## INTRODUCTION

Many people love to watch sports. I do too. Sports fans can often be the most irrational people on the earth. They travel with their teams to see them play. Some wear strange costumes to the games, others insist not to wear any shirt no matter how cold it is. They celebrate when their team scores and stun when their team loses. They unite with one heart to cheer for their team. Naturally, people who support the other team on the field will be seen as opponents. I know a brother who graduated from the Ohio State University. His kids grew up seeing their parents root for the school team. Later, the family moved to Michigan. The oldest daughter subsequently enrolled at the University of Michigan. If you know anything about the two schools, they are rivalries. This young lady went with her friends to watch the Michigan and Ohio State football game at the stadium. People called it “The Game.” You can imagine it is a big deal to both schools. When Ohio State first scored this girl did what she had been doing all her life. She yelled with joy. Then she quickly realized that she now studied in Michigan. Ops! Wrong place, wrong time. When her mom recalled the incident, she said: “To this day I still wonder how my daughter walked out alive.” Perhaps some of you are passionate about a different subject other than sports – Star Wars movies, cooking or cars, etc. When you are passionate about something, you spend time and effort to get to know every detail about it. You get excited when people mention it too. The apostle Paul might not watch any sport. His undivided passion was Christ. Paul lived for Christ and he was always ready to die for Him. I do not think that any Christian will not say they love Christ. But can we honestly say that we love Christ passionately? We can learn from Paul’s example to put Christ as the highest priority in our life.

## EXPLANATION

### 1. Paul’s Conviction 保羅的決心

Paul’s passion for Christ shaped his conviction. Paul gloried Christ no matter what circumstance he was in. He said in **verses 20-21**: 20 I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. 21 For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. Paul witnessed for Christ whether in his life or in his death. He made every opportunity to share Christ with people. He said in **1 Corinthians 9:22-23** that: 22 To the weak I became weak, to win the weak. I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. 23 I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings. Paul identified with the people he was in touch with to reach out to them. To the Jews, Paul abided by the Law. To those who were spiritually weak he refrained from eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols. Even later when Paul was finally killed people understood He died for what he believed. Paul was not ashamed of the gospel. Jesus required us the same allegiance in **Matthew 10:32-33** that: 32 “Whoever acknowledges me before men, I will also acknowledge him before my Father in heaven. 33 But whoever disowns me before men, I will disown him before my Father in heaven.” In the context, Jesus was talking about persecution for His name’s sake. One way or the other we will face situations where we need to stand up for what we believe. Perhaps people will ask our

position on current affairs or simply how we spend our weekend. Someone said that as Christians we should be a magnifying glass to make Christ evident in our lives. We should also be a telescope to bring Christ closer to people. Think about that. When people look at us, can they see Christ through us? We often see Christians in prominent positions openly profess their faith. Many of us watch the Super Bowl last Sunday. You may know that both the head coach and the quarterback of the Philadelphia Eagles are Christians. I am sure there are other players and coaches on both teams who are Christians too. They are not shy to give glory to God in front of the camera. It was January of 2000 when the St. Louis Rams won the Super Bowl. I am sorry to say that they beat the Tennessee Titans. Kurt Warner was the quarterback for the Rams. It was a typical Cinderella story because five years before then Warner was a nobody working in a grocery store. He was also an out-spoken Christian. The TV station knew it. Soon after the victory Warner was approached by a reporter, asking: “Kurt, first things first — tell me about the final touchdown pass to Isaac.” Isaac Bruce was one of the receivers. The journalist hinted that Warner should talk about sport rather than his faith. But Warner answered: “Well, first things first, I’ve got to thank my Lord and Savior up above — thank you, Jesus!” Warner put God first. Later, when Warner and his wife started their own non-profit organization, they simply named it First Things First Foundation. We do not have to be a celebrity to impact the people around us with the gospel. The question is whether we are not ashamed of the gospel like Paul and Warner did. God gives each of us a different platform to witness for Christ. No one else can go to your school and work place to witness to the people you see every day. The world fools us that faith is a personal thing, and it would be an offense to tell others what you believe. That is nonsense. If I am so proud of my earthly father I will carry his picture in my wallet, wear the shirt he bought for me and talk about him to my friends all the time. If I can talk non-stop about the sports team I cheer for, then why should I be ashamed to talk about the Lord who died for my sins? Brothers and sisters: what is your conviction? Don’t let the world stomp you under its feet like a little chicken. Let the power of the resurrected Christ infuse you with courage and wisdom, so that you can soar like an eagle, and boldly testify for Him!

## 2. Paul’s Confidence 保羅的信心

Paul’s conviction was to preach Christ in his life and in his death. Between the two options Paul would rather choose death. It was not because he was tired of living or afraid of the ongoing suffering. Paul understood that the moment he left this earth he would be with the Lord in glory. He shared his dilemma in **verses 23-24**: 23 I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; 24 but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Paul had struggles in his heart. But Paul found his confidence in the Lord. Paul chose to live on because he knew God still had unfinished business for him to complete. Paul was hoping that he would be released from prison soon so that he could visit the Philippian believers. Continue to read **verses 25-26**: 25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me. Paul looked forward to meeting his brothers and sisters again and encouraged them in the faith. The joy of witnessing their spiritual growth would be multiplied in Paul. It is like those grandparents who can only see their little grandchildren once every few years. It would give them great joy when they see how much those babies have grown. The Philippian Christians were Paul’s spiritual babies. He led them to Christ and he nourished them with God’s Word. How big a joy it would be for Paul to see that their faith

continue to thrive in the midst of persecution! Paul had full confidence in God's plan and timing for his life. Paul was not anxious about his own welfare. He lived with a purpose to exalt Christ. Paul did not allow hardship to bring him down. What is the difficulty you are facing now? There are many things in this life that cause frustration. People closest to us may betray us, we will all grow old and weak and our cars will break down. Put your confidence in the Lord. God has not completed your life-story yet. Do not let failure defines you. Instead, ask God what He wants to accomplish in your circumstance. God used the hardship Paul faced to glorify Christ. God desires to do the same in your life. Tomorrow morning as you get up you need to ask yourself what keeps you going. It should not only be your career, your family or even the bills, but Christ alone! Our purpose in life should be to magnify Christ. Paul found his joy in the spiritual growth of the Philippian believers. What is the source of our joy? The world tells us to live for ourselves and party like there is no future. While wealth and material possessions can bring us temporary happiness, what causes lasting joy in us? It may have been 5 or 10 years since you accepted Christ. Do you still feel the same joy as you first began your faith journey? You can. Just share the gospel with others, lead them to Christ and disciple them in their spiritual growth. There can be no bigger joy than to witness the birth and subsequent growth of a spiritual baby.

### 3. Paul's Concerns 保羅的掛心

Paul's conviction is to exalt Christ in his life. He had confidence in the Lord that God would continue to use him toward that goal. But since Paul was in prison far away from the Philippian church he showed some concerns for the believers there. The first concern can be found in **verse 27**: Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel. The Philippian church was actively growing, and it was zealous in preaching the gospel. If there was any problem, it was the issue of unity. We will study more about it next time when we look at chapter 2. In this verse, Paul urged the believers to live according to the gospel. The Greek word that was translated as "conduct" carries a meaning of behaving as a citizen. The city of Philippi was a colony of Rome, so by default all the people living there were Roman citizens. But in the spiritual realm, the Philippian believers also belonged to the Heavenly Kingdom. As such, they should live in such a way that was fitting for their title as heavenly citizens. How so? Paul explained that they had to contend "as one man for the faith of the gospel." The word-picture behind the word "contend" is like a team sport. To win a competition all the teammates have to work together with the same goal in mind. If there is any disunity, then the result may be a loss. Paul's first concern was pressure from the inside. The second concern Paul had was pressure from the outside. He explained in **verse 28**: Without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved - and that by God. Paul was concerned that the believers might yield to the enemies of the gospel. Believers would not face any persecution if they agreed with everything the unbelieving world professed. Therefore, their suffering was a proof that what they believed was from God. Hence, it also verified that their enemies would eventually be judged by God because of their unbelief. We looked at Matthew chapter 10 early on. In **verse 28** of the same chapter Jesus warned His disciples about the certainty of persecution. He said: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. Rather, be afraid of the One who can destroy both soul and body in hell." Who is the "One" that can destroy both our bodies and souls? It is God. Then how come we are always afraid of

men and unafraid of God? Suffering for Christ was part of God's calling. Paul said in **verses 29-30**: 29 For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, 30 since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have. Paul testified from his own experience that suffering for Christ was unavoidable. It is our human nature to run away from danger. We wear sunscreen to shield our skin, safety goggles to guard our eyes and oven gloves to protect our hands. What if we know that we may suffer unjust treatment if we tell others that we are Christians? A seminary student was looking for a summer job to earn his tuition money. The only job he could find was to work as a lumberjack. He understood that those professional loggers were tough guys. They smoked, drank and cussed. He knew that witnessing Christ to them was mission impossible. When summer was over, a classmate asked him how everything went. He said: "Oh, it was great. I got along with those people just fine." When asked how he managed to do so, he replied: "I didn't tell them that I'm a Christian." You know, the world may not care what we believe, as long as we do not make a big deal of it. It is considered a no-no trying to convince others to believe in our faith. Just stay silent and blend in. Paul's concerns should be our concerns too. Are we contending as one man for the gospel? Rather, do we have our own agendas in the church and argue about secondary issues? If we do not unite in one heart we will definitely fail. We do not like to hear anything about suffering. The world tells us that we are coming into a playground. Just work hard, enjoy all the goodies, do not bother how others live their lives. But the Bible tells us that the world is not a playground, but a battleground for Christians. Our government may not beat us up or lock us in prison because of our faith. However, we are in constant combat with the force of darkness. There is no middle ground. We either belong to God, or we do not. We always need to stay on guard, or we will be dragged away from the truth.

## CONCLUSION

We must put Christ as the highest priority in life. Paul showed us his passion for Christ. What is your passion? How does it look like in reality to have a passionate love for Christ? Some of you may hear the story of Pastor Francis Chan before. In 1994 Pastor Chan and his wife started a church in California with 30 people. By 2000, the church had over 1,000 members. He published a few books, started his own Christian charity organization and has been invited to speak at various national and international conferences. Pastor Chan's life philosophy is very simple: just follow Christ and live by God's Word. He chose poverty over prosperity. He insisted to receive a \$ 36,000 yearly salary at the beginning and until he left the church. Did I mention that he lives in California and raise a family of five kids? He downsized his home and gave away a large percentage of his wealth made from book royalty. In 2010 he resigned from his senior pastor position and moved to plant a new church in the inner city of San Francisco. In his well-known book "Crazy Love" Pastor Chan said: "God is calling you to a passionate love relationship to Himself, because the answer to religious complacency isn't working harder at a list of dos and don'ts. It is in love with God." He challenged people over their lukewarm attitude toward God. He explained that lukewarm Christians do not need to trust God in their problems. They have their retirement fund in place and their refrigerators are always full. Then pastor Chan said: "Their lives wouldn't look much different if they suddenly stopped believing in God." What a solemn warning. Just imagine how different our world would be like if Christians have passionate love for God. There will be more teachers who show genuine care to their students, more honest businessmen who pay attention to the needs of their customers instead stock-

holders, more thoughtful doctors who see lives as precious. Passionate love for God. Everything comes down to this: Is Christ the declaration or decoration in your life?