

## The Meaning of Paul's Statement "To Live is Christ and to Die is Gain" and Its Implications for Believers

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### ABSTRACT

*Philippians 1:21 expresses the Apostle Paul's declaration that life is entirely for Christ, while death is gain because it leads to eternal fellowship with Him. This study explores the theological meaning of Paul's statement "to live is Christ and to die is gain" and its implications for believers in contemporary life. The research applies a descriptive-qualitative method with a literature study approach, using the Epistle to the Philippians, Paul's other letters, and relevant theological writings as primary sources. The theoretical framework is built on Paul's understanding of life in Christ, the calling of believers, and the hope of eternal life. The findings reveal that living in Christ means making Him the center of faith, obedience, and service, while death is not to be feared but embraced as gain, since it opens the way to eternal communion with Christ. The study concludes that this understanding calls believers to live purposefully, remain steadfast in faith, and face suffering and challenges with strong hope in Christ. Ultimately, Paul's statement is not merely a theological principle but a spiritual foundation that shapes Christian identity and mission: life becomes an opportunity to glorify God, and death becomes the gateway to eternal life with Him.*

**Keywords:** Life, Death, Jesus Christ, Gain



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### INTRODUCTION

The main problem faced in the life of faith among believers today is the mistaken view of the meaning of life and death. Many Christians still regard social status, wealth, position, and power as the measure of a successful life, even though all these things are temporary and will eventually pass away (Stott, 2010). Human life in this world is transient, and what is considered valuable from a worldly perspective ultimately has no eternal significance before God. Scripture clearly emphasizes that the true meaning of the believer's life is not found in worldly achievements but in an existential relationship with Christ, where life is an opportunity to glorify Him, and death is gain because it means union with Him in eternity (Packer, 2002).

### Article History

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This reality should serve as the foundation for how believers perceive life in a world filled with various worldly values. Unfortunately, fear of death remains a universal struggle, including among Christians themselves. Death is often perceived as terrifying, uncertain, and even as punishment, rather than as part of the fulfillment of God's promise to those who live by faith in Him. Scripture in Hebrews 9:27 firmly declares that human beings are destined to die once, and after that face judgment (David, Baker L., SM Siahaan, 1997). This verse acts as both a warning and a reminder to believers that death is not a fearful end but a phase leading toward eternal life with God.

In practice, however, many Christians continue to live without this eschatological awareness. Life is often lived without clear direction, preoccupied with worldly pursuits, and lacking in understanding of their position regarding life and death before Christ. This inevitably affects the quality of faith and spiritual steadfastness in facing the realities of life, including suffering and the threat of death.

Another equally significant problem is the condition of the church, which continues to face pressure, discrimination, and even persecution for faith in Christ (Situmorang, 2025). Since the early church of the first century, followers of Christ have endured various forms of suffering-whether verbal, social, or physical. Such persecution is not only part of the historical record of the church but remains a reality in many parts of the world today, including in Indonesia (Awang et al., 2025). In this context, a correct understanding of the meaning of life and death from the perspective of God's Word becomes crucial so that the church may continue to stand firm amid trials of faith. The church must not live in fear, retreat under pressure, or shrink back from its witness, but must have the courage to remain faithful in testifying to Christ regardless of the circumstances.

When God's people lack a proper understanding of the existential meaning of life and death in Christ, the church risks losing its direction, living in compromise, or even withdrawing from its prophetic role in the world (Ay & Situmorang, 2025). The Apostle Paul clearly teaches that for believers, life is no longer about oneself but about Christ, and death is not emptiness but gain, because it means being united in His glory (Phil. 1:21). Therefore, the question of how the church and believers understand life and death in the light of Christ must be taken seriously. The church must not merely emphasize moral teaching or social ethics but also build a strong theological-existential foundation among its members so that every believer may live with an awareness of the temporality of this world and hold firmly to the hope of eternity with Christ (Ay, 2025). A proper understanding of life and death is not only important individually but also vital for the endurance of the church in facing the pressures of the times and the challenges of faith in the future.

In several previous studies, the theme of suffering, life, and death in Christ has indeed been addressed, yet each with different emphases and approaches compared to this research. First, John Marlin, in his work *Telaah Ontologis Penderitaan Menurut Rasul Paulus* (Marlin, 2023), emphasized that suffering must be understood correctly according to the truth of God's Word. Marlin's focus is more on the ontology of suffering in Paul's perspective, highlighting the metaphysical and spiritual meaning of suffering in the life of believers. However, the study does not specifically discuss the relationship between life and death in the light of Philippians

1:21, nor does it relate the meaning of suffering to the church's response to challenges of faith in the present era. Second, Mase, in his study *Penderitaan dalam Perspektif Konstruktif Sosial dan Agama*, attempted to view suffering constructively within the social and religious context (Mase, 2025). Mase argues that suffering is not always directly related to sin and its consequences, but can serve as a means of deepening one's relationship with God. This study is more ethical-philosophical and sociological in nature, addressing suffering as both a human and spiritual experience, without specifically linking it to the existential meaning of life and death in Christ as found in Philippians 1:21.

In light of the foregoing, the novelty of this research lies in its explicit use of a theological-existential framework that situates Philippians 1:21 as the foundational lens through which life and death are understood. Unlike previous studies that have primarily focused on *the ontology of suffering* (Marlin 2023) or on *constructive social-religious interpretations of suffering* (Mase 2025), this research advances the discussion by directly integrating the existential meaning of life and death in Christ into the current challenges of faith. This includes issues of identity, perseverance, and hope within both the personal spirituality of believers and the communal life of the church.

The uniqueness of this study is twofold. *First*, it repositions Paul's declaration "*to live is Christ and to die is gain*" not as an abstract doctrinal statement but as a theological-existential paradigm that shapes the believer's response to suffering, mortality, and the transient nature of worldly values. *Second*, it offers a practical theological contribution by articulating a contextual pastoral framework for the church in Indonesia, where believers continue to face realities of persecution, social pressures, and *existential anxieties* about death and suffering. By doing so, the study not only fills a gap in previous scholarship but also provides a constructive theological response that equips the church to remain faithful, hopeful, and prophetic in the midst of contemporary challenges.

## RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a descriptive-qualitative approach using the library research method. This approach was chosen because the research aims to understand the theological meaning of Paul's declaration in Philippians 1:21—"to live is Christ and to die is gain"—and its implications for the contemporary church. According to Moleong, the qualitative approach is used to gain a deep understanding of social and religious phenomena by exploring the meanings, values, and perspectives of the subjects regarding a particular reality (Moleong, 2018). Therefore, this study seeks to trace the existential meaning of life and death from a biblical perspective.

The research data were collected from a wide range of literature sources, including theological books, academic journals, and works of theologians who discuss the concepts of life and death in Paul's teaching. The data sources consist of both primary and secondary references relevant to the research topic. As Creswell explains, literature study in qualitative research serves not only as a theoretical foundation but also as a basis for deeply understanding the theme under study, particularly in the context of theological inquiry that requires the exploration of both classical and modern texts (Creswell, 2014). Thus, literature study in qualitative research is not merely a theoretical framework but an essential foundation for

comprehensively understanding the research theme, especially in normative and interpretative theological studies. This is crucial because theological research requires engagement with classical and contemporary texts in order to generate a holistic, contextual, and applicable understanding for the life of the church today.

Data analysis in this study is conducted using a theological-hermeneutical approach, which is a method of interpreting biblical texts by taking into account their historical, cultural, and authorial contexts. Through this approach, the study seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the concept of life in Christ and how this perspective shapes the mindset and attitudes of believers in facing life and death. The findings of this research are expected to provide broader theological insights for believers so that they may live with deeper meaning and maintain firm faith in Christ, even in the midst of suffering, challenges to faith, and the reality of death.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### The Meaning of Life and Death According to the Old Testament

#### *The Words “Life” (khavah) and “Living Being” (nefesh) in the Old Testament*

The Hebrew term *khavah* is the root form of the name *Eve (Havah)* and derives from the verb *chayah* (חָיָה), which means “to live” or “to give life.” Other Hebrew expressions such as *חַי* (*khay*) and *חַיִּים* (*khayyim*) communicate the idea of “life” in the Old Testament. The plural form *khayyim* emphasizes life in its fullness, encompassing both physical and spiritual dimensions, and is understood as a divine gift from God (Wahyu, 2020). Thus, these words affirm that life itself is a gift from the Creator.

From a theological perspective, the creation of humanity involves two essential elements: *the material* and *the immaterial* (Karkkainen, 2015). The material element refers to the physical aspect of human beings, formed from the dust of the ground, as recorded in Genesis 2:7: “The LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground.” This physical body connects humans to the created world and is inherently mortal. The body serves as the vessel of life, but in itself remains lifeless until animated by the breath of God.

The immaterial element refers to the non-physical dimension bestowed by God upon humanity, namely *neshamah* or *ruah*. Genesis 2:7 states that God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being (*nefesh chayah*).” This breath of life is not merely biological air but represents the divine gift of existence that sets humanity apart from all other creatures. Theologically, this immaterial aspect includes the human spirit, soul, and intellect, making human beings moral, rational, and relational creatures capable of fellowship with God (Webster, 2015). This breath of life is not merely the biological air that sustains physical existence, but the divine gift that grants humanity its unique identity among all creation (Pannenberg, 2019). Theologically, it signifies the immaterial dimensions of the human person-spirit, soul, and intellect-through which individuals reflect God’s image. These qualities make human beings moral agents, rational thinkers, and relational beings, capable of entering into fellowship with their Creator.

In Genesis 2:7, the divine act of breathing into Adam’s nostrils signifies more than physical animation; it represents the impartation of spiritual vitality that anchors human dignity

and moral responsibility (Dent, 2019). Similarly, Job confesses, “The Spirit of God has made me, and the breath of the Almighty gives me life” (Job 33:4), affirming that life itself is rooted in divine initiative. The breath of life, therefore, is not reducible to biological processes but testifies to humanity’s continual dependence on God for existence and meaning.

Furthermore, this reality carries profound theological implications for understanding human purpose. *To be alive is to exist coram Deo*-before the face of God-living not for autonomous self-determination but in relationship with the One who sustains all life. The immaterial dimension of humanity thus points to the capacity for worship, ethical responsibility, and eschatological hope. As Augustine observes, the human heart is restless until it finds rest in God, underscoring that the divine breath instills within humanity an orientation toward transcendence and communion with the Creator (Prahasan, 2024). Augustine’s insight that the human heart remains restless until it rests in God captures the essence of this reality: humanity’s deepest fulfillment is found only in the Creator who imparted life. Thus, the breath of life signifies more than existence-it is the very marker of humanity’s orientation toward transcendence, ethical living, and eschatological hope. In this way, the divine breath anchors both the dignity and destiny of human beings, calling them into a life of fellowship with God that begins now and extends into eternity.

Ultimately, the breath of life underscores both divine sovereignty and human responsibility (Shori, n.d.). It calls believers to recognize life as a sacred trust, to be lived faithfully in devotion to Christ, and to acknowledge death not as annihilation but as the doorway into fuller fellowship with God. In this sense, the gift of the divine breath grounds Christian anthropology, shaping how the faithful understand their identity, vocation, and eternal destiny. This theological concept demonstrates that life is not merely existential but purposeful. Humanity was created not simply to exist biologically, but to live in relationship with the *Giver of life*. True life, according to Scripture, is found not only in physical existence but in communion with God, who provides meaning and direction for human life.

Therefore, humans should recognize that life is not limited to material existence in the world but also concerns how their immaterial aspect-the spirit and soul-is directed according to God’s will (Arora, 2025). Human life in its entirety is intended to glorify God, since both body and spirit belong to Him (see 1 Corinthians 6:19–20). Thus, in the biblical perspective, a living being is not merely an entity that breathes but a person created to exist in relationship with God and to fulfill His divine purpose.

The Hebrew term *nefesh chayyah* (נֶפֶשׁ חַיָּה) literally means “living soul” or “living being.” This expression is used in Genesis 1:20–21 to describe the sea creatures and the birds, and in Genesis 1:24 to refer to the land animals (Archer, 2025). Interestingly, however, the same term reappears in Genesis 2:7 in the account of humanity’s creation: “and the man became a living being.”

In this section, the results obtained have been processed and are not described raw. Well-prepared tables and figures should be the main feature of this section as they convey the key observations to the reader. The information provided in the tables and figures does not need to be repeated in the text, but the text should focus on the significance of the main findings of the

research. Generally, the journal will contain three to seven figures and tables. The same data should not be presented in both table and figure form. The research results are discussed to answer the formulated problems, objectives, and research hypotheses. It is even better if there is a section before the Conclusion discussing the relevance of the issues studied to current life.

### ***Ruach***

The Hebrew term *ruakh* (רוּחַ) carries a wide range of meanings, including spirit, wind, breath, life, and will. In the Old Testament, *ruakh* appears 387 times, underscoring its central role in Hebrew theology. The word can mean “wind” or “breath,” reflecting both the physical and divine aspects of life as bestowed by God. Moreover, *ruakh* symbolizes human life and vitality, as seen in passages such as Psalm 31:6 and Judges 15:19. Human life is considered to be fully under God’s control, with *ruakh* expressing the intimate relationship between the spiritual dimension and the gift of life.

In Isaiah 42:5, *ruakh* is translated as “life” or “breath,” emphasizing that human existence derives from the divine breath given at creation. Thus, *ruakh* does not merely describe a physical element but also conveys the profound spiritual reality embedded within human existence. According to Milne (1993), the Hebrew word for “spirit” (*ruakh*) can signify “wind” (Ps. 148:8; Ezek. 1:4) or “breath” (Ezek. 37:5). This usage illustrates how *ruakh* encompasses both natural and transcendent meanings, expressing life as a divine gift imparted to humans and other creatures.

Furthermore, *ruakh* can be understood as “life” or “soul.” In the Psalms, David declares to God, “Into your hands I commit my spirit [*ruakh*]; you have redeemed me, O Lord, faithful God” (Ps. 31:6, cf. Gen. 7:22; Job 10:12; Isa. 42:5). This confession underscores that human life is entirely subject to God’s sovereignty, with *ruakh* serving as a symbol of the grace of life given by Him (Abineno, 2000). Pillon adds that *ruakh* may also be interpreted as the sustaining force of life and the capacity for endurance (Judg. 15:19; Gen. 45:27). This spirit is closely tied to human will and activity (Pillon, 1997). In Isaiah 42:5, the translation of *ruach* as “life” demonstrates that humanity cannot be separated from the spiritual element breathed into them by God from the very beginning of creation.

In sum, the semantic richness of *ruach* reflects both its physical and spiritual dimensions. It embodies wind and breath, the very essence of life, as well as the spiritual power and divine presence sustaining human existence. The Hebrew Scriptures reveal that life itself is inseparable from the divine *ruach*, grounding human identity, vitality, and purpose in God’s creative and sustaining Spirit.

### **Death**

#### ***Mot Tamut***

In the theological perspective of Genesis, humanity was originally created to live in eternal fellowship with God, free from the threat of death. Death was not part of God’s initial design for creation. The first mention of death as a threat arises in Genesis 2:17, where God commands the man not to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, warning with the Hebrew expression *môt tamut* (תָּמוּת מוֹת), which literally means “you shall surely die.” This

phrase signifies that death would become the inevitable consequence of human disobedience to God's command. Thus, death entered human experience only after sin, taking on two dimensions: spiritual death, which is the rupture of communion with God, and physical death, which is the mortality of the human body (Sailhamer, 1995). Death in the biblical narrative, therefore, is not merely a biological event but a profound spiritual tragedy that alienates humanity from the Giver of Life.

Beyond the concept of death itself, the Old Testament frequently refers to *Sheol*, a term occurring 65 times, which denotes the "realm of the dead." In the New Testament, the equivalent Greek term Hades appears 42 times, carrying a similar meaning. *Sheol* is understood as the shadowy abode of the departed, conceived as being in the deepest parts of the earth. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, consistently translates *Sheol* as Hades, reflecting continuity of meaning across the Testaments (Tacoy, 2012). *Sheol* in the Hebrew Scriptures is portrayed as the shadowy domain of the departed, often envisioned as lying in the deepest recesses of the earth, beyond the realm of the living. It functions not merely as a grave but as a collective abode where all the dead, righteous and unrighteous alike, descend (Job 17:13–16; Ps. 88:3–6). The Septuagint translators rendered *Sheol* consistently as Hades, thereby establishing a semantic continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament conceptual worlds. This translation reflects not only a linguistic equivalence but also a theological bridge, in which the notion of *Sheol* as a place of shadowy existence is carried forward into the Greek milieu, influencing later Jewish and Christian eschatological thought (Wright, 2006). Thus, the use of Hades underscores the enduring biblical theme of death as an inevitable descent into a hidden realm awaiting divine intervention and ultimate eschatological resolution.

According to Faot, Octavianus, and Juanda, drawing from the work of Laird Harris, *Sheol* is described as the underworld or the place of the dead, situated in the deepest recesses of the earth. The Hebrew Bible emphasizes that the wrath of God can reach even into *Sheol* (Faot et al., 2017). For example, Deuteronomy 32:22 declares: "For a fire is kindled by my anger, and it burns to the depths of *Sheol*, devours the earth and its increase, and sets on fire the foundations of the mountains" (NRSV). This passage underscores that God's judgment extends beyond earthly existence, penetrating into the very realm of death itself.

In summary, the concept of *mot tamut* introduces death as a divine judgment on human rebellion, while the broader biblical witness portrays *Sheol/Hades* not only as the universal destiny of the dead but also as a domain that remains under God's sovereign authority. Death in the biblical worldview, therefore, is inseparably tied to sin, divine justice, and the eschatological hope of God's redemption.

## **Life and Death in the New Testament**

### ***Life***

### ***Bios***

The Greek term *bios* refers to *life in its physical or material sense*, encompassing the necessities of worldly existence and daily sustenance. In the New Testament, *bios* is frequently

used to describe earthly livelihood and material concerns. For example, in Mark 12:44, bios is used to denote daily means of subsistence, while in 1 Timothy 2:2 it is associated with a “peaceful and quiet life.” Similarly, in 1 John 3:17, the term highlights the material resources that believers are called to share with those in need (Stevanus, 2021). The New Testament use of bios emphasizes that life is not merely an individual possession but a gift to be stewarded responsibly. Whether referring to daily sustenance, peaceful existence, or material resources, bios underscores the ethical responsibility of believers to live with gratitude, seek peace, and generously share with those in need. Thus, the term serves as a reminder that the Christian life is deeply relational-directed toward God in dependence and toward others in love.

Biologically, bios includes the processes that sustain physical existence—respiration, nutrition, metabolism, and excretion. However, bios is finite, for it inevitably ends in death. Theologically, this underscores the temporary nature of physical life: while essential, bios is not the ultimate purpose of human existence. From a Christian perspective, true life cannot be reduced to biological survival; rather, it finds its fullness in zoe, the eternal life granted by God in Christ (Ladd, 1993). While bios highlights the finite and temporal dimension of human existence, it ultimately points beyond itself to the greater reality of zoe. Biological life, though valuable, is not humanity’s ultimate end; it serves as the stage upon which God’s eternal purposes unfold. Christian theology affirms that true life is found not in the preservation of bios but in participation in the zoe of God through Christ, who offers eternal communion with the Creator.

### **Zoe**

In contrast to bios, the Greek word zoe (ζωή) refers to a deeper, transcendent form of life—life in its fullest sense, which is eternal and derived from God Himself. Whereas bios pertains to the temporal and material dimension of existence, zoe signifies spiritual vitality and eternal fellowship with God. In John 17:3, Jesus defines eternal life (*zoe aionios*) as the knowledge of the only true God and Jesus Christ, His Son. This indicates that zoe is not merely extended existence, but a life of communion with God that transcends biological limitations (Stevanus, 2021). *zoe aionios* in John 17:3 reveals that eternal life is not simply endless duration but a qualitative reality grounded in relationship with God through Christ. It is a life that transcends the limitations of bios, rooted in the knowledge and communion with the Creator. Thus, eternal life begins in the present through faith in Christ and finds its ultimate fulfillment in unbroken fellowship with God.

In John 1:4, Christ is revealed as the source of zoe: “In Him was life, and that life was the light of men.” Zoe is not created but belongs intrinsically to the divine essence, imparted only through Christ. Therefore, life apart from Him is empty, while zoe grants fullness of existence, overcoming death and ensuring eternal communion with God (Morris, 1996). The New Testament presents bios and zoe as complementary: bios sustains earthly life, but without zoe it remains void of ultimate meaning. Conversely, zoe gives purpose to bios, transforming temporal life into preparation for eternal fellowship with God. Hence, believers are called not merely to preserve bios but to pursue zoe, the abundant life Christ offers (cf. John 10:10).

## ***Death***

### ***Thanatos***

The term Thanatos (Θάνατος) in Greek carries a range of meanings, both in mythology and in the biblical context. In Greek mythology, Thanatos is the god of death, tasked with bringing death in a quiet and peaceful manner. Literally, *thanatos* means “death” and can also be used metaphorically, such as in the personification of death itself (Bowring, 2025). This dual usage underscores a critical theological truth: death is not merely the cessation of biological existence but also the ultimate consequence of sin. Thus, whereas mythology views Thanatos as an inevitable figure, Scripture frames it as a reality that Christ alone has conquered, transforming death from an absolute end into the gateway to eternal life for those united with Him.

Generally, thanatos in Scripture refers to physical death or the condition of lifelessness. However, in certain theological contexts, the word also points to spiritual death, understood as separation from God. For example, Romans 6:23 declares, “The wages of sin is death (thanatos),” highlighting the consequence of sin that results in spiritual death and estrangement from God.

It is crucial to distinguish between the use of thanatos in Greek mythology and in the Bible. In mythology, Thanatos is personified as a deity who governs death, whereas in the biblical writings the term is most often employed as a general designation for “death,” without any divine personification. Thus, thanatos encompasses a broad range of meanings, including physical, metaphorical, and theological dimensions of death (Mounce 2006).

### ***Hades***

The term Hades in the New Testament corresponds to Sheol in the Old Testament, as seen by comparing Psalm 16:10 and Acts 2:27. In Psalm 16:10, the psalmist declares, “For You will not abandon me to Sheol, nor will You allow Your Holy One to see decay,” while in Acts 2:27 the same verse is rendered with the word Hades (Swastoko, 2020). This shows that Hades is not identical with Gehenna (hell), but more accurately refers to an intermediate state or place of waiting. Hoekema (2014) clarifies this by distinguishing between the abstract and local meanings of Hades. In its abstract sense, Hades refers to the condition of death or disembodiment, while in its local sense it refers to the place where the wicked await final judgment.

Throughout its ten occurrences in the New Testament (e.g., Matt. 11:23; 16:18; Luke 16:23; Acts 2:27; Rev. 20:13–14), Hades consistently denotes the abode of the dead, particularly the unrighteous (Moody, 1981). Importantly, it is not the final destiny of souls but a temporary state prior to judgment. The righteous dwell with Christ after death, while the unrighteous remain in Hades until the final judgment. This theological understanding clarifies the doctrine of the intermediate state and provides the church with a biblical perspective on death, resurrection, and eternity (Hoekema, 2014).

## CONCLUSION

The findings of this study affirm that the New Testament presents a crucial distinction and complementarity between bios and Zoe, in which bios represents the temporal dimension of human life while zoe embodies the divine and eternal life that is intrinsic to Christ and made available to humanity only through Him. John 1:4 emphasizes that Zoe is not created but belongs to the essence of Christ, thereby giving true meaning to human existence beyond mere biological survival. Consequently, life apart from Christ remains bound to emptiness and death, but through Zoe believers receive fullness of existence, illumination, and assurance of eternal communion with God. This research contributes to theological science by clarifying the relationship between the biological and spiritual dimensions of human life, offering a framework for understanding the integration of temporal existence with eternal vocation, and deepening the scholarly discourse on the Johannine theology of life as it relates to Christian anthropology and soteriology.

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