

The Perfect Life
(Philippians 1:21 August 18, 2013)


The Perfect Life

This headline from Friday's paper caught my attention this week.

Is Los Angeles multi-millionaire Jimmy Goldstein the luckiest man in the sportingverse? We certainly think so

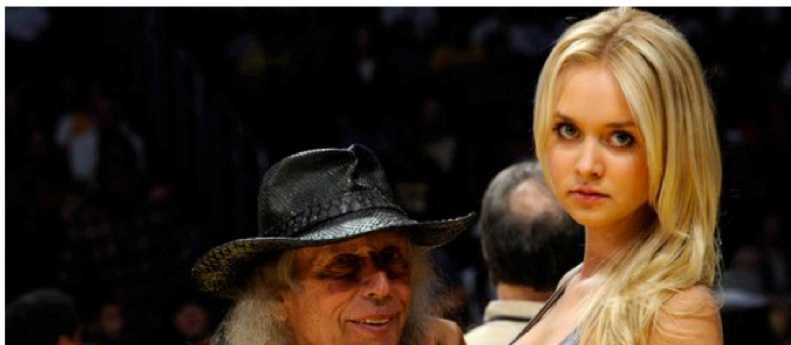
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Is Los Angeles multi-millionaire Jimmy Goldstein the luckiest man in the sportingverse? We certainly think so.

Why do many think that Jimmy has such an enviable life?

Jimmy might not be too much to look at, however, he is a billionaire from property development and lets just say – that gets you a lot of perks.

He is apparently never seen in public without a supermodel de jour on his arm. Amalie Wichmann the Danish supermodel is his current girlfriend.

He has what many have described as the coolest house in Los Angeles. You might recognise it from being featured in a number of Hollywood blockbusters.

He has courtside season tickets to the Lakers, Clippers and several over NBA franchises.

Which led *Sports Illustrated* to do an article on him as an NBA superfan.

And so for many – all of this makes Jimmy Goldstein into the luckiest man in the sportingverse.

Billions, supermodels, incredible homes, sporting superfan – sounds so good that there are many who would say that Jimmy Goldstein leads the perfect life.

In fact I would suggest that there are billions of men who would swap lives with Jimmy in a heartbeat.

But tonight I want to suggest that Jimmy does **not** have the perfect life.

At this point I suspect many heads here say – yeah – Christians are supposed to aim for more out of life – but many hearts say – his life sounds pretty good to me.

You might think you know where I am going with this. In Matthew 16:26 Jesus said this:

For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?

Having everything in this life – which in terms of eternity is such a short time – but then spending eternity in hell – is **not** a perfect life – it is a very bad deal.

There is not one person in hell who would not swap everything they had in this life for heaven.

Jesus told the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. In Luke 16:25:

Abraham said, 'Child, remember that you in your lifetime received your good things, and Lazarus in like manner bad things; but now he is comforted here, and you are in anguish.'

The rich man would have gone back and given it all up in a moment if he could have heaven.

When I was the pastor of a singles group in the US – every year we had two retreats – or camps. And our practice was to get something made for everyone who attended – a T-Shirt, a pen – and on it, it might say something like *Working Disciples Winter Camp, 1991*. Then you have something to remember the camp.

One year we had one of our really out there evangelists, Doug, organise the camp. The camp was on the dangers of materialism. So at our leaders meeting – I still remember him proudly unveiling the gift everyone would receive. It was a mug. But emblazoned on the mug was not the group name and year – it said this:

He who gains the most toys ... goes straight to hell.

His idea was that you put that mug on your desk at work and you will be certain to start some interesting conversations.

It's out there. But, whether you like that form of conversation starter or not – the sentiment is pretty true.

However, that is not the sermon I want to give. Most of you know that having everything for 80 years and spending eternity in conscious punishment is a bad deal.

No – I bring up Jimmy to make you think – so just what **is** a perfect life?

If a lifetime of toys, models, things – but then eternity in hell is not a perfect life – what is?

I suspect that for many – if not most Christians – if they were really honest – brutally honest – if they could construct the perfect life for themselves – it would go something like this.

I get the body of a 20 year old model and throw in that does not age or get injured for my life on earth – I get to live a life like Jimmy Goldstein – billions, supermodels, incredible homes, sporting superfan – I suck everything out of this world – but then on my death bed I repent – I truly repent – like the thief on the cross – so that when I die – that very day – I go to be with Jesus in Paradise.

I get the world and the coolest things of the world – sex, money, fame – and *then* I also get heaven.

That is what intuitively seems a perfect life. There are false teachers like Benny Hinn and other prosperity teachers who will tell you that exact lie.

And then some Christians read passages like 2 Corinthians 11:23–28 where Paul describes his life:

With far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless beatings, and often near death. Five times I received at the hands of the Jews the forty lashes less one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I was stoned. Three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from robbers, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure. And, apart from other things, there is the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches.

Here is Paul – sold out for Jesus – and in this life he gets beaten, imprisoned, starved – he suffers for Jesus.

I suspect that most Christians know that they are supposed to say – OK, OK – yes the perfect life is to share in the sufferings of Christ. But the truth is that this bears no attraction to them whatsoever.

Suffering or supermodel.
Prison or palace.

If I gave you these options:

Life of Jimmy – and then heaven.

Or

Life of Paul – and then heaven.

I suspect that the only thing that might make many of us hesitate – are passages like 2 Corinthians 5:10:

For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

You would like to know a little more fully what these eternal rewards are that are based on our works in this life. If you get an eternity of ultra-cool rewards – then maybe some suffering now is worth it.

But most of us would probably say – look – I know this is not politically correct to say in Christian circles – but as long as I finally get to heaven – that is OK – give me this world and give me heaven – that will do me fine.

Most of us have heard many people say – money won't make you happy – but some part of us thinks – while that is probably true – I would actually like to find that one out for myself.

To many, if not most Christians – deep down they might think the perfect life was the one lived by the emperor Constantine.

He supposedly came to Christ in 312 at the Milvian Bridge. He then ordered his army baptised – but interestingly – he himself was not baptised.

In fact his life did not seem to change – it was wine women and song day in and day out – until he lay dying in 337. It was then that he supposedly repented and was baptised.

No one can say if his deathbed repentance was genuine. No one can say for sure if Constantine is in glory.

However, here is my point for you tonight.

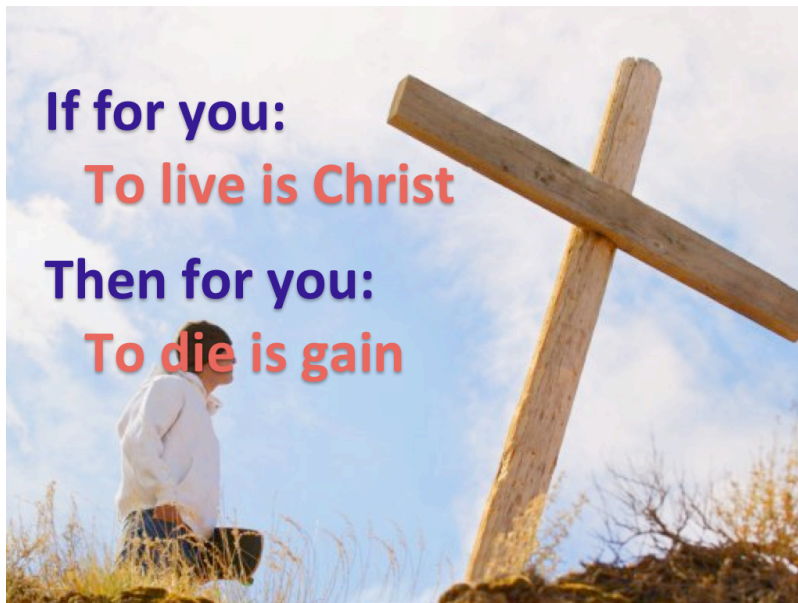
Even *if* Constantine did come to Christ at the end of a great life of wine, women and song – a life in which he enjoyed every earthly pleasure and then repented and went to glory – I want to suggest that is **not** a perfect life.

What **is** a perfect life?

Paul tells us what it is in one of the great verses of Scripture. Have a look with me at Philippians 1:21:

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

I slaved for many hours to come up with an outline of this verse. Here it is:



If for you:
To live is Christ

Then for you:
To die is gain

I think that is true to the text.

However, this is not what our deceitful hearts whisper. They whisper:

To live is – billions, supermodels, incredible homes, sporting superfan – then heaven.

Paul says:

To live is Christ, and to die is gain.

Let me set the context here. Paul is in prison. There is debate about where – Caesarea, Ephesus, Rome – most likely Rome.

Paul knows he may well soon face death for his faith.

He is facing opposition from those outside the faith and tragically also those inside the faith.

Many might say Paul is wasting his life. In fact you might say that in one way he has is nothing worth living for – first century prisons were not pleasant places at all.

But Paul would not swap the inside of his prison for supermodels and mansions – because he has everything. He has Christ. To live – is Christ.

Once Paul found his satisfaction – his joy – his life – in the things of this world. Being a Jew and a Pharisee. Being a man of importance. Having power.

Then on the road to Damascus he met the risen Christ – who said – I will show you how much you must suffer for the sake of My name.

And I am sure that Paul was thinking – that is it – my life in this world is going to be rubbish.

But it wasn't. Years later as he languished in prison writing to the Philippians Paul said this in chapter 3 verses 5–11:

[I was] circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Paul found joy in swapping everything he had – and he had a great deal – for the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus.

Paul came to realise that God created us in such a way that the things of this world do not ultimately satisfy – only God can.

When Paul travelled to Athens – he addressed the learned assembly on Mars Hill. There he said this:

God made all men – that they should seek Him – for in Him we live and move and have our being.

As Blaise Pascal put it – “Within each one of us there is a God-shaped vacuum that God and only God can fill.”

Since the Garden of Eden men have tried to fill this hole through idols and immorality and materialism – but while it seems to satisfy for a fleeting moment – it soon leaves them empty.

What Paul found was this – when he came to Christ he lost everything – but he also gained everything.

He gained Christ and the joy of the Holy Spirit – a joy that all men seek.

I went to a very expensive private school. But I was there on a scholarship. We didn't have the money of the other families.

One of my closest friends came from a very wealthy family. His father was a land developer.

They owned a huge home on acreage. It was airconditioned in the days when no one had airconditioning. Monster swimming pool, tennis courts and the like.

They owned yachts and speedboats. They owned a large house on Stradbroke Island. I spent schoolies week in that house and on their yacht.

I came to think that money and the things it could buy would make me happy. I did medicine at university because doctors make good money.

I came to believe that some beautiful nurse would marry me, I would have a great seaside house and live happily ever after.

But I vividly remember daydreaming one day about the Lamborghini Countach S – I would buy. I imagined myself pulling up to the lights and everyone looking at me.

But in my daydream – an Enzo Ferrari pulled up next to me. And I still remember my thought – I have to have that car. I have to work harder and get that car and then – I will be happy.

But something inside me asked the question, “There will always be a better car. So can any car make you happy?”

I dismissed the thought and went on with life.

Then the two men living next to me at college became Christians. And slowly it dawned on me why they irritated me so much.

I was striving to work hard, earn a lot and find happiness.

They had nothing – but were already happy.

They had the joy of the Holy Spirit.

It was a major part of the reason I listened to their gospel. They had it – I wanted it.

Paul found the secret to a perfect life – to live is Christ.

There are a couple of reasons why this is the perfect life.

First, Christ satisfies when nothing else can.

Our deceitful hearts tells us the world satisfies – it doesn't.

In Jeremiah 2:13 God says this:

My people have committed two evils:
they have forsaken me,
the fountain of living waters,
and hewed out cisterns for themselves,
broken cisterns that can hold no water.

God is the fountain of living waters – only He can quench our thirst.

He made us to only be satisfied in Him.

But still, even the people of God who know better head out into the desert of the world and hew cisterns that cannot possibly hold water.

We have our faces in the parched desert trying desperately to suck joy from a place where there is no joy. Why – because to live is Christ – not the world.

Twenty three years as a pastor – you get to hear everything.

Men and women who threw their marriages and family and reputation away over greed, lust, pleasure.

In all that time not one of them has said to me – it was worth it.

They say – it felt good for a very short time – then it felt bad – so crushingly bad – for such a long time. If only I could go back and tell myself – forget the world – to live is Christ.

I don't know Jimmy Goldstein, I am sure he has some goodish days. I don't know if he is happy, healthy, has kids or not. I don't know if the supermodel of the day actually loves him or just likes his money – I do have my suspicions. But I would strongly suspect that he is looking for something – that he is dissatisfied – because he does not have Christ – the only true place real joy is found.

There is a **second** reason having Christ is life – nothing can separate you from Christ.

If you find your satisfaction – your perfect life in the things of this world – you will lose some of them – and ultimately all of them.

Even good things – wife, children, friends – you can lose them.

I remember an anaesthetist breaking down in tears, distraught – she told me she had lost the one closest to her – the one who would not fail her – finally I realised it was her cat.

You lose the things of the world.

But Romans 8:38–39:

I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Because Paul's life was now Christ – *not* family, possessions, health, freedom or career; then the loss of those things did not devastate him.

He was content in any circumstances. Humble means or prosperity. Filled or hungry. Having abundance or suffering need – because nothing could separate him from Christ.

In the nearly 2000 years since Paul wrote Philippians – countless Christians have found the truth of his words.

I think of Joni Eareckson Tada.

I am sure you know the basic story of Joni – beautiful, young, athletic girl – she has everything – and then she dives into a river in 1967 and finds herself a paraplegic at 17.

She thought she had been a Christian. But she soon realised that her hope was in this world. Everything that mattered to her had been snatched away. Her only ray of hope was death. She had no way of taking her own life so she asked friends to end her life.

When they said no, she tried to kill herself by thrashing her neck violently from side to side.

That didn't work. She took up smoking. She tried to lose herself in mental fantasies. In occupational therapy, she was learning to draw with a pen in her mouth, but all she wanted to do was cover every bit of the paper in black ink.

Then a friend shared with her the reality that to live is Christ.

Now fast forward decades.

In an article in *Christianity Today* she says that she tells God:

Oh, thank you, thank you for this wheelchair! This paralysis is my greatest mercy.

Why? Because it led her to Christ. In losing everything – she gained everything. Only Christ can do that.

John Bunyan learned this lesson. He was given a stark choice – stop preaching or go to prison.

Leaving his wife and kids to try and survive without him was the hardest decision he ever faced.

He wrote about how his thinking went:

I was made to see that if I would suffer rightly I must first pass a sentence of death upon everything which can properly be called a thing of this life, even to reckon myself, my wife, my children, my health, my enjoyments, and all, as dead to me, and myself as dead to them. And, second, to live upon God that is invisible.¹

I had to reckon myself, my wife, my children, my health, my enjoyments, and all, as dead to me, and myself as dead to them. I had to realise that the things of this world are not my joy – even good things.

And, second, to live upon God that is invisible. I had to realise that even in prison – I would have Christ – and Christ is life.

To live is Christ. Not self, not wife, not children, not health, not enjoyments.

We know this is what the Bible says – but everything inside us screams – that can't be right.

Where do you find joy and real life?

Suffering or supermodels?
Prison or palace?
Christ or cars?

Sometimes God takes the choice away – like Joni Eareckson Tada. Sometimes God makes us take serious decisions like John Bunyan.

Sometimes we just keep making the wrong decisions until we finally come to realise that Christ is all we need – and we wish we had not learned the hard way.

But that is only half the truth.

¹ Cited in Frank Mott Harrison, *John Bunyan* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1964) p. 121.

If for you:
To live is Christ

Then for you:
To die is gain

If this life is Christ. If Christ is the consuming focus of your life – *then* when this life is done – death becomes great gain. If Christ is our life, then death is the final consummation. We go to be forever and perfectly with the One who is the source of our joy.

Notice though that if you cannot say to live is Christ – then you cannot say to die is gain. If Christ is not the jewel in the crown of your life then to die and be with him is NOT gain. If your wife, your kids your friends, your work, your ministry – if they are the sum and substance of your life then death is NOT gain – it is loss – for they are of this world.

Around nineteen years ago – one of my seminary professors sent me a tape by a pastor I had only vaguely heard of at the time. His name was John Piper and he was preaching to my old seminary on this verse. I put the tape into my cassette player – shows how long ago it was – and listened. I was stunned when he said this:

You must be able to be on your deathbed and ready to look your wife in the eye and say that to be without her is – GAIN. You must be able to hold your children and say that to leave them is – GAIN.

I stopped the tape and rewound it. And listened again and again.

I thought about it. At that time, I didn't think I could honestly say that.

Even today – I have to confess – I struggle to say that.

My wife and my kids mean the world to me.

I can honestly say that they mean far more to me than billions, supermodels, incredible homes, sporting superfan.

But did Christ mean so much more to me that to die and leave them and be with Christ is gain?

So nineteen years ago I ran out and bought Piper's book – *Desiring God* – back then it was the first edition and you had to buy a paper copy not a Kindle copy – and I read it – I devoured it – I reread it.

I thought through these verses in Philippians 1:21 – verses I had read so many times – and my conclusion was this. I was a pastor and I wasn't there.

Honestly, for me it was – to live is wife and kids and church and some of the good things of this world – Broncos, seafood, the beach *and* Christ.

It made me realise that if I were to summarise how too many of us who name the name of Christ live – it would be this:



To live is gain ... and I **hope** that for me ... to die is Christ.

I want to share a few thoughts about this.

If we are honest and examine our lives – too many Christians have lives that scream – to live is gain.

I live to gain the things of this world.

The more spiritual ones are content to seek gain through good things – wives, husbands, kids, hard work.

The less spiritual ones also seek gain through sin – greed, deceit, adultery, fornication, homosexuality, fame, power.

Both do it while still clinging to the hope that they are Christians. They know that Christ is not the centre of their life. But they hope that their profession of faith, their repeated repentance, their rebaptism, their future contrition, the money they gave, the good works they did – that these are enough so that death will bring them Christ.

To live is gain ... and I **hope** that for me ... to die is Christ.

The truth is that if Christ is not our passion now – then why would an eternity with Christ be gain?

If the best we can do is to say – to live is wife, kids, home, job, church – and also Christ – then why would death be gain? We are leaving the things that are most precious to us.

Listen to how John Piper describes the typical Christian.

The greatest hindrance to our experience of that enjoyment is that we are willing to settle for such *pitiful* pleasures. That's it! We have settled for a home, a family, a few friends, a job, a television, a microwave oven, an occasional night out, a yearly vacation, and perhaps a new personal computer. We have accustomed ourselves to such meagre, short-lived pleasures that our capacity for joy has shrivelled. The scenery and poetry and music have dried up like a forgotten peach at the back of the refrigerator.²

If you don't think that's you, then consider what ruled your week. Sport? Going out? Making ends meet? Getting your taxes ready? Surviving the work week? Getting the house clean? Watching T.V.? Playing computer games? Pleasing your boyfriend or girlfriend or spouse? Playing with your kids? Sex? Cars? Lust? Greed?

What dominated your thought-life this week? What dominated where your time was spent?

Was it Christ who was ever on your lips and before you?

Was your greatest delights this week time in the word and prayer and the fellowship of the saints?

Listen to the words of Spurgeon:

If you seek anything with greater fervour than you seek the glory of God – It is your idol.

Do you seek anything with greater fervour than God? Pleasure? Wealth? Happiness? Family? Career?

All of these things are temporal. They wither and die. They are of this world. They *cannot* satisfy.

Twenty-three years of counselling has shown me several things with absolute certainty.

First – our hearts are deceitful above all things and desperately sick.

Our hearts tell us that things – women, cars, fame – will please us.

Second thing I have learned. That is a lie from the pit.

Ask any Christian who has had an affair, sacrificed his family for work, been consumed by greed – it takes us so far from satisfaction it is hard for them to even talk about it.

² John Piper, *Desiring God*, (Portland: Multnomah Press, 1986), on back cover.

Read Ecclesiastes. Solomon had it all beyond anything we can imagine. Wealth, wives, concubines, power – and his conclusion – without God it is empty, vanity, nothing.

The secret to life is to make the one thing that cannot be lost, stolen or removed – the focus of your heart. To make the one thing that actually satisfies the centre of our lives.

To live ... is Christ.

Let me read Philippians 4:11-12 where an imprisoned Paul facing death wrote:

I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.

Am I there? Not fully. I still have some toes and fingers in the world. Less than ten years ago, less than twenty years ago. But I am not fully there yet.

I have tried too much world – and it is like drinking the sand of Jeremiah 2.

Too many of you have been there. Yet too many of us refuse to do whatever it takes to say – for me – to live is Christ.

Jesus wants us to have life and have it to the full.

Paul tells us how to do this. To live is Christ.

I want to finish by talking a bit about the other side of the equation – to die is gain.

I believe too many of us live like this:

To live is gain ... and I **hope** that for me ... to die is Christ.

Because our lives say – to live is gain rather than to live is Christ – we have no assurance of our salvation. So we **hope** that for me ... to die is Christ. That death will lead to Christ.

I have a few thoughts about this.

If Jesus is not your life – if this world is your life – then you may well not be Christ's. Jesus is very clear.

Luke 14:26–27:

If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me **cannot** be my disciple.

Luke 16:13:

No servant can serve two masters, for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You **cannot** serve God and money.

The Apostle Paul commands us to test ourselves in regard to our heart and our faith in Christ. 2 Corinthians 13:5–6:

Examine yourselves, to see whether you are in the faith. Test yourselves. Or do you not realize this about yourselves, that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless indeed you fail to meet the test! I hope you will find out that we have not failed the test.

If you can't say – to live is Christ – then I suspect that not only are you struggling with satisfaction and joy – you are struggling with assurance of your salvation.

But, in counselling there is another dangerous word I keep hearing – tomorrow.

Today, I am trying the world – tomorrow, I will try Christ.

I am so busy now – work, kids, mortgage – there is time to get right with Jesus.

There may well not be time.

Luke 12:15–21:

And [Jesus] said to them, "Take care, and be on your guard against all covetousness, for one's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions." And he told them a parable, saying, "The land of a rich man produced plentifully, and he thought to himself, 'What shall I do, for I have nowhere to store my crops?' And he said, 'I will do this: I will tear down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." ' But God said to him, 'Fool! This night your soul is required of you, and the things you have prepared, whose will they be?' So is the one who lays up treasure for himself and is not rich toward God."

And then there are those I have spoken to who think like this.

I do kind of love Jesus – even though my life is a bit of a mess. I hope that soon I will get my act together – but if worst comes to worst – when death looms – then I will repent for all I am worth – like the thief on the cross.

Call me sceptical but I believe that most deathbed conversions are not real. It is just hell insurance. It costs them nothing.

For the thief on cross it wasn't just hell insurance. His faith cost him. To trust that a criminal nailed to a cross next to you can save you – costs a lot. He knew nothing of Jesus rising from the death. His friends and family would have thought his last act was madness.

Constantine is often held up as a man who had it all. Worldly pleasures and then deathbed conversion. But what did it cost him to repent on his deathbed?

I am more than a bit sceptical.

Look, can you truly repent at the end of your life – yes – but be careful. Don't bet your eternity on the hope that finally you will choose to love Christ more than the world at the bitter end.

And anyway – I want to stress that if you do not live with Christ as the centre of your life – you will have missed out on the best of this life.

You want a perfect life – to live is Christ and to die is gain.

The newspaper article on Jimmy Goldstein ended with these words:

Don't know about you but we wish we could be like Jimmy – if only for a day.

Many may think that – but would I swap my life for Jimmy Goldstein's – even for a day?

Truth is part of my sinful heart says – for a day – yeah why not?

But I have seen enough and learned enough and known Christ enough to say – Jimmy's life – no sinful heart – absolutely not.

Billions, supermodels, incredible homes, sporting superfan – that is **not** the perfect life. That is a lie from hell.

To live is Christ.

Matthew 6:33:

But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.

The other things include clothes and food and may include a spouse and kids and a job – but Christ and His kingdom are to be our life.

I know full well too many of us will learn this the hard way – drinking from the dry cisterns of the world and wondering why we aren't satisfied.

My plea tonight is that we would listen to Solomon and Paul and Bunyan and Jesus Himself – and learn that:

If for you:
To live is Christ

Then for you:

To die is gain

And this is indeed a perfect life.