

Paul's Choice Between Living And Dying

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Phil. 1:21-24

When people are faced with the prospects of death their reaction to it varies greatly, depending on whether they are a Christian, or not. A person of the world, more often than not, would choose not to think of death at all.

John Wayne, at age 71, explained that he sometimes had difficult moments watching his old movies: "It's kind of irritating to see I was a good-looking 40-year old, and suddenly I can look over and see this 71-year old ... I'm not squawking ... I just want to be around for a long time."

Woody Allen once said, "It's not that I'm afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens."

Today, some people's fear of death is so strong and their confidence in technology so great that they are spending tens of thousands of dollars to have their bodies frozen at the time of death. Their hope is that they might be revived to live again when a cure is found for whatever caused their death.

A Christian looks upon death as but a doorway into that greater life in which God has in store for the faithful. Those Christians that remain behind grieve not because a soul was lost, but because a dear one will be sorely missed until they meet again.

When Lazarus had been dead for four days Jesus found Mary and Martha weeping because of their loss. Jesus himself also wept because of his empathy for these women who were so sad, even though He knew Lazarus was with God. Jesus used this moment as an occasion to show that He was the Son of God by raising Lazarus from the dead, so that others would believe.

Some people at the loss of a beloved family member are overcome with grief for days, weeks, months, and even in some cases years. It is not healthy for someone to let their minds linger continually on their loss.

A father gave this counsel to his married daughter on the first anniversary of her mother's death: "I had forty wonderful years with your Mom. They were the best years of my life. But that part of my life is over. Finished! Your mother is no longer with me; this truth has to be faced. But I am alive and must live the time allotted me until she and I are together again. She is gone, but no one can take away the wonderful memories. They are part of me, the happy

memories and the sad ones. But only a part. I can't let them possess me or I couldn't get through my days. Every day is a gift from God. It must be lived with joy. It is just a taste of the joy to come when we will all be together again."

This was recorded in *Home Living*, May, 1980, by the daughter after her father had passed away.

At this time I would like to take a look at Paul's view of death.

Text: Phil. 1:21-24, "*For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live in the flesh, this is the fruit of my labour: yet what I shall choose I wot not. For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better: Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you.*"

In this text the apostle was faced with a dilemma — he was faced with the great alternative of life or of death. He was certainly prepared for either.

The words of this text are not the words of a newly-born Christian, but the language of a full-grown man in Christ.

Paul had three desires which he expressed in his epistle to the Philippians:

- To be found in Christ. Phil. 3:9, "*And be found in him, not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith.*"
- To magnify Christ. Phil. 1:20, "*According to my earnest expectation and my hope, that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but that with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether it be by life, or by death.*"
- To be with Christ. Phil. 1:23, "*For I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better.*"

Our text deals with the latter choice of Paul's.

The choice of Life — “For me to live is Christ.”

That was the sole aim in Paul's life — to glorify Christ. That should be our aim also. Jesus should be the supreme object of our life.

Paul considered Christ to be the essence of his life, the model of his life, the solace of his life, and the reward of his life.

The essence of our life.

As we put to death the old man of sin, and allow Christ to come in and reign in our lives, we may be able to say with Paul, Gal. 2:20, *“I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: ...”*

Paul felt that he was indebted to Christ for the life he was then living.

There are three important words in this passage, “me,” “live,” and “Christ.” The middle term “live” is defined in the union of the two extremes. The two terms “me” and “Christ” are brought into contact to give “life” in Christ.

The model of our life.

- 1 Pet. 2:21. *“For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps:”*
- Phil. 2:5. *“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:”*

It was Paul’s passion in life to imitate Christ, to make Christ the model of his life. He did this better than anyone I can think of.

The solace of our life.

Amid all the storms, strife, and tumult of life, there is no cleft where the Christian finds safe abiding, save in the Rock of Ages, in the heart of the Redeemer, Jesus Christ. We may think we sometimes have it tough in this world, but it is nothing compared to what Paul went through for the cause of Jesus Christ. Let us search for that comfort of thought knowing that Christ is building a better home for the faithful.

The reward of our life.

Col. 1:27, *“To whom God would make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles; which is Christ in you, the hope of glory:”*

Christ is the source of the hope of glory in a better world.

John 14:1-3, *“Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.”*

Paul did not say, “For me to live is wealth.”

Yet this is the dominant purpose with many people.

Matt. 13:22, “*He also that received seed among the thorns is he that heareth the word; and the care of this world, and the deceitfulness of riches, choke the word, and he becometh unfruitful.*”

Paul considered the riches of this life a burden to be cast away. He wanted to devote himself to his duty as an Apostle and evangelist of Jesus Christ.

He did not say, “For me to live is pleasure.”

Yet, this is the great ambition of many.

- Luke 8:14, “*And that which fell among thorns are they, which, when they have heard, go forth, and are choked with cares and riches and pleasures of this life, and bring no fruit to perfection.*”
- 1 Tim. 5:6, “*But she that liveth in pleasure is dead while she liveth.*”

It certainly was no bed of roses to be scorned, beaten, stoned, and imprisoned by the hand of men, and to endure the heat and the storms while traveling — even enduring shipwreck.

He did not say, “For me to live is fame.”

Many movie stars and political figures crave the fame that comes with their work. Movie stars, especially, seem not to mind when there is some juicy gossip about them, because it means then that they will have more notoriety.

Paul rejected fame from those at Corinth who placed him above Apollos and Jesus Christ. He said we are all to follow Jesus Christ. He was but a servant.

He did not say, “For me to live is knowledge.”

Eccl. 1:13, “*And I gave my heart to seek and search out by wisdom concerning all things that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith.*”

Eccl. 1:17-18, “*And I gave my heart to know wisdom, and to know madness and folly: I perceived that this also is vexation of spirit. For in much wisdom is much grief: and he that increaseth knowledge increaseth sorrow.*”

If one strives for the knowledge of the world, it will not leave much room for the knowledge and wisdom of God. Further, those

who make it a living to make the textbooks of our schools and universities are prejudiced against God, and generally place God in an unfavorable light to the unsuspecting student.

But Paul could say, “Christ, first, last, always, and forever for me.”

The choice of death — “*To die is gain.*”

Paul was hemmed in on both sides, having a desire to depart and a desire to live.

The desire of death is commendable, for it is a sign of faith and fearlessness.

Many people sleep under an electric blanket during winter. The only problem with this wonderful invention is that it is too good at what it does. That is, an electric blanket makes a bed so warm and comfortable that on cold mornings it is very hard to get up. Some people have found that the only thing that works for them is to turn off their electric blanket so that the bed becomes much less comfortable, and thus it is easier to leave their cozy spot. Perhaps God lets us deteriorate physically in our late years so that we will be more willing to leave our ailing bodies for the unexplored future that He sets before us.

There sometimes is a longing for death on the part of the miserable who are weary of life, and anxious to escape from its ills and evils. This longing sometimes deepens into an unsoundness of mind that leads to suicide.

But the state of Paul’s mind was not like this. He was ready to welcome death, not because he lived a miserable life, but because of a loving desire to be with his Lord, Jesus.

Paul’s desire

Paul desired “*to depart, and to be with Christ.*”

To be with Christ implies:

That we shall see Him as He is.

1 John 3:2, “*Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is.*”

That we shall never be parted from Him.

- 1 Thess. 4:1, *“Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord.”*
- Phil. 1:23, *“...to be with Christ; which is far better.”*

Presence with Christ is far better than the best that this life can offer.

If we are in Christ while we live, we shall go to be with Christ when we die.

- John 14:1-3, *“Let not your heart be troubled: ye believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also.”*
- 1 Cor. 15:24-26, *“Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all rule and all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death.”*

But we must be **in** Christ **now** before we can expect to be **with** Christ hereafter.

Paul’s willingness to remain in this world

Phil. 1:24, *“Nevertheless to abide in the flesh is more needful for you.”*

To depart and to be with Christ was very close to the heart of Paul; yet he felt that his experiences, his services, and his influence were of great value to the cause of Christ, therefore, he desired to remain longer in the body for this cause.

His desire and privilege of helping others in the Lord was the great motive of keeping him working in this life, even though he had a great desire to be with Jesus.

Thus Paul desired to die and to be with Christ, but he was content to live longer that he might serve others.

Paul understood the duties he had to perform in this life before he could enjoy his relationship with Christ in the hereafter.

His duty to God.

- Eccl. 12:13, *“Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man.”*
- Matt. 6:33, *“But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.”*
- Matt. 22:37-38, *“Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment.”*

His duty to his fellowmen.

- Matt. 7:12, *“Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets.”*
- Matt. 22:39, *“And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself.”*
- Mark 16:15-16, *“And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.”*

Paul knew Jesus needed laborers here.

Matt. 9:36-38, *“But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd. Then saith he unto his disciples, The harvest truly is plenteous, but the labourers are few; Pray ye therefore the Lord of the harvest, that he will send forth labourers into his harvest.”*

Not only was Paul steadfast in the work of the Lord, he encouraged others to be so likewise.

1 Cor. 16:13, *“Watch ye, stand fast in the faith, quit you like men, be strong.”*

Sometimes preachers are heard to exhort their hearers to prepare for death.

While this is true, it also entails living for Christ, with the realization that others need to hear from us of the love of Christ.

Paul in his last recorded letter, 2 Timothy, just before his death, encouraged Timothy to be strong in continuing the work.

2 Tim. 4:1-8, *“I charge thee therefore before God, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables. But watch thou in all things, endure afflictions, do the work of an evangelist, make full proof of thy ministry. For I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: Henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing.”*

Conclusion

What choice would you make if you were Paul? Are you prepared if God chooses death at this moment for you? Are you a Christian? You know, one must become a Christian to be able to enter that heavenly kingdom. The following are the steps necessary to become a Christian:

- **Faith.** Heb. 11:6, *“But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.”* When I was in high school (I was about 17 years old), a neighbor boy my same age told me he was an atheist. Since I had been baptized, I took the opportunity to talk to him about the scriptures. He told me that he could see that living the life of a Christian was good, but he wasn’t sure if he believed there was a God. But to be on the safe side, maybe he should go to church, and when he dies and stands before God (if there is a God) on the day of Judgment (if there is a Judgment), maybe if God sees that he has gone to church and lived a good life that God would send him to heaven (if there is a heaven), and not to hell (if there is a hell). I told him, “It doesn’t work that way. You have to believe in Him with all your heart or you cannot please Him.”
- **Repentance.** Acts 2:38, *“Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.”* Acts 11:18, *“... Then hath God also to the Gentiles*

granted repentance unto life.” If while you were sleeping, you heard a noise in the other room, and you think to yourself, “There’s a burglar in my house!” So you reach for your cell phone, and as quietly as you can, you call the police, tell them there is a burglar in your house, and you give them your address. Soon, you heard them arrive and capture the thief. He yells, “I’m sorry; I’m sorry!” What is he sorry for? He is sorry that he got caught; not that he stole. In true repentance the thief would be sorry that he ever stole and wants to change his life so that he would never steal again. That is true repentance. It is a change of mind that brings about a change of action. That is what we have to do before we can become a Christian.

- **Confession.** Rom. 10:9-10, “*That if thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved. For with the heart man believeth unto righteousness; and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.*” What do we confess? That we believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

Note that in the above scriptures that faith (believing), repentance, and confession are “**UNTO**” righteousness, life, or salvation. “Unto” means toward something; not that one has already attained.

- **Baptism.** It is baptism where righteousness, life, and salvation are attained. Jesus, himself, was baptized to fulfill all righteousness, “*But John forbad him, saying, I have need to be baptized of thee, and comest thou to me? And Jesus answering said unto him, Suffer it to be so now: for thus it becometh us to fulfil all righteousness. Then he suffered him. And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.*” (Matt. 3:14-17). Jesus was baptized because God said it was the right thing to do. Did you see how pleased God was about Jesus being baptized? Jesus also said “*it becometh **us** to fulfil all righteousness.*” We are baptized because it fulfills His righteousness, not because it is of our righteousness.

In fact, if we are not baptized, we are still in our sins. “*Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and **be baptized** every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost.*” (Acts 2:38). Peter, what

did you say the reason of baptism is? “for the remission of sins”. Why would anyone want to leave out the step that removes our sins?

Jesus commanded that to reach salvation we must be baptized. *“And he said unto them, Go ye into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature. He that believeth **and** is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.”* (Mark 16:15-16).

Ananias told Saul (before he was rename Paul) the very same thing, *“And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on the name of the Lord.”* (Acts 22:16). Baptism is a requirement given by God.

Baptism is called a burial. *“Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.”* (Rom. 6:4). Our old man is to be dead to us. *“Know ye not, that so many of us as were baptized into Jesus Christ were baptized into his death? Therefore we are buried with him by baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life. For if we have been planted together in the likeness of his death, we shall be also in the likeness of his resurrection: Knowing this, that our old man is crucified with him, that the body of sin might be destroyed, that henceforth we should not serve sin.”* (Rom. 6:3-6). Baptism is God’s blueprint for applying the blood of Christ in our lives by baptism. We are free from our old sins only when we are baptized.

This doesn’t mean “sprinkling. The scripture above says baptism is a burial. We don’t take a dead body to the cemetery and sprinkle a little dirt over it; we bury the body.

If you have not yet become a Christian, won't you consider it today?

