

Hard Pressed Between the Two

Philippians 1:21–26

[21] For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. [22] If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. [23] I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. [24] But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. [25] Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, [26] so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

Introduction

- Listening to someone think through a hard decision, we learn how they think and what they value. Paul, in chains, “whether by life or by death” (v. 20), lets us listen in: go on living, or depart and be with Christ?

Point 1 — Living Well (1:21-26)

[21] For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. [22] If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. . . . [24] But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. [25] Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, [26] so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

- “To live is Christ” (v. 21) — park ourselves in Christ, immerse ourselves in Him. Whatever Paul decides about living, it will be focused on the Promised Land; better said, all about the Promised Person.
- “Fruitful labor” (v. 22) — first, living well means work. Not just labor but fruit: real spiritual fruit, lives changed, the kingdom flourishing, the culture around us looking more like heaven.
- “More necessary on your account” (v. 24) — second, living for others, particularly God’s people. Christ, the climax of the book, gave up everything for others — a calculus of selflessness, of self-forgetfulness:

Philippians 2:6–7 — [6] who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, [7] but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

- Our overly therapeutic culture puts our own well-being first (grown children told to write off their parents). The Christian worldview: look out for others first; spend ourselves for others before worrying how it may spend us.
- “Remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith” (v. 25) — third, persisting: being spent so that God’s people grow in faith and in their joy in Christ.

- Young people: one of the top passages for knowing the will of God for our lives. It changes how we view our current circumstances — like being enrolled in the army, waiting to be assigned; the kingdom assignment is coming quicker than we know.
- Every class, relationship and hobby through one narrow lens: Is this fruitful for the kingdom? How could it help prepare me to be fruitful for the kingdom? How could I use it to be ready to serve God's people?
- Parenting: helping our children learn to live well — the value of hard work, serving others, serving His church. We raise them to serve others and be spent for the kingdom.
- So: Am I living well? Fruitful labor for the kingdom as the chief aim of life, a life in service of others, spent on account of other believers.

Point 2 — Dying Well (1:21, 23)

[21] For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. [23] I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.

- “To die is gain” (v. 21) — yet dying well is an odd idea in the Christian worldview. Death entered when sin entered, its ultimate consequence:
Romans 5:12 — [12] Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all sinned—
Genesis 3:19 — [19] By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”
- We are never told to celebrate death. We mourn it like everyone else and are never corrected for it; we just grieve as those with hope:
1 Thessalonians 4:13 — [13] But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about those who are asleep, that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope.
- Euthanasia — Greek for “good death” — almost a contradiction in terms. The culture sanitizes death; a Christian sees it for what it is. Outside of Christ, death is where men and women meet the very judgment of God.
- Every one of us has sin; it has made us enemies of God, and it is why death ends in judgment. God sent His Son in a real body and condemned sin there — not because Jesus sinned, but because He put on our sin. Risen, He gives us a new option: death with Christ instead of death with judgment:
Romans 8:3–4 — [3] For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, [4] in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit.
- “To die is gain” — death is still the sad consequence of our sin, but it has lost all of its bite: instead of an entrance to judgment, death for the believer is fully life with Christ.

- The Jordan in flood: between us and the fullness of the Promised Land — the fullness of life with Christ — lies a river ten times harder — death. We won't walk in alone or even take the first step. Our ark went first, through the cross, and made dry ground through the tomb.
- "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better" (v. 23) — the ultimate end for the Christian is to be with Christ, in its fullest, most uninterrupted form. Paul is willing to deal with death to get to Christ.
- Our biggest hope in death: Christ is gained. Put all the terribleness of death on a scale, add Christ to the other side — Christ tips the scale, every single time. If something as dreadful as death can be called gain, how glorious Christ must be!

Point 3 — Choosing Well (1:22–25)

[22] If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. [23] I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. [24] But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. [25] Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith,

- Why put the choice out there at all? If Paul says "I could do A, or I could do B," then "No, I'll certainly do B" — save the ink, brother.
- Not a real choice: we don't decide when we die any more than we decided when we were born. A God decision, not a human decision:
Hebrews 9:27–28 — [27] And just as it is appointed for man to die once, and after that comes judgment, [28] so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.
Deuteronomy 32:39 — [39] "See now that I, even I, am he, and there is no god beside me; I kill and I make alive; I wound and I heal; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand.
Psalms 139:16 — [16] Your eyes saw my unformed substance; in your book were written, every one of them, the days that were formed for me, when as yet there was none of them.
- "Which I shall choose I cannot tell. I am hard pressed between the two" (vv. 22–23) — not contemplating death but teaching us how to live: so invested in Christ, so desirous of Him, that we have to be talked into continuing to live.
- Paul actually has a choice to wrestle with. Most of us don't — we want to stay right where we are, thinking less about how to live well than how to consume well. We're hardly even considering the alternative.
- Never disparaging life; the things of this world are so cheap by comparison, and being with Christ is so valuable that even death begins to seem preferable. Not what Paul would get out of, but what he would gain.
- A cardboard box or the house we live in now — which do we call home? An easy call. Yet many of us treat being with Christ like the cardboard box, and our current lives like the residence of choice.

- Paul: one is an acceptable residence, the other is glory. He stays in the acceptable residence only because it is best for everyone else (vv. 24–25), and all the while keeps his eyes on glory.
- Augustine, On Christian Doctrine — travelers far from home, charmed by the country and the pleasure of the motion: “we become unwilling to hasten the end of our journey.” We set out for home and fall in love with the boat whose sole purpose is to get us there.
- Paul hasn’t fallen in love with the boat. He longs to get home, yet while God keeps him here he spends himself for the good of others and the glory of Christ. Are we living so that there would even be a choice to wrestle with?
- Choosing well: we don’t cling to this life as though it’s all we have, and we don’t despise it. We treasure Christ above everything, long to be with Him, and until He calls us home, spend our lives helping others do the same. Try any other word: “To live is my family (my money, my happiness), and to die is gain” does not work. Only Christ fits.

Conclusion — Only One Life

- Summary — Live well: make our aim serving the people of God, helping bring forth kingdom fruit. Die well: with five words on our lips, “I will be with Christ.” Choose well: make our life actually have the choice at all.
- The missionary C. T. Studd’s poem, often quoted by John Piper: eight stanzas, two of them (the fourth and the last) read in the sermon.

“Only One Life, ’Twill Soon Be Past” — C. T. Studd (1860–1931)

*Two little lines I heard one day,
Travelling along life’s busy way;
Bringing conviction to my heart,
And from my mind would not depart;
Only one life, ’twill soon be past,
Only what’s done for Christ will last.*

*Only one life, yes only one,
Soon will its fleeting hours be done;
Then, in ‘that day’ my Lord to meet,
And stand before His Judgement seat;
Only one life, ’twill soon be past,
Only what’s done for Christ will last.*

*Only one life, the still small voice,
Gently pleads for a better choice,
Bidding me selfish aims to leave,
And to God’s holy will to cleave;
Only one life, ’twill soon be past,
Only what’s done for Christ will last.*

*Only one life, a few brief years,
Each with its burdens, hopes, and fears;
Each with its days I must fulfil.
Living for self or in His will;
Only one life, ’twill soon be past,
Only what’s done for Christ will last.*

*When this bright world would tempt me sore,
When Satan would a victory score;
When self would seek to have its way,
Then help me Lord with joy to say;
Only one life, ’twill soon be past,
Only what’s done for Christ will last.*

*Give me Father, a purpose deep,
In joy or sorrow Thy word to keep;
Faithful and true what e’er the strife,
Pleasing Thee in my daily life;
Only one life, ’twill soon be past,
Only what’s done for Christ will last.*

*Oh let my love with fervour burn,
And from the world now let me turn;
Living for Thee, and Thee alone,
Bringing Thee pleasure on Thy throne;
Only one life, ’twill soon be past,
Only what’s done for Christ will last.*

*Only one life, yes only one,
Now let me say, “Thy will be done”;
And when at last I’ll hear the call,
I know I’ll say “’twas worth it all”;
Only one life, ’twill soon be past,
Only what’s done for Christ will last.*