

# A Wonderful Dilemma

PHILIPPIANS 1:21-26

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We are all faced with dilemmas of one kind or another every day. A dilemma, according to Webster's, is "**A situation that requires a choice between two evenly balanced alternatives both of which are usually unpleasant.**" I believe that the current conflict in Iraq is a true dilemma. If we leave our troops there, we know that more of them will die. If we bring them all home now, we know that evil forces will have a better opportunity to collaborate to do our nation more harm. This dilemma should cause us to pray fervently for our troops, our president and for congress. But not all dilemmas are negative. The apostle Paul, even though he was in prison and chained to a Roman soldier, in his thinking faced a very wonderful dilemma. His decision was between two balanced alternatives, both of which were positive and profitable. It was a classic "**win/win**" situation.

The apostle Paul's *wonderful dilemma* was not unique to him alone. In fact, this blessed dilemma is something every true believer in Christ has the privilege of participating in. Option number one in this dilemma is 1) To depart this life, and option number two is 2) to remain. There is an old Roman coin with the image of an ox standing between an altar and a plow, and with the inscription, "**ready for either.**" The plow represents service, and the altar represents sacrifice, and the ox is ready for either. You and I as Christians should be ready for either. We must be ready to live for Christ, and ready to die for Christ. Of course the unbeliever typically has no desire to depart this world except as an escape. The unsaved person loves the world and his or her heart is set upon the things of this present world. The thought of dying and departing is a choice the unbeliever would not accept under normal circumstances. Such a person would be leaving behind all he has loved and lived for, while entering into a realm that is entirely uncertain and possibly terrible. But for the apostle Paul and every true

Christian, the situation is entirely different. Paul stated it succinctly in verse 21 – **“For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”**

To Paul, life or death were both good options. He said that he was **“hard pressed between the two.”** Let’s look now at the first of these options:

### **I. TO DEPART**

Now of course it needs to be noted that Paul was not saying that it was up to him whether he would live on in this world or whether he would leave it. He knew that God alone gives life and takes it away. God is sovereign over life and death. But Paul speaks as if he had a choice. He speaks from his heart as to what he desired and longed for. At first he says, in v. 22 **“yet what I shall choose I cannot tell. For I am hard pressed between the two...”** In other words, it was a difficult choice for him. Both alternatives had merit and appeal to Paul. There was a strong pull for Paul in both directions. Internally, he was torn between the two possibilities. In verse 23 Paul admitted that he had a desire to depart this life. He indicated that to depart for him was far better than to remain. That is, to him personally, if he made the choice by his individual preference as the only consideration, there was no question as to what he would choose. He would clearly rather depart.

How could Paul say that? How could he say that he would rather die than live? Actually, Paul doesn’t even mention the word death here does he? No, here is how he puts it – I have **“a desire to depart and be with Christ.”** He spoke as if he were simply walking from one room to another – merely walking through the doorway as if that was there was to it. But you know – for the believer, that is all death really is for us – it is merely a passageway into the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Greek word **“to depart”** in ancient Greek literature could mean **“to break up camp, or to weigh anchor and put out to sea.”** By the time of Paul this word had become a euphemism

for death. It is a very descriptive way of putting it though. When a believer dies he is like a ship that merely sets sail to travel to another harbor.

Paul had a desire to depart because death for him would take him to the shores of heaven and the presence of Christ. For every true believer, to depart is to be with Christ. Notice how confident Paul was of this matter. He was absolutely certain that if he died he would be with Christ. Do you have that kind of certainty in your own life? How can a person come to have that kind of certainty? In order to be sure that when you die you will be **“with Christ”** you must be sure that while you are alive you are **“in Christ.”** To be **“in Christ”** is to be in union with Him through faith.

In other words, if you receive Christ as Lord and God, and you trust in His death as the payment for your sins, you will become united to Him – vitally connected to Him. His Spirit will give you a new nature and will dwell in you. Your spirit will be inseparably joined to His Spirit. He has promised to those who believe on Him that He would never leave them or forsake them. In Romans chapter 8 Paul stated in the most emphatic terms that nothing in all creation **“shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”** Death itself cannot separate us from his love. In fact, it only brings us much closer to that love. For to depart is to be with Christ.

If you are not 100% certain that you are **“in Christ”**, then I urge you to cast your soul upon Him and commit yourself to Him and ask Him to be your Lord and Savior. Picture that large ship in the harbor. It is set to leave shore soon. Right now, there is still an opportunity to get a ticket and to board the ship. Many people have already received their ticket and have boarded the ship. They have left shore, walked across the gangplank and are now on the ship. You have got to leave the land to get on board the ship. In life, you have got to leave your sins and your love of this world and turn to

Christ. You must leave from going your own way and place your life in His hands to save you, to cleanse you and to take you where He wants you to go. He is the Captain of the ship and you must let Him direct your life. If you thus receive Christ by faith, then you can be confident that when you depart this world, you too will be with Christ. My prayer for you is that you would be able to say, as Paul said **“I know whom I have believed and am persuaded that He is able to keep what I have committed to Him until that Day.”**

What comes to your mind when you think of heaven? For many of us, it is the description in the book of Revelation of gold streets, gates of pearl and walls made of precious stones. But at the end of that section of Revelation chapter 21, after speaking of the appearance of the heavenly city the apostle John says **“But I saw no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple.”** It is interesting that we remember the gold and the precious stones, but the presence of God and of Christ are forgotten. This was not so for Paul. You may remember that in 2Corinthians 12 Paul mentions that he had been caught up into the third heaven, into paradise. There he said he **“heard inexpressible words, which it is not lawful for a man to utter.”** He was not sure if he went to heaven in the body or out of the body, but he did remember what he saw and heard. And now in this letter to the Philippians, when he has an opportunity to describe heaven, he simply says that heaven is to **“be with Christ.”** Before Deby and I were married, she lived in Germany for part of the summer. Actually, she was supposed to live there all summer, but she came home half way through. She wanted to depart and come back to the US more than anything. Why? To be with the one she loved – to be with me!

Do you love Christ? Do you not long to be with Him? The presence of Christ in heaven is what makes heaven really heaven to the believer. Paul been there and seen

Christ. He spoke from experience when he said that to depart and be with Christ is **“far better.”** Literally he says **“Very far better.”** To be with Christ in heaven is far better for several reasons. First, it is better to depart and be with Christ than to live in the flesh in this sinful world. A Christian living in this world finds himself tempted to sin and giving in to temptation every day of his life. And when a believer sins, it grieves him to have sinned against the Savior who loves him and died for him. To be with Christ is far better because there will be no more sinning and doing things that dishonor the Lord. Secondly, it is better to depart and be with Christ because at that time our fellowship and communion with Christ will be much closer. Now in this life, our fellowship with Christ is infrequent – broken by sin and the cares of this world. But in the life to come, our fellowship with Jesus will be unbroken and continuous. We will forever be close to Him and his loving arms. There are other reasons why we would want to depart and be with Christ, such as no more sorrow, suffering and pain. There we will rest from our earthly labors. But the greatest thing about departing to be with Christ, is that we get to be with Christ! The Psalmist said, **“In Thy presence is fullness of joy.”**

This passage teaches us that when a believer dies, his or her soul goes immediately to be with Christ in glory. Other passages confirm this truth. For example, in 2 Corinthians 5:8 Paul said, **“We are confident, yes, well pleased rather to be absent from the body and to be present with the Lord.”** Paul’s teaching in these verses clearly condemns any idea of **“purgatory”** or **“soul-sleep.”** What then happens to the soul of a believer at death? The Westminster Larger Catechism states that our, **“souls are then made perfect in holiness, and received into the highest heavens, where they behold the face of God in light and glory, waiting for the full redemption of their bodies.”** If these things are true, it is no wonder Paul had a desire

to depart and be with Christ. This is far better. But Paul still had a dilemma. The other side of that dilemma was:

## **II. TO REMAIN**

Why on earth would Paul, if he had the choice, want to remain in this sinful world that is under the curse of God? In verse 24 he said, “**Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you.**” Here’s how Paul breaks it down: “**To depart is better for me; to stay is better for you.**” Even as he considered the two options, Paul was completely unselfish. It is clear from this passage that Paul’s commitment was that even though he would rather depart and be with Christ, for the sake of the Philippian believers, he was resolved to stay. The average Christian today has it all backwards. Usually, we want to stay here as long as we can. We don’t really want to depart and be with Christ. We think it is far better to stay here in this fallen and sinful world – not for the sake of helping others, but for our own sake. Such thinking reveals a poor spiritual condition does it not? We are often so in love with the world and the things of the world that we would be happy to stay here forever.

Paul was willing to stay longer in the world, but not because he loved the things of this world. Rather, it was because he loved the believers who were still in this world. He knew it would be better for them if he stayed around a while longer. In other words, Paul is showing us what our purpose here on earth is all about. We should want to remain in this world for several reasons. It all comes down to the needs of others. Paul said he would gladly remain because it “**is more needful for you.**” Think about the needs of people around you in your own situation. There are unsaved friends and family members who need you. They need you around to keep loving them and praying for them and telling them about Jesus. And think about the needs of other believers. If Paul had started churches and just left groups of new believers to fend for themselves, without any guidance or input from him, they would not have made it.

You and I may not have the ministry of an apostle, but we are all called to serve one another in the body of Christ. When you joined this church or any church, did you ask, “**What does this church have to offer me?**” Or, did you ask, “**What do I have to offer this church?**” Of course we ought to ask both questions, but some people never seem to consider how they can get involved and serve. I know that as the leaders of this church, we need to do a better job of helping each one of you find a place of service. But please don’t wait for someone to ask you to serve. Rather, I would encourage you to approach the leadership or anyone in the church and ask them, “**How can I get involved and be of service in this church?**” Or if you have an idea or a way in which you would like to serve, let’s talk about it – or better yet, just start doing it. God wants all of us to get to where Paul was – to the place where we become interested in the welfare of others above our own.

Paul said, in verse 22 that “**if I live on in the flesh, this will mean fruit from my labor.**” To go on living for Paul meant fruitful labor; it meant preaching the gospel and seeing people converted to Christ; it meant preaching the word and seeing believers built up in Christ. Paul was a great servant of the church, promoting the peace, purity, and prosperity of the church by preaching, teaching and planting churches. The longer you and I are here on this earth, the more we have an opportunity to labor for the Lord. And as Paul said elsewhere, our labor in the Lord is not in vain. Every cup of cold water given in his name will have it’s reward. You may not feel very useful to the Lord right now. But there are people all around you who need you. There are opportunities great and small to serve them in Christ’s name. Find some way to serve and start serving. The apostle Peter put it this way: “**As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace: whoever speaks, as one who speaks oracles of God; whoever serves, as one who serves by the strength that God supplies—in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ.**”

Paul's resolution of this dilemma is found in verse 25, "**And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith.**" Paul somehow knew that he would remain on. He said it would be so that others would make progress in the faith. God wants you to grow in your faith. And part of that growth is that you begin to want to see others grow in their faith. Every Christian ought to want to see others come to know Jesus Christ. But not only that, we ought to care deeply about the spiritual growth of the people around us. We should be there for others to encourage them when they are doing well and to help bring them back when they wander from the path. It's like raising children. It is a big responsibility and it is often a lot of trouble. But when God gives us children, we can't simply pass them off to someone else. He calls us as parents to raise them. When God puts other Christians in your life, He does so for a reason. Maybe He wants you to learn and grow from someone else who is more mature than you are at this time. Or maybe he wants you to help raise that younger Christian to become more of what God wants them to be.

Paul's service in the church and his willingness to remain is a reflection of the Lord's own example. Think about Jesus, who was in glory with angels worshiping Him and singing to Him, "**Holy, holy, holy!**" day and night in the halls of heaven. Yet he chose to come to this sinful planet in the likeness of our sinful flesh. He left heaven's glory to live and die in a fallen world, to be rejected by His own people, to be crucified and buried. It would have been better for Jesus to stay in the halls of glory, but it was needful for us that He come. And so the Apostle Paul is just following in the footsteps of his Savior. What a mess it is to get involved with the lives of others who need help! What a mess people's lives can get in! But let us follow Christ and follow Paul, in caring enough to serve and give as long as the Lord has us here on this earth.