

Single-minded Devotion, Double-sided Dilemma: The Best vs. the Better, Which One to Choose?

- *Introduction and Outline*
- Scripture reading: Philippians 1:12-26.
- Have you ever had difficulty choosing between options? Paul was having a hard time because both options were so good! What choice did he make? His reasoning process is full of encouragement, challenge, and may even completely change the way you look at your life!
- Outlines:
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Single-minded Devotion (vv 19-21)

The Assurance of Salvation—Work of the Spirit Through Prayer (v19)

- **“This will turn out for my deliverance”**: “Deliverance” in the Bible refers not only to temporal release from danger, but more often to eternal salvation, that is, from God’s righteous judgment of sin and eternal punishment in the fire of hell and to be with the Lord forever. Paul uses it here to include both senses (cf. 25-26; 2:17. The following two verses explain what Paul means by deliverance).

The Christian’s perspective on trials: they will all turn out for your salvation! Either from the present difficulty so as to continue working for the Lord; or from all difficulties of this life to be with the Lord forever! You are invincible! No matter what, you always win!

- **“Through your prayers”**: Assurance of salvation does not mean prayer is unnecessary. God ordained not only the outcome but also the means, that is, through the prayers of the saints.

James 5:16 “The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.”

- **“The provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ”**: The Holy Spirit, as the Helper, gives every spiritual help to the saints such as encouragement, comfort, and exhortation. What does this have to do with Paul being saved? The answer is in verse 20.

The Meaning of Salvation—To Exalt Christ by Life or by Death (v20)

- **“... that ...”**: This conjunction introduces a further explanation of what Paul means by deliverance. For Paul, the meaning of salvation is not just to be out of danger, but to honor the Lord in life and death!
- **“I will not be put to shame in anything”**: Shame in the Old Testament often refers to humiliating events, especially the attack of enemies. But Paul was clearly not ashamed of his imprisonment (cf. verses 12-18). What Paul meant by shame is in the second half of the verse.
- **“but ... Christ will even now, as always, be exalted in my body”**: This is the meaning of not being ashamed. As long as Paul can glorify Christ and testify to the power of the gospel of Christ with his words and deeds, whether by life or by death, he has nothing to be ashamed of! This is the true meaning of salvation!

What makes you feel ashamed? A failed love pursuit? Disappointments in life? Being called a loser at work? Being mocked when sharing the gospel? Paul says the only thing I would be ashamed of is not being able to magnify my Lord in everything! When you stop seeking your own glory and long for the glory of Christ, your spirit is freed from the shackles of selfishness to do what God wants you to do!

- **“With all boldness”**: A necessary attitude for exalting the Lord in everything. Where does this boldness come from? 1) It comes from knowing and trusting in the gospel (Heb. 4:15-16); 2) It comes from abiding in the Lord (1 John 2:28); 3) It comes from a clean conscience (John 1 3:21).

The Outworking of Salvation—To Live Is Christ and to Die Is Gain (v21)

- **“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain”**: Most people’s view on life and death goes like this: “To live is money, to die is loss”; “To live is pleasure, to die is loss”; or “To live is fame, power, status, etc., to die is loss”..... Only when Christ becomes the definition of your life, death will be turned from loss to gain.
- To live is Christ: Christ is the creator of life, the source of life, the pursuit of life, the example of life, the meaning of life, and the goal of life. The purpose of living is to work for Christ, and to let others see Christ in us.
- To die is gain: Because we will immediately enter into the presence of Jesus! Immediately after the death of a Christian, the soul leaves the body to be with the Lord:

2 Corinthians 5:6-8 “...while we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord ..., and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.”

Therefore, the Bible often refers to the death of believers as “sleep”, which is not a euphemism, but a spiritual perspective that believers have received eternal life and will never die again! (Acts 7:60 Stephen “fell asleep”; 1 Thess. 4:13 “of those who are asleep”)

Double-Sided Dilemma (vv 21-26)

First-round Choice-making—To Die Is Gain and to Live Is Fruit (vv 21-22a)

- **“This will mean fruitful labor for me.”** There are three types of Christian fruit—inner character that reflects sanctification, good works out of that sanctified character, and gospel results brought about by those good works in the lives of others. Here is the third, the gospel fruit of Paul’s ministry in others. This is the meaning of Paul’s life. Death is gain, life is fruit, and both are great benefits to Paul.

Unable to Choose—Hard-pressed Between Two Great Options (vv 22b-23a)

- **“I do not know which to choose”:** Not that he has the right to choose between life and death, but he wants to choose in his mind which is better and more desirable. Such choices will inevitably affect the content of prayers and the perspective on life. But Paul couldn’t make a choice at this point.
- **“I am hard-pressed from both directions”:** The Greek verb means to be surrounded and controlled by some mighty force (Acts 18:5 “devoting himself completely to the word”; 2 Corinthians 5:14 “the love of Christ controls us”). Paul’s dilemma wasn’t because he had two bad options; quite the contrary, both options are so good that they are powerful driving forces, motivating him to live for the Lord boldly in life or death!

Do you ever have such a dilemma? Does the fruit of the gospel make you desire to live and work for Christ? Does the hope of Christ’s presence make you desire to die and be with Him? Without the former, your perspective on life is not quite right; without the latter, your eternal hope is not strong enough. Every Christian should feel this dilemma!

Second-round Choice-making—To Die Is Self-gain and to Live Is Others’ Gain (vv 23b-24)

- **“Having the desire to”:** The Greek expresses a very strong desire, often translated as “lust” when used negatively. It is an extremely strong, compulsive desire—Paul so longs to die!
- **“Depart”:** The Greek means “to be released”, and it is often used to describe a ship released from its anchor so as to sail freely. For Christians, death is a release from the bondage of the sinful flesh and the sinful world, so the soul can sail into the presence of the Lord Jesus.

- “**That is very much better**”: Strong superlative. This is the very best! Paul says it from his own experience—2 Corinthians 12:4 says he “was caught up into Paradise,” the same place the criminal on the cross went to when Jesus says “today you shall be with Me in Paradise!” Paul went there himself! If he says this is the very best, it must absolutely be the very best!
- “**Yet**”: What an unexpected turn! After he has just decided what is the very best, what else can make a “yet”?
- “**For your sake**”: This is the turning point! In the first round of comparison, to live means “fruitful labor *for me*”, and here, to live is “for *your sake*”. When Paul considered his personal interest, there was no better choice than to be with the Lord. But Paul not only had his own interests in mind. He really cared about his brothers and sisters!

Choice Becomes Clear—Forsaking the Best for the Better (vv 25-26)

- “**I know**”: It is not the revelation from God that predicts the future, but knowing how to choose the things that are more desirable. The one option is his own very best gain, and the other is temporarily laying aside his own benefit for the benefit of brothers and sisters for the church. Seeing this, Paul no longer struggled, and went directly for the latter.
- “**for your progress and joy in the faith**”: Paul’s earnest concern is the spiritual growth and joy of his brothers and sisters. It made Paul willing to delay the blessing of going to be with the Lord in heaven. What an example of humility and self-denial!
- “**Your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus**”: “Confidence” is literally boasting. A more accurate translation is “boast in me in Jesus Christ” because you see more of Christ in me. This also echoes the will of verse 20, “Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death”!

Encouragement and challenge: On the one hand, we see how meaningful the Christian life is. Whether to live or to die, our options are extremely good. As we resolve to live for Christ, to die is our gain. On the other hand, when we are afraid of things, or when we lack passion for life, we see how little our love is for the Lord and for others. May the Lord help us!