
PHIL 1:21 : TO DIE IS GAIN

No. EE4

People fear death. Nobody enjoys thinking or talking about it. Hb 2:15 describes such people as "those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death".

But this text confronts us with the issue directly. And rightly so. It is crucial that we consider this topic, for death inevitably awaits us all. Moreover, reflecting on this scripture brings about wonderful liberation, encouragement and comfort for true believers.

SOME GENERAL COMMENTS

❑ Contrary to the opinion of many, the Bible does not teach about only two states of existence, namely this present life and the life following resurrection. There is also a third state: the one following directly on death, until the resurrection - *as a disembodied spirit*.

Paul is discussing this in-between or intermediate state.

❑ We tend to think about death as a loss. Indeed, it is often an inexpressible loss to those who stay behind. And what shall we say about an unbeliever who dies? But the death of a true Christian counts as "profit" for him or her. Life following death is better for us than the life we have here - "better by far" (23).

❑ Paul does not have a morbid desire for death. Nor does he disregard the value of this life on earth. On the contrary, he is too aware of the mountains of meaningful work still to be done by him here and

now (22-24).

When he describes his internal struggle in v.23 - to move on, or to stay here - he isn't torn between good and bad, but rather between good and better. He is like a good soldier who longs for the end of the war so that he can return home, but who dutifully grits his teeth, sticks it out, and refuses to even consider deserting.

❑ Nowhere in the Bible will you find death itself described as a blessing. Before it was defeated by the redemptive work of Christ, it was a ruthless enemy. It is a predator that cruelly tears the spirit from the body (Ecc 12:7).

Death remains the last enemy for those of us who are united with Christ (1Cor 15:26). The prospect of death must have been abhorrent and frightening for the apostle - as it is for us. Even to the true believer to die is to cross a dark and deep river without a bridge - as Bunyan described it.

In terms of God's original creation death is not natural. It is a result of the Fall. The cost of sin is death. But redemption in Christ is all about abolishment of sin and its consequences. Therefore it is also about the annihilation of death (1Cor 15:51-57).

❑ Even the intermediate state in heaven is temporary. The spirit is still without its glorified body. As such, this is still a state of imperfection and incompleteness (2Cor 5:1-10).

This is why the New Testament almost without fail ignores this intermediate state - it is only a temporary thoroughfare, one step further on the road to my perfect inheritance in Christ. This is why the apostles keep their sights fixed directly on - the resurrection!

Yet Paul says to die is gain! Even the in-between phase is preferable to this current life.

❑ The phrase in v.23, "to depart" is apt. One of its meanings used to be to break up camp. Here, and elsewhere in the New Testament, it suggests the

end of a temporary, nomadic life fraught with insecurity.

Listen to 2Cor 5:1: "For we know that if the *earthly tent* we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands." Also 2Pt 1:13-14: "I think it is right to refresh your memory as long as I live in *the tent of this body*, because I know I will soon put it aside ..."

The Bible frequently emphasises that this life is temporary; in truth, the believer is only an alien and a stranger here (1Pt 2:11). We are merely pilgrims. This world is not our home.

WHY IS IT GAIN TO DIE?

❑ For the believer, dying is to *return home*. It is to quit the habitation of our body so that we can live at home with the Lord (2Cor 5:6-9). It is to depart for our eternal house (Ecc 12:5) - our fatherland and our own city (Hb 11:13-16). Where are you more content than at your own place? That is where we belong - with the Lord!

❑ One of the greatest blessings awaiting us after we have breathed our last is that we will, at long last, *have done with sin*. What causes more sadness and frustration in the life of a believer than failures in the struggle against his or her sin? But once we are with the Lord, it will be *impossible* to sin any longer.

❑ The wife of a King shares his possessions and status.

When Christ rose from the dead, He did not do so only in His personal capacity, but as Head of the new humanity (Eph 2:5-6). When He ascended to heaven, He did not take possession of the reward and inheritance just for Himself, but also for His bride. For us to take possession thereof is a process - and we have scarce begun - but the principle is certain and clear: those who are in Christ are already "co-heirs with Christ" (Rm 8:17).

Exactly how much of our inheritance in Christ we

will receive immediately after death, and how much will have to wait for the final resurrection, is not revealed. But we do know that "an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade" is secured for us in heaven (1Pt 1:4). "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love Him" (1Cor 2:9).

☐ Death is a portal to the knowledge and understanding of the Lord, the likes of which we cannot grasp at the moment. Once again, we do not know how much of it will only be revealed when our salvation is perfected with the second coming and resurrection. But assuredly, immediately after death, we will be overwhelmed with new truths and revealed mysteries while our loved ones are busy, in grief, with funeral arrangements. "Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Cor 13:12).

We will spend eternity in the land of astounding and inexhaustible discoveries! And at the heart of this will be an ever deeper knowledge of our triune God. To know *Him* is the heart of eternal life (Jh 17:3). To glorify Himself before His creatures is after all what it is all about for God. Will there ever come a point where our fascination and joy in Him will wane or level out? The answer is surely, "No, never!" *Truly, eternity is not long enough to fathom God and His works!*

☐ This text reveals the real reason behind Paul's eagerness to depart from this life: *it will take him to Christ!* (23). The essence of the hereafter for the believer is to go and be "at home with the Lord" (2Cor 5:8). Jesus told the criminal: "Truly I tell you, today you will be *with me* in paradise" (Lk 23:43).

Since we are Christ's bride, how great will be our welcome in heaven! Unquestionably, there we will experience a very close relationship with Him - much closer than even the relationship He had with His disciples here on earth.

☐ However, we will not only delight in the Son - we are also going *to the Father*.

The messianic Psalm 16 articulates it like this: "... you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand" (Ps 16:11, NIV). On the day of Pentecost Peter quotes these verses and applies them to Christ and His heavenly Father (Act 2:25-28).

However, in their unity with Christ, the saints will share in this joy. They too are adopted as children (Gal 4:4-7). In fact, they are even more. As bride of Christ they are, so to speak, the Father's *daughter-in-law!* They are completely part of the family!

CONCLUSION

☐ We must be sure not to deceive ourselves. Millions do so. What can be more foolish than the vain hope, not grounded in the Word, that everything will eventually turn out fine?

When we dare to think about it, many questions concerning our death arises: When? Where? What will the cause be? But according God's Word only one question is really important: *How?* Here I am not referring to what will be stated as "cause of death" on my death certificate. I refer to the spiritual state in which I will die. And there are only two possible answers: *in faith*, or *in sin* (Jh 8:24).

The worst conceivable thing that can happen to a person is not dying as such, *but dying in sin*. Remember, when you die you go somewhere from where no return is possible. And there are two, in fact only two, destinations according to God's Word.

☐ Verse 21 is an unbreakable unity. Thus, only *those for whom life is Christ* have reason to believe that death will be *gain*.

The pagan prophet, Balaam, prays: "Let me die the death of the righteous..." (Num 23:10). What he forgets is that one can only die the death of the righteous if you have been justified - and this always shows very clearly in a person's life.

So many imagine *grace* is only something you receive when you appear before God after death. That is a fatal misconception. Grace is something you receive in *this* life, or not at all. It is now or never. And when you truly receive it, it changes you completely - *because it makes life Christ for you*.

But those of us for whom life is indeed Christ can meet our coming death with confidence and eager anticipation. We are merely going to follow our Lord through the portals He has already passed.

Of course, when the time comes, we may experience momentary dismay. But for us it will not be a fatalistic leap over an abyss in the dark. We will pass through the gates in faith. Psalm 23:4 will become true for us: "Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me."

☐ The old Puritan, Richard Baxter (1615-1691), put it as follows: "If a man is miserably ill, but knows that he will be well in the morning; or if he is penniless, but knows that he will be a prince in the morning when he wakes - will he be afraid of going to bed?"

The pioneer missionary to Burma, Adoniram Judson (1788-1850), saw it in this way: "I am not exhausted from work, nor am I in the least tired of this world - but when Christ calls me, I will go with the exuberance of a schoolboy who runs out of the school gates for the summer holidays."

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