

Opening Words: Have you ever been in situations where you felt out of place, you felt like you didn't belong, and were uncomfortable? You will never feel that when you are with Christ. You will be in the place where you belong, the place you were made for – the presence of God.

17 Phil – To Die is Gain

“For to me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” These are the words of one of Christianity's greatest men and they have resounded through the ages up to our time – “To live is Christ and to die is gain.”

We have explored the first part – to live is Christ. We have learned some of what that means. But now we have to focus on the second half of Paul's statement – to die is gain.

Really? To die is gain? I have heard stories of people suffering from terminal illness for lengthy periods. They are tired. They are hurting. And they just want to die. I have heard of people in distressing situations from which there seems to be no exit, and all they want is to die. But this would not describe his mental condition. Paul wanted to die and be with Christ, but it's not that he was living in abject misery and wanted release from it. Yes, even though he was in prison, he had his own living quarters and a certain amount of freedom to receive guests and minister to people.

It is not that Paul was bored with life. I doubt if Paul experienced **one day** of boredom. And it is not that Paul sensed that his life and career were over. We have seen how imprisonment in Rome did not limit his ministry but accelerated it as the gospel spread through the Roman guards into the Praetorian guard and had even reached Caesar's household. We have seen how Paul's example was lighting up the church in Rome so that more of God's people were boldly proclaiming Christ. How exciting was that! Paul's ministry was thriving. Paul was not saying, “I'm done here on earth. I might as well die and be with Christ.”

Instead, Paul was drawn heavenward by his love for Christ. And this is what made his situation so difficult. He said he was “hard-pressed” from both directions. From earth he was hard-pressed because he had so many opportunities for fruitful labor. But he was also hard-pressed from heaven because he knew the joy that lay ahead of him.

Paul expressed his heavenly hope in two very simple terms. In 1:21 he said, “to die is gain” and in 1:23 he said it is “very much better.” That little phrase gets me excited. When we think of dying we think of loss, and that is natural. I've shared with you before some of my own experiences – the loss of my sister when I was a little boy and the trauma upon my mother. The loss of my mother and father, and of course, the loss of my first wife many years ago.

Did you hear the key word in all of those sad statements – the word “loss”? But I believe that what was a loss for me and others on earth was a gain for heaven. Paul spoke of his departure as a gain. In what ways? In what ways is it “very much better.”

Paul had an advantage. Years earlier he had had a vision of heavenly things. He tells us about it in the sparest of details in 2 Corinthians 12 where he says he was caught up into heavenly places and while there he heard inexpressible words which a man is not permitted to speak. They were inexpressible, not because Paul would not know what to say but because Paul was forbidden to

speak of them. How's that for a teaser! It's kind of like someone saying to you, "I have purchased a special gift for you that is the most amazing gift you will ever receive. But I can't give it to you for ten more years!" How would you feel? Excited, but curious beyond belief! Well, magnify that one million times and we may get an idea of why Paul said he saw glorious things but was not allowed to talk about them! That is enough to tantalize me some more!

Paul went on to say that God had to send him a thorn in the flesh to keep him from exalting himself. God knew that Paul might become proud after what he had seen and that leads me to believe that among the many things he saw, he saw himself in the future exalted and reigning with Christ. Paul spoke of this vision and described it as a revelation of "surpassing greatness." So great was the revelation that God refused to take away the thorn in the flesh so that Paul would remain humble and not be proud.

What awaits us in eternity?

Again, we are provided only a few details in Scripture, but let me share briefly on the little that we know.

1. Christ is there. Jesus Christ is there in all his glory at the right hand of God. Paul told the Colossian believers not to set their minds on earthly things but on heavenly things where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. What is it like to see Christ in his glorified state? What is it like to see him "at the right hand of God," knowing that he is there as our victor, our advocate, as our justification, and as the Lord of heaven and earth. What is it like to see him and to know that he is there for us and that we are secure eternally and nothing can separate us from his love? That should be reason enough to want to die! Paul said as much when he stated "to be with Christ is far better." – to be with Christ – that's what he wanted. To be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord he said in 2 Corinthians 5:8. That leads to my second thought.
2. To be home, that's another benefit. You know, the movie, the Wizard of Oz, got it right – "there's no place like home." And as much as we enjoy being in our earthly homes, really, the satisfaction we derive from that is little compared to being home with the Lord. When we are with Christ we will be exactly where we belong. Imagine what that meant for Paul. He was often on the road, travelling from city to city and sometimes he had no place to stay. Sometimes he was without food and shelter and was exposed to the elements. How great it would be for him to **be home** with the Lord.

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Here's a third thought for us:

3. You will see the worship of heaven and it is described for us in Revelation 4-5.

John is caught up to heaven by the spirit and he sees a throne and one upon the throne who is holy, majestic, and beautiful beyond description. Four living creatures are around the throne constantly crying out, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord” and 24 elders are there who cast their crowns, their honor and authority at the feet of the one who sits on the throne and they worship him for creating all things.

John sees this vision and is mesmerized by it. Then, an angel says, “who is worthy to open the book and to break its seals.” The book is the unfolding of human history and the consummation of the purposes of God. For God’s plans to be fulfilled, the book has to be opened, but no one is worthy to open the book and John begins to weep greatly because he realizes that if no one is worthy to open this book, then the worship of heaven, this beautiful, heart-filling, wonder of wonders will be forever barred from him and all others.

John weeps greatly because he feels the loss – what he was created for and what he was supposed to have, he could never have. But you know the rest of the story, one of the 24 elders says, “John, stop weeping! Look, the Lion of Judah has overcome!” Then John sees the Lion who is a Lamb take the book out of the hand of the one on the throne and the worship of heaven starts all over again with this added feature. They praised the one on the throne and the Lamb because the Lamb had provided a way for John and for other lost sinners such as Paul and you and me to come before the throne and join in the worship of heaven.

What a roller coaster of emotion for John – to experience the worship, to think he was denied it, to weep over his eternal loss, and then to see that the Lamb had rescued him and everything would be all right! And that is what we can know for sure and the gain that we can look forward to – worshipping the one who sits on the throne and the Lamb who was slain for us. I’m ready to experience it right now! How about you!

4. We will be in the presence of God’s people of all the ages. If you have loved ones who have passed on already, you will be with them. And you will be with the great saints of all the ages! You’ll be with Paul, with Peter, John, David, Isaiah, Moses, Abraham, and millions of others whose names you don’t know yet but who will be worth your time in getting to know them. And that will not be a problem because you will have plenty of time for them all!

There is so much more to say but we are running out of time – we are not in eternity yet! But let me close by mentioning quickly just a few more.

Rest – free from pressure and stress

And I heard a voice from heaven, saying, “Write, ‘Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!’” “Yes,” says the Spirit, “so that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them

We will see as God sees – we will have his perspective on everything. ¹² For now we see in a mirror

dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully just as I also have been fully known.

And there, we will be there awaiting the main event – the return of Christ and the resurrection of our body. As wonderful as the glories of heaven are, that’s not the ultimate destiny. The ultimate destiny is to return to a new earth with Him, to receive a new, glorified body. Heaven and earth will be reunited and our spirit and new body will unite in power and holiness for the glory of God as we reign with him.

And now, my friends, I hope we know why Paul said, “yes, for to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”