

“To Live or Die?”

Today the apostle Paul finds himself at a crossroads of sorts. He does not know what to do; which way to turn; or what road to take, if you will.

Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked down one as far as I could
To where it bent in the undergrowth;

Then took the other, as just as fair,
And having perhaps the better claim,
Because it was grassy and wanted wear;
Though as for that the passing there
Had worn them really about the same,

And both that morning equally lay
In leaves no step had trodden black.
Oh, I kept the first for another day!
Yet knowing how way leads on to way,
I doubted if I should ever come back.

I shall be telling this with a sigh
Somewhere ages and ages hence:
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.

The two roads in the middle of Paul's life is life or death. He does not know which would be best; to die and go be with Christ, or to live and minister to the Philippians.

In one sense Paul *does* know which is best *for* him. It would be better for Paul to die and go be with Jesus. “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

But in v.22 this perplexing question is asked. “Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!”

Paul's internal struggle is then expressed in v. 23-24. “I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.”

We can feel the agony, turmoil, and gut wrenching emotion of those words. Paul is in prison. He is sensing that his time on earth is coming to a close. He has completed three long, difficult missionary journeys in the Greco-Roman world. He has pushed his body, mind, and spirit to the limit. He is ready to die and go and be with Christ.

In his second letter to the Corinthians Paul gives us a glimpse of just how far he, or God, has pushed himself.

Five times I received from the Jews forty lashed minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea, I have been constantly on the move. I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

-II Corinthians 11:25-28

After all of that who wouldn't be ready to go be with the Lord?

But it is not just Paul's trials that makes him want to go and be with Jesus.

Usually that *is* what makes a person ready, our suffering. We have a bad day. We go through a difficult season of life. We experience tragedy. Somebody beats us down and makes us feel like a total failure. We want to die. At least if we were dead we would be in the presence of Christ. Through death we would find sweet relief from the misery that life sometimes imposes upon us.

Paul's Wanting to Die and His Love for Christ

But with Paul I do not think this is the chief reason that he wants to go be with Christ.

Yes he is tired. Yes he has experienced hardship. Yes he is in prison and his time is drawing nigh. And yes all these things are enough to make a man want to die, but this is not the chief reason. Paul is not about escapism. The reason he wants die and go be with Jesus is because he loves him.

For Paul death was like what the sun was to the watchman in the night. It couldn't come fast enough, because for him it would mean to be with Christ. "For to me, to live is Christ and to die

is gain.” Paul loves Jesus and he wants to be in his presence, forever; and life on earth is the only thing that is keeping him from that.

So a good question for us this morning is do we love Jesus Christ with that same kind of intensity?

Do we long for and look forward to being in the presence of Jesus, in God’s eternal kingdom, because we love him? Or are we more in love with the things of this world that will one day pass away?

Jesus said in his Sermon on the Mount, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven...For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Mt. 6:19-21)

These things we have a hard time letting go of, and often love more than Christ.

Paul’s Wanting to Live and His Love for the Philippians

But getting back to the text and the dilemma, Paul knows what is best *for* him, death. But Paul is not just interested in himself. The apostle is also looking out for the interests of the Philippians.

In fact, in the name of loving one’s neighbor as one’s self, Paul puts the well being of the Philippians above his own personal desires. And because he does that he makes the choice to remain the body. *Not that Paul has a choice, for God alone is Lord of life and death, but he makes a choice in the sense that that is what he will desire.* Even though he wants to die and go be with the Lord his desire will be to remain on earth so that he can be of further help to the Philippians.

This raises another question of application for our lives. Do we put the needs of others over our own, or do we always look to fulfill our own self-interests first?

Later in Philippians 2:2-4 Paul tells us that we are to have “the mind of Christ” and one way we are to do that is we are to “look not only to our own self-interests, but also to the interests of others.”

Jesus himself told us in the gospels that “whoever wants to become great in the Kingdom of God” must “become a servant.” “For the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mt.20:26-28)

So when Paul made a decision to desire to remain in the body for the sake of the Philippians he was taking his cue from his Lord who came into this world to give his life for sinners.

What about us? Whose interests are we looking out for?

Whether Paul Lives or Dies It Will Be for the Purposes of God's Salvation in His Life

It is important for us to note, just as I stated a moment ago, that though Paul was confident that God would honor his desire to remain in the body, he did not know for sure if God, in his providence would grant such a request.

Paul was confident, but not cocky, or arrogant. He knew that death was a very real possibility, regardless of what he desired.

Look at v.27 of the text, which is not a part of this morning's scripture reading. In that verse Paul said, "Whatever happens, conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the gospel." By this he meant but whatever happens to me, whether I live or die, you Philippians stay true to the faith. Live your life in a manner that would bring glory to Christ. So as confident as Paul was about the prospects of remaining in the body he knew that it was not a guarantee. He knew death was possible.

Now let us look at another thing that Paul said in his letter in Philippians 2:17. "But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice... I am glad and rejoice with all of you."

So what we see here is that even though he desired to remain in the body for the sake of the Philippians Paul was acutely aware that he might die a martyr for the faith.

Knowing this about Paul helps us to put into perspective what Paul meant in v. 19 of the text.

Our reading began with Paul saying "Yes, and I will continue to rejoice, for I know that through your prayers and God's provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance."

In the Greek the word that we have translated as *deliverance*, literally means *salvation*. That is to say that what has happened to Paul, his imprisonment, will turn out for his salvation. That means that whether he lives or he dies God will use Paul's imprisonment to accomplish the purposes of His salvation in the life of Paul.

Conclusion

In this life we have no guarantees for tomorrow. One day we will all die, but as Christians we must always remember that whether we live or we die, we are the Lord's. Jesus Christ has accomplished our salvation on the cross. He has paid the wage for our sin, which is death. He bore God's holy wrath so that we might be given a free pass-grace. Not only that, but Jesus Christ has conquered the sting of death, which we will all one day experience, through his resurrection of the dead.

In Christ God says to us that death will not get the final word. Your body will not rot forever in the grave and your Spirit will not fade away at your death. But God will redeem both body and soul from death's sting through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I close with these wonderful words from the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism.

Q. 1. What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

A. That I belong—body and soul, in life and in death—not to myself but to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ, who at the cost of his own blood has fully paid for all my sins and has completely freed me from the dominion of the devil; that he protects me so well that without the will of my Father in heaven not a hair can fall from my head; indeed, that everything must fit his purpose for my salvation.

So whether we live or die we are the Lord's. Nothing will separate us from the love of God. "Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all of creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Rom. 8:38-39)

"For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain."

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen.