

Message #8

Philippians 1:21-26

One of the most profound verses you will ever read in the N.T. is Philippians 1:21. **In fact, many people believe this is the most important verse in the entire book of Philippians.** It is succinct and it is deep. The only problem with this verse is interpreting what those twelve English words and nine Greek words mean.

John Eadie, a Scottish theologian and Greek Grammarian of the 1800's, dedicated six pages in his commentary to try and explain the meaning. Richard Lenski, the Lutheran theologian and scholar of the early 1900's, used five pages in an attempt to explain these words. So determining the meaning of the words is not as simple as one might think.

The first thing we may notice is that **verse 21** begins with a conjunction “for.” That immediately connects us to the preceding context in which Paul established the fact that his personal goal was not to be ashamed before God but to magnify Jesus Christ.

He said that he knew through the prayers of God's people (1:19a), through the power of God's Spirit (1:19b) and through the earnest expectation of his godly hope (1:20-21), he would reach his objective.

Now in the aftermath of all of this, he states **verse 21**. Now the conjunction “for” is emphatic and could be understood as “indeed.” “Indeed for me to live is Christ and to die is gain.” The two infinitives “to live” and “to die” are very important. The infinitive “to live” is present tense speaking of continually living and the infinitive “to die” is aorist tense speaking of a one moment of time event.

What Paul is saying is that my life has been so lived for Jesus Christ that at this very moment in time, it does not matter whether I live or die. If I live, I will continue to live for Jesus Christ. If I die, I will go to be with Jesus Christ. **In other words, the focus of my life has been so devoted to Jesus Christ that it does not matter to me whether I live or die right here right now.**

Not every believer can make such a statement and actually have it be true. The Bible is clear that not every believer can have such a confidence. In fact, John says (I John 2:28) that when a believer faces God, he may face him in one of two ways: 1) With confidence; 2) With shame.

Depending upon one's life activity, dying will either be a loss or a gain. Paul's life had been so dedicated to Jesus Christ that it did not matter in A.D. 62 whether he lived or died. That is the point here:

A BELIEVER MAY BE SO DEVOTED TO JESUS CHRIST THAT IT DOES NOT REALLY PERSONALLY MATTER TO HIM WHETHER HE LIVES OR DIES.

This is an amazing statement to be able to make. Paul says if I live today or die today makes no difference when it comes to my commitment to Jesus Christ. Paul had no loose ends in life that needed to be fixed. If his ministry would have ended that day, he had a confidence that it was done right.

Now primarily there are two follow-up messages that Paul makes in the aftermath of making this amazing statement:

FOLLOW-UP MESSAGE #1 – Dying for a faithful servant of God is a better option than living for one's self. 1:22-23

When it came to living or dying, Paul faced a real dilemma. He faced a real conflict within himself. Paul says in **verse 22** that he was struggling with the idea of remaining here on earth so he could bear more fruit or go to be with the Lord.

In **verse 23**, he said he was hard pressed to figure this out. What that means is that when it came to him choosing to live or die, he literally was hemmed in from every side and pressed in from every angle to the point that he could not turn in either direction.

In other words, after carefully examining all angles, he literally was having a difficult time determining whether he wanted to live or die.

Now this decision for Paul was not easy. The difficulty for him was not the hostile circumstances. Many believers in hostile circumstances or adversity want to die or be raptured. That was not it for Paul. John Eadie said, "It is not weariness of life, difficulties or misery that motivates Paul to think death is gain...it is being with Jesus Christ, that is making the choice so difficult."

Paul's life had been so focused on Jesus Christ that he knows to die and go to be with Christ was "much better" for him. He had faithfully served Christ for nearly 30 years. He had been mightily used by God all over the world. He had unlocked grace age truth and dying for Paul would mean that he could go into the presence of Jesus Christ as a good and faithful servant.

Now apparently the issue that really made this choice a little more difficult was the issue of bearing "fruit" (**v. 22**). The pronoun "this" in **verse 22** refers to the fact that if he lives, he will be able to propagate truth to more people and thus produce more fruit. Do not miss this point. **Paul's ministry, that was so fruit bearing, was a preaching and teaching ministry.** That is what he did and that is who he was. He bore fruit by preaching and teaching the grace of God and all of the doctrines that came with it.

When Jesus Christ was here on earth He informed His disciples that He wanted them to bear "much" fruit (John 15:8, 16). This is accomplished by communicating the truth and by living a life that is totally focused on Jesus Christ (John 15:5). It is also accomplished by not fellowshiping with unfruitful things (Eph. 5:11), both unfruitful people and unfruitful places.

By keeping a close relationship with Jesus Christ and by presenting truth, one bears fruit. Paul says if I continue to live here on earth, I will be able to bear more fruit. I'll never forget something one of our dear saints, Bob Ricks, who is now with the Lord, did in a hospital. He had gone to the hospital to see a believer who was recovering from some surgery. The man was whining and complaining and saying he didn't know how things would go so the man from our church said, "Well if things are so bad just lay there and die then." He turned and walked out. His wife, Elsie, said, do you think you should have said that? He said, "Yes, I do." This guy has a lot to live for and he is acting like life is over.

Paul is literally facing death and he says if I get to live, I can bear more fruit. Can we say the same thing? If God gives us more time, will we bear more fruit? Or do we say, "If God gives us more time, we will whine and complain and live for ourselves, seeking our own pleasure?"

Paul says my struggle is that I really have a desire to depart and be with Christ which is much better than being here. But this is not a cop-out, this is a real dilemma.

Now the word "depart" (v. 23) is not a word that would allow for some heretical doctrine like purgatory or soul sleep. The word speaks of a loosing and departure from one location to go to another location. It was used of a ship that would be loosed from a dock so it could sail to another place or of a tent that would be taken down by a soldier so he could relocate and even go home (G. Abbott-Smith, *Greek Lexicon*, p. 31).

Bishop Moule says that Philip Melancthon, who was a theologian and friend of Martin Luther, who became the head of the German Reformation in 1546 when Luther died, referred to this verse and this very word on his death bed. Melancthon's close friend, Camerarius, was at his side just before he died, and he said that Melancthon, with great delight, pointed out this verse and this word and the error of the Apocrypha and Catholic translation of the Bible (Vulgate) and said the word meant that he was about to "return home." One must admire Melancthon as he thought about this very word as he was about to go into the presence of Jesus Christ.

There are some questions worth considering in view of Paul's point here:

Question #1 - Is our life so committed to Jesus Christ that right now would be a great time for us to depart to be with Jesus Christ?

See this is what bothers me. There are those who seem to have some delusional perspective of this. You'll see some people saying, "I just want to go be with the Lord," "I am sick of life and sick of this world and I just want to go be with the Lord." Sometimes you have to say, "Why?" "What gives you that confidence?" What exactly have you done that would make you want to depart to go be with the Lord right now? Some people are so lackadaisical when it comes to the Lord, you can't even hardly get them to go to church much less come back to church Sunday night. In fact, some ministers are so lazy they cancel Sunday night services because they don't want to have to work to preach two messages on Sunday.

Frankly, some people live their lives dedicated more to the world than the Lord and then they say I am now ready to depart and face Jesus Christ. That was not Paul. Paul was ready to depart because his life was sold out to Christ.

Question #2 - Is our life so committed to Jesus Christ that we are bearing fruit?

If God continues to grant us life are we interested in bearing fruit for Him? Is that our objective? Do we witness? Do we warn? Do we challenge people that they need to be in a church where God's Word is carefully taught and worship is reverent? Do we take a stand for what is true, and right and sound? Paul did that all the time and he bore fruit.

Question #3 - If we die today could we say we got it done for the Lord?

Paul literally could sit there in jail and say there is nothing more that I could do for the Lord. Can we say that? Are we doing what we can to enhance the Word and work of Jesus Christ? Do we pray? Do we give? Do we serve?

For Paul the answer was yes to every one of those questions.

FOLLOW-UP MESSAGE #2 – Living for a faithful servant of God is a better option than dying for others. **1:24-26**

We really get to see the heart of Paul here. He was not interested in doing what was best for him, but was best for others. He was willing to put the needs of others ahead of his own personal desires. Most people don't think like this. Most people put their own comfort and pleasure way ahead of the needs of others in the church. Not Paul.

Paul knew that him dying was not the best option for other believers. Other believers needed Paul. That word "necessary" is one that indicates that Paul's existence on earth was more of a necessity or compelling need for the Philippians more than for him. **The Philippians so needed Paul and verse 25 makes it clear that the need was so great that Paul was totally convinced and fully persuaded that he would not die, but that he would live.**

In other words, Paul became convinced of the reality that God wanted him to live longer because he could see he was still needed by the body of Jesus Christ. **They needed him and they needed his teaching.**

Paul wanted to go home to be with the Lord, but he sensed the body of Christ needed him to be on earth, so he became convinced that God wanted him here for a while yet.

Now there are two reasons why Paul became convinced that he would not die:

Reason #1 - The faith progress reason. **1:25a**

Paul was needed so that he could teach others so that they could advance or progress in their faith. His life and teaching ministry was being used by God to help others move forward and develop in their faith.

It is interesting that it was his teaching that got him thrown into jail, but it was also his teaching that developed the faith of others and enabled them to move forward and progress in their faith.

So for this reason Paul knew it was better for them if he lived. The truth is God granted Paul about six more years of life so that he could teach others, write a few more books of the Bible so that they could develop in their faith. Paul wanted to go to be with Christ, but God knew he was needed in the church.

Reason #2 - The joy progress reason. **1:25b-26**

Paul wanted the Philippians to joyfully live for and serve Jesus Christ. Paul's existence on earth would enable them to grow in their faith and that brings joy.

For one thing, as **verse 26** says, when they saw Paul coming again, they would have a joyful moment and be proud of the fact that they knew Paul, had prayed for Paul and were now able to be with Paul again.

Two questions this text certainly prompts us to ask:

- 1) Would it be better for other believers if we live today?
- 2) Would it really be better for us to die and face Jesus Christ today?