

## **Introduction**

Four weeks ago, the Spiritual Life Commission handed out a *Belief Questionnaire* to the congregation. It consists of fifteen statements, each of which is followed by two boxes, one that says, "Believe" and another that says, "Doubt". Thirty people handed in their questionnaires, the fascinating result of which is this. Only one of the fifteen statements was checked "Doubt" by any of the thirty. That one was this: **"I will, after death, have an eternal life with God that is far better than earthly life if I am a disciple of Jesus."** Several of you who handed in the questionnaire doubt that.

But based on my experiences with people, I think many others do as well. I am, therefore, going to address that doubt today so that all of us can know or at least believe that we're better off dead.

## **Desire Dying**

Look at the word **"die"** in verse 21. Paul was thinking about dying here and so should we. I read about a friendly funeral director who enjoys signing his correspondence, **"Eventually yours."** He's right. All of us will some day be embalmed, cremated or directly buried by a funeral director. All of us are eventually his because all of us are going to die. And we need to face the fact that we are. Some psychologists tell us that we aren't prepared to live until we're prepared to die, and that's true. We need to come to grips with our deaths, which is precisely what Paul helps us to do here.

Paul was in prison and grasped that the Romans might execute him. Thinking about death as a result, he expressed two opposing desires in that regard. One was to live. He desired that, according to verses 22 and 24-26, so that he could resume his ministry to the Philippians. He'd be able to help them grow in faith and joy if he lived. His other desire was to **"depart"** or die. He desired that, according to verse 23, so that he could **"be with Christ."** Notice the phrase, **"hard-pressed from**

**both directions**" in verse 23. It indicates that he desired to die as strongly as he desired to live, which explained his ambivalence in verse 22, **"I do not know which to choose."**

Tony Campolo tells about a promising young Christian writer named Mel who was diagnosed with lymphatic cancer and given six months to live. Dispirited and wallowing in self-pity, he decided to attend a lecture at a local university given by the controversial Daniel Berrigan. As Berrigan spoke, he could tell something was bothering Mel and finally stopped and publicly asked him, **"What's wrong with you?"** It was insensitive and rude and Mel felt like telling him to mind his own business. But he answered instead, **"I'm dying."** To which Berrigan quickly and unsympathetically replied, **"That must be very exciting."**

Paul would have agreed. His posture toward imminent death comes through loudly and clearly in this text. It was something about which he was excited, something that he eagerly anticipated.

## **Dread Dying**

But do you and I? If we're like almost everyone else, we don't.

Freudians and neo-Freudians like Norman Brown and Ernest Becker explain why I say that. They identify what they call people's "ultimate sickness." That ultimate sickness is their soul's angst or fear of dying. People attempt to cure that angst, they tell us, by covering up the fact of death in a variety of ways. Those ways include bickering, embracing life, mental illness, heroism, hero worship, and more. Freudians and neo-Freudians are wrong about a lot of things. But they are right about this. Almost everyone dreads dying.

That "almost everyone" includes many followers of Jesus. I've been with at least 30 of His followers through their final illnesses. And I've carefully observed how they spoke and acted with regard to dying. My assessment from doing so is this. **Most** anticipated it fearfully. **A few** anticipated it calmly. But **none** anticipated it eagerly as Paul did.

Your experience, if you think about it, is likely the same as mine is.

Think about it by asking and answering this question. How many followers of Jesus do I know who desire to die as strongly as they desire to live? It's probably only one or two if any.

But why is that? As a consequence of the *Belief Questionnaire* you handed in, I think I may now know. Someone who checked "**doubt**" by the statement I mentioned before asked this question on the comment line of the questionnaire, "**Life after death. Time in the grave. Are we 'asleep' until the 2<sup>nd</sup> coming?**" Whoever you are, I publicly thank you for asking that. Your question has given me insight I didn't have before. I think I now know why many followers of Jesus either dread dying or aren't excited about it as Paul was. It isn't because they don't believe in or love God. It's just because they don't understand "**the intermediate state.**" So let's come to understand it!

### **To Die Is Gain**

The Bible teaches that you and I have one life. It's one life that begins when we're born and never ends. But while it's only one life, it does have three different phases. The first is what the dashes in the dates on tombstones represent. It's our lives in fallen physical bodies on earth. The second phase is our lives between the time we die and the time Jesus comes again. That phase is called "**the intermediate state.**" The third phase is our lives after Jesus comes again. It's our lives in perfect resurrection bodies in heaven that last forever.

Now, all followers of Jesus have a thorough understanding of the first phase because they've experienced and are experiencing it. And most have a basic understanding of the third phase because the Bible reveals a mass of facts about it, some of which they've learned.

But only a few have any understanding of the second phase. For one thing, it's so different in nature than anything we've experienced that it's difficult to comprehend. For another thing, the Bible reveals few facts about it. Consequently, it's something about which the vast majority of Jesus' followers know little. It's a mystery to them.

That's problematic though because people naturally fear not anticipate the unknown. And since the intermediate state is unknown to them, they fear it. That state of course is the one they immediately enter when they die, which explains why they fear death. The fear death because they fear the life to which it immediately leads. That's what I learned from the *Belief Questionnaire*.

So to be excited about dying as Paul was, we must know about the intermediate state what he knew. We see what he knew in verses 21-26. The verb tense he used in this text shows he was writing about what would happen the moment he died, in the intermediate state.

First, according to verse 23, he would **"be with Christ."** That phrase reminds me of an old child's prayer that most of us have prayed: **"Now I lay me down to sleep. I pray the Lord my soul to keep. If I should die before I wake, I pray the Lord my soul to take."** That last line isn't a cheap sentiment aimed to comfort us. It's the truth. When we die, He takes our soul to be with Him in a new and changed relationship, one that's dramatically richer and deeper than we have now.

Second, notice the word **"soul"** in the prayer, **"our soul to take."** Remember that the intermediate state is before Jesus comes again and the Holy Spirit gives us our resurrection bodies. That clearly implies that we won't have bodies and brains in it. That isn't a problem though. The Bible teaches that existence doesn't requires bodies and brains. God and the angels don't have and need them and neither will we. He will secure our existence without them.

Third, by its nature, relationship with Jesus requires consciousness and activity, which we will have in the intermediate state. The levels of consciousness and activity we will have in fact dwarf the levels we have now. Suppose that an earthworm suddenly became a human being. Calculate the increase in its levels of consciousness and activity if it did. Dead to music – alive to music. Dead to mathematics – alive to mathematics. The increase would be staggering. But the increase in our levels of consciousness and activity the moment we die will be greater

than that. No longer restrained by the limitations of our earthly bodies, we will know, act, experience, and relate in phenomenal new ways that make our current lives pale in comparison.

Finally, fourth, when I say, "**relate**," I don't mean only to God. I mean to followers of Jesus as well. God won't cast us out into isolation in the moments after we die. We won't be alone for even a second. He will instantaneously usher our souls into the presence of Jesus and His followers who died before us. A family welcoming a soldier home from combat is a good analogy. I saw my mother take her last breath and die. In the moment following, she found herself in the presence of Jesus, her mother Esther, her sister Hazel, her brother Walter, and Christian friends, all eagerly awaiting her arrival. And she is with them now in her new life, moving from one breath taking experience to another until Jesus comes again. It will be the same for all of us who follow Jesus.

Those aren't many facts I admit but they're enough to infer what Paul did. Several moments before taking the hemlock that killed him, the Greek philosopher Socrates told his followers: "**I go to die, you remain to live. God alone knows which of us goes the better way.**" Do you get what he was saying? No one knows which is better, to be alive on earth or to be dead. But he was wrong. Paul knew. He wrote a startling statement in verse 21, "**To die is gain.**" He then explained why it is in verse 23. Referring to life right after death, he stated that it "**is very much better**," that is, very much better than life before it. That doesn't mean life before it, on earth, is bad because it isn't, far from it. In Jesus, it's abundant and full of joy. But as good as it is, life right after death is "**very much better**" to quote Paul. Or to paraphrase both statements together, followers of Jesus are better off dead.

### **To Live Is Christ**

That's the truth and you and I need to live in light of it. We need to live our lives in the first phase so that we're prepared to live our "**very much better lives**" in the second phase. Paul tells us how to do

just that in verse 23, **“to live is Christ.”** Notice the combination here, **“To live is Christ and to die is gain.”** That momentous statement has an Old Testament equivalent, Psalm 73:25, which says, **“Whom have I in heaven but You (God)? And beside You, I desire nothing on earth.”** **“And beside You, I desire nothing on earth,”** is the equivalent of **“To live is Christ.”**

Those declarations instruct us how to live our earthly lives. It's by making Jesus the center of them. We make Him the center of our calendars, our activities, our conversations, our battles, our problems, our tragedies, our achievements, and everything else in our lives. We make Him the integration point around which everything that we are, experience, and do revolves. We make Him what Oswald Chambers calls **“the one terrific reality of our lives.”**

We do that in a specific observable way, which I've explained before. We make the decision to be with Him and to learn and do all that He says. We then arrange our daily affairs around carrying that decision out to the best of our abilities. If we do that, we are totally prepared for death and the **“very much better”** life to which it leads us.

Pam Williams' son-in-law Grant has a project for a class he's taking. It's to get people's answers to a question. If you knew you were going to die in three months, what would you do? Well, Grant asked his friends on Face Book to answer the question and my wife, who is one of those, did. She replied, **“I'd continue doing what I'm doing now, arranging my life around my familiar friendship with Jesus.”** That's the right answer to the question. By **“right”** I mean the only one that prepares us for death and the **“very much better”** life to which it leads.

## **Conclusion**

I'd sum up everything I've said today this way. You and I need to do two things. First, understand the life to which death leads us. And second, arrange all of our affairs around Jesus. We'll desire death not dread it if we do. Why? Because we're better off dead and know it.