

A Peaceful Place Called “Either/Or”

²¹For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²²If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. – Philippians 1:21-24

Who among us would not like to declare with Paul his well-known words: “For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain”? Of course, I am safely situated in my study waxing philosophical. Paul was sitting in Roman chains not altogether certain of what the final verdict against him might be. He might be turned loose or he might face the emperor’s sword. Subsequent verses suggest that he was inclined to think that God had more fruitful labor in store for him, which would likely require his release, but Paul was not “naming and claiming” a thing. He readily conceded that God was sovereignly in charge of his destiny.

For Paul, to live was to stand in fellowship with Jesus. Outside of that fellowship, life had lost any meaning because it was devoid of any eternal hope. Jesus was the Securer of Paul's new life, the continuing power by which he lived and ministered as well as the ultimate reward for which he craved. Clearly, to die was, for Paul, gain (or profit) for death would simply vault him home into the fullest conceivable experience of Christ.

Paul conceded that even if the choice to live or die was his, he would not know what to do with it. Living in Christ was good. Every day was an opportunity to affect someone in a positive way for Jesus. But, dying in Christ would be even better. His yearning was for Christ's will, whatever that might be, and a choice would only leave him in a mental straight. “I am torn between the two” means “to be in a straight.” The idea is that two compelling barriers on either side rob a person of the freedom to turn either way.

We have all been in mental straights because of a future beyond our control. To decide one way means a risk. To decide the other means a different risk. But, Paul's attitude finds him preoccupied not with an “either/or risk”, but with an “either/or joy”. He trusts God so he anticipates eventual joy. Even if the details he imagined were dead-wrong, Paul had already determined that God would ultimately lead him to joy, so he chose to embrace a joyful outlook whatever the future might bring.

Again, from the safety of my study, I probably should not try to convince anyone that I have this whole either/or assurance thing down when it comes to living or dying. But, perhaps I can testify that progress is being made – that I am learning to think more consistently that a faithful God has my best in mind even behind potential scenarios that might frighten me. For, if God takes me down either this path or that path, I know He is there.

The late Bishop Krister Stendahl liked to tell the story of the little boy who kept following his mother around the house, from one room to another, until she asked: “What is it that you want?” The lad replied, “Nothing, I just want to be where you are.”

There will be many occasions when our futures hold either this possibility or that one. To be where Christ is - may that be the extent of our longing.