

To Live Is Christ; To Die Is Gain

by Matthew W. Bassford

Among its other effects, a terminal diagnosis will lead you to read the Scriptures with very different eyes. All sorts of passages that you thought you understood take on new depth and meaning. For me, the chief of these is **Philippians 1:21-24**.

Years ago, I read this passage as Paul being Paul. He was a good man and loved the Philippians, so he wanted to continue living in order to help them. That's true, but it's vastly incomplete because it doesn't really reckon with either half of **Philippians 1:21**.

Let's start with the back half. When Paul describes death as gain, he isn't guessing. According to **2 Corinthians 12:2-4**, he was caught up into the third heaven and heard inexpressible things that no human can repeat. The unimaginable joys of eternal life were no mystery to him.

Against that gain, though, he balances life in the likeness of Christ. Serving the Philippians is as precious to him as his heavenly reward. This might seem incredible to us, but I think it's where most genuine disciples would end up if they were placed in Paul's position.

I'm not eager to die. I don't look forward to the process of dying, which is likely to be very unpleasant. I don't relish giving up my abilities one by one. I already miss hunting and hiking, and I'm sure I'll miss being able to walk when I lose that. However, against those things, I can set my hope of that which is far better. From a selfish perspective, heaven wins every time!

Instead, the losses that I mourn the most are of my opportunities to serve others. I bitterly regret that I probably won't be able to finish raising my children. I grieve that I won't be able to give my wife a lifetime of being happily married. I mourn that I will have to step away from the pulpit and the keyboard and won't be able to help others on to heaven. Once I die, I will be done with all of those things.

I think that's what Paul is talking about when he says, *"to live is Christ."* Christ was a servant who actually **LEFT HEAVEN** so He could come to earth and help us! The essence of following Him is living with self-sacrificing love. Paul prized the opportunity to do that so highly — an opportunity that would last only as long as his life did — that he was willing to postpone his reward for the sake of others.

The Christian's bucket list, then, doesn't consist of travel and skydiving. There's nothing wrong with them, of course, but they are of no lasting value. Instead, the truly valuable things in life are the times when we can put a family member or a friend ahead of ourselves, take on that Bible class at church that nobody else wants to teach, or gather our courage and invite an outsider to worship with us. Those, not our possessions or abilities, are our true gifts. As Paul found, they are the only things in this life that are worthy to be compared to the joys of heaven.

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