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To Live is Messiah, to Die is Gain
1: 21-26

To live is Messiah, to die is gain DIG: What is Paul's dilemma in these verses? What does it mean in verse 21? Why was Paul unsure of his desire to stay in this life or go to be with the Lord? Who was Paul dedicated to ministering to? Who are you ministering to this week?

REFLECT: "For me to live is _____?" Given your priorities and schedule this week, how would you honestly fill in the blank? What would change for you to fill it in with "Messiah?" Do you sometimes struggle between your personal feelings and your commitment to ministry?

Because Paul was not sure of the Lord's will in the matter, he was not sure of his own will.

With the well-known words of **verse 21**, **Paul's** reflection on **his** current situation (**to see link click Ao – Paul's Chains**) takes a considerable turn. Up to this point, **his** primary concern has been with the advancement of **the Gospel** through **his** imprisonment and **Messiah** being glorified through **his** trial. Now **he** turns to purely personal reflection, but reflection of a different kind from what one might expect following **verses 19-20** (see **Ap – Paul's Critics**). Although **the apostle** assumed **he** would go free, the final words of **verse 20** raised the possibility of execution. What **he** sets out to explain is **his** desire for **Messiah** to be glorified even if the verdict were to go against **him**. Picking up on the final words of **verse 20**, **whether through life or through death**, **he** vows that since **Messiah** is the passion for **life**, **he** wins in either case, whether released or executed.[48]



The Greek phrase rendered **to live is Messiah and to die is gain (1:21 Greek)** contains no verb. It literally reads *to live as Messiah, to die gain*. **Paul** knew the living is **Messiah**, because **he** would continue to serve **Him** while **he lived**. As **he** explained to the congregations throughout Galatia: **My old self has been crucified with Messiah. It is no longer I who live, but Messiah lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:20 NLT).** But **he** also knew that **dying** would be **gain** because then **he** would be in the presence of **ADONAI**, able to worship **Him** in holy perfection (see **verses 23**). **The apostle** fully understood that wealth, power, influence, possessions, prestige, social standing, good health, business or professional success, and all other such things are fleeting. Many acknowledge that truth, but not many **live** as if it is true. Few can say with **Paul's** complete sincerity: **For to me, to live is Messiah, to die is gain.**

But if I live, I can do more ministry for Messiah (1:22a NLT). Adoniram Johnson was the first overseas missionary sent out from America. In the early nineteenth century, he and his first wife went to India and, a short while later, to Burma, where he labored for nearly four decades. After fourteen years, he had a handful of converts and managed to write a Burmese grammar. During that time he suffered a horrible imprisonment for a year-and-a-half and lost his wife and children to disease. Like **Paul**, he longed to be with **the Lord**, but, also like **the apostle**, he considered his work for **God** to be much more important than his personal longings. He therefore prayed that **the Lord** would allow him to **live** long enough to translate the entire Bible into Burmese and to establish a church there of at least one-hundred believers. **God** granted that request and also allowed him to compile Burmese-English and English-Burmese dictionaries, which became invaluable to the Christian workers, both foreign and Burmese, who followed him. He wrote, "If I had

not felt certain that every trial was ordered by infinite love and mercy, I could not have survived my many sufferings."

Part of spiritual greatness is to know **Messiah** intimately and long to be with **Him**. But spiritual greatness also includes being totally committed to the advancement of the Kingdom of **God** and serving **Yeshua** on earth. Every believer **lives** with this tension. But **Paul** did not escape that dilemma, which **he** expressed so honestly.

So I really don't know which is better (1:22b NLT). The word **know** (Greek: *gnorizo*) is used twenty-seven times in the New Testament, over half of those times by **Paul**. It is used of revealing something that was previously unknown, whether by **the Lord** to men (as in **Luke 2:15; John 15:15; Romans 9:22-23**), or by men to other men (as in **Acts 7:13; Second Corinthians 8:1; Ephesians 6:19** and **21**). **Paul's** point seems to be that **he** had not yet decided **which was better** because **ADONAI** had not yet revealed to **him which was better**. Because **he** was not sure of **the Lord's** will in the matter, **he** was not sure of **his** own will.[49]

Here, **Paul** is laying bare **his** soul and frankly admitting that **I am torn between the two desires: I long to go and be with Messiah, which would be far better for me (1:23 NLT). He** acknowledges feeling a tension – a trying, and perhaps an almost unbearable tension – between **his** personal desire and **his** duty as **an apostle**. The phrase: **I am torn between** (Greek: *synechomai*), is used of personal feelings, and indicates at the very least the idea of constraint **(Second Corinthians 5:14)**, and at worst that of torment: in **Luke 4:38** of suffering from **a fever**; in **Luke 8:37** of being overcome by **terror**; in **Luke 12:50** of **Yeshua's** distress as **he** anticipates **His** suffering on **the cross**. Although we cannot import the meaning of these references to **Philippians**, we surely miss the real importance of this passage if we fail to see it as an echo of **Paul's** mental state. The nature of **Paul's** tension is described most briefly and powerfully in **verse 21**, words that have been spoken from the lips of the faithful down through the centuries: **to live is Messiah and to die is gain.**[50]

But to remain in the flesh is more necessary for Your sake (1:24 Greek). Paul's choice is to remain **alive** because **the Philippians** need **him**. **The apostle** doesn't ignore the needs of this world, but in recognizing the benefits to **himself** of the *'olam haba* (the world to come), **he** chooses to minister to others here in the *'olam hazeh* (this present age).[51] **Convinced of this, I know that I will remain alive so I can continue to help all of you [Philippians] grow and experience the joy of your faith (1:25). The apostle** knew that **the Philippians** still

needed **him**. It was not that **he** considered **himself** indispensable, but rather that **he** was **convinced** that **his** ministry to **them** was not yet complete. Because **he** had just expressed uncertainty about whether **he** would **live** or **die**, it seems that **his** being convinced reflected **his** personal conviction rather than a revelation from **YHVH**. Had **God** told **him** that **he** would not **die** until **he** had finished **his** work in the **Philippian** church, **his living** or **dying** would not have been an issue in **his** life.

As John MacArthur relates in his commentary on *Philippians*, **Paul** was **convinced** that the church still needed **his** teaching and leadership. Despite **their** maturity, love, and gentleness of spirit, the Philippians needed to exemplify more of **their Lord's** humility **(2:1-18)**. They needed to be on guard against **false teachers** (see **Bg – Paul's Opponents**), to observe **Paul's** example, and to oppose **the cross of Messiah (3:18).** At least two members of the congregation needed to learn to **settle their disagreement** (see **Bl – Live in Harmony**). Some, perhaps many, were troubled by anxiety, so **Paul** had told **them**: **Don't be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God (4:6).** In addition to those things, **they** needed to continually keep **their** focus on **whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things (4:8).**[52]

So that when I come to you again, you will have even more reason to boast in Messiah Yeshua because of what He is doing through me (1:26 Greek). Paul looked forward to physically returning to **Philippi** to personally teach and disciple believers to grow more mature in faith. **The apostle** spoke earlier about how lives were changed by **his** imprisonment, with the result that the believers in Rome were being strengthened in their faith through the witness of **Paul's** life and **his** willingness to suffer for **Messiah**. Essentially, **Paul** argues that **his** return to **Philippi** would demonstrate **God's** power, build up **their** faith, and give **them** reason for **boasting in ADONAI's** ability to answer prayer.[53] No circumstances, however severe, could steal **Paul's joy**. Nothing could diminish **his** enthusiasm for the ministry. Nothing could keep **him** from **always doing the Lord's work as vigorously as [he could], [because he knew] that united with the Lord [his] effort [was] not in vain (15:58).** May you find the **joy** and freedom of serving the great cause of **Messiah's** glory, so that you can truthfully say in your own heart: **to live is Messiah and to die is gain.**

*Dear heavenly **Father**, praise **You** that when life gets hard, I can trust **You** with absolute certainty that **death** will be **gain**! What comfort to know that trusting in **Messiah** as **Lord** and **Savior** will not bring shame but will bring **joy** and peace **– that is, the word of faith that we are proclaiming: For if you confess with your mouth that Yeshua is Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart it is believed for righteousness, and with the mouth it is confessed for salvation. For the Scripture says, "Whoever trusts in Him will not be put to shame" (Romans 10:8b-11). You** not only redeemed for **Yourself** a people at a great cost (**Hebrews 12:2);** but **You** also have promised to reward those who believe in **You**. When focused on the **joy** of eternity with **You**, it makes **death** into a stepping stone to **joy**, not to be dreaded because **it is swallowed up in victory (First Corinthians 15:54c).** In **Messiah Yeshua's** holy **Name** and the power of **His** resurrection. Amen*