

Philippians 1:12-30

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[0 : 0 0] The believer's hope is a precious one. As we've been giving some thought to over these past couple of Sundays, we look forward to sharing in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ. We are excited at the prospect of taking our place at the feast with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. Employing the tender language of Paul as he writes to the Corinthians in his second letter, we long to be at home with the Lord. C.S. Lewis expresses something of the beauty of our hope in the language of Narnia in *The Last Battle*. Let me just read to you a paragraph from *The Last Battle*.

Then Aslan turned to them and said, You do not yet look so happy as I mean you to be. Lucy said, We're so afraid of being sent away, Aslan, and you have sent us back into our own world so often. No fear of that, said Aslan. Have you not guessed? Their hearts leapt and a wild hope rose within them. There was a real railway accident, said Aslan softly. Your father and mother and all of you are, as you used to call it in the shadow lands, dead. The term is over. The holidays have begun.

The dream is ended. This is the morning. And we, with childlike anticipation, long for the end of term and the beginning of the holidays, our heavenly and eternal holiday, though I'm sure it certainly will not be a holiday marked by inactivity. We would gladly echo and adopt the words of Paul, I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far. And it is to these words that we will now turn our attention this evening. I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far and what follows in the passage. Now, this is a very familiar passage, and there is so much that could helpfully and legitimately be drawn from it. But our goal this evening is a modest one. I want us to consider these words of Paul in as much as they reveal three realities. Three realities. And let me just mention what those are. A healthy desire, a worthy submission, and a necessary task. Three realities that Paul touches on in this passage. A healthy desire, a worthy submission, and a necessary task.

And before we look at each of these, we need to step back for a very brief moment to familiarize ourselves with the occasion and the context of this declaration by Paul. As we've read, the apostle is in chains. Then in verse 13, we read, as a result, it has become clear throughout the whole palace guard and to everyone else that I am in chains for Christ. Paul was a prisoner, probably, given the reference there to the palace guard, probably in Rome. And Paul is facing the prospect of an imminent trial and the looming possibility of execution. And proximity to death does rather concentrate the mind. And Paul, as he writes, is pondering on and struggling with matters of life and death. Or perhaps more accurately, the matter of life or death. Let's read again what he says from verse 21. For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If 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. I am torn between the two.

I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far, but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. And he goes on. Well, let's, having very briefly given ourselves an idea of why it is that Paul is considering these matters and indeed writing on these matters, let's just consider these three realities that we have already highlighted that we can draw out or that we can identify here in what Paul says. A healthy desire, a worthy submission, and a necessary task. First of all, then, a healthy desire. Paul considers himself to be in what we could call a win-win situation.

[5 : 30] He's in a win-win situation. He faces two possible outcomes. There he is in prison. He's in chains. A trial is imminent. One possible outcome of the trial is that he will be executed. So, death is one outcome, and the other outcome is that the trial will not result in his death and that he will remain alive and indeed be freed from his imprisonment to continue his service. So, two outcomes. He may die or he may live. But it's very clear that for Paul, both outcomes are attractive. Though he doesn't say so explicitly, we could say that he desires both. Now, if we just pause for a moment there, isn't that a great place to be? It's a great place to be whatever the scenario that we may be confronting, when we're maybe facing different possible outcomes in our life or in some aspect of our life, what a good thing it is to be in that place where we can observe the outcomes and be equally, or at least perhaps equally isn't the right word, but to consider the possible outcomes as being attractive, whether it's one thing or another. Generally in life, that would be a great place to be, but very particularly in the matter that Paul is concerned with, in the matter of life or death. Both attractive options, both outcomes that we could desire. In the matter of life or death, is that true of you? Are you able, with Paul, to say, I'm torn between the two, whether to live or to die, because both are attractive to me. But though both outcomes are attractive to Paul, he does have a preference.

And what is his decided preference? As he is torn between the two, as he ponders on the pros and cons, if you wish, of either outcome, which is the one for which he has a preference that he expresses?

What is that preference? But then also, why does he have that preference? So really two questions. What is his preference, and why is that his preference? First of all, what is his preference?

Well, he tells us very clearly his preference is to die, or the language he uses is to depart. I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far. So there are two outcomes, but very clearly Paul has one that he favors or that he prefers, and that is to die. Indeed, the language that he uses in revealing his preference is in itself instructive. And there are two verbs that he employs in that declaration of his preference, desire and depart. And both of them are helpful in having an understanding of Paul's thinking. First of all, he's the verb desire, I desire to depart. And the word that he uses is one that we come across with some regularity in the New Testament, and it's a verb that conveys the idea of an intense desire, of that which one desires above all else. And so Paul testifies to a deep desire for death, or perhaps more accurately, a deep desire to die. Now, that's rather startling when we put it that way, a deep desire to die. But that's what he says, I desire to depart. I desire to die. So that verb, as we think about it, is helpful, but perhaps even more helpful is as we explore a little bit the word that he uses to express the reality of dying. I desire to depart. Now, Paul could have said,

I desire to die. That's what he means. That's the truth that he's getting across. But he chooses to use this verb, I desire to depart. Now, why does he do that? Well, there are a couple of intriguing possibilities, and it all has to do with how that verb was used in the milieu in which Paul was by those who spoke Greek. How was this verb employed? And it was employed in different ways, and there are a couple of ways in which it was employed that may give us some insight into why Paul uses this verb. One possibility is that Paul is using here a camping, or a camping metaphor, where to depart is a military term for striking camp at the conclusion of a long march.

[10 : 33] And if we understand that Paul has that picture in mind, which may be the case, then the idea that is being communicated is that for the believer to die is to head home at the end of a transitory life, to exchange our temporary tent for an eternal house. And certainly this is a picture that Paul develops in 2 Corinthians in chapter 5. From the beginning of the chapter, we'll read verse 1, but then he continues to use this picture, this imagery of a tent as a temporary dwelling that we currently occupy compared to and contrasted with an eternal house that is permanent. If we read just one verse in 2 Corinthians 5 and verse 1, we read, now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands.

Well, that's one possibility as to why Paul uses this particular verb, I desire to depart. Another possibility that Paul is using a sailing metaphor, where the verb would have the idea of setting sail.

And so the picture is of a ship that has been tossed to and fro by the storm in open sea, set sail to a safe harbor, where there will be security in this safe harbor. Now, it's difficult to know if Paul has in mind either or both pictures, but it's certainly true that both illustrate an important truth with respect to the death of a believer, the death of a Christian. To die is to head for home. To, use Paul's language again, to be at home with the Lord. So, this is the what of Paul's preference. Two outcomes, both that are attractive. He's torn between the two, but there's one that he leans towards, one that he prefers, that is to die. But the question is why? Why is that his preference? Now, we've already answered this in a measure in what we've spoken, what we've said about this verb, to depart. But we can explore the matter a little further with the aid of one word in the passage that is significant and revealing, and it's the word gain. We have to backtrack a little to verse 21, very familiar words, for to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. Sometimes when words are so familiar, we just assume that we know what they mean, and then maybe we sit back and say, well, what does that mean? Well, what does this mean? Why does Paul want to die? Well, here he says, or explains it in this way, because to die is gain. For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

But gain in what sense? I would suggest that Paul uses this idea, or uses this language of death as gain, in two senses, and we don't need to choose between the two. I think they go together. There is the idea of personal gain, and it's maybe the most obvious thing that would come to mind if we were to try and answer the question, well, what gain is Paul referring to? It's most apparent in what Paul goes on to say, you know, in our text, I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.

And if we were to develop that a little or introduce words or put words into Paul's mouth, we might say, to be with Christ, which is better by far for me, because that's really what Paul is saying. It's better for me to be with Christ. And so that is why I desire to depart. It is gain for me to be nearer to Christ, to be with Christ, to enjoy all that awaits me in glory. It is gain for me.

[14 : 46] And there's nothing wrong with desiring that, if you wish, personal gain. But I don't think that exhausts Paul's meaning when he speaks of death as gain. I think there's also in Paul's mind the recognition that there is what we could call gospel gain. What do I mean by that? Well, notice what Paul says in verse 20. I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now, as always, Christ will be exalted. Notice what he says, Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death. So here Paul is speaking of his death resulting in Christ being exalted. And then having said that, he immediately goes on to say, for to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. So there it would appear that Paul, when he speaks of his death as gain, he's referring to what he has just said, that his death will result in Christ being exalted, that his death will in some way further the cause of the gospel. Now, how would that be? How would it be that his death would further the cause of the gospel and lead to Christ being exalted?

Well, I think perhaps in a couple of ways that we could suggest. First of all, as a testimony to unbelievers, a martyr's death where he courageously faces death out of loyalty to his Lord would be something that unbelievers would witness, the palace guard that he's made reference to, and others, and that could be used of God to make them consider the one that Paul so willingly dies for, but also as an encouragement or challenge to believers. We've already read in this chapter how his imprisonment, his chains, have served to encourage the brothers in the Lord to speak the Word of God more courageously and fearlessly. We read that in verse 14. Well, if his imprisonment had that impact or had that outcome or consequence, well, equally, perhaps in greater measure, his martyr's death, his martyr's death, it could serve a similar purpose. So, this gain that Paul speaks of, it's personal gain, but it's also gospel gain. That is why Paul's preference, two outcomes, both attractive in a sense. He desires both, but he can't have both at the same time, and so if he has to choose, well, his preference is to die, to depart, and there are some reasons why that is so.

So, a healthy desire. But we also said that in what Paul says, we can identify a worthy submission. Now, what do we mean by a worthy submission? Well, I want to explore this idea under two headings.

First of all, the need for submission, and secondly, the nature of submission. First of all, the need for submission. The choice between the two outcomes, life or death, is not in Paul's hands. It's not for Paul to decide if he lives or dies. That is for God to decide. It is for God to decide and for Paul to submit. That's the way it works. Now, to be clear, God will make effective his decision through human instrumentality. In this case, in the case of Paul, that will be the decision of the Roman authorities.

Whether he lives or whether he dies, well, that will be determined by the Roman authorities who will come to a conclusion concerning his case. And so, if you look at it purely at that level, then you say, well, it's the Romans who will decide. But Paul, of course, knows that behind the decision of the Roman authorities lies the decision of God. And the Roman authorities will be God's instruments, albeit unknowingly, to fulfill God's purpose. The decision as to what the outcome will be for Paul is God's decision. Now, for us in the matter of life and death, we also acknowledge that we are in God's hands and we need to submit to God's will. But this is true, of course, in so many other matters in life. Life is replete with circumstances where there is a need to submit to God's will.

[19 : 21] Now, bear with me as I illustrate with one we might call topical example, which you may or may not appreciate. This week I have been giving some thought to the decision taken by the deacon's court on Monday concerning relocation from this building to Maiden Craig. Now, the deacon's court, in trying to wisely weigh all the important issues and sensitive to the varied opinions and preferences of the congregation, has decided that we should relocate to Maiden Craig. Now, the court, the members of the court, I personally am very conscious that many people, and for very good reasons, were and are of the view that we would be better served remaining where we are. That's evident in the consultation, almost half and half in terms of people's preferences, and that's fine.

But, of course, the reality in terms of what will happen is not in our power individually to determine. It's not for any one of us to make that call, whether we stay or whether we go. God will decide through fallible human instrumentality, but God decides. And when God decides, it is for us to submit to what He decides. It's no secret to many of you, and I've made this clear, that my own personal preference as we went through this process and considered the pros and cons of two outcomes, my own personal preference was to remain here. And if I can stretch somewhat, probably unduly, the application of the passage in front of us, I came to the point with Paul where I could see that we were in a win-win situation. That's the way I saw it. I'm not saying that others have to see it in the same way. Both outcomes attractive, remaining or going. But the point is that the decision has been taken. God has ordered our circumstances and has ordered even, perhaps especially, the fickle workings of our fragile little minds, and through fallible men has revealed His will. And in those circumstances, it is for us to submit to His will. That is the need for submission. Paul had to submit to God's will. He had his preference. His preference was to die. But God had other plans. God's plans for him were for him to continue living. And we'll see the reason for that in a moment. So, there's the need for submission. But there's also what we might call the nature of submission. When we think of Paul and submitting to God's will, does Paul submit grudgingly to God's will? His preference was to depart. This was his intense desire. But he doesn't get his own way, if we can put it in that way. God has other plans. God has determined otherwise for the apostle. Paul submits, but he does so readily, and he does so joyfully. He does so with real conviction. Notice the language he uses in verse 25, having come to a conclusion, convinced of this, that he will remain, convinced of this. It's not what I wanted. I wanted something else. But convinced of this, I know that I will remain. Paul is persuaded that God knows best, that God has a purpose. The language he uses is that it is more necessary, says Paul, where this language has the flavor of divine necessity. When in the face of alternative outcomes, our preferred outcome proves not to be God's will, we too are to submit to His will in a confident and joyful manner, not grudgingly or even reluctantly. Now, the examples in our experience of where such submission is called for are many and varied, from the seemingly mundane to matters of great moment. The house that we wanted to buy, and somebody else bought it, got in there with a higher offer before us. The job that we'd hoped to secure, but that wasn't God's will for us to get that job.

The college or university, a course that we applied to, but it didn't turn out as we had hoped, and we were then forced, or circumstances dictated that we do something else. The girl that we had a crush on, but somebody else got in there and married her. What could we do? It's not personal experience, I should stress, you know, just very hypothetical here. The location of our church building. We have preferences, but God determines what we are to do, and we could go on. Now, I want to be clear here, so as not to be misunderstood, I'm not closing the door to the legitimacy of trying again, or persevering in the face of an initial disappointment or rejection. So, for example, the young person who applies for a course at a given university and is rejected, I'm not saying that they can't, if they think it appropriate to do so, if there's the opportunity to do so, I'm not saying they couldn't try again for that same university and that same course, of course. But there are moments when we have to realize that there is no turning back, where God has determined a way in which we should go, and I recognize that that can be difficult sometimes to be clear about, but there are those times when we say, well, clearly, what I had wanted, my preference, is not what God wanted, and God has ordered my life and my circumstances or our lives and our circumstances in a different way, and I readily and confidently and joyfully submit to His will. So, we have a healthy desire here expressed by Paul, a desire to depart. The reason is clear, because it's better by far. There is gain for him, and there is gain even for the gospel. But then finally, we also have not only a healthy desire, a worthy submission, but we have what we could call a necessary task. Now, what can we say about this necessary task?

Well, Paul recognizes, to use his own language, that it is more necessary for him to remain. There in verse 23, I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far, but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Why? Why is it more necessary? Well, because God has a task for Paul, and there are three aspects of God's task for Paul that I want you to notice, and we can notice how these aspects of Paul's task given by God apply to each of us also. The first thing I want you to notice is that it is for the benefit of others. Paul doesn't say that it is more necessary for me. He doesn't say, but it is more necessary for me that I remain in the body. No, that's not what he says. He says it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. The task that he is given is not for his own benefit, but for the benefit of others. Now, that shouldn't surprise us. This is the

Christian life to serve others. It's our task as individual believers and as a congregation to serve others, be that here in Rosemount in the time that remains or in, from Maiden Craig in due course, if God indeed confirms that path. So, the task that we are given is for the good of others. That's one aspect of the task that Paul was given. The second aspect is that it involves progress in the faith.

[27 : 27] Notice what he goes on to say there in verse 25, convinced of this, I know that I will remain and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith. This is what Paul and this is what we are about, helping others, helping each other progress in the faith.

We can take this from the point of introducing others to the faith, to helping others grow in the faith, helping them, helping each other identify and use the gifts that we have been given, and in turn, those who are so helped to progress will then introduce others to the faith and help others progress in the faith. This is what it's about. This is what Paul is going to do. That is why he must remain. This is the task he has been given to help others progress in the faith. That is also our task. But then one final aspect of the task that Paul has given that's worth noticing, and it is this, that it will be fruitful. Notice Paul's confidence in this matter. Then in verse 22, he says, if I am to go on living in the body, he's kind of coming to the conclusion, coming to the realization that this is what God would have him do, remain in the body. He would prefer to die, but I guess

God is making clear to him, by whatever means he chose, to bring him to the point of realizing that that is not going to happen. Then in verse 25, his clarity is greater, convinced of this. But here in verse 22, there's still this mental struggle. And as he has this mental struggle, he says, if I am to go on living in the body, well, if that's the outcome, this is particularly what I want you to notice.

This will mean fruitful labor for me. Again, this is something we can read, and it just passes us by, and we don't really notice something quite challenging and remarkable. And what I think is challenging and remarkable is Paul's confidence. There is no doubt in Paul's mind that if he continues to live, it will mean fruitful labor for him. He doesn't say that if I continue to live, well, hopefully my labor will be fruitful. And you know, that's what I would aspire to. I really hope that it's fruitful. No, it will be fruitful. He doesn't conceive of any other possibility. He says, if I remain living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Now, are we to accuse Paul of unwarranted presumption? Well, by no means, because it is God's intention that we bear fruit.

It is God's intention that as we employ the spiritual resources he has provided for us, as we seek his help in so doing, that we will bear fruit. Fruitfulness is God's intention.

[30 : 33] Fruitlessness is not the norm. If we are fruitless, be it as individual Christians or as a congregation, then something is wrong. Something is awry. That is not God's intention for us.

Paul is clear. If I live, I will be fruitful. He doesn't conceive of any other possibility, and we too should share that confidence. As we contemplate what the future holds for us as a congregation, I would encourage you to expect a fruitful future. We should expect fruit or growth, growth in grace and spiritual maturity as believers as we help one another to grow, and growth in numbers as God draws many to himself. And God grant that it would be so. Let us pray.