

...that I will not be put to shame in anything – Such firm and unshakable hope is based upon a strong and growing faith in God Himself and His promises, for Yeshua promised that He would always be with those who are His disciples:

Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age. (Matt 28:19–20)

Surely these are the words spoken to the eleven disciples of Yeshua, but the fact that Yeshua promises His presence “even to the end of the age” clearly indicates that His promised presence and aid attends to all who are joined to Him through faith and are therefore kept by the Spirit for the final day of redemption.

Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. (Eph 4:30)

Therefore, even as Paul faced a major trial and was strong in faith, fully trusting the Lord for the outcome, so all who are “in Messiah” likewise have the unfailing promises of God that He will enable them to remain firm in their faith and even rejoice in difficult times, knowing that God is in control and will bring all things to work together for the good of His people and for His glory.

...but that with all boldness, Messiah will even now, as always, be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death – The word order in the Greek would render this phrase more directly as “but with all boldness, as always and now, Messiah will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.” Thus the emphasis Paul is expressing is that even if in the near future he would face execution, he is resolved that this would bring glory to Yeshua even as his escaping such harm would honor the power of God. For it is by the power God gives that His children are enabled to face even very difficult situations in life, demonstrating faith in God that He will sustain them with strength to endure. Even as God was sustaining Paul in his imprisonment, so he firmly knows that God would give him the strength and power to stand firm in his faith regardless of what the future held.

The Greek word translated “boldness” (*μεγαλύνω, megalunō*) often takes the sense of “to cause to be held in greater esteem through praise

or deeds, exalt, glorify, magnify, speak highly of”¹ and most likely evidences Paul’s full assurance that by the enabling power of the Ruach, he would never stoop to seeking an easy way out by, for instance, denying Yeshua to be his Lord and Savior. But rather, through the strength God would supply, Yeshua would be fully exalted as the true Messiah, the One and only Son of God, through his own testimony of faith and faithfulness.

What is more, such assurance of faith is not simply the privilege of an apostle or teacher, but is the reality of all who have been born again by the Ruach and who therefore grow in their faith and faithfulness to God. Note, for instance, that Paul, writing to the believers in Rome, states:

...for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord’s. For to this end Messiah died and lived again, that He might be Lord both of the dead and of the living. (Rom 14:8–9)

We who have been purchased by God to be His own children, must therefore affirm without doubt that regardless of what the future may hold, we are eternally safe in Him and that both in life and in death, we will be saved by His omnipotent power and grace. There is therefore no need to fear the future or to worry about what the future holds. Paul will emphasize this again in the closing chapter of Philippians.

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (Phil 4:6)

Paul’s perspective was this:

Depending on the results of the trial, the options are life and death. Life refers to being set free, death to his possible execution. Even though Paul expects a favorable outcome, there is always the possibility that it might go against him. That, of course, would hasten Paul’s eschatological salvation/vindication before the heavenly tribunal. But for now, his singular hope is that Christ—and thus the gospel—will be vindicated through his life or death.²

1 BDAG, “μεγαλύνω,” p. 623.

2 Gordon Fee, *Philippians in IVP NT Commentary* (IVP, 1999), p. 69.

Thus Paul expresses the ultimate purpose of his life, the very purpose that should be held by all who are “in Messiah,” namely, that our lives, including the way we live and the way we face our final days, would bring exultation to Yeshua.

21 – For to me, to live is Messiah and to die is gain.

The Greek of this verse presents itself as a saying that is to be remembered, a short well structured and even rhythmic phrase which is impossible to demonstrate in English translation. The Greek is: τὸ ζῆν Χριστὸς καὶ τὸ ἀποθανεῖν κέρδος. In transliteration this would be:

<i>to zēn</i>	<i>Chritos</i>	= “to live [is] Christ”
<i>to apothanein</i>	<i>kerdos</i>	= “to die [is] gain

Since the ending sound of the words is similar, the assonance (that which sounds alike) makes the phrase easily remembered. We should also be reminded that the people of Philippi would not be reading Paul’s letter but would be listening to it being read at a community gathering. Thus this short but highly significant phrase would not only act as a conclusion of the previous verses, but would also form an easily repeatable phrase in the minds of those who heard it.

Some have considered that the opening infinitive, τὸ ζῆν (*to zēn*) “to live,” being a present infinitive, is to be contrasted with the corresponding infinitive, τὸ ἀποθανεῖν (*to apothanein*), “to die,” which is an aorist infinitive. Lightfoot takes this to thus indicate

...not the act of dying but the consequence of dying, the state after death.¹

But in this case, the tenses of the infinitives simply fit the general nature of the two concepts as portrayed by the Greek, where “life” is viewed as on-going (thus a present infinitive) while “death” is viewed as a one-time event (thus an aorist infinitive). We therefore should not seek to derive some special theological significance based upon the change in tense.

The obvious point of Paul’s statement is clear: he declares himself and all of his hopes, desires, and efforts, to be all for Messiah. But what does he mean by “to die is gain?” This obviously does not mean that

1 Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians* (Zondervan, 1953), p. 92.

Paul had given up because of the persecution he was experiencing! He has made it clear that his primary goal is to exult Yeshua in all of his life as well as in his death. Regarding the phrase “to die is gain,” Fee writes:

This expresses not a death wish, nor dissatisfaction with life, nor desire to be done with troubles and trials; it is the forthright assessment of one whose immediate future is somewhat uncertain but whose ultimate future is both certain and to be desired.¹

So once again we see a perspective in Paul for which each of us who confess Yeshua to be our Lord and Savior ought to strive, namely, that serving the Lord ought to be the primary goal of our lives, and that when we face our final days, we glory in the truth that we will be with our Lord forever.

22 – But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose.

Paul continues to make known his inner longings and even his questions, though such questions are not a sign of weakening faith, but of his desire to know what the Lord’s will is.

Paul has elsewhere used “the flesh” as describing the sinful nature, but obviously this is not the case in our text. Rather, the opening phrase of this verse emphasizes the truth taught throughout the Scriptures, that life does not end at death. For Paul has already told us that “to die is gain.” Thus in our verse he specifies to what realm he is referring when he speaks of “to live,” for he adds “in the flesh.” To “live on in the flesh” means to remain alive in this world which would occur for Paul only if he is acquitted of the charges leveled against him in the pending trial. On the other hand, if he is found guilty of the charges against him, execution would ensue but life in the very presence of Yeshua would be the result.

Many of us who are believers in Yeshua have never faced such persecution. Therefore we rarely contemplate what it would take to remain faithful to Yeshua when the outcome could result in our being put to death. So even as we must strive to strengthen our faith in God in order to be ready to face such a situation were it to come upon us, we must not fear the future. For the Scriptures teach us:

1 Gordon Fee, *Philippians*, pp. 70–71.

But even if you should suffer for the sake of righteousness, you are blessed. AND DO NOT FEAR THEIR INTIMIDATION, AND DO NOT BE TROUBLED, but sanctify Messiah as Lord in your hearts, always being ready to make a defense to everyone who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you, yet with gentleness and reverence; (1Pet 3:14–15)

...this will mean fruitful labor for me; – Here we see a sterling example of that for which all leaders and teachers should strive, that is that we have as our primary focus the spiritual maturing of those we teach or lead. The “fruitful labor” to which Paul refers is the spiritual fruit of the Ruach being developed and enlarged in the lives of others. Such maturing and spiritual growth brings glory and honor to Yeshua. Indeed, this is the ultimate and final goal of salvation itself, that God would receive all the glory.

Moreover, we sense in Paul’s words here a genuine faith in God’s sovereign hand, for he does not speak of what might take place, but that which will inevitably come to pass, that is, the spiritual fruit that would come in the lives of those among whom he would labor. He states as fact that there would be fruit because he affirms that the word of God will be used by God to accomplish His purposes, even as Isaiah teaches us:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it. (Is 55:10–11)

Thus once again we see an important aspect for teachers and leaders, at every level, to hold as an essential truth: it is the word of God, the Scriptures, and their application to one’s life, that is used by the Ruach to bring forth spiritual maturity and the fruit of righteousness.

...and I do not know which to choose. – Since it is clear from the wider context that the choice of the matter is not in Paul’s hands, it seems best to understand the word “choose” to mean “my preference.” That is, if the decision were up to him, he would not be entirely certain which he would choose: to be acquitted and live on in the world or to be found guilty of the false charges, be executed and immediately be in the very presence of the Lord.

23–24 But I am hard-pressed from both *directions*, having the desire to depart and be with Messiah, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake.

The issue of “eternal life” after a believer in Yeshua dies is no question whatsoever for Paul. He knows and fully affirms that if he were to die, his spirit would enter the very presence of the Lord Yeshua. And of course, this would clearly be his preference. Just considering such a reality fuels Paul’s desire to be with the One he serves.

Even contemplating Paul’s words here should cause all who confess faith in Yeshua to ask themselves, “Do I likewise long to be with Yeshua and know without a doubt that when my days on this earth are completed I will be with Him?” All too often in our busy lives we neglect to contemplate our final and ultimate destination, to be forever with Him.

Though there are plenty of questions that theologians and commentators have wrestled with in terms of the intermediate state, it seems quite clear how Paul understands it. The controversy regarding the intermediate state, i.e., the time between one’s death and the final resurrection, is whether or not the disembodied spirit of the individual has consciousness. Clearly in this context Paul expects to be “with Messiah” in full consciousness. The fact that Paul uses the metaphor of “sleep” to describe those who have died¹ does not suggest that he was teaching an unconsciousness in the intermediate state. He simply uses “sleep” as a kinder metaphor for death but also as indicating that the life of the spirit continues even when the body is buried in the grave.

Note that Paul indicates “to depart (i.e., leave the body) is to “be with Messiah” and that this is “very much better.” This surely indicates a consciousness on the departed spirit of the person who has died. In this regard, note also Paul’s words to the believers in Corinth.

Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord—for we walk by faith, not by sight—we are of good courage, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. (2Cor 5:6–8)

Furthermore, Yeshua’s promise to the believing thief on the cross likewise makes it clear that the departed spirit of the deceased exists in a state of consciousness in the intermediate state:

¹ Cf. 1Thess 4:14, 16; 1Cor 15:51, 52.

And he was saying, “Yeshua, remember me when You come into Your kingdom!” And He said to him, “Truly I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.” (Lk 23:42–43)

...having the desire to depart and be with Messiah, for that is very much better; – Thus Paul, in expressing his desire “to depart and be with Yeshua” teaches us that for the believer in Yeshua, there is no need to fear the future nor to fear death. Surely we are to cling to life and guard it carefully as a gift from God. But in our daily lives of serving Him and walking in the faith He has given to us, we must not fall prey to fearing the future. When our days are finished, we will be with the Lord in a place where death and the demise of a fallen world do not exist.

...yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. – Paul undoubtedly had taken the words of Messiah spoken directly to him as he was traveling toward Damascus, to define the primary focus and impetus for the work Yeshua had called him to accomplish.

As he was traveling, it happened that he was approaching Damascus, and suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him; and he fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?” And he said, “Who are You, Lord?” And He said, “I am Yeshua whom you are persecuting, but get up and enter the city, and it will be told you what you must do.” (Acts 9:3–6)

At this divine encounter, Paul was struck blind and brought into the city of Damascus where Ananias was instructed by the Lord to go to him so that he might receive his sight. At first Ananias was hesitant to go, knowing the manner in which Paul had persecuted the followers of Yeshua. So in giving the instructions to Ananias, Yeshua stated:

But the Lord said to him, “Go, for he is a chosen instrument of Mine, to bear My name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel; for I will show him how much he must suffer for My name’s sake.” (Acts 9:15–16)

Surely this message to Ananias was made known to Paul, and this undoubtedly formed the primary directive for his ministry and service to the Lord and His people. Thus, it seems quite likely that his willingness to “remain on in the flesh” was that he would continue to fulfill the very mission to which Yeshua Himself had directly appointed him.