

THE BIG ISSUES – LIFE AND DEATH

Phil 1.19-26

INTRODUCTION

It has sometimes been said that *you can only be sure about life, when you are first sure about death – your own death*. In other words, you can only be sure how to live when you are sure about how you will die.

- If this life is all there is, if beyond death there is nothing, there is a sense in which it doesn't really matter how we spend our days. We could make it our goal to maximise our pleasures. *Eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die*, is the old motto of the hedonist, the pleasure-seeker, the rich fool in the parable Jesus told (Luke 12.19; 1 Cor 15.32). The person who believes that beyond death is oblivion would be logically consistent to live a life of self-indulgence, to maximise the fun he has from his limited time alive. And that is the way many people do indeed live their lives.
- But if death *isn't* the end, if there is some form destiny beyond death for each of us, that destiny should surely shape the way we do *everything* this side of the grave.

So these are the really big issues that Paul is grappling with in the verses before us this morning – the biggest issues of all, the issues of life and death.

Illustration. Bill Shankly, the one-time manager of Liverpool Football Club, once quipped, “*Football isn't a matter of life or death. It's much more important than that!*” Well, it may have been for him; but for most thinking people it's not. Football is certainly a big part of many people's lives here in the Northeast. But life is more than football, even for them. And beyond football and life in general lies the big issue of our own death to face up to.

So let's have a look at what Paul has to say about these all-important subjects of life and death.

Certainties and Uncertainties

One of the first things we notice from this passage is that there are some things about which Paul is very sure. Twice, first in verse 19 and then again in verse 25, he uses the phrase ***I know***. But then in verse 22 he also uses the phrase ***I don't know***. So there were some things Paul was very certain about, and other things he was less sure of.

- What he was absolutely **cert**ain about was *the destiny that awaited him beyond death*, as a follower of Jesus. And in view of this certainty, he was also very sure *what his life was all about*.
- Where a number of **uncertainties** crept into his thinking was in trying to weigh up, which was better – living for Christ in the here and now, or departing this life to be with him forever. The latter would undoubtedly bring him great personal gain. The former would be of greater benefit to the friends he was writing to.

Later on, we will see which side of this dilemma he came down on, and why. But to understand the thinking behind his decision, we need to look first at what he says about life and about what he says about death in these verses.

- We will begin with what Paul says about death, because as we said earlier, only when we're sure about what death will bring us can we be sure about how we should be living our life.

1. DEATH

The Christian's view of death is one of the great distinctives of our faith.

- ***Many in our society don't give death much of a thought at all*** - even though it's one of life's two cast-iron certainties, (the other is having to pay taxes, so it's said!). The mortality rate for the human race is 100%. Eventually, everyone dies – except for those living at the time of Christ's return to this earth.
- Yet despite this, many give their own death little thought. They might take out an insurance policy to cover their own funeral expenses, to save their family having to pay for them. And they might even make a will. But that's as far as their thinking goes.
- To many in our society, death is the end. Beyond it lies nothing. This life is all there is, they reckon, so they give death very little thought indeed.

- On the other hand, ***there are some who live in extreme fear of death***. They dread the prospect of dying, because they are terrified by what might lie beyond death for them. This life is all they've got, so they want to cling on to it for as long as they can. They dread the prospect of leaving all that's familiar to them and passing into an unknown eternity.
- And then there are others who take ***the show-business approach to death: "It will be all right on the night***. Everything will turn out fine. There's really nothing to worry about. Everybody goes to heaven when they die." Sadly, some people base their hopes and confidence on mere wishful thinking – and tragically, if they do so, it's likely to let them down – and by then, beyond death, it will be too late to change the assumptions on which they have based their hopes and confidence.

The Christian's attitude to death, however, stands in stark contrast to these three approaches. Far from dismissing death as being unimportant, or dreading it as something uncertain, or whistling in the dark and hoping for the best, the Christian can be very positive in the face of death, and for good solid reasons.

First of all in this passage, Paul speaks of

1.1 Death as a departure (v23)

- The word he uses in verse 23 was often employed by soldiers striking camp, packing up their tents to move somewhere else. In 2 Cor 5.1, Paul likens our present earthly body to a *tent*, because it's so flimsy. It's subject to wear and tear. It's not very permanent, and so eventually it will be *destroyed*. But *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*, Paul assures his readers. Beyond the frailty of our present body, something much more robust awaits us – something as superior to our present body as a house is to a tent. Paul speaks about our new resurrection body in 3.20-21. *Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body*.
- The word for 'departure' that Paul employs here was also used of a ship leaving port, to sail off to a new destination (cf 2 Tim 4.6, *the time has come for my departure*).

So what this word emphasises is that death for the Christian, as for everyone else, is a departure from everything that has become familiar to us in this life.

- There are some things we won't be sorry to say '**goodbye**' to: all ***the troubles of this life*** - every moment of sickness and pain, distress and disappointment, heartache and failure. Death will be a welcome farewell to all the troubles of this life.
- But we will also be saying 'goodbye' to all the ***possessions*** we have accumulated over our lifetime – our house and car, our furniture and photographs, our favourite clothes and family mementos. *We brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it*, Paul reminds us rather soberly in 1 Tim 6.7.
- We will also be saying 'goodbye' to all our ***family and friends***. And this is why death can be a very great wrench, as well as a release. And of course, for those left behind, the sense of loss can be overwhelming. We should never minimise the depth of pain people may feel when they've lost a loved one through death – especially someone very close, like a husband or wife, mother or father, son or daughter.
- When Jesus' close friend, Lazarus, died, we read that Jesus wept over his death. The hired mourners were there to provide the ritual wailing. But John tells us (in the shortest verse of the Bible, John 11.35) that Jesus *shed tears*, because he loved Lazarus so much. So it's OK to cry when we lose someone we've loved. Jesus wept, and so can we. Indeed, the greater the love there's been, the deeper will be the sense of loss, and the more fully the tears will flow. "*See how he loved him!*" was the way the Jews reacted to the tears Jesus shed for Lazarus.

But if our death is a departure from this life, we can also speak of it as an arrival, as Paul does here. For the Christian,

1.2 Death is a Homecoming (v23)

For Paul, departing this life would mean being at home with Jesus! What a wonderful picture this is! In this life, Christ lives within us, by his Spirit, if we belong to him. And that's very wonderful. But at death, we are taken into the very presence of Jesus, to bask in the glory of his home.

- It's the difference between corresponding with someone through letters, or exchanging e-mails with them, or speaking to them on the telephone, and being with them face to face – in their own home. There's just now comparison. It's what Ellen Macarthur looked forward to most on her return from her round-the-world sailing adventure. She looked forward to spending time with her family, in their home. She had been able to speak to them by satellite telephone during her 71 days away – but to arrive back, knowing she would see her family again, and be able to hug them, and go home with them, to be with them for as long as she wanted their company – that was something so good as to be beyond description.
- If that's so of a round-the-world yachtswoman arriving back home, how much more wonderful it will be for us when we reach heaven, the home of Jesus.

Now we see but a poor reflection as in a mirror; then we shall see face-to-face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known, Paul writes in 1 Cor 13.12. *To be away from the body is to be at home with the Lord,* Paul assures us in 2 Cor 5.8. There will be no hanging around in a foyer, waiting to be let in. And there will be no proving period to endure, as if we were on probation. The moment we die, as Christians, we will find ourselves at home with Jesus. *Today, you will be with me in Paradise* Jesus assured the dying thief, next to him on the cross. The promise was for immediate fellowship, not just a distance prospect of fellowship.

This is why, in verse 21, Paul is able to describe

1.3 Death as great gain (vs21,23) for the true believer, *better by far* than anything this life has to offer us. Life beyond death is not a pale imitation of life, as we now know it – not for the Christian. It's not a kind of shadow lands, where nothing will seem very real. The exact opposite is the case. The life to come will be *more* real than any thing we will have ever experienced this side of the grave.

- This life is like looking at a static, black-and-white photograph; whereas the life to come will be like being on the set of an action-packed, fully animated, three-dimensional Technicolor movie!
- Best of all, we will be with Jesus, and with all his people – from every generation and continent - enjoying unclouded and uninterrupted fellowship with him (there will be no mobiles going off to interrupt our quality time with him!).
- We will be free from all pain and suffering, every kind of distress and disappointment. Nothing will ever make us sad again, and we will be out of reach of every bothersome temptation.
- We will be clothed in a new and glorious resurrection body, just like Christ's, on the day of his Return to earth, when he comes to usher in his kingdom of righteous, peace and joy for ever, the new heavens and earth, in which God and man dwell together in perfect harmony.
- *Now, it is God who has made us for this very purpose and has given us the Spirit as a deposit, guaranteeing what is to come,* Paul writes in 2 Cor 5.5. We've been made for the life to come; and we've been saved for the life to come.

Now, if this is what we can look forward to beyond death, it is going to have a profound effect on the way we live our life in the here and now, isn't it?

2. LIFE

And so, in verse 21, Paul says, ***For me, life is Jesus.*** He is the one I live for! In view of all that Christ has done for me in the past, dying on the cross for my sins, undeserving though I was; and in view of all that he yet has in store for me in the future, how could I do any thing else *but* live for him.

- He sums up his attitude in Galatians 2.20, where he explains, *I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.*
- People live for all sorts of things, don't they? Some people live for their careers, or for an all-consuming pastime – like gardening, or fishing, or football. Some people live for their pets.
- Others live for their family – for their husband or wife, mother or father, son or daughter, or the

grandchildren.

But Paul was determined to live for Jesus; and when we, like him, realise the enormity of what Jesus has done for us in the past, and what he has got stored up for us in the future, we too will want to live for him, more than for anything else or for any one else.

And so in verse 20, he speaks of

2.1 His Over-riding Desire (v20) – for Christ to be exalted in his own person, whether by life or by death, whether through further fruitful service, or a courageous martyr's death for his Lord.

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 in my body, whether by life or by death. In 2.17, Paul speaks of the possibility of his life being poured out in death, like a *drink offering* for his Lord. He was being held in prison, pending his trial before Caesar. Humanly speaking, Paul's life was hanging in the balance, by a thread. But his over-riding desire, and great hope and expectation, was that Jesus would be *exalted* in him, *whether by life or by death*.

- The word **exalted** here could be translated *magnified*. It's the same word found on Mary's lips, in Luke 1.46, where she cries out *"My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour.* When we magnify something, we make it appear bigger. That's what Paul wanted to do with Jesus. He wanted to make him appear as big as possible to people, through the way he conducted himself, whether in life or in death. That thought has prompted Alex Motyer (p67) to write, *Whatever the future held for Paul, his task was not to carry around a snapshot of Christ, in his wallet, for occasional sharing with the saved; but to display a life-sized portrait of Christ to all who cared to look, a Christ magnified in every dimension of Paul's body.*
- And when he speaks of his **eager expectation** that this will be so, in this verse, he is giving us an indication of how focussed he was on this task. The word he uses here means to *'turn your head away from all other distractions, quite deliberately, in order to watch for those things that really matter'* [Motyer, p86]. Paul was a highly focussed individual, as all great men and women are. He was determined not to be an embarrassment to Christ in any way. He couldn't bear the thought of letting him down, or misrepresenting him. So he turned away from everything that might be a hindrance to his witness, and craned his neck forward to catch a glimpse of the hope Christ had set before him.

Paul also speaks here, in verses 22 of

2.2 His Utter Determination (vs22)- to be fruitful for Jesus.

If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me.

- John Wesley used to say, *"Give me my life until my work is done, and give me my work until my life is done."* I don't think the word 'retirement' is one that either of these two great men of God would have been familiar with! They were both determined to spend all their days in fruitful labour for their Lord, to whom they owed so much.
- When I was younger, I often thought to myself, *"Wouldn't it be great to get to leave, to leave all the hassles of this life behind me, forever."* But as I've got older, I've tended to think, *"Give me as many days as possible on earth, so I can maximise my fruitfulness for you."* Unless I live away beyond 100, I'm now well passed the halfway point of my life. So I've got fewer days left than I've so far been given. And so I want to maximise their usefulness to Jesus. In John 9.4, Jesus reminds us that *as long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work.* That night may be his return; or it might be our home-call. Either way, so long as we *go on living in the body*, we will want our days to be spent in *fruitful labour* for our Saviour.
- And notice that Paul puts the emphasis here on being **fruitful**, not just 'busy' or 'occupied'. Anyone can be busy, or fully occupied. But what Jesus looks for is fruitfulness (John 15.8). *This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.*
- In this letter, as in many others that Paul wrote, he explains what he means by being fruitful. He is speaking about the privilege that was his in leading people to a mature faith in Christ, so that at the great harvest festival, on the day of Christ's return, he is able to present an overflowing basket of fruit to his

Lord – people who have grown to maturity in him. Glance across to 2.12,16: Paul urged the Philippians to *continue to work out their salvation ... in order that I may boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labour for nothing*. Our fruitfulness is to be measured in terms of people brought to maturity in Christ.

And so we come to Paul's

2.3 Unselfish Decision (vs24-26) – a decision to stay alive for the benefit of other Christians

I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far, he writes in verse 23; then continues, but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. 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, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.

- Verse 23 expresses **the anguish Paul felt**. He was being torn in two directions. He was under pressure from two opposing forces. Should he live fruitfully for Christ, in the here and now; or depart to bask in his glory forever?
- As far as **his personal preference** was concerned, the latter was more appealing to him. But Paul always put his service to others before his own personal preferences. He practised what he preached – or rather, what he prayed. His unselfish attitude here is an example of what he has been praying about in verse 10 – discerning not simply what's good, but what's *best*.
- It was more necessary for Paul to stay on earth as **a tireless ambassador for Christ**, than take his well-earned rest in heaven. That would come later; meanwhile, there was still an awful lot of useful work for him to do on earth. That's why he was convinced the Roman authorities would spare his life and set him free.

To that end, in verse 19, he refers to **two crucial factors in his on-going ministry** – one human and one divine – the prayers of God's people, and the support of God's Spirit. He needed both.

- Paul never tired of asking people to **pray for him** (Rom 15.30; 2 Cor 1.11; Col 4.3; 1 Thess 5.25; 2 Thess 3.1), because he was so convinced of the efficacy of prayer. He prayed for other people with such commitment and consistency because he was convinced of the benefits of praying for people. And that's why he asked people to pray for him. He knew that God's power is unleashed as God's people pray.
- And he knew too, the crucial importance of the undergirding **support of God's Spirit**. Paul knew he couldn't do anything without the Spirit's help. He couldn't be fruitful as he lived, or courageous as he died – without the undergirding reinforcement of the Spirit. And the same is true for us. God's Spirit is what Alex Motyer calls *the plus factor* of Christian living, our vital supply.
- So, with the undergirding support of God's Spirit, and backed by a great army of intercessors, Paul was confident that *what had happened to him would turn out for his deliverance* – indeed, for his **salvation**. Paul knew that everything that **had** happened to him, and everything **yet** to happen to him, was being woven into God's great plan for his life – not just his expected release from jail, nor even his release from his sins and guilt, which Christ had secured on the cross for Paul; but his eventual arrival in heaven itself. Our salvation has three dimensions – a past, a present and a future.
 - We have already been saved from the **guilt** of our sins, if we belong to Christ;
 - and we are being saved by the power of his Spirit in our lives;
 - and eventually, we will be saved for all of eternity, to be at home with Jesus forever.

It seems that Paul has the words of Job in mind as he pens these words (Job 13.15,16,18):

Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him ... Indeed, this will turn out for my deliverance ... I know I will be vindicated.