

Ready for Either

Moving Forward, Part 4

Philippians 1:21-26

In 1934, John and Betty Stam were new missionaries with the China Inland Mission. Along with their 3-month-old daughter, Helen, they were serving in a small town.

But civil war had erupted nearby and the communist or “red army” forces were fighting with government forces.

The town's magistrate knew it was life threatening for any foreigners, especially missionaries, and he came to the Stam's missionary compound and urged them to flee for their lives.

Taking no chances for his wife and daughter, John arranged for Betty and their baby girl to be escorted away to safety. Before their plans could commence, the 19th Division of the Red Army had streamed over the mountains behind government troops and entered the town.

Gun shots echoed in the streets as the rebel forces began looting and killing. It wasn't long before some of them began pounding on the Mission station's front gate.

John opened it and invited the soldiers inside, asking them if they were hungry? Betty set before them tea and cake. Their courtesy meant nothing and the soldiers demanded all the money the Stams had. John handed it over.

Still, the men tied up John's hands as he pleaded for the safety of his wife and daughter. All three of them were eventually taken to a local prison where some of the prisoners were released to make room for the Stams. In the midst of all the chaos, little Helen began to cry – nothing would console her. Finally, one of the soldiers offered to kill her, since she was bothering all of the troops.

One of the prisoners who were in the process of being released asked how anyone could even think of killing an innocent baby. The soldiers turned to him and said, “Well I will allow the baby to live tonight but you will take her place.” And with savage rage, he hacked that prisoner to death in the prison yard.

The Stams knew that they would certainly not be allowed to live much longer.

John wrote a hasty letter to the Mission, explaining how they'd been captured and ended his note with the words, “May Christ be glorified whether by life or death.”

The next day, as they were leaving, John handed the letter to the postmaster and the postmaster, a believer, asked John where he was going. He looked at this man and quietly said, “I don't know where these soldiers are going, but we are going to heaven.”

That day, after a forced march of 12 miles, they arrived at the town where they stopped for the night at a wealthy land owner's home who had fled upon their arrival.

Betty was allowed to tend to her little girl; but Betty did more than that. She hurriedly fed her baby, hugged her goodbye and then wrapped her in a sleeping bag and hid her in one of the rooms of that large home. Inside the sleeping bag she placed a change of clothing and all the money she had – \$10 dollars.

The next morning the young couple was led to the town square without their baby and none of the soldiers seemed to notice.

Both John and Betty's hands were tightly bound. As they were led past jeering soldiers and curious citizens who had been forced to come and watch, they were stripped of their outer garments in the tradition of common criminals being led to execution. John was barefoot, having given his socks to Betty to help keep her warm in the winter air.

The commanding officer stopped and ordered John to kneel. John and Betty exchanged a few words that went unrecorded on earth and then John knelt and as he was praying softly, a soldier flashed his sword through air and severed John's head with one vicious swing.

Bystanders reported that Betty did not scream out, but merely shivered and then fell to her knees beside her husband's body. And there, with her hands bound, as she knelt there next to him, the same sword rose and fell again, ending her life.

Their baby, Helen, was found two days later, her muffled cries in that abandoned house had aroused curiosity from neighbors. They called a Chinese pastor who came and took her to his home.

Sometime later she was safely delivered to her maternal grandparents who would raise her, while also serving as missionaries in China. Later she came to the United States where she lived with her Uncle and Aunt – she would grow to serve the Lord in a variety of ways, including writing. She passed away just a few months ago.

As for her martyred parents, a small group of Christians took their bodies and buried them on a hillside nearby.

John was 27 years old . . . Betty was 28.

Their deaths would impact and inspire the evangelical world in the west. For instance, at Moody Bible Institute, 700 students immediately dedicated themselves to missionary service . . . no matter what.

Their biography would be written by the daughter-in-law of Hudson Taylor.

The courage of John and Betty Stam wasn't the first to be written into the annals of church history.

In fact, on their headstones were lines from a letter written by another martyr, lines inscribed next to their names:

- John Cornelius Stam, "That Christ may be glorified whether by life or by death."
- Elisabeth Scott Stam, "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain."

Those words came from the pen of the Apostle Paul in one of his missionary letters we know as the Book of Philippians.

Like John and Betty Stam, he has no idea at the moment which way the Lord will arrange his future.

But he wants the world to know that he isn't just delivering inspired scripture – he's delivering the very motto – the mission statement of his life.

Given what we know of his near term future, reading his words in chapter 1 bring the Bible student to a holy hush and reverence.

He plans to return to these believers, but he never will. And we know why.

The sword of the executioner will eventually flash in the sunlight and Paul's future will be faith – translated into glorious sight.

But for now, listen to the passion of his heart.

Philippians chapter 1 and verse 21. For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

In other words, I don't know what God has in mind for me – but this I do know . . . if I live – it's

all about Christ . . . and if I die – things will only get better.

Did you notice the personal pronoun at the beginning of this statement which makes it clear this is intensely personal?ⁱ

For to me!

In other words, "I don't know about you – but to me – life is Christ and dying is gain!"

It's interesting that Paul writes here with punctuated, shortened exclamations. This sentence is actually missing any verbs and you can roughly translate it:

- to live – Christ!
- to die – gain!

And the absence of the verb allows the reader to fill in the blank – to live is Christ; to live means Christ; to live depends on Christ; to live honors Christ. Paul wrote it so that all of those could apply; in other words, for Paul, the foundation, the center, the purpose, the direction, the power and the meaning of life was simply Christ.ⁱⁱ

William Barclay wrote that:

- For Paul, Christ had been the beginning of life – on that day along the road to Damascus where he was arrested by the Shekinah glory of the resurrected Savior. He was the beginning of Paul's life.
- For Paul, Christ was the continuation of life – there wasn't a day Paul didn't live in the conscious presence of his Lord;
- For Paul, Christ was the end of life – and the older Paul grew, the more he longed for the day of his final redemption.

To Paul, Barclay added, Christ had given him the task of his life, making him an apostle; Christ was the strength of his life – in His all sufficient grace; and Christ was the reward of his life he longed to see. Barclay concluded; If Jesus Christ were taken out of his life, there would be nothing left.ⁱⁱⁱ

I can't help but wonder, if Jesus Christ was taken out of your life – would you notice anything missing? Would anything change?

And how long can you survive without His grace?

- You're faithfully living for your family, but does your family see Christ magnified in you – isn't that the most important thing?
- You're deeply invested in a career, but is that the arena where Christ is revealed through you – isn't that the most important thing?

- Maybe at the moment, you're set aside through illness or set back through suffering or trials, but is Christ the apparent source of strength and peace and grace – isn't that the most important thing?

Paul writes under house arrest, chained to a Praetorian guard, *"Life for me is all about Christ and death is all about going to live with Christ forever."*

By the way, you can't help noticing that there isn't any dread or foreboding in this mission statement. Paul isn't dreading the future. Either way, life or death, it's a win-win.

I remember as a kid at the Mission's to Military Center downtown Norfolk – one Friday night a sailor telling me I could have his quarter if he didn't guess correctly as he flipped it into the air. And that was a lot of money – that quarter could buy an Orange Shasta from the machine – when all the sodas came in thick glass bottles. 25 cents could be mine!

And just before he flipped it into the air, he said, "Okay, heads I win, tails you, what – lose". Somebody pulled that one on you too?!

That was a crushing blow.

Heads I win, tails you lose . . . in other words, this match is designed to be a win-win.

That was Paul's perspective on his future – living I win . . . dying I win.

The logo of one missionary organization is a picture of an ox with a plough on the ground next to him and on the other side of him, an altar of stone. Underneath him are the words, "Ready for Either."^{iv} This was the motto of the Apostle Paul.^{iv}

This is his personal life motto.

And in the meantime, he is modeling trust and inner joy as he waits for that future sentence – he originates the perspective that Spurgeon so eloquently imitated when he wrote in the late 1800's, "I have learned to kiss the wave that throws me against the Rock of Ages."

I have learned to kiss the wave that throws me against the Rock of Ages.

Now what Paul goes on to write can be categorized along these two ideas – the reason for living and the truth about dying.

The reason for living and the truth about dying.

We'll deal in today with Paul's reasons for living.

And Paul identifies at least three reasons for wanting to live.

1. First, he wants to multiply fruit

Notice verse 22. If I live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me.

Paul's words here translated *fruitful labor* is simply:

- And expression for living one day at a time in a demonstration of Spirit control – which yields fruitful attitudes; he refers to these attitudes as the fruit of the Spirit (*Galatians 5:22-23 – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control*);
- Fruitful labor not only refers to fruitful attitudes, but to fruitful actions – earlier in *Philippians 1:11* Paul calls righteous deeds *the fruit of righteousness*;
- Paul also uses this idea for fruitful additions: he refers to winning converts to Christ as a *spiritual harvest* – a metaphor for fruitful evangelism – in *Romans 1:13*.

Paul anticipates one of the benefits of living a little longer to being an opportunity to reap more fruit for the glory of Christ.

And this fruit goes on into eternity because it is related to people . . . to the gospel . . . to the living, eternal Lord.

Paul wants even more lasting treasure.

Have you ever thought about the fact that every treasure from earth – possessions, food, clothing, money, careers, houses, cars – whatever; every one of the treasures of earth have an expiration date.

They eventually rust, dissolve or spoil – some quicker than others.

The treasures of earth come with expiration dates.^v

Now we know that's true with things like bananas . . . or milk . . . even Krispy Kreme doughnuts don't stay fresh for more than, um, a year. The microwave helps . . . you'd never know they were in the back seat of your truck for 6 months. I'm speaking hypothetically . . . of course.

Look, sooner or later, the stuff of earth sours . . . whatever earth produces eventually spoils . . . rusts . . . expires.

Whatever God's Spirit produces lasts forever. And that's real treasure.

Betty Stam wrote these words sometime before her martyrdom in China, "When we consecrate ourselves to God, we think we are making a great sacrifice when we are only letting go of some little

trinket . . . and when our hands are empty, He fills them with His treasures.” – Betty Stam

Paul says, “Listen, one of the reasons I want to live is to get more opportunities to multiply true treasures that lasts forever.”

Secondly, Paul says, “The reason for living is not only to multiply fruit, but . . .

2. To motivate growth

Let’s stay focused on Paul’s reasons for living – so skip down to *verse 24* where he adds these complimentary thoughts.

But to remain in the flesh – that is, to stay alive – ***is more necessary on your account. 25. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith.***

In other words, I know that for the time being God has me remaining here for the sake of ***your progress*** . . .

That word ***progress*** appeared earlier in *verse 12* for the progress (prokope; προκοπη) – the ***advancement*** – of the gospel.

It’s a word that refers to cutting forward.^{vi}

It’s the idea of is hacking your way with a machete through thick brush in the forest to make a path.

It’s a word that refers to making progress against obstacles and in the face of resistance.^{vii}

Paul is saying, “I want you to move forward against resistance and through the thick forest of difficulties.”

Paul has already used this word to highlight the idea of moving forward – even when it seems you’re being taken backward.

Paul knew that he could feel that way these believers would certainly feel this way as well.

So Paul isn’t just interested in moving forward in his own growth – he wants the Philippians to move forward in their maturity with him.

He’s modeling what he’ll write in a few verses ahead to, “Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also the interests of others.”

And get this – Paul is willing to postpone going to heaven – if the Lord wills is – and Paul has already seen heaven - personally.

He was personally trained by the Holy Spirit over a period of three years in isolation (*Galatians 1:17*); and during his training, the Holy Spirit miraculously took him on a tour of tour of heaven.

In fact, Paul admitted that he didn’t know if his body went with him or not; but he wrote to the Corinthians believers and said that he had seen things he wasn’t allowed by God to describe and he had heard things he wasn’t allowed to repeat (*2 Corinthians 12:2*)

Listen, I’m not happy about that . . . why couldn’t he give us the inside scoop . . . and draw some pictures.

Probably because we’re not as patient as Paul and we’d probably all jump off a cliff to get there sooner – you mean we’re trying to stay alive so we can avoid going there?

If we were given a tour of heaven today, we would be ready to get on the bus . . . we definitely would stop taking vitamins and fish oil and fiber to last longer . . . we’d eat more stale doughnuts and just end it early . . . with a smile on our face.

Paul was not allowed by God to reveal what he saw in heaven.

But listen, Paul has seen it.

Little wonder he is ready for either living or day . . . it’s a win-win!

He would either add fruit and service to his ministry or he would depart to that place where he had seen the glories and heard the music and the host of heaven singing in the Celestial City where he was longing to live.

Dying . . . is gain!

So don’t miss this point – Paul is actually willing for God to literally postpone heaven in order to use him to help other Christians grow in their faith and joy.^{viii}

That leads me to his third reason for living.

Not only does Paul want to:

- Multiply fruit
- Motivate growth

Third: he wants:

3. To magnify Christ

So that – he writes in *verse 26* – this translates Paul’s purpose clause – yes I want to live to multiply fruit and motivate growth – but here’s where I’m driving . . . here’s the core of my desire – notice, ***so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you.***

In other words, if Paul is allowed to live – and he will for some time yet – the Philippians will have all the more reason to praise and worship the Lord for answering their prayers in this regard.^{ix}

Ultimately, Jesus Christ will receive greater glory in Paul's living and ministering and preaching and discipling rather than dying.

And if the believers can receive even more incentive for glorifying Christ through Paul's ministry, then Paul is fully willing to stay living.

Can you imagine? Paul was so "other-people" oriented.

He is willing to sacrifice comfort and personal ease for the sake of the gospel;

He is even willing to postpone entering heaven in order to give other believers greater reason to magnify Christ.

As I studied several sites that recorded the biography of John and Betty Stam, I'm almost convinced that they must have been either reading or studying or memorizing this paragraph from the Paul's letter to the Philippians.

So much of their brief correspondence is steeped in this language; for instance, in his last letter home from China, in 1934, John Stam had written his parents, "God knows what our end is, but we have decided that, by life or death, Christ shall be magnified."^x

You want a convicting thought? Does our living cause anybody to deepen their desire to praise God?

Do our lives lead others to want to provide even more ample cause to grow in their faith and glorify Christ?

I don't know about you but I've been around a few people in my life that have made me want to get alone and say, "Oh Lord, I don't worship You like I should; I don't glory in You and seek after You like I really should; but now that I've been in that person's presence; oh how they motivate my faith and my joy, and a deeper desire to worship and glorify You my Savior."

I'm convinced that to become that kind of person, we must mirror these kinds of reasons for living.

To sum up your life with this motto: ***For me to live is Christ – and to die is gain.***

In fact, let me encourage you sometime in the next day or two – to either mentally or physically take out a piece of paper and write the words,

For me to live is – blank

And to die would be – blank

For me to live is – blank

For me to die would be – blank

The world won't offer any help here . . . only obstacles and thick underbrush that you'll have to cut through daily. There's nothing of the world to imitate.

One commentator on this paragraph referred to some excavations in Carthage where among the ruins is an inscription carved by a Roman soldier. The inscription reads: To laugh, to hunt, to bathe, to game – that is life."^{xi}

In other words, for me to live is to hunt, to go to the public swimming pool and to party."^{xii}

Fill in the blanks; "For me to live – is to play games; for me to live is to accumulate, to shop, to golf, to garden, to travel, to watch television, to get a degree . . . to build a house . . . to grow a portfolio . . . for me to live is whatever I want to live for.

Now don't misunderstand. Living can involve all those things – but the question is – are they a part of your life or are they the reason for your life?

Paul made tents for a living . . . do you think he lived to make tents?

Most people you know are living for the weekend . . . they have a job only to pay for what they're going to do on the weekend. "Man, I'm just looking forward to the weekend." Is that it?

You probably know some guy who not only enjoys golf but that's all he can talk about – in fact he can't wait to retire so he can play golf every day . . . are you kidding? Is that it?

You might know people who saved all their lives so they could retire in a cottage so they can spend their remaining years living at the beach? Are you kidding? Is that it?

How much of what you really want out of life has an expiration date attached?

Are your treasures people?

Are your greatest joys the Lord and His Gospel?

Are your deepest prayers for the growth and faith and joy of others?

Here were Paul's reasons for living –

- To multiply fruit for Christ
- To motivate growth in Christ
- To magnify worship of Christ

As a young woman of eighteen, just 10 years before Betty Stam would be martyred in China, she had written a prayer that would later be published throughout the western world:

*Lord, I give up all my own plans and purposes
All my own desires and hopes
And accept Thy will for my life.
I give myself, my life, my all*

*Utterly to Thee to be Thine forever.
Fill me and seal me with Thy Holy Spirit
Use me as Thou wilt, send me where Thou wilt
And work out Thy whole will in my life at any cost
now and forever.*

This poem would be copied by a young 12 year old girl into the fly leaf of her Bible – a 12 year old the world would one day know as Elizabeth Elliot. The fruit continues to multiply to this very day.

Elizabeth’s husband would become one more martyr in the annals of church history. A likeminded man who once wrote of his commitment: He is no fool who gives up what he cannot keep, to gain what he cannot lose.

Which is another way of saying with Paul, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die, is gain.”

Let me close by reading from the Valley of Vision – a practice we’ve been edified by in our evening worship services – tonight, by the way, is our last evening worship until January. I’m reading from a collection of Puritan Prayers – this one specifically reinforces the kind of prayer we want to make after studying the Paul’s mission statement in life.

O God,

I come to Thee as a sinner with cares and sorrows,

*To leave every concern entirely to Thee;
Every sin calling for Christ’s precious blood;
Give me more intense faith in eternal truths,
Burning into me by experience the things I know;
Let me never be ashamed of the truth of the gospel,
That I may bear its reproach,
Vindicate it,
See Jesus as its essence,
Know in it the power of the Spirit.
Lord, help me, for I am often lukewarm and chill;
Unbelief mars my confidence,
Sin makes me forget Thee
Let the weeds that grow in my soul be cut at their
roots;
Grant me to know that I truly live only when I live to
Thee;
That everything else is trifling.
What shall I do to glorify and worship You, the best
of Beings;
O that I could consecrate my soul and body to Your
service,
Without restraint forever.
But when I have done all I can,
I shall not be able to offer more than a small
fraction of the praise that you, my glorious God
deserves.^{xiii}*

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 11/23/2014 by Stephen Davey.

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i G. Walter Hansen, The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letter to the Philippians (Eerdmans, 2009), p. 81

ii Ibid

iii Adapted from William Barclay, The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 27

iv Sam Gordon, An Odyssey of Joy: Philippians (Ambassador, 2004), p. 53

v Matt Chandler, To Live Is Christ, To Die Is Gain (David C. Cook, 2013), p. 36

vi Adapted from Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 546

vii MacArthur, p. 81

viii Adapted from Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Joyful: Philippians (Victor Books, 1978), p. 38

ix Adapted from Life Application Bible Commentary: Philippians, Colossians & Philemon (Tyndale, 1995), p. 41

x Gordon, p. 53

xi R. Kent Hughes, Philippians (Crossway Books, 2007), p. 59

xii Ibid

xiii Adapted from The Valley of Vision, ed; Walter Bennett (The Banner of Truth Trust, reprint, 2002), pp. 232 & 235