

Stay!

Moving Forward, Part 5

Philippians 1:23

As a year passes into the history books and another new year begins, one of the news items that always catches my attention is the list of famous people who died in the previous year. Magazines carry the report . . . including World Magazine, which ran a listing of people who passed away in the previous year. They listed their names under the headline: Departures

It included people who made some sort of impact on our world.

Like Edmund Abel – you probably don't know his name, but he was the engineer who invented and designed the coffee drip brewing machine as we know it – replacing the percolator in the average American home. The appliance was launched as Mr. Coffee in 1972 and Joe DiMaggio did the commercials. The first year alone Mr. Coffee earned \$150 million dollars.

Since Edmund was on contract, he never much of the proceeds. He'd rather build boats anyway – the article read that when Abel died, the frame of a glider he was building was in the middle of his living room. He died at the age of 92 and told reporters that he was able to live a long and healthy life because of two things – he regularly ate grapefruit and he never, ever drank coffee.

Other names include the former CEO of IBM, John Akers, Comedienne Joan Rivers, Shirley Temple, Truett Cathy, the founder of Chick-fil-A and a committed Christian – our men's ministry had his son Dan spoke here not too long ago.

Another name in this list that caught my attention was Dayuma – the woman from the Auca tribe who came to faith and became a connecting point for Elizabeth Elliott and Rachel Saint to eventually reach the Auca's for Christ. I can't imagine her reward as she meets her Savior face to face.

There were a host of athletes listed . . . names I'd never heard of before. Like Dorothy Cheney – hall of fame tennis champion – she won 391 U.S. championships – what caught my attention was the fact that she won most of these championship matches after she turned 55 – and she competed until she was in her 80's; she died last year at the age of 98.

I guess the secret to long life is evidently, play a lot of tennis, eat grapefruit and never drink coffee; which means I'm a dead man.

Not to mention my introduction 2 weeks ago to a new place in Cary called Duck Doughnuts . . . homemade . . . while you wait . . . maybe I'll work in the details in a future sermon.

The truth is the average person on the street is actually, secretly, honestly, troubled at best and out right afraid at worst – of dying; primarily because they know that something is probably going to happen next.

One author wrote, death looms large as a dreadful enemy. Francis Bacon, the statesman who lived four hundred years ago said that “men fear death as children fear the dark.” We know from scripture that buried in the heart of every human being is the knowledge of a Creator and even though they attempt to suppress that truth, Romans 1, the law of God is written on their hearts with their conscience bearing witness, Romans 2; they intuitively know that some kind of reckoning is on the other side. Samuel Johnson, a leading author from the 18th century witness the death of one of his friends and then later wrote, “At the sight of this last conflict I felt a sensation never known to me before . . . a confusion of passions . . . a gloomy terror without a name.”ⁱ

Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman played the role of terminally ill men in the movie *The Bucket List*. They decided to do some things before they died. When one of the actors was interviewed by a magazine, Jack Nicholson admitted, “I used to live so freely. The mantra for my generation was “Be your own man . . . choose whatever rules you want.” I'll accept the guilt; I'll pay the check. I'll do the time. I chose my own way. Later in the interview he added, “We all want to go on forever, don't we? Everybody goes to that wall, yet nobody knows what's on the other side . . . that's why we fear death.”ⁱⁱ

Without realizing it, these men actually personify the truth of scripture that says the children of unbelief are literally ***held in slavery by their fear of death.*** (*Hebrews 2:14-15*).

You know as I read through this really long list of departures: athletes, political figures, authors, actors and actresses; media personalities, philosophers, inventors, business leaders – I couldn't help but wonder how many of them lay on their deathbeds and thought, "I'm about to die and I can hardly wait . . . this is gonna be so much better than life as I know it now."

That can be the testimony of every Christian. We know from scripture what's on the other side.

If you reopen your *letter of Paul to the Philippians*, you discover this kind of confidence.

Lets' go back to his categorical statement on life and death which we began to explore . . . beginning in *verse 21. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.*

What Paul is about to do is give us his thought process instead of simply delivering his opinion . . . he takes us through a pros and cons listing of either living or dying.

Have you ever done that whenever you've made an important decision? My wife and I have at times either talked through a pros and cons thought process or we've even taken out a piece of paper and drawn a line down the middle. On one side were the pros and on the other side are the cons.

In our last study – we looked at Paul's list of reasons for living. There are three of them – he wants to multiply spiritual fruit – *verse 22. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me.*

He wants his life to produce spiritual, lasting, eternal fruit.

Secondly, he wants to motivate spiritual growth in others – *verse 24. Yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. And convinced of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith.*

Paul says, "Here's why I wanna be alive – I wanna multiply spiritual fruit – I wanna motivate spiritual growth . . . and then thirdly, he says, "I wanna magnify Jesus Christ – *verse 26. So that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you.*"

Ultimately, Paul's life was really all about multiplying, motivating and magnifying Jesus Christ.

Tucked inside this expanded list of reasons for living, Paul makes a rather brief statement on why it would be better to die – this is the other side of the column.

Before we look at this I want you to notice the battle in Paul's heart and mind and spirit – he is obviously not afraid of dying – and he's also very interested in living.

Lets' pick it up at verse 23. *I am torn – your translation might read – I am hard pressed.*

The verb *sunechomai* (συνεχομαι) is used in the New Testament for being squeezed on both sides.ⁱⁱⁱ

It's used to depict the pressure of the crowd the Lord experienced in Luke 8:45, where he they were *pressing against* Him.

Paul even uses the word to describe how the love of Christ literally serves as the pressurizing, constraining compelling force that governs our lives (2 Corinthians 5:14).^{iv}

It was used in the ancient world for a traveler in a narrow pass, with a wall of rock on both sides so tightly hemming him in he can't turn around.^v

This verb gives us our expression of someone being caught between a rock and a hard place.

Paul effectively says, on one side is my desire to live and on the other is my desire to die – notice verse 23 again – I am hard pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ.

Paul uses a really strong word translated here "desire". I desire to depart . . . and Paul uses the word *epithumia* (ἐπιθυμία).

It's a word that refers to longing or craving.^{vi}

And it often shows up in a negative context.

It appears in the New Testament as a sexually loaded word, used for lusting after forbidden desires. Paul uses this word when he talks about the lust of the flesh (Galatians 5:16).

But Paul also uses it in a positive sense too – he writes to the Thessalonians and tells them how eager he was and with great desire – same word – to see their faces (*I Thessalonians 2:17*).

Which provides another insight into this man – he was extremely passionate and emotionally wired. He was the most resolute, steadfast, brilliant theologian you'd ever meet, and at the same time he was incredibly tender and emotionally sensitive; he felt deeply with every fiber of his being.

This is the kind of man all our wives *thought* they were marrying when they married us. We aren't even close . . . and all the women said – Amen?

My wife will say, "Honey, I need you to listen to me, and I really need you to *feel* what I'm saying . . . I want you to *feel* it."

Why don't we just start singing I believe in Miracles while we're at it.

Look, here's my point . . . I'd better get to the point – we can understand why Paul would wanna be alive – to **multiply fruit; motivate growth and magnify Christ**; but why in the world would Paul so passionately, emotionally, longingly want to depart by way of death?

Well, it'll be easy to misunderstand him unless we carefully unpack his reasoning about dying.

Paul has given us, in this paragraph, three reasons for life; but now he gives us three truths about death.

The first truth is this:

1. Death is a spiritual departure

Notice again *verse 23. But I am hard pressed from both directions, having the desire to what? the desire to depart.*

Paul uses a word freighted with both emotion and imagery here.

It's the verb from *analuw* (αναλωω); a verb found throughout Paul's world.

I have found at least five contexts which use this word – giving us a little different reflection of light as we turn and study it.

It's used by **a soldier** and his company as they strike camp. In other words, as they take down their tents and prepare to move out.

And by the way, this departure had in mind the soldiers moving from one post to another.

I found it interesting to read an illustration of this idea from William Barclay who wrote many years ago of the British Royal Air Force. Many of these pilots were sacrificially spent as Great Britain stood alone against the onslaught of Hitler's bombers.

When a pilot was shot down and confirmed as dead, they never spoke of that pilot as having been killed, but always as having been – quote – “posted to another station.”^{vii}

Paul is effectively saying, I am eager to strike camp and leave this field of battle and enter the eternal rest of heaven in the presence of Christ.

The word was also used in the days of Paul by **the traveler** on board a ship that was loosening the ropes that tied it to the dock.

The ship was read to depart and set sail.

Paul could have been thinking of this nuance in that his coming death would do nothing more than loosen the ropes that held him to the dock of earth and allowed him to set sail for heaven.

Paul was ready to cast off the lines – to set sail for the harbor of heaven.^{viii}

The farmer used this word as he unyoked his oxen from the harness after a long day of ploughing and pulling and sweating and straining.

Paul could be very well be longing to be unhooked from the strain of ploughing and weeding in the harvest fields; if anyone could claim to be weary and worn out, it was the Apostle Paul.

Some people retire and go to Florida . . . Paul was ready to go to heaven. He was longing for the Master Ploughman to unhook him from the harness and welcome him home.

This word was also used within **academia** for solving a problem. When it was solved, they would say, the problem has departed.

What a wonderful truth about dying for the believer. Death is the end of problems – it is the departure of every problem and the beginning of unending solutions.^{ix}

One more reflection of light from this word-gem; it was a verb that could be used for a prisoner or even a slave who was set free. **A judge** would allow the person to depart – his sentence either revoked – his status changed – his chains removed. He was free to go.^x

Paul wasn't looking at his death as the moment of extermination – he was looking at his death as the moment of emancipation.

The chains of mortal flesh would fall off and his spirit would soar to meet his Lord.

Paul says – and we with him who know the Lord

–

- I'm ready to get out of the harness
- I'm ready to slip out of my shackles
- I'm ready to strike camp and take down my mortal tent
- I'm ready to have my problems replaced with solutions
- I'm ready to weigh anchor and set sail for the Harbor of Heaven

For those of us who believe, your spirit goes to be with Christ – and your body returns to dust, but it will be resurrected and glorified and reunited with your spirit at the Rapture of the church

Here's the truth about death - it is a spiritual departure.

But that's not all; secondly,

2. Death is a literal arrival (23b)

Notice again *verse 23. But I am hard pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ . . .*

God's revelation about death here through Paul's letter effectively destroys a number of unbiblical, false teachings.

- **The false teaching of soul sleep or limbo.**

The New Testament uses the sleep as a metaphor for death – to picture the individual as free from the cares of life.^{xi}

It is never intended in scripture to teach that the soul is literally sleeping – in some state of limbo – some kind of cursed wandering around the planet until your time's up.

If that were true, Paul would never be able to write – I can't wait until I die because then my soul will go to sleep and enter a state of limbo.

Notice the text again – *having the desire to depart* – that is die – *and be* where? *and be with Christ*.

There is no spooky mystical wandering of the soul or some transient sleep that keeps a soul from immediately becoming united with Christ.

- **This text also adds to other texts to destroy the false teaching of Purgatory.**

For Paul to say here than when he dies he's going to be with Christ, would mean that if Paul went to Purgatory, then Jesus would have to be there too.

Paul says here he's going to be with Christ and Jesus isn't suffering in the flames of purgatory.

In fact, notice the last part of *verse 23* – *for that is very much better*.

Do you think Paul is writing – I can't wait to die so that I can go to Purgatory, *for that is very much better?*

There's not a shred of biblical evidence in the persisting doctrine of Purgatory – it is a manmade religious belief that fits well with other Catholic doctrines of earning your salvation – you literally gotta work your way into Heaven.

If that's true, there's no joy in dying . . . why would Paul be so excited . . . death would only open the door to even greater suffering.

The Bible clearly teaches that when believers die, they immediately depart to be with Christ; like the dying thief who hung on his cross next to Jesus and to whom Jesus promised, *“Truly, I say to you, today you shall be with Me in Paradise.” (Luke 23:43)^{xii}*

Not tomorrow . . . not a year after you've burned off your sins in Purgatory – *Today you will be with me!*

In the *Book of Revelation*, during the Tribulation, we're shown through John the Apostle's tour of heaven that the martyred believers are fully conscious and in the presence of the throne of God (*Revelation 6:9-11*).

Just before Stephen died in *Acts 7:59*, being stoned to death by the mob, he prayed, *“Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”*

He didn't pray, Lord, keep me from the flames of Purgatory – Lord, and please don't let my soul sleep in limbo.

The Apostle Paul wrote – *To be absent from the body is to be present with the Lord (2 Corinthians 5:8)*.

In other words, upon dying, your spirit leaves your body and is immediately present with the Lord.

Not after years of suffering in the flames of Purgatory or floating around the planet haunting all your relatives – although that might sound appealing.

Listen, the distance from earth to heaven isn't measured in years . . . or miles . . . it's measured by a split second of time.

The reason Paul could write here in *Philippians chapter 1* that death was so much better, was because death was not only a spiritual departure – it is a literal arrival.

I've been by the bedside of many believers over the years who breathed their last breath. For those of us who are left by the bedside of a believing loved one who died, we say through tears – he's gone! There he goes!

From heaven's vantage point, the hosts of heaven are saying – Here he comes!^{xiii}

We're weeping, and rightly so – she's just left us! Heaven is singing, and rightly so – she's just joined us!

There he goes . . . here he comes!

Death is not only a literal departure it is a literal arrival.

And given the fact that Paul has already been provided a tour while in private training by the Holy Spirit, we can't imagine how he longs to return to the Father's House . . . no wonder he writes here . . . *for that is so much better!*

Death isn't just a departure, it's an arrival.

Sam Gordon included in his commentary on this text the inscription on a headstone in a churchyard cemetery in Montgomery, Alabama. I love this.

The name of the deceased was Jonathan Pease – p-e-a-s-e. The inscription was a poem and it read:

Under the clover, and under the trees,
Here lies the body of Jonathan Pease.

Pease isn't here, only the pod,
Pease shelled out and went home to God.^{xiv}
That's pretty good theology.

We can make a third observation about death from this verse. Death is not only a spiritual departure and a literal arrival – death is:

3. Death is an eternal connection

But I am hard pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ – for that is much better.

I long – I passionately crave – I can't wait to depart and be with Christ.

Three reasons to remain alive and stay the course . . . three reasons to welcome death and finish his course, which Paul clearly said, "Is far much better."

This leads me to point out something especially profound in Paul's relationship with Christ.

There were three reasons for living and three reasons for dying – did you notice it was a tie – three life benefits and three death benefits!

Three against three . . . it was a tie in Paul's mind and heart – and he admitted that he was between a rock and a hard place.

There is a tie-breaker here. The tie breaker was Paul's Master. Paul started his letter in verse 1 by telling us all that he was the slave of Christ Jesus.

I'll do what my Master says . . . He casts the deciding vote on whether I stay the course, or finish my course and go home.

Let me summarize with two principles what we observe here in Paul's attitude and spirit.

- **First, Paul was able to fully live because he was ready at any moment to die.**

The truth is, my friend, you are not ready to truly live, until you are truly ready to die.

- **Paul was willing to stay because his Master had the final say.**

What keeps you where you are? What role does the Master play in casting the deciding vote on major decisions . . . life endeavors . . . career changes . . . crucial turns in your path.

I mean you have your paper out and you're writing down the pros and cons of some decision . . . where does Christ fit into the equation?

Paul had given his Lord the right to cast the deciding vote – the right to choose.

Now don't misunderstand. Your Master and Lord has the right to choose whether you give it to Him or not.

Oh, but when you do – when you surrender to Him and acknowledge His right – and willingly offer yourself to His deciding vote – His final say – that's when you're truly able to live . . . and truly ready to die.

Whether you stay . . . or go.

And for someone like Paul who's mind and heart was always on go, imagine how difficult it was for him to be directed to stay.

Over the Christmas holidays I read through much of a little book entitled, Lessons from a Sheep Dog. It was written by Phillip Keller – a former rancher and shepherd.

In his book he talks about a Border Collie he took to his ranch and trained. She was exceptionally bright and learned quickly all the commands – the commands to Come – To the left – To the right – Sit – Stay – Lie Down

Everything you try to teach your kids . . . sit, stay, and lie down.

Lass, as she was named, caught on quickly.

Keller writes, one of the truly touching aspects of our friendship was her utter devotion to me. She became my virtual shadow. Where I went, she went. My presence seemed to be her very sense of peace and pleasure.^{xv}

He goes on to write that, for probably that very reason, the most difficult command for her to obey was the command, Stay. He writes, "Sometimes it meant that she would have to keep watch over some unruly rams while I was doing another job. It was very trying for her to have me disappear from view . . ."^{xvi}

This explicit word – Stay – meant for her to remain steady wherever she was placed. And on a sheep ranch, part of the success of sheep involves moving them from pasture to pasture, sorting out ewes, lambs and rams. It might mean she needed to guard an open gate; or to hold a small band of ewes in a corner while I checked their lambs. But if I disappeared from her view she would become uneasy . . . she was sure she had been forgotten. She would begin to move about, and finally take off in search of me. The sheep would scatter, the work would be undone . . . asking her to stay was almost asking too much.^{xvii}

Keller applies this experience by writing – God used this to teach me a most important principle – to be steadfast and faithful wherever He placed me. These are often tough and testing times –we become uneasy . . . we may even feel we have been forgotten by God [when His command is simply – Stay].

It occurs to me that almost any of us can be heroic, even daring in the midst of great excitement. But it takes a much more steadfast faith in our Father to stay – to stay true in the daily duties of our little lives where God asks us to be steady – to perform our part without fanfare, someone He will trust to do their duty – even if it means – to stay.^{xviii}

Even when it means, He is out of sight.

I wonder if God’s command to you this day – on the threshold of a new year – is a clear, explicit “Stay”. Stay the course . . . stay at your task . . . stay in that difficult marriage . . . stay in that difficult curriculum . . . stay in that tiresome job . . . stay in that old house or apartment . . . stay right where you are.

Stay.

I can’t help but think of our great model . . .

- overwhelmed in His humanity with the coming suffering and cruelty of the cross – his rejection by his own people and disciples – overwhelmed in His deity by the coming separation from His Father as He bore in His body all our sin . . . as He became sin who knew no sin . . .
- and there in the Garden, overwhelmed in His humanity and deity, He cries to His Father and asks, “Is there any other path I can take . . . is there any other way I can go.” And His Father effectively said, “Stay.”

Paul, facing lesser sorrows and pressure, but still a great example having been beaten numerous times, stoned nearly to death, shipwrecked, imprisoned and now abandoned even as he writes this letter . . .

“Lord, it would be far better to come home.” And the Lord effectively said, “Stay.”

Yes Lord . . . I’ll stay. And for now, the motto of my life shall remain – as it should be for all of us who serve this same Lord and Master – it remains – a win-win . . . but the best is yet to come.

For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/4/2015 by Stephen Davey.

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i Adapted from James Montgomery Boice, Philippians (Baker, 2000), p. 81

ii Dotson Rader, “*I want to go on Forever*” Parade Magazine (12-9-07), p. 6; www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2008/february/6021808.html

iii Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 547

iv Adapted from G. Walter Hansen, The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letter to the Philippians (Eerdmans, 2009), p. 86

v William Barclay, The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians (Westminster, 1975), p. 27

vi Hansen, p. 86

vii Barclay, p. 26

viii William Barclay, The Letters to Timothy, Titus and Philemon (Westminster Press, 1956), p. 209

ix William Barclay, The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians (Westminster Press, 1978), p. 28

x Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Joyful: Philippians (Victor Books, 1978), p. 39

xi Boice, p. 82

xii John MacArthur, Philippians (Moody Publishers, 2001), p. 79

xiii Sam Gordon, An Odyssey of Joy: The Message of Philippians (Ambassador, 2004), p. 57

xiv Gordon, p. 58

xv Phillip Keller, Lessons From A Sheep Dog (Thomas Nelson, 2002), p. xvi

xvi Keller, p. xvii

xvii Keller, p. 42

xviii Keller, p. 43