

## Prayer

The love and graciousness You show us throughout our lives will never change, Lord Jesus, because You are faithful and dependable, and we treasure this great promise of Your everlasting love and compassion. May we never fear the evils that sometimes afflict us, because You are with us, and the demons will flee as we take hold of Your sure and steadfast promises! We praise You forever, Lord Jesus. AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

Open your Bible at a place in the Gospels and read a story about Jesus. Let this inform your prayers today

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for countries of different religious beliefs.** Pray for countries with a variety of indigenous beliefs, such as those in Africa
- Give thanks to God for the great blessing of sight
- Pray for those who risk their lives for our security

## Meditation

Be sensitive, my spirit, like the Lord who listens;  
For He seeks to bless all those in need:

He hears the cry of the lonely;  
and feels the anguish of the bereaved;

He bears the anger of a wounded soul;  
and knows the damage that words can do;

He attends to the cry of the downcast;  
and takes heed of those who search;

He understands the pain of the unloved;  
and takes notice of all who cry out to Him;

Be sensitive, my spirit, and let the Lord show you  
How to respond in love to those in need.

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## Bible passage - Philippians 1:19-26

Yes, I will rejoice, <sup>19</sup> for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will all result in my deliverance. <sup>20</sup> It is my eager hope and expectation that I will not be put to shame in any way, and I have complete confidence, now as always, that Christ will be honoured in my body, whether through life or through death. <sup>21</sup> For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.

<sup>22</sup> If, however, I remain alive 'in the flesh' this means that there is fruitful work for me to do; so what should I choose? I do not know, <sup>23</sup> and I am torn between the two! For I have a longing to leave and be with Christ, and that is my strongest desire <sup>24</sup> yet for me to remain alive is more important for you.

<sup>25</sup> I am persuaded of this; I know I must remain and stand with you to encourage you in all your progress, joy and faith; <sup>26</sup> then, when I come to see you again, you will have good reason to boast about Jesus Christ because of what has happened to me!

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# Bible Study

## Review

***Paul agonises over what God has in store for him. He is in prison and the future looks uncertain. Nevertheless, he is content to place himself in the hands of the God who has saved him.***

This is an extraordinary reading, and in verse 21, it contains some powerful and memorable words which have been quoted for centuries as an example of Paul's great spiritual experience of Christ; *'for me to live is Christ, to die is gain'* (1:21). These words stand towering over the whole passage, and they sum up everything Paul says here in these verses. Some people may be shocked by this phrase because it seems that in saying this, Paul accepts death as the ultimate goal of his spiritual experience of God; but we must read everything he says if we want to understand this remarkable phrase. It is deeply rooted in both the reasons why he wrote his letter and the circumstance of its writing.

The passage contains Paul's thoughts on the dilemmas facing him whilst in prison, and awaiting his future. Despite the obvious confidence of his writing here in this letter, Paul was nevertheless deeply affected by the sentence of death which hung over him. In the previous passage we read about Paul's imprisonment, and how he had used this for the greater glory of God by proclaiming the Gospel even to the Imperial Guard who were looking after him and responsible for his transport to Rome. Here in this passage, however, Paul seems far more thoughtful, for to face the Emperor in Rome on a charge of subversion was a daunting prospect. He believed that this would lead either to his vindication and the official acceptance of the Christian faith within the Roman Empire, or it would lead to his death. The gravity of this prospect seems to lie over everything he says here.

On the one hand, Paul expresses complete confidence in the prayers of his supporters for his release and vindication (1:19). However, he also accepts that anything might happen to him, and he encourages his readers that the Lord's will would indeed be done whatever the outcome of his trial; he says, *'Christ will be honoured in my body, whether through life or through death'* (1:20).

He then reflects on the possibilities of what might happen once taken to Rome. If he was to be martyred by the Roman authorities, then he would have the privilege of going to be with Christ (1:21), but on the other hand, if he was to be acquitted, this would mean that there was a great deal more *'fruitful work'* for him to do in the service of God and His Kingdom (1:22). Whatever translation you read, the Greek language of the next few verses in the New Testament is completely irregular, and this seems to indicate that Paul was utterly uncertain about what was best for him, and what God had in store for him. He says *'I am torn between the two'* (1:23).

As the passage continues, Paul speaks to those who would receive his letter at Philippi, and assures them of his affection for them and his desire to be with them; he says, *'yet for me to remain alive is more important for you'* (1:24). Paul had a powerful urge to encourage his dear friends, and although he feared for what would happen in Rome, he also knew that the church at Philippi would not understand everything he was going through. So the last two verses of the passage tell the Philippians of his desire to visit the church and enjoy fellowship with them again.

Most of us never face the same kind of acute situations faced by Paul, but most of us have some reason to contemplate the possibility of our death at some point in our lives. What Paul said is therefore a profound challenge to any of us. On the one hand, can we say that our love for Christ is so strong that we long to be with Him in eternity? On the other hand, do we embrace life as God requires of us, and look forward to a life that is lived in His service? Of course, we never have a choice, for we can never choose to live or die. However, this passage challenges us strongly. Are we strong enough to accept, with Paul, that whatever happens to us in life or death is within His will?

### Going Deeper

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Answered or unanswered prayer?
- Acceptance of life or death
- Standing with the church and boasting about Jesus Christ!

### Going Deeper

There was a deep love within Paul for the people of the churches he founded, and this love showed itself in his concern to pray for them, write positively of their fellowship and offer them encouragement (1:1-11). He also attacked those he saw as preaching any Gospel other than that which the Lord had spoken through him to found the church, as we have already seen in the preceding verses (1:12-18). Now he turned to the Philippian church in his own hour of need, expressing his own personal concerns, at a time when he clearly faced death.

A close reading of this passage shows that Paul responded to this threat in a way that was entirely natural, yet as he wrote, he expressed faith of a remarkable kind. In the rest of the Bible study, we shall look at the way Paul's faith rose above the natural feelings a man might have while imprisoned. If we are right about these circumstances, then the charge against him was that he was preaching and encouraging religious rebellion within the Roman state (see Acts 23:12ff, 24:2-8), which could be interpreted as a direct threat against the authority of the Emperor, who was regarded by many as a god. The Jews and their beliefs were officially tolerated within the Roman Empire, providing there was no hint of subversion, and Paul's preaching was certainly regarded by some as crossing the boundaries of what was acceptable and therefore breaking the 'Pax Romana'; the internal peace of the Empire.

### ***Answered or unanswered prayer?***

Paul began by expressing confidence that the prayers of his supporters together with the '*help of the Spirit of Jesus*' (1:19) would be sufficient for his acquittal on all charges, or as he put it, his '*deliverance*'. This was his starting point, and the same starting point that many of us have with other issues of prayerful concern we face; surely our prayers and the help of the Spirit will bring deliverance. Few of us have not been here before, praying for the Lord to heal someone from a disease, for example, or help them in a critical situation. Sometimes the person or circumstance we pray for is indeed resolved as we have prayed, and for that we give thanks to God. Sometimes our prayers remain un-answered, it seems, for the healing or resolution we have prayed for does not come. In the case of Paul's final imprisonment, we must recall that he was not released, and though his final years were made as comfortable as possible whilst in captivity (see Acts 28:16ff), the only church documents we have about Paul's final days (which are not in the Bible) indicate that he died the death of a martyr.

You could say that the prayers said for Paul's release were not answered, not unlike the situations we face when people wonder why their prayers remain un-answered. Remarkably however, Paul provides us with an answer to this dilemma. Immediately after being positive about the prayers of the saints and the power of the Holy Spirit (v19), he declares the hope that nothing that happens to him will fail to honour Christ (v20) and adds most importantly '*whether through life or through death*'. This is not simply a way of accounting for all situations so that no one will feel let down or have their prayers unanswered; the faith Paul talks of rises above all human circumstances and is able to be at peace with the prospect that God can achieve His will whatever happens. This is quite different. Paul's whole life was the proclamation of the Gospel and the evangelism of the Gentile world (2 Cor 4:1ff) and in this verse he was able to accept that God would continue that work whether he lived or died.

What a challenge this presented to those from the church at Philippi who were praying for Paul's release so that he might sort out the church's problems and continue evangelism there! He was asking them to accept that the Lord might require they do this for themselves, for Paul's sure hope was that if he died, this work of the Lord would continue unabated!

### ***Acceptance of life and death***

Having broken free from the constraints of the normal human response to trial and tragedy, Paul was now at liberty in the Spirit to say the famous words '*for me to live is Christ, to die is gain*' (1:21). The first two words, '*for me*', are emphatic. This was a personal statement of faith by Paul, but we cannot escape the feeling that he commended these sentiments to his readers. For Paul, life was completely dominated by the Gospel, and therefore full of Christ; full of obedience, acts of faith, preaching, following the Lord and a whole array of activities of ministry that made up his life as an apostle (see also 2 Cor 6:4ff).

Some feel that Paul's words, however, convey a feeling of tiredness, as if the apostle had done enough of these things and wanted to pass away and be with the Lord. His words '*to die is gain*' may sound at first reading as if Paul had a death wish after the stresses and strains of ministry! But there is nothing in Paul's writings elsewhere that would support such an interpretation and the impending trial at Rome with its potential outcome explains perfectly well why Paul might speak in this way. Really, this was Paul's willing acceptance that his own final destiny would always be with his Lord, and that neither he nor his supporters could ultimately escape this fact. Everything Paul went on to say in Philippians emphasised that he was willing to place himself completely at the Lord's disposal for whatever might happen. His love of life and the ministry of preaching the Gospel was no greater than his desire to be with his Lord in glory, and neither was his desire to be with the Lord an expression of tiredness or weakness in the face of the problems of ministry at Philippi or anywhere else.

## ***Standing with the Church and boasting about Jesus Christ!***

None of this was a matter of preference, and choices were impossible, which is the only conclusion we can draw from the strangely confused Greek words that make up verses 22, 23 and 24. Yet this makes sense; Paul was genuinely struggling to say what he preferred as an outcome from his trial; release would give him more time to work for the Lord, and martyrdom would take him to be with his Lord. As far as Paul was concerned, both could lead to the greater glory of God. Few people have ever been in a position to speak in this way, and it is hard for us to imagine what Paul felt; but Paul's ability to see the possibilities of the Lord's greater purposes even through his death is a unique expression of faith in the New Testament. Paul does not call for people to follow his martyrdom, what he said was an acknowledgement that even death was not beyond the vital purposes of God. It was not a death that Paul sought, but if it came, he would accept it as God's will.

It is perhaps natural that Paul should end this passage by talking about standing with the Philippian church in *'all your progress, joy and faith'* and speaking of going to see the church again (1:25,26). In so doing, Paul turned away from the dilemma and spoke to his church of the importance of the Gospel work in their midst. What could be more important? It is unlikely that Paul saw the people of the Philippian church again, if our understanding of his circumstances is correct, and we are left to wonder what impact this would have had on his friends who prayed for his safety and release from imprisonment. We may also wonder whether after reading these words, his supporters might have changed the emphases of their prayers and prayed more fully for the work of the Gospel and Paul's place within it. They would surely have continued to pray that the mercy of God be shown to their beloved apostle who faced the uncertainties of life or death. If, in the midst of all that was happening, they were able to 'boast of the Lord' and face the consequences of sorting out the church without Paul but inspired by his message, then the Lord's will was truly done, even though Paul was in reality, on his way to his death.

## Application

This scripture faces us with the ultimate challenge of discipleship. Does our faith allow us to say verse 21 with Paul? There are other ways of interpreting this verse, which you can find in other commentaries and analyses of this famous text, but the challenge will not go away. Are our lives so full of the work of the Gospel that we can say 'for me to live is Christ', and can we say in the same breath that we are so committed to the ultimate will of the Lord that 'to die is gain'? We can only say this if we understand, of course, that the second half of this sentence is not a death wish or an invitation to martyrdom, but a pragmatic assessment of a life lived for the Lord through which he is in sovereign control, even of our life and death.

It may be that there were those who read these words when they were first written, and found them too much; there are certainly those who find them too difficult today. Their difficulty is focussed around two issues. Firstly the absolute commitment to God required of any who say these words for themselves, and secondly, the fact that this text is about life and death; indeed, the Gospel in this passage, is a matter of life and death. One way to deal with them is to say that they were part of what Paul said in his particular circumstances, but they have little connection with our lives today. The centrality of the Gospel and its radical demands upon all is however, a feature of the whole New Testament, and Philippians 1:21 gives focus to that message. You could say that this brief comment is one of scriptures most challenging texts.

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## Discipleship

### ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. Discuss in your group what Philippians 1:21 means to you.
2. What general impression do you gain from this passage of scripture. Is Paul happy or sad as he speaks, or does he portray any other emotions?
3. Put yourselves in the position of the Philippian church, and try to imagine what these words might mean to you.

### ***Personal comments by author***

*I have to ask myself as well as you to face the challenge of this passage of scripture. 'For me to live is Christ, to die is gain' is brief enough to memorise, and it is a phrase which has never left me since I heard it. It represents to me the paradox of life and the ultimate Christian call, to accept from the hand of God*

whatever He has for me. The Bible study notes are fairly forthright about the meaning of the text, but it may well be that if you follow them, you will be led to a new place in your discipleship of the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *Try repeating the phrase 'for me to live is Christ, to die is gain' regularly over a period of time, for example, a day or a week, in order to see how you respond to it. Then spend some time prayerfully considering what this might be saying to you.*
  - *What important work would the Lord have you do in the coming days? After prayer, write down a list. Consider this list carefully and what it will cost.*
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### **Final Prayer**

What blessing can we give to You, O Lord, who is all-powerful and has done everything for us? Nevertheless, open our hearts to respond to You and all Your works with such love, care and appreciation, that we may truly be a blessing to You, as true and faithful disciples. We bless You, Lord, forever; AMEN

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