

TO LIVE OR TO DIE

Generally, most unbelievers cling to life as though this life were all they will ever have. Some, of course, find this life so unfulfilling that they opt out in despair. However, that does not solve anything, because it means facing an implacable Judge, and being consigned to eternal punishment. That is why it is mistaken to say that when an unbeliever has died after suffering great pain for a long time, he has had a merciful release. For the believer, the situation is quite different. The real death has already taken place. St Paul wrote, "It is also no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. The life that I now live in my body I live by faith in the Son of God, who has loved me and given Himself for me" Gal 2:20. He wrote, "You have died, and your lives have been hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your Life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory" (Col 3:3-4). No matter what happens, Christians know that, in Christ, they have true life.

In some respects, Jesus went even further, summing up this life in terms of profit and loss. "If anyone wants to follow Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow Me! For whoever wants to save his life will lose it; but whoever will lose his life for My sake and for the sake of the Gospel will save it. For what good does it do a person to gain the whole world and yet lose his own soul?" (Mk 8:34-36). It follows that the person who has abandoned attempts, to cling to what this life has to offer and clings to Christ, who went the way of the cross, is the one who truly lives.

A Christian can readily speak like this, because hope and assurance flow from faith in Jesus' redemption from sin and death. The last letter that we have from Paul was his second one to Timothy. He was in prison again, and this time expecting to give his life. Yet he wrote, "The Lord will deliver me from every evil deed, and will save me for His heavenly kingdom. To Him be glory for ever! Amen!" (2 Tm 4:18).

Paul wrote to the Philippians from prison, even though on that earlier occasion he expected that he would be released, "To me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I live on in my body, that will mean results from my labour. Yet I do not know which I should choose. I am hard pressed between the two. I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far. However, it is more necessary for you that I should remain in my body" (Plp 1:22-24). He unselfishly weighed up his situation. If he was released from prison and continued his ministry as an apostle, that meant that he was being useful to other people in the most valuable way he could, and continuing in this life meant continuing to live with Christ and for Christ. He knew that he would be spared, and also know that the members of the congregations still need him. Continuing to live in this world meant constant enjoyment of Christ himself. For every Christian, Christ is the closest Friend, Confidante, and Helper. On the other hand, since the glory to come far outweighs what this present life has to offer, departing and being with Christ in glory was far better. To die is nothing but gain, because when the believer departs, he real self, his soul, leaves the body to be present with the Lord until the time of the resurrection of the body at the last day. There is nothing between death and the realisation of the immediate presence of Christ. Each had its advantages. Since he knew Christ as His Lord and Saviour, it did not really matter whether he lived or died. He was torn between the two.

Really, Christians have no say in whether their lives are taken or are prolonged. God is the only One who determines when the cord of this present life is snapped. He knows it in advance, and there is nothing that anyone can do to prolong his life by even a little. Because God's commandment forbids taking human life, we try to preserve it by medical means that are available, but that does not mean extreme and extraordinary measures, like prolonged life support when it alone can keep a person breathing artificially. Paul could find a reason for joy in each of the alternatives that he was weighing up. To die is sheer gain, as for the believer there is nothing between death and the realisation of the immediate presence of Christ.

Paul wrote, to the Romans, "If we live, we live to the Lord; and, if we die, we die to the Lord. Therefore, whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord" (Rm 14:8).

In Second Corinthians Paul faced the same situation from a different perspective. Since death is unnatural, not having been part of God's original design before the fall into sin, it is not wrong for Christian people to express a preference that the Lord might return before they face death. Putting off the body is similar to being unclothed. Paul used the comparison of taking down a tent, and putting off clothes, and putting on others. A tent is only a temporary residence, and clothes are worn for only a time. He compared the present tent to a permanent house when he thought of his strong, immortal resurrection body. He also thought of his body as it would be changed and glorified when Christ returned as new and glorious garment. "If the earthly tent in which we live is demolished, we have a house from God, not made by human hands, eternal in heaven. To be sure, in this dwelling we groan, longing to be clothed with our dwelling that is from heaven, since, after we have put it on, we shall not be found naked. For we, who are in this tent, groan as we are weighed down, because we do not wish to be unclothed, but to put on the additional clothing, in order that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. God is the One who has prepared us for this very thing, and who has given us the Spirit as the guarantee. Therefore we are always confident. We know that, while we are at home in this body, we are in a strange land, away from the Lord. For we live by faith, not by sight. We are confident, and even prefer to move out of the body and to be at home with the Lord. Now, whether we are at home or in a strange land, we aspire to please Him" (2 Cor 5:1-9). Here again, he was confident whether he remained in his present mortal body or went to be in his permanent home with the Lord.

In Philippians 1:23 Paul used a double comparative for departing and being with Christ, literally, "For by far more better." That preference far exceeded remaining with Christ in this present life. It was beyond all comparison.

That showed that he did not simply think of a person who has died as in some kind of stunned stupor, or as if his soul would die with his body only to be brought back to life with his body when Christ returned. Jesus had affirmed that God is the God of the living. Since He was the God of Abraham, Abraham was alive. "For to Him all are alive" (Lk 20:38). In the Gospel according to John Jesus spoke of eternal life as a present possession for the believer, so that, when he or she dies, there is a passing from life to more abundant life (Jn 5:24; 11:25-26). The statement of the Psalmist, "In Your presence there is fullness of joy. At Your right hand there are pleasures for ever" (Ps 16:11) applies also to the soul of the departed believer even before the general resurrection. Paul's statement also expressed the tension that is present for every believer. Christ may return at any moment, and although he thought that Christ would return soon, he still reckoned it as very likely that he might die before that joyous hour.

To die is better than to remain in this present life. To be with Christ is far, far better. That is Christians' sure hope. They have received "we have received a kingdom that cannot be shaken" (Hb 12:28). They say, with the psalmist, "As for me, I shall see Your face in righteousness. When I awake, let me be satisfied with Your manifestation!" (Ps 17:15).