

“To Depart, And To Be With Christ”

Comments On Philippians 1:20-25

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Philippians 1:23 is often quoted by opponents of “soul sleep” as if it were some kind of proof that the Apostle Paul believed that his own death would immediately be followed by a disembodied “life” in Heaven with Christ. In my opinion, the verse teaches no such thing.

Three verses earlier (in Philippians 1:20), Paul mentions two “options” that were facing him as possible outcomes of his impending trial by Nero Caesar: 1) “life,” or 2) “death.” In the very next verse (Philippians 1:21), he clearly states that both of those options are equally appealing to him: “to live is Christ” (that’s good!); “to die is gain” (that’s good too!).

Philippians 1:22 elaborates on why option #1 is good (“to go on living ... will mean fruitful labor”), then concludes with the searching question, “What shall I choose?” – and immediately answers it with the emphatic statement, “I do not know!” Here I pause to ask, “If Paul emphatically did not know (in verse 22) whether he preferred to live or to die, how can anyone think that a moment later (in verse 23) he is saying he prefers to die?”

Philippians 1:23 begins with a restatement of the essence of Philippians 1:22: “I am torn between the two” – that is, “I am undecided whether life, or death, is the preferable option.” At this point, I would like to suggest that the rest of verse 23 should be placed in parentheses, and the line of reasoning resumed at the beginning of verse 24.

Philippians 1:24 proposes a solution to the dilemma: while the two choices (“life” and “death”) are equally attractive to Paul as an individual, he reckons that he would be more valuable to his readers if he were to live rather than die. This thought continues into verse 25 (where he concludes that he is “certain” he will live on to continue his ministry). What, then, does the parenthetical statement (“having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ; which is far better”) mean?

Last things first, in this case: “to depart, and to be with Christ” is “far better” than what? Is it “far better” than continuing to live? No, he has just finished saying that death is no better than life. Is it, then, “far better” than dying? No, he has also just finished saying that life is no better than death. The only possible explanation is that he means that “to depart, and to be with Christ” is “far better” than either living or dying! What is it that he says would be “far better” than either of the two options? Remember, “to depart, and to be with Christ” cannot possibly mean the same thing as “to die” since the latter is one of the two options it is said to be “far better” than!

Literally, the Greek text can be translated as reading, “having a desire for the returning, and the being with Christ.” The one thing Paul says would be better than either “life” or “death” would be the immediate returning of Christ, which would unite him with his Savior forever. Failing that, he says, only life in ministry would be preferable to a martyr’s death.

So the passage does not teach against “soul sleep” at all. It does not teach that dying is “far better” than living. It does not teach that “departing” from this life means immediately “being with Christ” in Heaven. It teaches that neither life nor death are important enough to distract the Christian from his real and ultimate goal, which is to experience eternal life, with Christ, in His Kingdom, when He comes.

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