

Pressed Between Two “Goods”

During family road trips when I was a teen, it was common for my family to stop for lunch at a well-known fast food establishment. It was inexpensive, quick, convenient, and predictable. Their locations could be found everywhere, their signs were easily identifiable, and their menu never changed. Upon our arrival, the whole family would bounce out of the Volkswagen Vanagon, stroll into the establishment, and line up at the front counter, glancing at the menu while determining who would order first. One by one each of us made our meal and beverage selection, sometimes choosing something familiar, other times choosing something new. Without fail, my younger sister would be the last one to order. Every single time she would agonize over which selection to pick, the stress and frustration written on her face. Yet, every single time, she would choose the exact same value meal. Tried and true: chicken nuggets, french fries, and a Coke. It was as dependable as the indigestion that was to follow.

Making choices can be hard sometimes. Especially if the choice is between many different options or between two extremely good ones. The latter is the scenario Paul is facing. In Philippians 1:20-23, the apostle speaks of living for Christ or dying to meet Him. His words are rich with hope and courage as he shares his expectation of honoring Christ in life or in death. Both are means through which Paul can represent Jesus well. Here is how he describes this difficult choice:

“... it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. **For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.** If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. **I am hard pressed between the two.** My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.”

On one hand, the apostle recognizes that valuing life and living with purpose honors Christ. It allows him to remain fruitful, continuing to invest in gospel work. On the other hand, Paul notes that dying allows him to reach his goal and gain his greatest treasure - Christ. What a difficult choice! It is no wonder that he claims to be “hard pressed between the two” (Phil 1:23).

Paul reveals his final choice in the verses that follow (Phil 1:24-26), but suffice it to say that his decision is founded on a deep understanding that everything he is, thinks, feels, and does is based on being a resident of two worlds. In this current world in which he momentarily resides, “to live is Christ” (v. 21a). In the world to

come in which he is securely seated in heavenly places, “to die is gain” (v. 21b; Eph 2:4-6). Putting this into a proper perspective helps to appreciate that Paul’s heavenly citizenship determines and directs his earthly one. His earthly life has enormous value, because his heavenly citizenship places him under Jesus’ authoritative direction and rich blessing.

Paul describes this dynamic tension on another occasion. His second letter to Timothy is his final earthly communication preserved for us. Anticipating his execution in a Roman prison, Paul passes the ministry mantle on to his beloved protégé. He reminds his spiritual child, Timothy, that his heavenly allegiance determines his earthly effectiveness and illustrates this by using three relatable roles: a soldier’s, an athlete’s, and a farmer’s (2 Tim 2:3-6). Each of these roles aligns themselves under an authority that determines their aspirations and rewards their faithful achievements. A soldier obeys the King’s orders to fulfill his objective, an athlete competes according to the Judge’s rules so he may gain a prize, and a farmer works hard to enjoy the Creator’s fruitful harvest. **A Christian’s earthly life is filled with tremendous responsibility and anticipates heavenly gain in and from Jesus, who is King, Judge, and Creator.**

If you are a follower of Jesus, you too should feel the tension of being a resident of two very certain realities. And while being with Christ is far better than anything this world has to offer, you are placed here for a fruitful purpose. Let’s just make sure we don’t get the two confused. Like Paul, we are here to make Christ known and know Him more deeply. We have much to learn and much to do, counting “everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus [our] Lord” (Phil 3:8).

2 Timothy 2:1-6 (ESV) - *“You then, my child, be strengthened by the grace that is in Christ Jesus, and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also. **Share in suffering as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier gets entangled in civilian pursuits, since his aim is to please the one who enlisted him.** An athlete is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules. It is the hard-working farmer who ought to have the first share of the crops.”*