

Stay or Go?: Lessons from Paul's Dilemma

Phil. 1:12-26

Main Point: *When facing uncertainty, believers should seek to follow Paul's example by asking how they can best exalt the Lord Jesus and advance the gospel in the lives of others.*

Introduction:

I had a professor in college who once said the most difficult decisions in the Christian life are not between the good and the bad/sinful, but between the "good" and the "good". What do you do when you have two equally "good" options before you, neither of which are inherently sinful, and both of which could be done in service to God. The example my professor gave, which was tailored to us as college students at that time, was this: do I serve as a counselor at a Christian summer camp, where I could have a great spiritual impact on young people, or do I take a job back in my hometown for the summer, where I might have a spiritual impact on my peers and co-workers who don't know Christ?

Both are good options, and both come from good motives. Which direction is the one that God prefers? When I was trying to choose which seminary to go to, it was an agonizing decision – I had an opportunity to go to Chicago, or Philadelphia or Australia. All great schools, and all of which would provide great opportunities for growth and future ministry – which is the one God wants for me? Now these kinds of dilemmas between the "good and the good" happen in churches too. With only so much time and so many resources, which ministries should a local church focus on? Local missions, global missions, biblical counseling, mens/womens ministries, youth ministry, outreach to the homeless? All good things – all biblical, all important to the Kingdom of God. But which do you decide?

Friends, these are the true dilemmas of the Christian life. Now, for some Christians, making these kinds of decisions and seeking the Lord's direction can *paralyzing*. Rather joyfully walking with Lord and trusting Him along the way, I've encountered Christians who find discovering the will of God to be agonizing, and becomes a burden and source of stress and anxiety. For churches, choosing between the "good and the good" can become *polarizing* – where well-meaning, well-intended Christians leaders disagree on what the "good" is and succumb to someone's personal preferences or agendas.

Friends, as we prepare for a new season of ministry here at EBC – with some significant changes coming at the end of the month (for both you as a congregation, and for our staff, and for me too), and a lot of uncertainty about our future, I want to direct our attention to someone in the NT who encountered his own personal dilemma between the "good and the good", and in the midst of great uncertainty, discovered what God's best was for his life.

This individual none other than the Apostle Paul. And what I hope to show you from Paul's life is the spiritual framework and priorities that were operative in his life, and out of which he sought to understand the will of God for his life and decisions. I want to invite you to open your bibles to Philippians 1.

Introduction to Philippians:

For those of you not familiar with the book of Philippians, it is one of what is known as Paul's prison letters (along with Ephesians and Colossians). Most likely written during his imprisonment in Rome which you can read about at the end of Acts 28, it is a thank-you letter to this church that sent him some support. This Philippian church was planted by Paul during his second missionary journey as recorded in Acts 16. They probably figured he was lonely, discouraged and in need. However, upon receiving this letter, they discovered that Paul's emotional state was anything but despondent. In fact, there is more references to joy and thanksgiving in Philippians than any other letter in the Pauline corpus.

Now, we need to ask: how is this even possible? With all the uncertainty surrounding him in prison, how was it that Paul maintained his sense of joy in the Lord? Think about it: throughout the book of Acts, we find Paul having all kinds of fruit coming from his ministry – churches are being planted and people converted. Yes, there is intense persecution, but still through it all God is being glorified and people are meeting the Lord Jesus! And then – poof – it all comes to a startling halt with Paul’s arrest and imprisonment. No missionary work, no new churches, no discipling new converts. If anything, you would think that Paul would be frustrated or even angry with God! But that’s not what we find in Philippians.

Lets begin in verse 12, and see Paul understands God’s purposes for his imprisonment. (Philippians 1:12-18a) So Paul says, that this seemingly bad thing in his life – prison – has turned into a new opportunity for what he calls the progress or the “advance of the gospel.” First, prison guards are coming to Christ. People who otherwise would not hear the gospel are hearing it from Paul! Second, both his friends and even his enemies are preaching the gospel more earnestly now. And in all of this, Paul rejoices. Why? Here is the first point I want to make. Paul’s life and ministry was governed by one single priority: the advancement of the gospel in the lives of others.

Paul’s Singular Priority: the advancement/progress of the gospel in the lives of others

If its good for the gospel; if its good for the witness of Christ; if its good for the spiritual growth of others; then its good for Paul. Even if it means personal suffering, loss, and inconvenience. If people are being reached for Christ and growing in Christ, then Paul is happy and content.

Now, the next question I want to ask is: where did Paul get this kind of perspective on life and circumstances? How does one become a person who prioritizes the gospel the way Paul does? Well, he tells us in the next few verses. Notice what he says beginning in v. 18... First, Paul says that he anticipates he will be released from prison, and not be executed by the Roman government (historically, this is what actually happened. Paul doesn’t die until a few years later). Despite uncertainty, he was fairly confident that God wasn’t quite done with him yet.

But even if he’s wrong, and execution were to come, Paul says he would be okay with that because whether he lives or dies, all that matters to him is that Christ be exalted in his body, whether living or dying. For, he says in v. 21, living, for him, means Christ! And dying means gain! By saying that “living” means Christ, implies that Christ is for him the goal, object, and focus of his life. Christ is the all-consuming passion of his life! How did Paul come to this realization about the supremacy of Jesus? Remember: for an ancient Israelite and faithful Jews of Second Temple Judaism, the goal of life was to be in Yahweh’s presence. For all the problems Israel has in the Old Testament and subsequent history, the goal remains the same: life in Yahweh’s presence.

Listen to the language from the Psalter, the prayerbook of the Old Testament: Psalm 16:11; Psalm 42:1-2; Psalm 63:1-8; Psalm 84:1-4

Psalm 16:11

¹¹ You make known to me the path of life;
in your presence there is fullness of joy;
at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.

Psalm 42:1-2

¹ As a deer pants for flowing streams,
so pants my soul for you, O God.

² My soul thirsts for God,
for the living God.

When shall I come and appear before God?

Psalm 63:1-8

¹ O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you;
my soul thirsts for you;
my flesh faints for you,
as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.
² So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary,
beholding your power and glory.
³ Because your steadfast love is better than life,
my lips will praise you.
⁴ So I will bless you as long as I live;
in your name I will lift up my hands.

⁵ My soul will be satisfied as with fat and rich food,
and my mouth will praise you with joyful lips,
⁶ when I remember you upon my bed,
and meditate on you in the watches of the night;
⁷ for you have been my help,
and in the shadow of your wings I will sing for joy.
⁸ My soul clings to you;
your right hand upholds me.

Psalm 73:25

²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you?
And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you.

Psalm 84

How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD of hosts!

² My soul longs, yes, faints
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and flesh sing for joy
to the living God.

³ Even the sparrow finds a home,
and the swallow a nest for herself,
where she may lay her young,
at your altars, O LORD of hosts,
my King and my God.

⁴ Blessed are those who dwell in your house,
ever singing your praise!

For the pious, faithful, Israelite – the language of the Psalter was to inform their heart, mind, and affections concerning God. And the presence of God was something to be desired, cherished, and treasured above all else. But for Paul, this God now has a name and a face: Jesus Christ! To put it another way, the God of Israel – the God described in these Psalms – has been revealed in the Lord Jesus. With Christ and in His presence, Paul

finds what his heart longed for: the presence of the living God! So, Paul's singular priority of advancing the gospel in the lives of others flows out of his singular passion for the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul's Singular Passion: the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ

Now, notice in the next few verses that Paul's PASSION for the presence of Jesus and his PRIORITY for the advancement of the gospel in the lives of others creates an internal conflict within him, where he feels like he is now forced to choose between the "good" and the "good." Phil. 1:22-23... Here Paul says if he is executed, then his ultimate goal will be reached: to be with Christ forever. He says something very similar later in chapter 3. Phil. 3:10... For Paul, death leads to resurrection, and resurrection means being in the presence of Christ forever. In Paul's mind, being with Christ – personally – is the very pinnacle of human experience. In fact, this is precisely what it means to be human. To be fully human (in Paul's mind) is to be in communion with God, the creator and Father; to be in communion with God entails being in communion with the Son, in whose image we are being conformed and in whose life, we find life.

And yet Paul's greatest priority is the advancement/progress of the gospel in the lives of others – which of course requires him to be alive still in this life, on this side of the new creation and the resurrection! You see Paul wants other people to have what he has: Christ. And the only way for that to happen is for the gospel to be proclaimed, for converts to be made, disciplined, and pastored. And so, Paul is a man conflicted between "the good and the good": On the one hand, he wants to depart and be with Christ – this is much better (my translation of the Greek emphatic here). Yet on the other hand, Paul knows that his ministry is still needful. The churches he has planted are still fledgling, under persecution, and in need of ongoing teaching/shepherding. Also, there still many places around the Roman Empire where the gospel has not yet been heard? Who will reach them? Well, Paul wants to be the one to bring them the gospel.

So how does Paul resolve this apparent dilemma between the "good and the good" and find God's best? Let's find out: Phil. 1:24-26... In effect, Paul says to the Philippians, "your faith will be stronger, your joy in Jesus will be deeper, your trust in God will be greater if I get released and continue ministering to you." And so, the dilemma becomes resolved for Paul. Because his passion is for the presence of the Lord Jesus, then the best way for him to express this passion is to exalt Jesus so that others may exalt him too. You see? He knows his time will eventually come to be with Jesus forever. He knows he will eventually die – probably sooner than later, given the amount of persecution his missionary work was evoking.

But in the meantime, his priority would remain advancing the gospel in the lives of others. The best thing, for the sake of the gospel and the Kingdom of God, was for him to continue living, to continue serving, to continue preaching, shepherding, discipling, and introducing others to the one whom he loved so dearly. So, Paul says confident of this, that God's purposes for him will be to be released and continue his ministry, he says he will continue on for the sake of their joy and progress in the faith! For Paul, the way out of dilemmas between the good and the good is to find God's best – and God's best is almost always about the spiritual impact our lives can have on other people. In doing so, Paul is acting Christ-like, for this is precisely what we see the Lord Jesus Himself doing in his own ministry.

As one writer states it: **"To say 'living is Christ' is to say that for him 'life means Christ'. Life is summed up in Christ. Life is filled up with, occupied with Christ, in the sense that everything Paul does – loves, trusts, hopes, obeys, preaches, follows, and so on – is inspired by Christ and is done for Christ. Christ and Christ alone gives inspiration, direction, meaning and purpose to existence."** (G. Hawthorne, Philippians, 45).

So, I could put Paul's philosophy into words, I would say: **Paul's Life/Ministry Philosophy: "Exalt Christ as the all-sufficient, all-satisfying treasure of life by advancing the gospel in the lives of others."**

Main Point: *When facing uncertainty, believer's should follow Paul's example by asking themselves how they can best exalt the Lord Jesus and advance the gospel in the lives of others.* Exalt Christ/Advance the gospel – this is the twin-matrix Paul uses for decision making.

Conclusion:

So what does this mean for us? In closing, friends, I want to give you two words of encouragement:

First - As you are preparing to send kids back to school, or start up HS again, you're getting back into the fall routine, establishing schedules, life will get busy again, and you will have to decide between "the good and the good." And as you do so, let's follow Paul's example by asking: what is the best that God would have us do, for the sake of the gospel. What is going to best serve the interests of Jesus Christ, and the spiritual growth not just of ourselves, but of others. How can we leverage the opportunities before us for helping others come to know Jesus more clearly and more fully.

When I was in Kansas (Darren/Bethany story) ... But you know what? I was proud of them – these are the kinds of disciples I wanted to make. They weren't asking: "Where do I get fed? Who has the best programs for my kids?" Those are okay to questions to ask, but they should be secondary: first and foremost, our questions should be: where are the needs of the gospel most urgent? Where is Christ not known, and not being exalted? How can I be of use by God to advance the gospel in the lives of people in that place? In your life, your social circles, what doors of opportunity is God opening to you to advance the gospel in the lives of others? Where has He strategically placed you?

Second - We have seen our own pastor make this kind of decision. As most of you know, Pastor Stan will be transitioning to a half-time role with ELLS International and splitting time between EBC and ELLS. He's not doing it because he wants to leave EBC – he doesn't, he loves this church! But he sees the need – gospel urgency – in countries in the developing world where there is an explosion of church growth, but very few trained pastors and even fewer resources for training those pastors. So, for our own pastor, the dilemma between the "good and the good" has become, "How can I best advance the gospel in the lives of others?" Staying in his current role or – taking a huge risk, stepping out of his comfort zone, risk upsetting the apple cart here – and find ways to train the untrained, strengthen the global church, and continue to encourage us. I know his transition and this change brings up a lot of anxiety and uncertainty about our future as a church – but can we not also step back and rejoice in the fact that we have a pastor who is modelling for us what it means to put the gospel, and the call of Christ, ahead of his own comfort. What an example Stan's change is for us, and also what a challenge!

Friends, I don't have all the answers pertaining to our future – none of the elders do at this point. So, I am living in the uncertainty of the next year right along with you. But I believe, that if we together as a church, will seek to follow Paul's example – which, as I said earlier, is really Christ's example – and together discern what God's best might be for our lives and for this church, then I am quite sure the future of this church will remain blessed and secure. Again, God's "best" is most likely not going to be defined as "whatever makes us most comfortable", but rather God's best should mean for us: what will most exalt and please the Lord Jesus? What will most advance the gospel in the lives of others and in this community, especially for those who have not yet heard about the love and glory of the Lord Jesus?

Friends, let us ask the Spirit of God to make EBC a truly biblical church – not just in the sense that we treasure the bible as our highest authority – but that what we see in the bible becomes evident in our own lives. Let's pray that Paul's very clear and evident passions and priorities in Phil. 1 would also become our passion, and our priority. And let us pray that whatever the future holds for us, that in this building and in our hearts, the Lord Jesus Christ will always be treasured and exalted, and that because of this church's passion for Jesus, the gospel will continue to be advanced in our lives, and the lives of many both here in Silverton/Salem and throughout the world.