Paul wrote Philippians during his first imprisonment in Rome (cf. Phil. 1:7, 13, 14) around the year AD 62. At this point, he was not totally certain about what awaited him, although he hoped to visit the Philippians once more. He was not sure whether he would die at the hand of the Romans or be released and allowed to live. Most Protestant commentators use these verses to “prove” that Paul wanted to die so his immortal soul could go directly into the presence of Jesus.

In our last lesson (2 Cor. 5:1–10) Paul described three options. He could be absent from the Lord in the “tent,” be present with the Lord in the “building,” or be “unclothed.” In this lesson we will study Philippians 1:21–24, which is similar to 2 Corinthians 5:1–10. The options in both passages are three: to live here, to die, or to be translated. Explanatory notes have been added in brackets to show the link between the two passages:

“For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain. But if I live on in the flesh [in the tent], this will mean fruit [do what is pleasing] from my labor; yet what I shall choose [to live or to die] I cannot tell. For I am hard pressed between the two [living in the tent or dying], having a desire to depart and be with Christ [at translation], which is far better [than the other two options]. Nevertheless, to remain in the flesh [to live in the tent] is more needful for you” (emphasis supplied).
Read Philippians 1 from the translation of your choice. Write out Philippians 1:19–26. You may also rewrite the passage in your own words, or outline or mind-map the chapter.
PAUL’S UNSELFISH CHOICE

In the immediately preceding context of our passage (Phil. 1:15–18), the apostle rejoiced because the gospel was being preached. He realized that some were preaching out of selfish ambition and gain and others out of good will and love. Nevertheless, the important thing was “that in every way, whether from false motives or true,” Christ was being preached. And because of this he rejoiced (Phil. 1:18, NIV).

In verse 20, the apostle described his earnest expectation and hope: “I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death” (NIV). Then the apostle explained, “For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (v. 21). Paul realized that if he continued to live for Christ in the flesh he would be able to continue his labors and bear more fruit (v. 22). On the other hand, if he died, he would be able to rest from the burden of his labors (cf. Rev. 14:13) and in death, glorify God. About ten years earlier Paul had written to the Corinthians about his trials and labors:

Are they Hebrews? So am I. Are they Israelites? So am I. Are they the seed of Abraham? So am I. Are they ministers of Christ?—I speak as a fool—I am more: in labors more abundant, in stripes above measure, in prisons more frequently, in deaths often. From the Jews five times I received forty stripes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep; in journeys often, in perils of waters, in perils of robbers, in perils of my own countrymen, in perils of the Gentiles, in perils in the city, in perils in the wilderness, in perils in the sea, in perils among false brethren; in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness—besides the other things, what comes upon me daily: my deep concern for all the churches. (2 Cor. 11:22–28.)

Paul faced a dilemma. Would it be best to continue living in the flesh and bearing fruit to the glory of God or die and rest from his hard labors? Paul then considered a third option, translation without seeing death, which would be far better than the other two. He could be caught up in the clouds and taken to heaven with those who “are alive and remain” (1 Thess. 4:17).

Nevertheless, Paul was not selfish, and therefore he wrote that to remain in the flesh was more needful for the Philippians (Phil. 1:24). “And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith, that your rejoicing for me may be more abundant in Jesus Christ by my coming to you again” (vv. 25, 26).
WITH THE LORD—WHEN?

Sadly, most Christians read their personal opinions into the text as follows: “For I desire for my immortal soul to depart the body at the very moment of death to be in heaven with Christ.” Some Christians even use Near Death Experiences (NDEs) in an attempt to prove that the souls of the righteous depart the body and go to heaven at death. The Bible is clear about when God’s people will depart to be with the Lord, however. It is never at death but rather at translation. Elsewhere, the apostle Paul assu,res us that the dead in Christ do not go to heaven before the living:

For this we say to you by the word of the Lord, that we who are alive and remain until the coming of the Lord will by no means precede those who are asleep. For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of an archangel, and with the trumpet of God. And the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And thus we shall always be with the Lord. (1 Thess. 4:15–17, emphasis supplied.)

Paul’s view is clear. The righteous dead will go to the Father’s house at the second coming, not at death! Jesus promised His disciples that He was going to heaven to prepare a place for them and then He would come back to receive them unto Himself (John 14:1–3).

Let’s compare Paul’s three options in 2 Corinthians 5:1–10, 1 Thessalonians 4:15–17, and Philippians 1:21–24:

- 2 Corinthians 5: Alive, unclothed, translated (the better option)
- 1 Thessalonians 4: Alive, asleep, translated (the better option)
- Philippians 1: Alive, dead, translated (the better option)

Paul wrote 2 Timothy during his second imprisonment in Rome. At this point he was certain that a martyr’s death awaited him. He was equally certain, however, that because he had fought the good fight, finished the race, and kept the faith, Jesus would give him the crown of righteousness, not at death but at His appearing: “For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing” (2 Tim. 4:6–8).
inSpect

What relationship do the following verses have with the primary passage?

1 Corinthians 15:20–23
John 21:18, 19
Acts 7:59, 60
Revelation 14:13
Philippians 3:8–11

What other verses/promises come to mind in connection with Philippians 1?

Review your memorized verse from Philippians 1.
IN LIFE AND DEATH—GOD’S GLORY

In Philippians 3:20, 21 the apostle Paul explained *when* he expected to be with the Lord. We presently live on earth, but our citizenship is in heaven, and when Jesus returns, He will transform our lowly body into the likeness of His glorious body, and we will ever be with Him.

The key question, however, is this: What should we be doing while we live in our present body? The apostle Paul serves as a living example. As noted before, seven years earlier (in the time period between writing 2 Corinthians and Philippians, see 2 Cor. 11:22–29), he had described the severe trials and tribulations he had suffered during his missionary journeys. In the Corinthians passage he uses the word *labor* twice, and in the context of his writings it generally describes hard evangelistic toil. Paul magnified Christ in his life, and he knew that by living in the flesh, his labor of preaching would bear fruit (Phil. 1:22). His preaching had already produced fruit in the whole world (Col. 1:5, 6). In fact, “he wrote to his Philippian brethren that his imprisonment had resulted in the furtherance of the gospel” (Ellen G. White, *The Acts of the Apostles* [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1911], 480.)

Paul wanted to magnify Christ in his body “whether by life or by death” (Phil. 1:20, emphasis supplied). At this point in his life, Paul was exhausted, and he knew that death would be gain because it would give him a well-deserved rest from wearisome toil (cf. Rev. 14:13). In what sense would Paul’s death magnify Christ? The martyrdom of Peter illustrates how Christ can be magnified even in death. Shortly before His ascension, Christ told Peter that he would be crucified and his death would glorify God (John 21:18, 19). Peter’s faithfulness in death no doubt convicted many of those who were present at his crucifixion. Stephen’s martyrdom also reveals how God can be glorified even in death. Stephen’s serenity and peace impressed Saul and led to his conversion. Who knows how many millions will rise and thank Peter, Paul, and Stephen for glorifying Christ in death!

While we live in the flesh, we are to bear fruit to the glory of Christ. By our demeanor, our words, and our actions we can bring precious souls to the feet of Jesus. Furthermore, in the testing times ahead, many of God’s faithful children will bear witness at the cost of their lives (Rev. 20:4, 5). Jesus predicted that “they will lay their hands on you and persecute you, delivering you up to the synagogues and prisons. You will be brought before kings and rulers for My name’s sake. But it will turn out for you as an occasion *for testimony*. Therefore, settle it in your hearts not to meditate beforehand on what you will answer; for I will give you a mouth and wisdom which all your adversaries will not be able to contradict or resist. You will be betrayed even by parents and brothers, relatives and friends; and they will put some of you to death. And you will be hated by all for My name’s sake” (Luke 21:12–17, emphasis supplied).
Long afterward, when the disciple had been brought into sympathy with Christ through the fellowship of His sufferings, the Lord revealed to John what is the condition of nearness in His kingdom. “To him that overcometh,” Christ said, “will I grant to sit with Me in My throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with My Father in His throne.” “Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of My God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of My God, . . . and I will write upon him My new name.” Revelation 3:21, 12. So Paul the apostle wrote, “I am now ready to be offered, and the time of my departure is at hand. I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, shall give me at that day.” 2 Timothy 4:6-8.

The one who stands nearest to Christ will be he who on earth has drunk most deeply of the spirit of His self-sacrificing love,—love that “vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, . . . seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil” (1 Corinthians 13:4, 5),—love that moves the disciple, as it moved our Lord, to give all, to live and labor and sacrifice, even unto death, for the saving of humanity. This spirit was made manifest in the life of Paul. He said, “For to me to live is Christ;” for his life revealed Christ to men; “and to die is gain,”—gain to Christ; death itself would make manifest the power of His grace, and gather souls to Him. “Christ shall be magnified in my body,” he said, “whether it be by life or by death.” Philippians 1:21, 20. (Ellen G. White, The Desire of Ages [Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1898], 549.)

I have thought of Paul, the great minister who was sent to preach Christ and Him crucified to the Gentiles. On one occasion he was in a strait betwixt two. He was so weighed down with responsibilities that he knew not whether he would rather die or live, whether he would choose for the good of others to abide in the flesh or give up the conflict. “Brethren,” he writes, “I count not myself to have apprehended: but this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.” (Ellen G. White, The Southern Work [Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald Publishing Association, 1901], 89, 90.)
Share insights from this week's memory verse and Bible study as well as any discoveries, observations, and questions with your Sabbath School class (or Bible study group). Consider these discussion questions with the rest of the group.

What is the meaning of the word martyr? What did the apostle mean when he wrote that “to die is gain”? How is it possible for someone to glorify God by suffering a martyr’s death?

Why would it be beneficial for Paul to remain in the flesh rather than depart to be with Christ? Is the same true for us?

What did the apostle present as a better option than living in the flesh or dying? Is this our burning desire as well?

According to Philippians 3:10, 11, did the apostle expect to be with Jesus at death or at translation?

Why did the apostle Paul conclude that it would be better to remain in the flesh for the moment? Could this be true of us as well?