

Suppose God gave each one of us the opportunity to choose whether we wanted to stay here or go home to heaven. How many of us, provided our family and friends could go with us, would choose heaven? In our text, Paul is sitting in prison awaiting his fate of life or death. As he does so, he contemplates which would be better for him and for others and which would be God's Will. Although we may not face that choice, we make choices every day, sometimes good, sometimes not-so-good.

I. Even so, it's God's plan that we stay here at least a little while longer. A. But, we know how we think and given the choice, we'd prefer to leave. 1. We would prefer to leave because we are ready to enjoy perfection. Can you picture it? Do you have at least a tiny image of heaven etched in your mind? Since God is rather silent regarding the details, images are difficult to create. Yet the term "perfection" gives us enough to work with, enough to say, "I'm ready to go." How could we not want to go to a place where we are perfect, and, better yet, where everyone around us is perfect? Doesn't that sound incredible? Doesn't that motivate us to say, "Lord, can I go now?"

2. We'd prefer to leave because we're tired of the pain. How many of you over thirty experience some type of ongoing pain, a pain that you would like to trade with someone, or get rid of somehow, some way? Every person since the Fall has learned the hard way that pain isn't enjoyable, entertaining, nor does it top our bucket list of things we want to encounter before we leave. Chronic pain is exhausting as so many of you already know. It wears you down, steals some of your youthful energy, and leaves us uninspired to accomplish certain tasks. Those of us who face ongoing pain are tired of pain and, if we had the option, we'd walk away from it in a heartbeat.

3. We'd prefer to leave because we're tired of being tired. We know all about the rat race. Hurry here; rush there. Produce more and do it in less time. Be more productive. We don't care how you do it, just make sure you get it done. Doesn't that describe our world to the tee? With all our running and rushing, many of us might think that we'd prefer to be Paul sitting in prison because at least we wouldn't be on the run. Your tiredness is created by different circumstances than my tiredness. The cause of your weariness is not necessarily the cause of mine, but, at the end of the day, we all agree that we're tired of being tired, that relief would be a great thing.

II. We may have our preference, but Paul concludes for himself and us that God clearly wants us to stay. A. So let's consider what we gain by staying. 1. By staying, we gain the opportunity to finish our work. Paul says, "But to remain is more necessary on your account." God has a plan; He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion, if we were to quote Paul's own statement. You may think life is all about you, but, in actuality, life is all about God working through you. While we're doing those other things we call work, we do God's work. Until we finish God's work, we have everything to gain by staying right where we are.

2. By staying, God gives us the opportunity to touch hearts and change lives. In the past six months, how many lives have you impacted? About now, some of you

are probably trying to think of a life that you have touched. But while you are thinking, let me interject a more important question, "How many lives has God enabled you to touch that you are unaware of?" Did you catch Paul's statement, "I will continue with you all, *for your progress and joy in the faith?*" Like Paul, we may not always see the full picture, but, by faith, we conclude, "Because God is still using me, because He still has work for me, I choose to remain here."

3. By staying, we continue to grow our faith. Why does that matter? If we have just a little faith, isn't that good enough? It might be, if you're scheduled to depart for heaven within the next five minutes. But beyond that, growing is a good thing, an important thing. Our Old Testament lesson points out that God's thinking is beyond our thinking. An obvious implication of that statement beyond the stated understanding is that we haven't arrived, that we have more growing to do. Even Paul had more growing to do. Whether you, me, or Paul, by staying, we grow and the more knowledge we possess, the more able we are to take on this world until we depart.

4. By staying, we have the opportunity to enable one more person to arrive in heaven. Suppose God gave you a glimpse of the next 365 days of your life and in that glimpse, He showed you each person who would ultimately arrive in heaven because of you. What impact would that have on you? Or maybe I could ask the question in a bit different manner, "If one more family member or friend could arrive in heaven because of you, would you be all the more eager to stay?" I don't know who that person is for you or for me, but this we both need to believe - there is one more person and they need you to stay long enough for them to join you in heaven.

5. By staying, our boldness to speak increases. Those of you who believe heaven is real, that everything God has said about heaven is true, how many of you find that information to be a great motivator to speak? Early in our Epistle, Paul writes, "And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the Word without fear." What motivated them? It was Paul's faith in the midst of his situation. The examples others provide increase our boldness and as we become more bold, we speak, and, as we speak, God uses our voices to impact lives most of whom we never realize.

6. By staying, Paul also reminds us that it increases our eagerness to depart. Remember Paul's words? "My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better." Every day moved Paul one day closer to heaven and that awareness motivated him to press on. Ever watch a child as they are getting close to their birthday? Every day makes them a bit more anxious and excited. Each day we remain here is a day that increases our eagerness to arrive in heaven. Why? Because we know we are one step closer to the fantastic. Each day closer amplifies our eagerness until our hearts overflow with exuberant excitement that's truly contagious.

7. Staying or going - ultimately that's God's choice. Yet, until God say, "Let's go to My house for eternity," we make the right choice each morning as we say, "My work is not yet finished here. Come on body; we've got work that still needs to be done!" Amen.