

Our Contributors.

For Dominion Presbyterian.

The Blessed Strait and the Willing Sacrifice.

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I. — The Blessed Strait.

There are perhaps few who do not know by experience the unhappiness of the perplexity occasioned by one's being obliged to make a choice between things that are all of them to be dreaded or all of them to be desired. It is proverbial that of two evils we should choose the less; and the same may be said of things that each claims our preference. But it is often very difficult to settle in our own minds which of the things betwixt we have to choose is, all things considered, the better or the worse. How great must have been David's strait when God laid it upon him to choose between war, famine, and pestilence! And what a fine example he set, in respect of the principle which determined his choice, when he said to his seer, "I am in a great strait, let us fall now into the hand of the Lord, for his mercies are great; and let me not fall into the hand of man!" Let us be careful in all such perplexities of choice to decide on spiritual principles, remembering Lot, who, with a view to worldly prosperity, selected to dwell among a people who "were sinners and wicked before the Lord exceedingly."

We can hardly think of a more interesting and instructive perplexity of choice than that which we have in the experience of one of the best of men, as he himself tells us, between living and dying. He was, he says, (Phil. 1. 23-25,) in a strait in his choice between the two things, each of them having its own attractions, and both of them being, in his estimation agreeable and inviting. That a man is like Paul in a strait between living and dying is, it will be generally admitted, a great attainment. Perhaps to most even of the best of men such a strait is rather a matter of desire than an actual Christian attainment, as it was in the experience of Paul. That he had attained to such a frame of mind was no doubt owing to his having Christian views of life and death. What weighed with him, that is, in his view of both was something pertaining to Christ. On the one hand, he was drawn by the prospect of the enjoyment of Christ's presence in heaven; and on the other, he was actuated by the desire of serving the Church of Christ; which he knew he could do only on this side of death. To depart and be with Christ was, he says, "far better"—that is, so far as his personal happiness was concerned; but his remaining here was more needful for those who were the fruits of his ministry that their faith might be confirmed "unto all patience and long-suffering with joyfulness," Col. 1. 11. And therefore while to depart was to him an object of desire, he was willing to make a sacrifice of the immediate enjoyment which death would bring to him, leaving the time of his departure and all its circumstances in the hand of Christ.

What we then would ask our readers very seriously to consider is, 1. The Christian man in a strait in his choice between living and dying; and, 2. His willingness to make a sacrifice of his preference that the good of others may be promoted.

1. In reference to the strait which the Apostle says he was in, he felt that, so far as his own personal enjoyment was concerned, death was to be preferred; not of course on its own account, but in view of the state into which death would introduce him. That

state, he knew, was a "far better" state than the present could be even at its best; so that to enter on it would be "gain" to him. And, therefore, however repulsive death might be in itself and in its accompaniments and in its effects, in some respects, it was nevertheless to be desired as being the only way of entrance into the "far better" state. For there is in death much that is repulsive to nature and much that makes it formidable to us. It is the design of Scripture, or of the Gospel which Scripture presents to us, to make it otherwise—to give us such views of death as shall rob it of all the terrors with which it is invested to our apprehension as sinners. God there reveals Himself in His Son Jesus Christ, who assumed our nature that "through death," that is, His own death for our sins, He might pluck the sting out of death—"might deliver us, who through fear of death had been all our life time subject to bondage," Heb. 2. 15. Nowhere but in the Gospel can we have such views of death as shall give us solid ground to look forward to it with desire. It is true, men in their folly and wilfulness quarrel with God often to the extent of resenting their very existence. Not content, yea not full of gratitude, as they ought to be, that man was made in the image of God and constituted His deputy in the rule of this lower world, they will, because they cannot be "as gods," throw back in His face the life given them for great and good purposes. "The foolishness of man perverteth his way; and his heart fretteth against the Lord," Prov. 19. 3. He charges God with the evil issues of his folly and wickedness. But our Apostle had no quarrel with life or with God who gave it and sustains it. He knew the value of life and he valued it. Amid all his trials he found the Christian life a happy life, and that especially because it was a life of service for Christ and his fellowmen. But knowing with full assurance, (2 Cor. 5,) that there is a higher and "far better" state at the close of the Christian life on earth, that was the object of his desire.

It is worthy of notice that Paul speaks of his death as a *departure*. No thoughtful reader of the Bible can but have noticed how largely, in referring to death, it favors terms of a *euphuistic* kind. "If," our Lord says, "a man keep my sayings, he shall never see death," John 8. 51. And again He says, "Whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die," John 11. 26. He does not mean that such a one shall be exempt from the universal law of mortality (Heb. 9. 27); but that death, so as to speak, shall be so changed to him that he shall cease to regard it as those do who have not the Christian's hope, 1 Thes. 4. 13. Not only is death in old Testament language one's being gathered to his people; but now that He who is "the resurrection and the life" is risen, the Christian believer in dying does not die but "falls asleep" as did Stephen under the stones of his murderers. His death is a "sleeping in Jesus." It is the "putting off of this tabernacle." It is a "departure." "I desire to depart," as the mariner desires to loose anchor to voyage after long absence to his own country, as the wearied traveller desires to turn his face homeward, as the soldier at the close of his warfare desires to begin his march for home, as the captive desires to leave his chains and his prison house. All these may be regarded as partial representations or images of the death of the Christian believer, according to the thoughts and feelings of our great apostle.

Again we should take very special note of the reason of the Apostle's preference—the reason why he desires to depart. It is that he may "be with Christ." It is this that

makes the state beyond death "far better" than the present at its best. No doubt something is wanting when we depart. We shall be for a time "absent from the body." That is left behind for a little, but only for a little. It, too, will follow in due time. Meantime it is left behind; and all that depends on it is at an end, whether in the way of enjoyment or in the way of suffering or of service. But the *loss* and *want* are far more than compensated for by the *gain* of being "present with the Lord."

In an important sense the Apostle enjoyed the presence of Christ in the present life. It is this, indeed, that makes the Christian's life the happiest of lives, that makes it truly more or less a heaven below. Christ promises to be with His people "always, even unto the end of the world," Matt. 28. 20. He "manifests Himself to them." He even "makes His abode with them." But there is a great difference between the fellowship of the Christian with Christ *now* and his fellowship with him when he *departs*, leaving the body behind. In the present state "we walk by faith, not by sight," 2 Cor. 5. 7. Christ is *really* present with us, and faith apprehends His presence with us to protect and guide us and to provide for and comfort us. But He is invisible to the eye of sense. By none of our senses is His presence apprehended. We have no direct or immediate consciousness of His presence. Our spiritual needs are supplied. We are enlightened, comforted, strengthened, upheld, only in the way of our believing what He says in His word. And hence it is that owing to the weakness of our faith and various adverse influences our fellowship with Him is liable to disturbance and interruption. Yea sometimes we are "in heaven through manifold temptations" for the trial of our faith, 1 Pet. 1. 6, 7. But when we "depart" we are forever free from all disturbing influences. No infirmity and no care of any kind, such as occasion constant annoyance now, shall be known in the "far better" state. And fellowship with Christ shall not be clouded by any of the causes which are constantly operating to cloud it in the present state. High and ennobling as is the Christian's fellowship with Christ now, his present fellowship with Him is not to be compared with what is reserved for him when he is before His throne in the Heavenly world. For then "He that sitteth upon the throne shall dwell among them" that are before it; and "they shall hunger no more, neither thirst any more; neither shall the sun light on them, nor any heat. For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them to living fountains of water; and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes," Rev. 7. 15-17.

Truly to the Christian believer thus to be with Christ is "far better" than the best that can be his experience in the present state. We say *better than the best*. For it was nothing to say that to be with Christ in heaven is "far better" than a life of constant conflict and trial here,—*"far better"* than being like Paul stoned and scourged, reproached and having to fight with wild beasts, and being in constant jeopardy from the ungodliness and wickedness of men. But more. It were little to say that to be with Christ in heaven is "far better" than a life of temporal ease, comfort, and enjoyment. Not that the Apostle undervalues earthly blessings. "I know," he says, "both how to be abased and how to abound," etc. Nothing less must be said than that to be with Christ in heaven is "far better" than the best that is attainable here by the saintliest of all saints. To have all the means of grace, to enjoy all the comforts