The morality of assisted suicide and active euthanasia is widely disputed today. Jack Kevorkian has been vocal in legal and public settings, but has recently started to bring his message into the church. One pastor who invited him to speak at his church said, “The belief of many Christians that suicide is a mortal sin is a fallacy borne of politics instead of theology. It is a hoax that’s been hoisted upon us by the institutionalized church. It’s just not true.”

Kevorkian himself wrote that laws against suicide and euthanasia are “taboos” arising from either superstition or “inflexible rules based on stern religious doctrines.” Two recent popular books (A Noble Death by Arthur Droge and James Tabor, and What Does the Bible Say About Suicide? by James Clemons) attempt to provide justification for this position.

The argument suggests that although the Bible describes a number of suicides, it nowhere condemns the practice. These authors note that suicide was commonly practiced and highly regarded among ancient peoples. They claim that Augustine’s writings led to suicide’s being viewed as one of the three unforgivable sins (the others being blasphemy and adultery). But Augustine, in their view, used Aristotle’s philosophy more than Christian theology to argue against suicide.

However, many of the early church fathers spoke out against suicide. Darrel Amundsen’s historical survey of this issue brings together many references written in the first three centuries of the church, known as the patristic era. He concludes:

It should be obvious to the attentive reader that a survey of the patristic literature demonstrates that it is simply wrong to suggest that Augustine formulated what then became the “Christian position” on suicide. Rather, by removing certain ambiguities, he clarified and provided a theologically cogent explanation of and justification for the position typically held by earlier and contemporary Christian sources.
We will not focus here on the writings of the early Christians or Augustine. Their perspective on suicide was based on what they believed was taught by the biblical authors. While the books by Clemons and Droge and Tabor demonstrate clearly that the Bible does not teach that suicide is an unforgivable sin, they go too far in claiming that Christians should be very slow to view suicide as wrong. This is particularly the case when examining Paul's view of suicide. In another article on this issue, Droge speculates:

What if Paul reached the position of failing health or old age, so that he could no longer carry out his divine commission? Then I think it equally possible that Paul would have committed suicide and done so with a clear conscience and with the expectation that he would pass into immortality, united with Christ.

Similarly, Clemons claims that Paul “had no immediate sense of wrong-doing in contemplating his self-chosen death.” While he is more cautious in applying his conclusions, his argument leads in the same direction as Droge's. The implications are very clear. If suicide is not wrong for a Christian, it would be hard to argue against assisted suicide or active euthanasia.

Droge condenses his position to three main arguments. We will deal with his first and third arguments briefly. His first point is that suicide was commonly practiced and approved of in Paul's day. Many accounts of suicide in the literature of the time, including the Bible, do not condemn the practice. His third point is that “the mystery surrounding Paul's death suggests the possibility that he may have committed suicide and that knowledge of the event was suppressed in the New Testament as well as in apocryphal writings.” But these two arguments negate one another! Why would the early Christians hide the fact that Paul killed himself if suicide was an acceptable practice? Either it was hidden because it was not approved of, or Paul did not commit suicide.

Droge's second argument will be the focus of this paper. He sees Philippians 1:19–26 as the key New Testament passage to support his view that Paul saw nothing wrong with suicide. Was this Paul's view?

THE CONTEXT OF PHILIPPIANS

Paul wrote this letter from prison to encourage the Philippians. He points out that in spite of his apparently bad circumstances, the situation had become a great opportunity to spread the Gospel. As a result, the whole praetorian guard had heard the message of Christ (1:12–13). In addition, although some were preaching Christ for selfish reasons, the Gospel was still being proclaimed. This gave Paul great joy and confidence as he turned to reflect on his own situation and whether imprisonment would lead to his freedom or death. Paul declares:

eagerly expect and hope that 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. (Phil. 1:19–20 NIV)

No matter what happens, his goal is to see Christ exalted. This resembles the confidence of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego as they walked into the fiery furnace, knowing that God would remain with them and be vindicated, either in their living or their dying (Dan. 3). But then we come to the controversial passage.

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me. (Phil. 1:21–26 NIV)

Paul's situation leads him to contemplate his future. He may be released from prison and continue his ministry with the Philippians. On the other hand, he may die soon. But we are not told how he might die. The traditional interpretation is that he may be martyred if the verdict of his trial goes against him. Droge's view is that Paul is considering killing himself. “I do not know which to choose”—life or death—certainly does sound like someone contemplating suicide! Which interpretation is more accurate?

WHY IS DEATH A GAIN (1:21–23)?

Everything in Paul's life revolves around Christ and spreading Christ's message. As one commentary puts it:

Life is summed up in Christ. Life is filled up with, occupied with Christ, in the sense that everything Paul does—trusts, loves, 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.... Paul can see no reason for being except to be "for Christ" (Rom. 14:7–9).

But this does not result in Paul's clinging to physical life with all his vigor. I can attest from past personal experience that committed athletes love to exercise and take care of their bodies. However, they recoil at the idea of injury or a time when they will no longer be so strong or fast. Our society tends to worship youthfulness and health, and then cannot come to grips with aging bodies and death. Medical technology has been used to help maintain our denial of death. These attitudes are linked to the current demand to
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But this is not the case for Paul. In spite of his passion for physical life, he
does not recoil at the idea of death. In 2 Corinthians 5:1-10, Paul states that while we are in our physical bodies we are, by comparison, absent from the Lord. Droge claims that this passage shows how much Paul longed to die. However, the Greek in verses 2-4 clearly shows that what Paul wants is to be alive at Christ's Second Coming. Rather than want to die, or deliberately take his own life, Paul wants to be with Christ. Since death brings closer union with Christ, Paul tells the Philippians that it is "gain" (1:21) and "better by far" (1:23). He shows why Christians do not have to fear death (Heb. 2:15). We know that it cannot separate those who are in Christ from the love of God (Rom. 8:38). It brings a new depth to our relationship with Christ.

Some authors have proposed other reasons why Paul sees death as gain. D. W. Palmer gives many examples of ancient Greek and Roman literature, which viewed death as a legitimate way to escape the sufferings of this world. In commenting on our passage, he says, "If death is a gain, that is not because of any closer union with Christ, . . . [but] because it brings release from earthly troubles." Droge agrees with Palmer, but holds that Paul saw death as a gain both because it allows escape from suffering and leads to greater union with Christ. Given this interpretation, could Christians not use assisted suicide or active euthanasia to escape suffering and be with Christ?

However, as both authors clearly admit, their interpretation is an argument based on silence. Paul tells us there is gain both in living and in dying (Phil. 1:21). He qualifies what he means in the next few verses. Continued living is of gain because it will mean fruitful labor (v. 22). He will be able to help the Philippians mature in Christ (vv. 25-26). However, his only qualification for the gain from death is that he will then be with Christ (v. 23). He gives no other reason.

In spite of what other authors of his time say about the advantages of fleeing the woes of this life, Paul's writings reveal a very different attitude. He certainly had many troubles, and even refers to them in this letter (e.g. 1:17; 4:14). At one point he despaired of life, but then was thankful that he did not die (2 Cor. 1:8-10). He endured his many sufferings and persecutions (2 Tim. 3:11). He resisted the many attempts on his life by evation (Acts 14:5-6) and possessed a tenacious will to recover from the numerous abuses he experienced (2 Cor. 11:23-27). Later in Philippians he says that his sufferings lead to fellowship in Christ's sufferings, which allows him to know Christ better (3:8; 10). Paul rejoices in the good his sufferings will accomplish in others (Col. 1:24) as they increase his dependence on Christ (2 Cor. 12:10). He does not flee from suffering but learns to be content in the midst of it, something he urges the Philippians to imitate (4:11-12). Again, his only gain from death is to be with Christ.

WHAT SHALL I CHOOSE (1:22)?

Droge's argument depends heavily on the last part of verse 22: "Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!" He comments: "This should be taken to mean what it says, that the question of life or death was a matter of Paul's own volition, not a fate to be imposed on him by others." The danger of execution must have passed because Paul is so confident about visiting the Philippians soon (vv. 25-26). His conclusion suggests that Paul must have been contemplating whether or not to commit suicide.

However, this interpretation ignores the role of prisons in Paul's day. They were used only to hold prisoners while they awaited trial, sentencing, or punishment. Since he was still in prison, his fate was not yet decided. While there, he was at the mercy of his captors. He was not in control of the situation at all.

Further analysis of the Greek supports this. In verse 22, "I do not know" translates gnōrio, which is nowhere else in the New Testament translated as such. In all other passages it means "to make known" or "to reveal" (Col. 1:27; Eph. 1:19; 3:5). Because of this, other translations read: "I dare not reveal my preference" or "I cannot tell what I would choose." Also, the verb translated "choose" is hairesomai. It is in the middle voice, as opposed to the active voice. In Greek, the active voice of a verb is used when the subject does the action. The active voice of this verb "always contains an element of action and personal decision." But Paul uses the middle voice here, which instead conveys the idea of preference between two alternatives. The same type of word is used in 2 Corinthians 5:8, where Paul says he would prefer to be with Christ than in his physical body. In both cases he is talking about his preference, not actively choosing to pursue one option over another.

Paul is not sitting back in turmoil trying to figure out which action he will choose. The active voice of the verb would communicate this. Instead, he is caught in vice-grips, hemmed in from both sides. Since he does not have control, he wonders which he prefers. But he will not reveal his preference because he is content either way. He is giving us a practical example of how he has applied Philippians 4:11-13 in his own life. He has learned to be content regardless of the circumstances. His confidence is in God's control of the situation. As one commentator put it many decades ago: "The Apostle will not venture to decide between the alternatives, and the choice must be left in his Master's hands." Job is another person in the Bible who exemplifies patience and reliance on God in the midst of suffering. Job's sufferings were similarly intense, and he openly loathed his life and wished he were dead (10:1, 18). Paul gives us an important clue that Job may have been on his mind when he was writing to the Philippians. In Philippians 1:19, the phrase "will turn out for my deliverance" is identical to the Greek Septuagint wording in Job 13:16. In the two verses prior to this Job says, referring to God,

Why do I put myself in jeopardy, and take my life in my hands? Though he slay me, yet will I hope in him. (Job 13:14-15)

In spite of his suffering and his desire to die, Job decided to put his trust in God. Paul follows this example as he contemplates his own situation. We too must learn to put things in God's hands during our illnesses and dying. Suicide and euthanasia are attempts to put our lives in our own hands.
WHY IS PAUL HARD-PRESSED (1:23)?

Deciding to rely on the Lord will not always take the turmoil and uncertainty away. In verse 23 Paul says he is still hard-pressed between the options. The Greek word used here (συνάχομαι) carries the idea of external control, as in how an illness overcomes a person (Matt. 4:24; Acts 28:8). Interestingly, Paul uses this word in a parallel passage when he says that the love of Christ controls us (2 Cor. 5:14 NASB).

The word confirms that external factors are in control of the situation rather than Paul. One of the hardest things to accept is the fact that we do not have ultimate control over our bodies or what happens to them. It often takes an illness, or our imminent death, to make this clear to us. Yet in response to this, some people pursue euthanasia as a way to regain some sense of control.

Is this what Paul does when he says, “I desire to depart” (v. 23)? This is a euphemism for dying, which Droge translates as: Paul “lusts after death.” Droge chooses the word “lust” to emphasize the intensity of Paul’s desire to die. Ironically, the word he chooses brings out the negative connotation of the Greek word used by Paul. Epithymia is used of wronged desires associated with natural inclinations in all but two of its thirty-eight occurrences in the New Testament. When Paul speaks of praiseworthy desires, he uses the term epithymia (e.g. Rom. 15:23; 2 Cor. 5:2). It seems that while Paul views one of his options as highly desirable, it is not entirely praiseworthy.

THE “MORE NECESSARY OPTION” (1:24)

Paul views death as “gain” and “much better,” but the alternative is “more necessary” (ἀναγκασθεῖν). This term conveys the idea of compulsion, but not due to external force. It is the type of necessity that arises because of God’s involvement in our lives and the world. Paul uses this word group to describe the necessity of being subject to our governments (Rom. 13:5) and the compulsion that he experienced to preach the Gospel (1 Cor. 9:16). In our passage, this word implies that Paul saw the option of his continuing to minister to the Philippians as closely linked to God’s will for his life.

Droge makes much of the fact that the same word was used by Socrates in his influential discussion of suicide. According to Plato, Socrates held that people should not take their own lives unless they had received a divine anagke to do so. This view was commonly held in Paul’s day. Droge concludes that since Paul’s anagke was for ministry in this world, he could not commit suicide. “It is not the case therefore that Paul rejects suicide per se, only that it is not (yet) the proper context for such an act.” But given different circumstances, Paul could believe it was his time to die.

Some of the possible circumstances that Droge thinks would have led Paul to commit suicide are (1) believing his missionary work was finished, (2) believing the necessity to minister was now removed, (3) becoming convinced that he had fought the good fight and finished the race, so that it was now time to depart, and (4) failing health or old age preventing him from carrying out his divine commission.

These, with the relief of suffering, are exactly the same types of reasons given to support the need for euthanasia. If Paul saw these as valid reasons to take his own life, surely Christians today should support people’s requests to die and even assist them in dying. Assisted suicide and active euthanasia would seem to be valid options so long as people believe it was God’s will for them to die, or their suffering had become unbearable and meaningless.

But this view depends on the assumption that Paul felt it necessary to remain alive only under his current circumstances. Some believe Paul would not want this passage applied to others, regardless of their circumstances. However, Dailey shows that this is not in keeping with the nature of Paul’s letters. “Certainly his reflection arises from a personal, individual experience, but this reflection becomes teaching when he publicly manifests its content to the entire community by means of the particular character of an epistle.”

Our passage comes within a discussion of the Gospel, and is immediately followed by a call to act in a manner worthy of the Gospel (Phil. 1:27). This shows the importance and general applicability of what Paul is saying. He tells the Philippians they will experience similar conflict because they also will suffer for Christ (1:29-30). Later, he specifically tells them to have the same attitude as he does and to follow his example when dealing with suffering (3:15, 17). Thus, whatever this passage teaches, it does apply to all Christians.

PAUL IS CONVINCED (1:24-26)

Yet, from the midst of being unsure which way to turn, we find that suddenly Paul is convinced. What has he become convinced of, and why? Most obviously, Paul is convinced that God wants him to remain alive. This cannot be confidence in knowing the future. Although he says he will come to the Philippians in verse 26, in the next verse he says that he may or may not come. While convinced in verse 25 that he will not die, he again sees this as a possibility in 2:17. Paul is like the rest of us: he does not have clear insight into the future. He is convinced that God wants him to live, but he remains open to whatever may actually happen.

In the broader context, Paul is also convinced that Christ will be glorified through him. He has already seen his imprisonment turn out for good. The selfish preachers did spread the Gospel. Rather than show that Paul looked favorably on choosing one’s own death, this passage shows that Paul had given complete control of his life to God. The Greek words we have examined emphasize that Paul was not in control of his circumstances. The necessity to live was determined by God, not Paul. Paul is not like today’s autonomous individuals who claim the right to control their bodies, to avoid pain and aging, and yet when defined, to end their lives. Paul’s life was completely under the control of God; he was Christ’s bond-servant (1:1).

Knowing that God was in control, he was confident that things would work out for good for those who love God (Rom. 8:28). This means giving up the control we so desperately crave, and waiting on the Lord to act. It means relying on prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit, as Paul did (Phil. 1:19; 4:6). It means tough discussions within the community of believers and the willingness
to accept mature counsel (Prov. 20:18). God may reveal precisely what we should do, but so often we need to trust Him and accept whatever happens.

This gave Paul confidence that God would set him free to accomplish His will. It seemed clear to him that God still had much ministry for him to do on earth. In spite of his great desire to go be with the Lord, he was going to wait until he was called home (1 Cor. 6:19–20). To depart this life by one’s own choice is to reject the opportunity for loving and glorifying God in our bodies. We can do this through what we say and do, or through what others do for us. It can simply be our willingness to trust God and others in our final days. Rejecting suicide shows the willingness to accept God’s sovereignty and grace and to depend on Him for direction.

CONCLUSION

The New Testament speaks of an afterlife in which believers will have intimate fellowship with God and all pain and suffering will be wiped away (Rev. 21:1–5). Droge explains how an ancient school of philosophy viewed the afterlife as a major determinant in its view of “voluntary death,” his word for suicide.

The two schools with the strongest belief in an afterlife (the Pythagoreans and Platonists) expressed the strongest opposition to voluntary death. In contrast, the Cynics and Epicureans, who did not believe in an afterlife, were prepared to defend the right of an individual to take his own life. In fact, it appears that the Cynics were prepared to die on the slightest provocation.

It is ironic that Droge then claims Paul’s strong belief in the afterlife led him to “lust after death.” The Bible never uses the hope of the afterlife to devalue this life. It emphasizes the significance of this life and the service we can give to others. Our bodies may become weak and pain ridden, but they are not to be seen as worthless or useless. They remain gifts from God through which He can be glorified (1 Cor. 6:20; Phil. 1:20), even when they suffer humiliation, loss, or pain.

Paul tells us to consider others as more important than ourselves and to look out for the interests of others (Phil. 2:3–5, 21). This was Christ’s attitude and we should imitate Him. Paul endured all things for the sake of others (2 Tim. 2:10). He holds up the example of Epaphroditus, who risked his own life to serve others (Phil. 2:25–30). Even when he was sick, his focus was on the well-being of the Philippians (v. 26). We can continue to serve others even in our illnesses and in our dying. For example, we can pray for others or witness to the hope that is within us. We will always have relationships that need healing and depth.

This is the challenge that lies before us as Christians. When healthy, are we interested in serving the needs of others, especially those who are ill or dying? That will help them want to live. When ill or dying, do we continue to think about the needs of others? How we face death can be our final gift to those who survive us. This is how our lives and deaths can bring glory to God and take away the desire to hasten death. Suicide and euthanasia deny all this. As Martin states,

If death were the answer to all hope, we would think that Paul would desire death, but this is not what we find. Rather, he considers it still an enemy (1 Cor. 15:26). He is thankful that he has escaped death (2 Cor. 1:10) and he desires to finish his ministry in this life (Phil. 1:20–24; 1 Cor. 9:23–27).

Those who have a deep relationship with Christ will be better able to accept their time of death when it comes. They do not have to fear annihilation or the unknown. They will be going home to be with their Lord whom they love so much (2 Cor. 5:6–8). It is a time of release from these corruptible bodies, which groan and ache (Rom. 8:23; 2 Cor. 5:4). It takes us closer to receiving our new bodies, which will no longer experience pain, illness, or death (1 Cor. 15:42–44; Rev. 21:4). Trust in this truth should remove our fear of death (Heb. 2:15). We trust in Him for the life we live; we must trust in Him for the death we experience.

Contemplation of the afterlife should lead to a greater desire to please the Lord in this life (2 Cor. 5:9; Rom. 14:7–8). This is done by serving others and suffering with our fellow sufferers. As we do this, our relationships with Christ deepen, and we desire to be with Him even more (Phil. 3:8). As long as we live, our desire should be that others come to know and love the Lord. This should give us perseverance to endure until our ministry to others ends by divine, and not human, design.

In Philippians 1:19–26, Paul acknowledges that death can look very attractive. The desire to die can be strong. But Christians should turn aside from that temptation, as he did, and find ways to love others and glorify God.

ENDNOTES

1. Assisted suicide and active euthanasia involve the administration of a lethal dose of substance with the intention of causing death. They differ in who administers the dose: in the former, it is self-administered, while in the latter it is given by another, often a physician. The withholding or withdrawing of life-sustaining medical therapy involves different ethical issues if the intention is something other than hastening death and is not the subject of this chapter.


7. Ibid., 102.
13. The verb *ependuomai* means “to put on over” (v. 2, 4), while *enduo* means simply “to put on” (v. 3). Paul does not want to be found naked, i.e. without a physical body, as would seem to be the case for those who die before the Second Coming. He would rather be alive when Christ returns and have his physical body clothed over by his spiritual body. Gerhard Kittel, ed., Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 2:319-21.
21. See the New English Bible, Revised Standard Version, Goodspeed, Knox, or Moffatt; cited by Hawthorne, Philippians, 47.
38. Droge and Taylor, Noble Death, 43.
39. Ibid., 122.