I will get back to contradictions in my next post. For now, something else has come up. In my two previous posts I’ve mentioned Phil. 1:21, where Paul says, “To live is Christ, to die is gain.” I’ve been asked by several blog-readers about this, and it occurs to me that it might be useful to sketch out one set of reflections on the verse, as I lay it out in one of my side-comments in my textbook on the New Testament. Here is what I say there:

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In an intriguing book that discusses suicide and martyrdom in the ancient world (A Noble Death: Suicide and Martyrdom among Christians and jews in Antiquity. HarperSanFrancisco, 1992) Arthur Droge and James Tabor argue that the modern notion that suicide is a “sin” stems not from the Bible but from the fifth-century Saint Augustine. Prior to Augustine, suicide per se was not condemned by pagans, Jews, and Christians. On the contrary, in certain circumstances it was even advocated as the right and noble thing to do. Indeed, several famous classical authors spoke of self-inflicted death as a “gain” over present afflictions, one that should be accepted joyfully. The protagonist of Sophocles’s play Antigone, for example, says, “if I am going to die before my time, I count it gain. For death is a gain to one whose life, like mine, is full of misery.” She ends up, then taking her own life. So too in a famous passage in Plato’s Apology, Socrates, prior to ending his life by drinking hemlock, reflects that “the state of death is one of two things: either it is virtual nothingness… or it is a change and a migration of the soul from this place to another. And if it is unconsciousness, like sleep in which sleeper does not even dream, death would be a wonderful gain.”

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