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Philippians 1:18b-28, ESV.

Yes, and I will rejoice, ¹⁹for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, ²⁰as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²²If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. ²³I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. ²⁴But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. ²⁵Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

²⁷Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God.

To set sail.

One thing I began to notice during my first months as a chaplain is how many people, when confronted with a terminal illness or a disease that might, if treatment is not fully successful, prove fatal, worry not about themselves, but about their adult children. It's not their children's physical health people tend to worry about, but rather their spiritual health. Indeed, people are often more concerned about the future of their children's souls than they are about their own

aging bodies. I have seen parents express the same concern when their adult children are the patients; in these cases, they tend to be even more concerned about the future of their kids' eternal souls. I find this intriguing, as more and more young people dismiss the idea of a God or an eternal life or any notion of Heaven. But one thing is true, the older generation, the one that tends to believe, doesn't want to be separated from their adult kids until they know that those children have accepted God as their creator, Jesus as their Savior, and the Bible as the true Word of God. It doesn't matter who's dying, whether it's the parent or the adult child, it's tough to let go of your kid until you know that they are set for all of eternity.

Indeed, many of us still believe that a life eternal with God is far more important than a life filled with earthly riches. Paul says this in our quote. Here is a shortened version: *I will rejoice, ¹⁹for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance. Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. ²¹For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²²If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. ²³I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. ²⁴But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. ²⁵Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶so that in me you may*

have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁷ *Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm for the faith of the gospel,* ²⁸ *and not frightened in anything by your opponents.* Paul is saying that he's in some sort of trouble, that he needs deliverance – but that it doesn't matter whether he is delivered in life or if that deliverance takes the form of dying and being with God. He says that to die is to “gain”, that there is a profit in passing away. If he lives, he will continue to serve as an evangelist; he says that he does very much want to continue helping the people in Philippi build their faith. But whether he lives or dies, he wants them to stand firm in their faith and not be frightened by their persecutors.

Let's look at something that comes before our quote: ¹² *I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel,* ¹³ *so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.* ¹⁴ *And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.* This makes it clear just what Paul needs deliverance from: he is a prisoner somewhere and he is about to be judged. He might be executed. But he is making use of his time as a prisoner to preach to and convert the guards who are watching over him. It's not clear exactly who the “imperial guard” is, but they are

clearly high-ranking Roman soldiers of some sort. Depending on where he is being held, this could be soldiers assigned to either the emperor or some governor. It's not known where he was being held. People have conjectured Rome, Ephesus, or Caesarea. He doesn't even bother to talk about the details of his imprisonment. His focus is entirely on serving those to whom he is writing.

Here's something interesting. By this point in time, Paul has founded several churches. The church in Philippi would eventually grow to about 75 people, total. It's believed that by the end of the first century – maybe 40 years after Paul died, there were about 7,500 Christians in the entire world. Paul was joyously offering his life up because a tiny percentage, an infinitesimal percentage of the population of Earth were now followers of Christ. Today, and it is hard to estimate this, it is believed that around 2 and $\frac{1}{4}$ billion people are Christians. In America, the numbers are way down, from 70% of Americans in the year 2000 saying they belong to a church to well under 50% today, and that number is shrinking rapidly as believers age out and pass away, and young people do not follow the faith. Still, there is no question that many millions of young people in the U.S. are indeed believers, and worldwide, the faith is spreading. While churches close in the U.S., many are opening in South America, Africa, and Asia. The faith is growing particularly fast in Africa. It seems that the easier life is, the faster people lose their faith, and the

harder that life is, the more that people reach out to God. This is what Paul knew to be a fact, that the people of Philippi were searching for meaning. Philippi was in an area called Macedonia, which is now northern Greece. It was an important city and had been either founded or rebuilt around the middle of the 4th century B.C. by Philip II of Macedon, the father of Alexander the Great. When Rome defeated the Persians in 168 B.C., it was absorbed by the Roman Empire. It was a fertile area with a lot of water in the form of springs, and there were gold and silver mines in the area. It lay on a major road that connected Rome with Byzantium to the East. The inhabitants were Romans, Greeks, and a sprinkling of Jews. Most of the people of Philippi worshiped Greek and Roman gods. In Acts 16, we learn about its first Christian convert, a woman named Lydia. Her home became the home of the church at Philippi. The fledgling church in Philippi faced persecution. While some of the believers there were apparently well off, people like Lydia, most of them were very poor. Despite this, they donated what they could to the church and provided funds to Paul so that he could continue his missionary work.

Here's the thing about Paul's letter to this small church in Philippi, made up mostly of poor people who were facing brutal oppression by the society surrounding them: in the letter, Paul, who is facing possible execution himself, uses the Greek word for "joy" in various forms 19 times. The word is "*chara*" (say hara),

and it's specific meaning describes deep inner gladness, true delight, and deep rejoicing. Translating it simply as "joy" is a big understatement. Paul is joyful, he is deeply glad and truly delighted, he rejoices in the fact that his current extreme hardship has allowed him to preach to the soldiers guarding him, giving him access to powerful people in the Roman government. He is equally joyful at the deep level of faith among the believers in Philippi. Paul also tells them that their faith should give them great cause to be extremely joyful. He says this: *I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith.* He's saying that he believes he will survive and continue to serve them. And very importantly, he tells them that they should have joy simply in the fact that they have faith.

Let's look closely at another piece of our passage. Paul declares this: *To me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. ²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. ²³ I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better.* Paul says that when he is alive, he is devoted entirely to Christ. But if he dies, then there is a gain to this. He is, as a result, torn. If he survives his current imprisonment and upcoming trial, he will be able to continue to devote his life to serving the followers of Jesus. But to die, to be with Christ, would be for him far better. Specifically, he says "*My desire is to depart and be with Christ.*" As we have seen many times in

this church, there isn't a clean one-to-one translation between Biblical Hebrew and Greek words and modern English words. There's another example in this brief passage. *My desire to depart and be with Christ* – what does it really say? That word that is translated as “depart” is the ancient Greek word “*analsai*”. The word was used to refer to releasing a boat so that it could set sail. It meant to “set free”. And very interestingly, it can also mean “to return”. What Paul is saying here is that his desire is to be set free, to be released, to be allowed to set sail and return to God. It's a very powerful statement. He, on one hand, knows that he should remain alive and serve the people of Philippi, that handful of poor, persecuted Christians. He knows that this will probably happen. But what his heart really desires is for someone to untie the rope from the dock so that he can set sail and go home.

I started out by saying that I have met many older people who when faced with either their possible death or the possible death of an adult child worry first, and foremost, about that child's faith. One woman was in the hospital for a chronic condition. She was a cardiac patient. She had been in the hospital before, and I knew her from her previous visits. We'll call her Elisa. Elisa was struggling with the decision to continue or to terminate aggressive treatment. If she stopped treatment, it wouldn't mean that she would suddenly die. But it would put her on the path to passing away, and she would start researching the process of going into

hospice at home. She was tired of the repeated trips to the hospital, of lying in a room with nothing but a TV and none of the things that gave her happiness at home. She was a voracious reader and we talked about the many books she had read. We were both lovers of the classics, and I discovered that she had a far, far better memory than me. She reminded me of the characters, plots, and themes of books by Dickens, Dostoevsky, Jane Austen, C.S. Lewis, and Thomas Mann. Her eyes lit up as she talked about the thousands of books she had at home. It was those books that kept her from moving into a retirement facility like her adult kids wanted her to do – because moving into a small apartment would have meant having to let go of most of those books. Then she told me the main reason why she was leaning toward continuing treatment: her son. He was a heavy drinker who occasionally used drugs. He held down a good job despite his addiction, but his wife had left him. Elisa badly wanted him to return to his childhood faith, to join a church, to start valuing his relationship with God more than his relationship with the bottle. I talked to her about addiction, about the fact that it is certainly a genetically related disease, and that I was sure he wasn't an alcoholic by choice. She said yes, she knew all that, and that indeed, she had recently talked him into entering a residential program. He was there now, and doing well, and highly motivated to get clean and to completely stop using alcohol and drugs. But when

he got out of there in a few weeks, he was going to need an anchor. She wanted that anchor to be God and a church. She wanted him surrounded by the faithful. She wanted him to see the joy of being a believer among believers.

I don't know what became of Elisa's son. But I can tell you that Elisa has passed away. She has been released and she has set sail and returned home. One day, that will happen to every one of us. In the meantime, we should be like Paul. We should celebrate being among the faithful. While we sometimes bemoan the fact that the Christian Church in the United States, Canada, and Western Europe is shrinking, our global church is radically bigger and healthier than the church that Paul celebrated. Paul knew that it isn't the size of a church that matters. If our personal church is a small one, then we must remember that to Paul, it would be quite big enough. What's important is that we be surrounded by the faithful, that while we are here, we have the privilege of serving God and our fellow believers, and that when we leave, there is indeed great gain. We will be released. That rope will be untied from the dock. God will watch as our sails are filled with air - and we will return. Please pray with me.

God, thank you for this small church. Thank you for giving us the gift of service. Thank you for the promise of one day returning to you. We will continue to find the deepest joy in simply having faith in you. Amen.