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Isaiah 40:31, English Standard Version

*But they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint.*

Isaiah 40:31, New Living Version

*But those who trust in the LORD will find new strength.
They will soar high on wings like eagles.
They will run and not grow weary.
They will walk and not faint.*

Isaiah 40:31, New International Version

*But those who hope in the LORD will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
They will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.*

Acts 16:19-26, English Standard Version

*they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers.
²⁰ And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. ²¹ They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice." ²² The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. ²³ And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison,*

ordering the jailer to keep them safely. ²⁴ Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

²⁵ About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, ²⁶ and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened.

Wings like eagles.

I've got a treat for you, today: a sermon that's a bit shorter than usual.

Our first passage today, which we have heard from three different translations, is from Isaiah. Let's look at these three versions of this piece of Isaiah. Superficially, they seem identical. But consider the first line. English Standard Version: *But they who **wait** for the LORD shall renew their strength.* New Living Translation: *But those who **trust** in the LORD will find new strength.* New International Version: *But those who **hope** in the LORD will renew their strength.* Wait. Trust. Hope. Which is correct? Those are different words, with different meanings. What does it say in the original Hebrew? The word is *wə·qō·w·yê*. To end the suspense, the word more or less means *wait*. *They who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength.* The English Standard Version is the closest to being correct, at least as far as we can tell, given our knowledge of Biblical Hebrew.

Let's step back for a moment. Isaiah is one of the major prophets of the Old Testament. The Bible reveals almost nothing about his personal life, despite the

significant length of the Book of Isaiah. From a few bits of material in the Book, we conclude that Isaiah was a Temple priest before God called him to be a prophet. His name translates to: God gives salvation. The first section of the Book, Chapters 1 to 39, are prophecies from his time as a prophet. This material was written either by him or by those who knew him. The rest of the Book comes from a later period of time and was probably recorded by followers of Isaiah, who are often referred to collectively as the “school of Isaiah”. The material in the Book of Isaiah largely dates to the time during and after the exile to Babylon. A major theme of the Book is messianic in nature, having to do with rewarding the faithful and punishing the wicked. Therefore, Isaiah became very important to the early Christians. Other major topics are social injustice and having faith in God.

Let’s look at Chapter 40, where our quote comes from. The Prophet is in Exile in Babylon, where the Babylonian oppressors had forcibly moved the elite of Israelite society. The overall message of Chapter 40 is this. The Chosen People were turning away from God, since they thought that God had abandoned them. Here’s an overview of the Chapter: 1. The Prophet Isaiah brings a message of deliverance to his people, based on the fact that God forgives their sins. 2. Isaiah tells his people that in the same way that God once delivered the Israelites from

bondage in Egypt, he will bring his people out of Babylon. 3. Isaiah tells his people that because of this prophesy, they should renew their trust in God.

Let's look at the part of Isaiah that ends with our quote. I'll use the English Standard Version, because indeed, it better reflects the original Hebrew. These are verses 27 to 31:

- 27 Why do you say, O Jacob,
and speak, O Israel,
"My way is hidden from the LORD,
and my right is disregarded by my God"?*
- 28 Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable.*
- 29 He gives power to the faint,
and to him who has no might he increases strength.*
- 30 Even youths shall faint and be weary,
and young men shall fall exhausted;*
- 31 but they who wait for the LORD shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles;
they shall run and not be weary;
they shall walk and not faint*

The message here is that God will protect and care for the Chosen People during their desperate times. While God appears to have abandoned his people to a life of exile in a faraway land where they are ruled by pagans, God will give his people the strength they need to survive. They will not grow faint or weary. They shall mount up with wings of eagles.

But let's return to that first line of our original quote. It doesn't precisely say trust or hope in God. It says wait. Notice the language that follows from this line. It talks about mounting up and running. You see, trusting and hoping sound passive. Sit back and trust that God will care for us. Relax and just cling to your hope. Waiting might seem passive, too. But since the surrounding text is very active in nature, very physical, I think that the writer intends us to see waiting as something active. In fact, waiting is a special word in the Bible, and that is why the ESV translation is so much more accurate. In the Bible, waiting is a very active term. But what do we mean by actively waiting on God?

This brings us to our second passage for today. It's from Acts, a book we've looked at a few times here. Acts is the story of Peter and Paul bringing the teachings of Jesus Christ to the Jews and the Gentiles, of founding a new church. Paul in particular goes through incredible hardships as he spreads the faith. In our passage, Paul and his companion Silas have been beaten by a crowd and tossed in jail. They are then put into a prison within the prison, a dungeon, most likely. Their feet are put in shackles. All they can do is wait on God, right? But what does it mean to wait on God? Here is what they do:

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them. Waiting on God isn't passive. They pray and

they sing. Even while pathetically trapped, they are evangelizing. The other prisoners are listening. So, what happens? *Suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened.*

Now, the Bible can make it seem like miracles should happen and happen fast. But the truth is that it's largely an issue of time and perception. We need to actively wait longer than we might hope. We need to pray and sing. Having time pass is a good thing. We need to let others hear us so that they are infected with our faith. Perception is perhaps a more critical issue. We often see God as having not come through for us, when in actuality, he has. We look at the bad and ignore the good. There are things that we strive for and we don't get. But we don't remember all the things that we never had to fight for, that we never wished for, and yet happened. We can become so preoccupied with seeing ourselves as victims that we're unable to enjoy the simple beauty of another day living on this planet, with God in our hearts. We see other people as a bother, as annoying, instead of relishing the richness of life as a human being.

When I was a boy, my father loved to golf. He worked very hard for a living, selling tires and working on cars. He was paid by commission and by the hour. He often worked six days a week, far longer than an eight-hour day. Every now and

then, he would take some time off. Usually, he golfed alone, but one Saturday, he decided not to work, and he and my mother went golfing together. I don't remember where my brother and sister were, but I was too young to stay home alone and look after myself. So, they brought me along to some club where they could golf. I think the company he worked for, General Tire, gave employees passes to this club. I was left by the pool, with a warning to not stay in the sun too long. I remember swimming for a while, thinking, hell, there's no one looking after me, except for some life guard who'll make sure I don't drown. I could be at home watching TV and be just as safe. I won't drown there, either. I really felt sorry for myself, being abandoned with a bunch of strangers while my parents went off and slammed some little white balls around a giant lawn. There weren't even any kids my age at the pool. I sat in the shade and pouted.

But then an older kid walked up to me. I was maybe seven and she might have been twelve. I'm not sure. She asked me if my parents were off golfing, too. I said yes. She said that she and her little sister were doing the same thing as me. Then I saw the girl standing behind her, to the side. She might have been ten. This older girl said that she and her little sister were waiting, too, and that they had decided to do something nice while they were waiting. It was then that she pulled her hand out from behind her back. She was holding a bag of bar-b-q

potato chips. It was my favorite. She said that they figured I might enjoy these.

Then she broke out in a big smile as she handed me the bag of chips.

That girl and her kid sister were waiting actively. That's the message of Isaiah. Paul and Silas understood it. When we are most desperate, when we are busy feeling sorry for ourselves, that's when we should think about digging deep down inside us – and seeing if we can use that time to give to others. That is how a believer waits. I remember sitting in a bit of shade, eating those chips, and being very, very happy. It was more than the chips; it was that act of care for me.

One remark about the NIV and NLT translations of our first passage: I don't know why some translations vary so far from the Hebrew and Greek. The ESV tends to be the most accurate. That's why I use it when I analyze the original language. But what about trust and hope? The translation from the Hebrew isn't black and white. These other words are reasonable translations. We should trust God. We should never question whether God has what's best in mind. Trust lets us take worries off our minds. We should never lose hope that God will come through, either. Hope keeps us positive during bad times.

But nothing beats active waiting. Nothing. That's what being a Christian is actually all about. That's what we do with our faith.

Amen.