

# "With the Lord"

**Dr. Rich Knight**

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**Philippians 1:21-26**

We're studying Paul's letter to the Philippians this summer, the Letter of Joy. We've noted that Paul wrote this letter from prison, literally chained to a Roman soldier 24 hrs. a day; yet he uses the word "joy" and "rejoice" more than any other book in the Bible.

Let's take a look at Philippians 1:21-26

*For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.*

A few weeks ago I mentioned Dietrich Bonhoeffer during my message. Bonhoeffer you'll remember was one of the most brilliant theologians of his day and a pacifist. But he came to believe that assassinating Adolph Hitler was a necessary and just thing to do. The assassinating attempt that he helped plan failed and Bonhoeffer and others were imprisoned. He became a chaplain, a pastor to his fellow prisoners. Bonhoeffer was executed just several days before the end of the war. Bonhoeffer was led away for execution just as he concluded his final Sunday service. He asked an English prisoner Payne Best to remember him to Bishop George Bell of Chichester if he should ever reach his home: "This is the end - for me the beginning of life." The camp doctor who witnessed the execution wrote: "I saw Pastor Bonhoeffer ... kneeling on the floor

praying fervently to God. I was most deeply moved by the way this lovable man prayed, so devout and so certain that God heard his prayer. At the place of execution, he again said a short prayer and then climbed the few steps to the gallows, brave and composed. His death ensued after a few seconds. In the almost fifty years that I worked as a doctor, I have hardly ever seen a man die so entirely submissive to the will of God."

*"Entirely submissive to the will of God."* Those words describe the Apostle Paul as well.

*"For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. If I am to live . . . that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain . . . is more necessary for you."*

Now that's faith, isn't it? We can learn a lot from this passage, but let's just focus on two things. First, Paul is not afraid to die. "Living is Christ, and dying," well, that's even better. "My desire is to depart and be with Christ."

Paul is most likely up in years when he wrote this passage. His life and not been easy. He'd been beaten, stoned and imprisoned for preaching the Gospel. And here he was again in jail, wondering if he would live or die there. So, it's no wonder that he says, *"My desire is to depart and be with Christ."*

The word he uses for "depart" is *analuein*. In ancient Greek it was a euphemism for death but it also had three other distinct but related meanings.

1 - It was a military term for striking camp, moving on. Death is leaving this basecamp and moving on to a better one!

2 - It was also the term that was used when a ship pulls up anchor, releases from the dock and sails out to sea. It's departing the harbor for the ocean blue. Death as leaving these shores and landing upon the shores of heaven.

3 - Analuein also meant solving a problem. When you solve a problem you move on, you depart from it and moved on to whatever is next. Heaven will solve many, many problems for us, won't it? Most notably my sore lower back! The problem of pain will be solved. God's justice and peace reign in heaven. All will be fed, all will know unending, eternal love & life.

So, Paul is not afraid to die. And he tells us why - dying is departing from this life, striking camp and moving on - to be with the Lord. *"My desire is to depart and be with Christ."* Paul shares with us the most important characteristic or feature of heaven - God! Heaven is knowing all the fullness of God. It's knowing the embrace of God. It's being welcomed home by our Creator, by our Savior, by the One who knows us fully and loves us completely. Death is simply being with Christ, and that is heaven.

This simple but beautiful truth about heaven is seen elsewhere in the New Testament.

A. Think of the conversation between Jesus & the one criminal crucified with him. *"Then he (one of the criminals) said, 'Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.' He replied, 'Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise.'" Luke 23:42-43*

B. A man named Stephen was the first martyr of our faith. As he was led away he looked up and saw a vision of Christ. *"I see the heavens opened and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." "And while they were stoning Stephen, he prayed, 'Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.'" - Acts 7:59*

C. To the Thessalonians Paul wrote: *"Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever. Therefore encourage one another with these words." I Thes.4:17-18*

There's a story that I tell at a lot of the memorial services I do, because I think it illustrates this point so well. It's a story about a pastor who was on his way to visit a man in the hospital who was in the last days of his life. As the pastor was making his way to the hospital he started thinking about what he might say to the man that might be of comfort to him. The pastor then pulled into the parking lot of the hospital and found a place to park. As he was getting out of his car he rolled down the window some to give his little dog some air. Well, he went inside the hospital and found the room where the man was. He entered the room, closed the door behind him, and stood at the bedside still searching for the right words to say. It wasn't long before he heard some commotion in the hall outside. Then he heard some scratching at the door. Then he heard a bark. He had cracked his window too much. But then he knew what to say to the man. The pastor said, "My little dog is on the other side of that door. He's never been in a hospital before. He's certainly never been in this room where you and I find ourselves. He has no idea what's on the other side of that door. He only knows that I his master am here. And that's all he needs to know. The pastor continued, "I don't know a lot about heaven. I don't know where it is - it may be all around us for all I know. I don't know what it looks like and what all we're going to do there. But I do know one thing - God is there. Jesus Christ our Savior is there. And that's all we need to know."

Heaven is found in God. Heaven is simply being in the gracious presence of our Lord. So Paul says, "That's far better than the life I'm living now. That would be a gain for me, that's for sure." However, is that the choice he makes? Is that where his focus is? Is that what he's fixated upon and where he pours all his energy into, longing for heaven?

No. Paul chooses life! Paul chooses life!

*"I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith,*

*so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again."*

Not only is Paul not afraid to die, he's also not afraid to live! - and that's the harder path for him. But he's such a person of faith. "I see myself getting out of here. I see fruitful labor ahead for me. I see myself visiting you all once again in Philippi." Someone said to me this week, "Faith is filled with hope, isn't it?" Yes, it is, especially if you have a passion for life and a passion for God. That's why Bonhoeffer could become a chaplain to the fellow prisoners in a Nazi prison camp. He had a passion for God, for people and for life. And being imprisoned couldn't change that. The same was true for Paul. And isn't that inspiring? Doesn't that remind us and rekindle within us a passion for God, for life and for people.

It seems to me that the people who know the most happiness in life are usually the people who have a passion for life. They love people and they have a sense of purpose in their lives to be a blessing to others. They're driven to be a blessing to others. I think of Dot Barker, Hazel Orchard and Bev Valle. They have a passion for ministering to the elderly. Bob Zeiner has a passion for fixing things. He helps people by fixing anything that comes his way. Gladys Earley has a passion for helping people. So when I called her and asked her if she could watch Maddie this past week while I attended a funeral, Gladys said yes. She also told me that she hadn't changed a diaper in years. I said she probably wouldn't have to. But of course Maddie didn't cooperate. But Gladys did it because she has a passion to be a blessing. Stan Boothby, who blessed us with his original song this morning, has a passion for music - making music and sharing his music with others. That's the spirit we all need!

Let me close by sharing something that was written by Robert Fulghum (he wrote the well known poem, *"Everything I Needed to know I Learned in Kindergarten"*). Fulghum tells a beautiful story that illustrates having a passion and a focus for our lives. Fulghum was taking a two week seminar on Greek culture from a man named Alexander Papaderos, a Greek

philosopher, teacher, activist and politician. At the end of two weeks of lectures, Papaderos finished and asked, "Are there any questions?" After a little silence, Fulghum then asks, "Dr. Papaderos, What is the Meaning of Life?" Fulghum says he likes to ask that question a lot hoping someone just might know the answer. "I will answer your question." Taking his wallet out of his hip pocket, he fished into a leather billfold and brought out a very small round mirror, about the size of a quarter. He then said, "When I was a small child, during the war, I found on the road the broken pieces of a mirror. A German motorcycle had been wrecked in that place. I tried to find all the pieces and put them together, but it was not possible, so I kept only the largest piece. This one. And by scratching it on a stone I made it round. I began to play with it as a toy and became fascinated by the fact that I could reflect light into dark places where the sun would never shine--in deep holes and crevices and dark closets. It became a game for me to get light into the most inaccessible places I could find.

"I kept the little mirror, and as I went about my growing up, I would take it out in idle moments and continue the challenge of the game. As I became a man, I grew to understand that this was not just a child's game but a metaphor for what I might do with my life. I came to understand that I am not the light or the source of the light. But light --truth, understanding, knowledge--is there, and it will only shine in many dark places if I reflect it.

"I am a fragment of a mirror whose whole design and shape I do not know. Nevertheless, with what I have I can reflect light into the dark places of this world--into the black places in the hearts of men--and change some things in some people. Perhaps others may see and do likewise. This is what I am about. This is the meaning of my life."

So may your life be blessed with purpose and meaning.

May you have a passion for God, for people and for life.

May you not be afraid to die or to live, knowing that you live for

Christ, the Light of the World, in this life and will enjoy him forever.  
Amen.