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Philippians 4:21–23, English Standard Version.

²¹ Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. ²² All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.

²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Proselytizing in Prison: *Letting our faith see the light.*

It's widely believed that Paul wrote the letters to the Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and the letter to Philemon while he was in prison, during the first of two known incarcerations in Rome. (There is debate, though, about whether Paul personally wrote Ephesians and Colossians). This would have been during the years 60 to 62 A.D., approximately. The first three letters were written to churches; the fourth is addressed to a man named Philemon, a man who was probably very well off. In the Book of Acts, written by Luke, the same person we believe wrote the Gospel of Luke, we are told that Paul did indeed serve time in prison, and this confirms the reports that Paul himself gives in his letters. In general, Acts serves as a source for supporting or augmenting much of what we learn in Paul's letters, with respect to his series of travels. Luke accompanied Paul on some of his mission trips and personally documented the spread of the faith out of Jerusalem and into the

world of the Gentiles, far away from Jerusalem and into what is now western Europe, literally to the ends of Paul's known world. Thoughtfully consider this brief passage from Chapter 4 of the prison letter to the faithful in Philippi, an important Greek city of that time, which might have had a population of about 10,000:

²¹ Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. ²² All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.

²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Paul had founded the church in Philippi. According to the Book of Acts, he did this on what we call his second missionary journey, around the year 50. Philippi was an important city in Macedonia (which was a region in Greece) and was either built or rebuilt around the middle of the fourth century B.C. It was part of the Roman Empire and was located in a fertile area with nearby gold and silver mines. The population was mixed: Romans, Greeks, and Jews, and correspondingly, many different religions were practiced there, with a tiny Christian church. Since the letter is choppy, some scholars believe that it is a blend of two or three separate letters written by Paul. The purpose of the letter was to give the Christians in the city advice on how to deal with growing persecution, how to manage dissent among the members of the Church, and how to help that church mature spiritually. Our passage contains the very last words of this letter. I'll get back to these powerful words. It's good to let them sink in.

From what we know of the conditions under which people like Paul would have been imprisoned, he was likely to have been chained to a guard at all times. Often, he was treated brutally. In the Book of Acts, chapter 16, the imprisonment of Paul and his assistant Silas is recorded:

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.

What's true, though, is that most of the time, Paul was probably free to talk to other prisoners, to guards, and at times even to outsiders who came to see him. Part of his imprisonment was apparently a form of house arrest; while still in shackles, he had to cover his own living expenses, but at least he could have personal guests. A good part of the reason he was allowed this sort of freedom is that he was a highly educated Roman citizen. But perhaps much of the time, he was in an underground, low-ceilinged cell made of blocks of stone. Such cells have been located, and interestingly, one that has been found largely intact had an altar in it. There is some reason to believe that one of his prisons was the Roman Mamertine Prison inside the Roman Forum. There were no windows underground, of course, and much of the time, Paul was probably in darkness.

But what did Paul do while in prison? Acts ends with a statement that makes it clear that Paul was busy evangelizing while he was in prison, and it suggests that he was very successful at this:

³⁰ He lived there two whole years at his own expense, and welcomed all who came to him, ³¹ proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.

In fact, in the letter to the church in Philippi, Paul wrote, in the first chapter:

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.

Paul is saying that being in prison has helped his job of spreading the faith. The entire military guard in charge of the Emperor's residence and the prison knows that this man is in chains because of his faith. He has been proselytizing to them, and the faithful in Rome in general feel freer to express their faith knowing that Paul, who is in prison, is doing so. This probably gave confidence those in Philippi who were struggling with a society that disapproved of them.

Several years ago, I was required to attend an all-day meeting as part of my duties at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Rather than holding it on campus, we met in a conference room rented out by the Humane Society in Boulder. The idea was to isolate us off campus, so that it would feel more like a retreat where

we could bond with each other. Many of us here today have been to these forced, uncomfortable *let's-all-bond* gatherings. It was, of course, a very tedious meeting where we were required to play some team building games. I coyly slipped out during one of them and went for a walk. I discovered that the grounds outside the center were being maintained by inmates from the jail. They were wearing yellow jumpsuits and were weeding gardens, picking up trash, planting bushes, and spreading fertilizer and ground cover. There were maybe fifteen of them. I started talking to them, and yes, they were far more interesting than a bunch of puff toad professors. During that meeting, each of us academics was competing with the others to prove that he or she is the most intelligent, important, and famous - at least famous to a couple dozen other people around the world doing the exact same sort of research. But let's get back to the men from the jail. One the prisoners was a man of about forty, I would guess. He told me that he had been living on the street and had gotten in trouble because he was caught sleeping on private property. (By the way, later, as a hospital chaplain, I learned that this is a common reason for being incarcerated.). Somebody called the cops on this man when they saw him wrapped up on a blanket sleeping in the snow on their back deck. He was a man with a happy disposition who seemed to not be at all stressed by being an inmate. He told me that he was eating three times a day in jail, had a warm place

to sleep, that the other guys in the jail were for the most part fun to hang out with, and the corrections officers were friendly and protected men who were victimized. He said that when he got out, there was a job waiting for him, as part of some program to help ex-prisoners reenter society. He said that he was part of a Bible study in jail and that he was in charge of the next lesson, but that he didn't know yet what Bible passage he was going to choose. I told him that the great evangelist Paul spread the faith while in jail. I told him that if he looked at Acts or Philippians, he would find some good quotes. I don't know what might have come of this. I did ask him his name. We'll call him Nate. At that point, I figured I had escaped from my faculty meeting long enough and needed to get back and bond with the rest of my lovely team. I did talk to Nate one more time, and I'll get back to that.

Note that our quote from earlier says:

²¹ Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. ²² All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household. ²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

There Paul is, ending his letter to the Philippians, casually sending the Christians greetings from himself, from other Christians in Rome, and of course, from the members of the Emperor's household who have come to the faith.

I'd like to read to you an abridged version of the eleven verses that come just before these, at the end of the letter to the Philippians:

¹⁰ I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that you were indeed concerned for me. ¹¹ Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. ¹² I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

¹⁴ Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. ¹⁶ Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. ¹⁷ Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. ¹⁸ I am well supplied, having received the gifts you sent, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. ¹⁹ And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. ²⁰ To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Paul is thanking the Christians of Philippi for sending gifts to him. He is saying that while they have met his physical needs, he is hoping that God will fill all of their needs. He is also saying that regardless of this generous gift, he is okay whether he is poor or wealthy, that his joy in life has nothing to do with his physical situation. While he did very much need whatever they sent him while he was in prison and responsible for feeding and clothing himself, he doesn't want them to feel sorry for him. Paul is deliberately minimizing the value of earthly things. He wants them to value their spiritual lives above their physical lives. It's clear that he does.

Here is the bottom line when it comes to Paul the great evangelist who did so much to establish our faith and plant it in much of the world. Paul could have remained Saul. Remember that he was a highly educated, powerful Jewish leader. But he was converted on the road to Damascus when Jesus – after having been resurrected – appeared before him. Rather than remaining in the Jerusalem area

and living a life of plenty, a life of comfort, respect, and relative wealth, he chose to throw away everything he had and go on the road. He spent his life wandering, with no permanent home, relying on others to house and feed him, finding a way to pay for his own food and personal items while imprisoned, and always using every opportunity he had to talk to people about his faith. Most of all, he found a life that was far more joyous than the powerful and highly envied life that he had left behind. Remember that he had been a Pharisee, raised in a rich part of Jerusalem, educated by famous Jewish theologians, in particular a Rabbi named Gamaliel who was the president of the Sanhedrin, a sort of combined Supreme Court and legislature in the Jewish community surrounding Jerusalem, the center of the Jewish faith. The Sanhedrin interpreted the Torah, specifically, the laws that had to be followed every day, and they passed judgement on people. Paul, that is, Saul, was a zealous prodigy, fast-tracked to be an important man. He was fully literate in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. He must also have known Latin to some degree. He was proud and ambitious. He was charged with pursuing, arresting, and prosecuting Christians. He was a brutal man. But all we know of him at the end of Acts, the end of his documented life, is that he is simply Paul, and is now in prison, perhaps for a long time, and that he is very happy because he has an opportunity to spread the faith that changed his life. It's thought that he was

eventually executed. But throughout his life, as he wandered, he openly spoke of his faith with everyone, regardless of whether those people would be likely to appreciate what he had to say - or more likely to want to kill him for saying it. Paul didn't just give. It's important to note that he also received. Every time he identified himself as a believer in the teachings of Jesus, he was lifted up in joy. That's what happens when we share with others what is most important to us. When Paul was proselytizing in prison, he was also being set free while in prison.

After our day-long faculty meeting was over and after I was forced to play a number of silly team building games, and after we had all pretended that we had bonded, we got to go home. I was feeling very stressed about having wasted a day that I could have used to do far more important things, like working on papers or research proposals, or planning lectures. Remember that I was very caught up in the life of a professor, a Pharisee, if you will. The prisoners were still out there. I looked for Nate, the prisoner who was planning to lead a Bible study. I found him leading a small group of prisoners, about a half dozen, in prayer. He happened to look up, and he saw me. He enthusiastically waved me over to join them. I had told him that I was a professor at the university in town. But he simply introduced me to the other men as a brother in Christ.

As I knelt down with this ring of men, Nate explained that a couple of the men there were not yet believers. I noticed that they didn't care that the other prisoners could see them on their knees, offering themselves to God. Even the ones who were not Christians yet didn't care. I think it was a mixture of being used to living on the edge of society and having people look down at them, as well as being infected with the pure joy of the men who did fully believe. I felt a sudden surge of gratitude. I offered the next prayer, thanking God for bringing Nate into my life and turning a boring, ineffective day into a beautiful, very useful day.

In sum, that day, I witnessed a man use his jail time to bring others to God. I also watched a group of men, most of them young, publicly express their faith, and in doing so, release the anxiety that comes with living a Christian life in world that wants us to hide our faith. Remember that Paul was not always successful. He got beaten and run out of town many times. He was locked up simply for evangelizing. His success came from being persistent. He was filled with the joy that comes to us when we no longer hold our faith in darkness, and instead, let our faith see the light of day - so that all may witness our faith.