Connection with Unit Theme: To complement the small group study *Living with Hope in a Broken World*, this sermon covers Paul’s response to a situation in which others would have seen their hope evaporate. Paul’s, however, endured. It’s not that his will was stronger than others but that previous experiences with God had taught him that God answers prayer, including the prayer to be used.

Introduction: Paul was in a Roman prison. Though it may seem an obvious thought, it still needs to be said: this is not where he wanted to be. Still, he who had learned contentment in any situation (Phil. 4:11-12) made the best of this one. He rejoiced, but not because prison gave his body rest from his rigorous travels. Nor did his confinement excuse him from the mission to which God called him. No. He based his joy on the hope Jesus gave him.

Prison and the execution that often awaits those there usually steals hope. According to Dante’s poem, the *Divine Comedy*, the phrase, “Abandon hope all ye who enter here” is engraved on the doorway that leads to eternal confinement in Hell. But Paul responded differently.

He did not anticipate that his earthly chains would hold him forever, nor did he expect his soul to suffer eternal separation from God. He had hope for the present and for eternity. These two dimensions of his hope required him to make a difficult choice. Should he stay, or should he go?

1. **Death, though dreaded, is rewarding.** “to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21)

   Prison did not provide much for Paul, but the isolation gave him time to think. Naturally, the environment prompted him to evaluate his journey and consider the possibility it might soon end. Though he did not expect execution (1:19, 25-26), it could come. Paul did not fear it. He knew what awaited him beyond the last beat of his heart.

   Death, for Paul, meant more than just an end to his suffering. He described it as “gain.” For one, his death would provide entrance into Heaven. Looking at the Bible’s description of that new and vivid experience has the power to give hope even to the desperately depressed. Paul knew that the source of hope, Jesus Christ, resided in that place. The One who sustained Paul’s hope on earth would fulfill it there.
Death had its appeal. Life, however, was an equally attractive choice. It provided its own source of hope.

2. **Life, though difficult, is meaningful.** “needful for you” (Phil. 1:24-25)

Paul’s present situation did not alter his motivation, his goal, his actions, or his excitement. He gave his life for others. Yes, death would be better – “far better” (1:23), but it would only be better *for him*. His continued earthly existence, however, would be better *for them*. What he anticipated in Heaven secured his personal hope, but what he saw in them gave him hope for the Church. So, if only in his own mind, Paul chose to stay. He still had meaningful ministry in store.

The apparent absence of significant impact steals hope from many. Senior citizens are particularly vulnerable. They repeatedly question why God delays their death and forbids their immediate entrance into Heaven as if God is punishing them in some way. Though multiple sources communicate to them the value that their presence still offers, they discount their ability to live a meaningful existence.

Similar doubts about the reality of a meaningful existence plague people of all ages and life situations. If you are one of those people, do something about it. First, go the Scriptures. Study about God’s mission for His people. See how He used weak people, young people, old people, Jewish and Gentile people, male and female people to accomplish that mission. This will strengthen your faith that God still wants to use you.

Second, if you presently assess your life as unimportant, then find someone else who feels the same, and become important to them. The best way to find meaning is to serve. Restore your hope by bringing hope to another.

3. **Suffering, though painful, is normal.** “given…to suffer” (Phil. 1:29)

When Paul chose to accept Jesus’ call, he began a ministry of suffering (Acts 9:16). Yes, Paul’s body would have eventually ached and groaned due to the normal aging process. Beatings, stonings, shipwrecks, and harsh treatment in prison hastened his body’s degeneration and heightened his need for relief.

Though Paul’s identification with Jesus increased his pain, suffering is not unique to Christians. Life begins with agony, and it often ends that way. Suffering is normal. A *hopeful response* to suffering is rare, however. Any person enduring pain hopes that the pain will soon end. There’s nothing unusual about that. But a Christian’s hope endures for a different reason.

The Christian has hope that God uses pain for good purposes (Rom. 8:28; James 1:2-31). The Christian has hope that the pain, though severe, is limited by the love and wisdom of God (1 Cor. 10:13). Why? Because that is what God has promised. God’s promises enable the endurance of our hope.
Conclusion: Paul’s confinement eventually gave way to freedom…for a time. That’s the thing about suffering. It goes, and it comes. One day, it will go for the final time. Our hope is not in pain’s end; our hope is in the God who rules it now. If God could maintain Paul’s hope in his difficult circumstances, He can do the same for you in yours.

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