

Philippians 1:21-30 N.T. 185 (NRSV)

²¹For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. ²²If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. 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 for you. ²⁵Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith, ²⁶so that I may share abundantly in your boasting in Christ Jesus when I come to you again.

²⁷Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. ²⁹For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well—³⁰since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

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“A Reason to Stay!”

Opening Prayer: Please bow with me in prayer. O God, we long for our lives to be meaningful and full of hope. But so often things don't go as planned, and we end up discouraged and filled with despair. Speak to us today. Fill our hearts, and minds, and souls with your unending hope. Renew within us a reason to live. In Jesus' precious name we pray, **Amen.**

Introduction: **You're driving** to work when a truck in front of you throws up a stone **chipping your windshield**. It's a deep chip and you're sure in no time flat it'll grow to be a full-fledged crack all the way across your windshield.

You get to work and your boss chews you out for not completing an assignment to his liking. It doesn't matter that what he asked for didn't make any sense in the first place, and that he doesn't even have a clue how to do it himself, **cause it's all your fault** since you're low man on the totem pole.

Then as your heading home you get caught in a traffic jam so as you pull into the driveway a half-hour late, **your spouse** is standing there disgusted with you because you'd promised to take your teenage son to band practice and your wife's just getting back from dropping him off.

And then finally, as you walk through the door, **your daughter** shows the homework you'd helped her with the night before, and it's all marked up in red. It turns out that the way you learned things 20-years ago isn't the way they're teaching kids to do things today.

Talk about a bad day. This is one of those days when you just can't seem to catch a break. How's the old song from “**Hee Haw**” go? “*Gloom, despair, and agony on me. Deep dark dispersion and excessive misery. If it weren't for bad luck I'd have no luck at all. Gloom, despair, and agony on me.*”

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How many of you have ever had a day like that? Raise your hand. (Wait for people to respond.) And while a bad day is bad enough what do you do when the day stretches into a week, and the week stretches into month, and the month stretches into year? **All you want to do** is throw in the proverbial towel. That's when your need "***A Reason to Stay.***" A reason far stronger **than your** deep dark dispersion and excessive misery.

PAUSE

Move I.

Everyone is tempted to quit and walk away. Bad things happen to good people all the time. You do your best. You try really hard to do the right thing. You maintain your integrity, and yet setbacks, hardships, and outright failures are commonplace realities. This is not a new development; **this has been the case** for as long as we human beings have walked the face of the earth.

Many Biblical scholars believe that the oldest book in the Bible isn't what you might think it is. **If you ask** the typical person which is the oldest book in the Bible, **I expect many** would answer Genesis. After all it does open with the words, "In the beginning." How could there be anything older than the beginning? Well, when Biblical scholars ask the question which book is the oldest book in the Bible, they aren't referring to which tells the oldest stories. No, **what they are asking** is which book was reduced to writing before the others? **Before Moses** gave us God's law, **before Abraham** became father to a great nation, and quite possibly **before Noah** built his ark, there was a man who was blameless and upright who feared God and shunned evil. Who was he? (Wait for answer). **Yes, his name was Job** and he lived in the land of Uz. **Most Biblical scholars** believe that the book of Job is the oldest book in the Bible, in fact some even think it is the oldest book in the world. So, the story of Job goes back about as far as you can go.

And what happen to Job? All kinds of bad stuff. **First** the Sabeans came and carried off his oxen and donkeys and killed his servants who were watching them. **Next**, fire came down from heaven and burned up his sheep and all of his servants who were watching them. **Next**, Chaldean raiding parties came and carted off his camels and killed all his servants who were watching them. **And finally**, a mighty wind collapsed Job's house while all his sons and daughters were partying inside killing them all. Talk about when it rains it pours, this is a veritable flood of bad overtaking this blameless and upright man.

And then, as if that wasn't enough, to add insult to injury, **Job develops very painful sores** that covered his body from the top of his head all of the way down to the soles of his feet. **The bad day of that fellow** I described in the introduction to today's message seems like a walk in the park compared to Job's day. How could things get any worse? **Feeling that enough is enough**, Job's wife even tells him to just "**curse God and die**" (Job 2:9).

When life is disintegrating all around you, death seems like a more and more appealing alternative. It's just not worth it anymore. There's just too much pain to carry on. You're tempted to just quit and walk away from life. Fortunately, most people resist that temptation and ride through the rough times. **That's what Job did.** Job maintained his integrity (Job 47:5). But tragically some people give in to the temptation and walk away from life. **They kill themselves.** Each year in America nearly **48,000** people, young and old, male and female, commit suicide. (And that doesn't include the spike in suicides this year since the pandemic struck back in March.) **How many of you** have had a family member or close friend who has committed suicide? In the relatively short time, I have been in ministry, on more than one occasion **I have sat and cried with a family** as they tried to make sense of a loved one's suicide. And every one of those family members feels guilty. Somehow, they should have been able to stop what happened. But they couldn't.

Into every life there comes some trouble. Bad stuff happens to good people every day. **There's a sirens call**, to "*curse God and die!*" **Yes, from time to time, everyone is tempted to just quit and walk away.**

End I.

Move II.

But each of us has a purpose. Or perhaps I should say each of us have **purposes plural** as opposed to a purpose singular. It's not so much that there is only one thing God put you on the earth to do, there are multiple things. And it's not that the set of things you do will stay the same throughout your lifetime. **Our lives** have times or seasons. God designed things that way. **Let's take a woman** who is a mother. What she does changes as her children grow. **She might** coach t-ball when her kids are in pre-school **and run the band boosters** when her kids are teenagers. **But then when** her kids have grown and are quote "on-their-own" she may do volunteer work at the arts center, or stock shelves at the food pantry. Each of those activities have a purpose, and whichever she's doing at that moment, is her purpose at that time.

Our Bible lesson today is part of another one of the Apostle Paul's letters to the early churches spread throughout the Roman Empire. Lately we have focused mostly on Paul's letter to the Christians in Roman itself, but this week we shift to Paul's letter to the Christians at **Philippi in Macedonia**. Years earlier, while on his second missionary journey, Paul, along with Timothy and Silas, **had planted** the church there. So, Paul has a special affection for the believers there in Philippi. But a lot has happened since then. Paul has endured all kinds of persecutions and hardships. **In fact**, he's actually writing this letter while he's in prison in Rome. If you were to trace Paul's life since when he founded the church in Philippi to when he's writing this letter to them, you would see that Paul didn't just have a few random bad days, his bad days had long since stretched out into being a bad decade. **Countless times** Jewish and Roman authorities have had him beaten, five times with 39 stripes, assumed to be one less than would kill a man. **He's also** been shipwrecked three times, robbed, gone hungry for weeks, **and even** been stoned. Paul's life, the life of an apostle, was a hard life full of pain and suffering.

Knowing that, you might think Paul would be a down and out when he writes this letter. But even in prison, Paul has found he still has a purpose. **In Philippians 1:12-14 (NRSV)** Paul writes, **“I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the word with greater boldness and without fear.”** Talk about finding the silver lining even in the darkest storm cloud. Put Paul in a Roman jail, and what does he do? He preaches the Gospel to his jailers. **When life hands you lemons; make lemonade.**

But that was Paul, the great Apostle charged with taking the Gospel to the Gentiles. Our purposes aren't nearly as important and our faith isn't nearly as strong as Paul's, **are they?** Perhaps that's true, but what God's given you to do is important to God. **We're all part** of a well-oiled machine, each gear and cog need to do their part. One broken tooth, one slipped gear, and the whole works grinds to a halt. **“Whatever you do, work at it with all of your heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters”** (Colossian 3:23, NIV). **It doesn't matter** if you're a stay-at-home mom, **or a supervisor** at a local factory, **or a school bus driver, or are a self-employed entrepreneur, or a personal care giver, or the president** of a multi-million dollar corporation, **whatever you do**, do it as unto the Lord. **There will be times** when you grow weary and discouraged. **You might even feel** like throwing in the proverbial towel. **But each and every one of us still has a purpose.**

End II.

Move III.

So, stay for the sake of the people God's placed in your life. You do have a purpose, **and as Rick Warren says** in opening line of his book, "***A Purpose Driven Life,***" "***It's not about you.***" The longer I live the more true I see that this is. **Personal fulfilment** is momentary. Peace-of-mind is momentary. Even happiness is momentary. They all come and go with our ever-changing moods. "**But Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever**" (Hebrews 13:8). God's central purpose for us all boils down to what Jesus told us is the greatest of the commands, **to Love God and to love others** (Mathew 22:37-39). That's fulfillment, that's peace-of-mine, that's happiness, that's purpose.

In our Bible Lesson today we find Paul playfully debating whether it would be better for him to **live or die**. Now he's not doing this in the sense that some depressed, suicidal person might. Rather, he does this as a mature follower of Christ, who firmly believes Jesus' promised that he's going to take us to be with him. Paul writes, "**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;**" (Philippians 1:22b-23, NRSV). This life is a struggle. **Famine**, pestilence, war, and death just keep on happening. Our ageing bodies and minds gradually start to fail. Friends grow old and die. It does seem far better to go and be with Christ. **We all long for a time** and place where there will be no more death, or mourning, or crying, or pain (Rev. 21:4, NRSV). **For Paul**, that would mean no more beatings, no more shipwrecks, and no more hungry nights in prison. **For us** it might mean no more back aching, no more worrying about money, and no more COVID-19.

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But just as Paul's faith wasn't an escapist faith our faith isn't either. While we may toy with thought of wanting to go, **we all have a reason to stay.** **There are people** in this world who are depending on us. There are people in this world whose lives are enriched because we're in their lives.

Once again, this week, Eugene Peterson does a masterful job of giving a fresh expression of what Paul wrote so many years ago. Peterson paraphrases **Philippians 1:22-25 (MSG)** like this: **“As long as I'm alive in this body, there is good work for me to do. If I had to choose right now, I hardly know which I'd choose. Hard choice! The desire to break camp here and be with Christ is powerful. Some days I can think of nothing better. But most days, because of what you are going through, I am sure that it's better for me to stick it out here. So I plan to be around awhile, companion to you as your growth and joy in this life of trusting God continues.”** **Who are you helping** to grow in the joy in this life of trusting in God? Is it your children—your grandchildren? Is it the children and grandchildren that don't have believing parents and grandparents? Is it your neighbors? Is it your friends or perhaps even your enemies? **What's your reason to say?** We all need a reason to stay. And God has put reasons all around us. **So yes, please stay for the sake of the people God's placed in your life.**

End III.

Conclusion: We all have bad days now and then, but what do you do when the bad day stretches into a week, and the week stretches into month, and the month stretches into a year. That's when your need "*A Reason to Stay.*" **Yes, from time to time, everyone is tempted to just quit and walk away.** Job lost his oxen, and his donkeys, and his sheep, and his camels, and even his children, and finally his health. It would have been easy for Job to take his wife's advice, and just curse God and die. **But each and every one of us still has a purpose.** Paul's purpose was to preach the Gospel to the Gentiles. Your purpose may be to raise your kids, or to supervise a factory, or driver a school-bus, or lead a multi-million-dollar corporation. **So please, stay for the sake of the people God's placed in your life.** You have children and grandchildren, friends and neighbors, all kinds of people all around you. So, if you need "*A Reason to Stay,*" **God's given you plenty of them.**

{Play video: "*You Raise Me Up Westlife.wmv*" [2:07]}

Closing Prayer: Let's pray. O God, when we're down and our souls are oh so weary; you lift us up and give us a reason to stay. Thank you, Lord, for all of the reasons we have to stay. **Amen!**

10:30 Closing Hymn: "*O Master, Let Me Walk with Thee*" Red Hymnal 430

All Four Verses

Sending Forth: Are you weary and discouraged? Are you ready to throw in the proverbial towel? Then look to God for a reason to stay. Go forth and stay for the sake of the people God's placed in your life. **And all of God's people said...Amen!**