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BETTER THAN BORA BORA
Philippians 1:19-23

There's a story out of Ireland about a priest who walked into a pub there. The first man he encountered was Kelly. The priest said, "Kelly, do you want to go to heaven?" Kelly answered, "Oh, yes, Father, of course I do." The priest said, "Fine, then, go over there and stand by that wall." Then the priest talked to O'Sullivan and asked him, "Do you want to go to heaven?" O'Sullivan answered, "Indeed I do Father." So the priest said, "Then go over there and stand by that wall next to Kelly." Next the priest came to O'Toole. He also asked him, "Do you want to go to heaven?" O'Toole answered, "No, Father, I don't." Surprised by this, the priest asked, "You don't want to go to heaven when you die?" O'Toole replied, "Oh, well, of course I want to go to heaven when I die. I just thought you were getting together a group to go right now."

Mr. O'Toole expressed a very common sentiment. Yes, given the alternatives we all would likely choose heaven when we die, but no one is eager to make the trip. Socrates said it is possible that death could turn out to be the greatest blessing for us, "yet men fear it as if they knew that it is the greatest of evils." That is true. When we think about dealing with fear, we have to think about the fear of death, for it is the biggest and most consistent fear of all. In fact, all our other fears pretty much pale in comparison. If we are going to live fearlessly then we must have some way of dealing with the fear of death. For some help with this we will look today at Philippians 1:19-23, written by Paul who had a number of close calls with death, and when he wrote these words was potentially staring it in the face.

DEATH IS THE MOST BASIC AND CONSISTENT FEAR

In 1 Samuel 13 there is an incident that was hugely significant in the life of King Saul, one that began his downfall. But there is something that we might not notice that was happening there. Israel and the Philistines were at war. The Philistines were massing their troops to attack. The Israelis were vastly outnumbered. Even worse, the Philistines had the latest in weapons technology, and the Israelis didn't. Verse 22 says, "On the day of battle not a soldier with Saul and Jonathan had a sword or spear in his hand." All they had were plow points, axes, sickles and clubs. Verse 7 says, "Some Hebrews even crossed the Jordan in the land of Gad and Gilead." That means they ran away. It goes on, "Saul remained at Gilgal, and all

the troops with him were quaking with fear.” What were they so afraid of? They were afraid they were going to die in battle.

Luke 8:23-24 tells us about what happened when Jesus and his disciples took a boat trip across the Sea of Galilee. “As they sailed he (Jesus) fell asleep. A squall came down on the lake, so that the boat was being swamped, and they were in great danger. The disciples went and woke him, saying, ‘Master, master, we’re going to drown!’” They were afraid they were going to die!

This is no news to you. We are all afraid of death. Hearing the words “It’s cancer” is something we dread and hope we never experience. That’s because it makes the threat of dying very immediate. If having cancer just meant you were going to have to cough up lots of money for treatment of the disease but you would be cured for sure, then it would be bad news, but it wouldn’t be that worst news you could ever receive. The possibility of death totally changes that equation.

Edward Welch in his book, *Running Scared*, said that every fear we have finds its roots in the fear of death. Epicurus, the Greek philosopher, said, “It is possible to provide security against other ills, but as far as fear of death is concerned, we live in a city without walls.” In other words, there is no defense against it. Thomas Pyszczynski, Professor of Psychology at the University of Colorado, Colorado Springs, says that death is always on the fringes of our awareness.

Dr. Alex Lickerman, an MD, wrote an article in *Psychology Today*, about how to deal with the fear of death. This was prompted by a protracted series of physical problems that brought the possibility of death very much into play for him. He said, “I’m always surprised by people who say they’re not afraid to die...I’ve always wondered if that answer hides a denial so deeply seated it cannot be faced.” He says he loves being here and doesn’t want to leave. Even before his brush with death he said when he tried to face the idea of death he unearthed a fear so overwhelming that his mind turned away from it like magnets with identical poles. But his close encounter with death made it much worse. He has tried to deal with the fear. He has adopted Buddhism, which he thinks holds the answer, but has not helped. Here is his conclusion, “I’ve tried to resolve my fear of death intellectually and come to the conclusion that it can’t be done.” That’s not very helpful for dealing with this fear.

Robert Wilkins, a British psychiatrist who is his nation’s leading expert on fear of dying, wrote a book titled *The Bedside Book of Death*. In it he wrote, “What I’ve

done is make a conscious decision to confront my death anxieties, the thesis being that the more you address issues about death, the less fearful they become. It hasn't worked of course...I'm just as frightened as I ever was."

Death is so very final and so very certain. We are going to die, and we cannot stop it. But that doesn't keep us from trying to avoid it. There have been and continue to be lots of efforts to prolong life, to no avail. In the 1930's a nutritionist named Clive McCay designed a low calorie diet for lab rats that enabled them to live the equivalent of 130 human years. He lived on his own diet hoping it would extend his life as it did for the rats. He died at the age of 69.

In the 1980's researcher Roy Walford came up with another diet plan based on calorie restriction and called it the 120 year diet. He published two books about it and was certain he would live well past the century mark. He died at the age of 79. Euell Gibbons was a proponent of organic foods and especially of wild foods as a way of staying healthy and living long. He died at the age of 64. Nutritionist Adelle Davis was the first to draw attention to the dangers of refined foods. She died at the age of 70.

The classic was Jerome Rodale who had a publishing empire dedicated to health and longevity. He was called the guru of the organic food movement. He was invited to appear on the Dick Cavett television show when he was 72. He took his seat next to Cavett, proclaimed that he knew he would live to be at least 100, then he made an odd sound and died right there on the set.

Scientists are now studying the possibility of curing the problem of aging and death. Harvard trained physicist Michio Kaku believes he is a member of the last generation of humans who will have to die. He believes that our grandchildren will have the very real possibility of never dying.

Max Lucado wrote an article in which he talked about how 10 years ago he began to notice a tremor in his thumb. He said as he combed his hair his thumb quivered. Putting on a golf course his thumb kept twitching. The problem for him was that his dad had been an oil field mechanic and one day noticed while wielding a screwdriver his hand shaking. It turned out he had ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease, a certain death sentence. Lucado says he put off seeing a doctor about his thumb for a long time because it was just too scary. He was sure he was going to hear that same death sentence, that he had ALS. He finally went to see a neurologist who did a neurological exam. Lucado says when the doctor was finished Max was thinking,

“This is it. He’s going to deliver the death sentence.” Instead the doctor told him it was nothing to worry about.

When Paul wrote Philippians he was at a watershed moment in his life. He was awaiting trial. His judge would be Nero, a violent man whose sanity was tenuous at best. Paul would either be acquitted and released or found guilty and executed. There were no guarantees on how that was going to turn out. In these verses he shows how to deal with not just the possibility, but the certainty of our demise.

LIVE WELL

Paul wrote in verse 19, “I know that through your prayers and God’s provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, what has happened to me will turn out for my deliverance.” That sounds like he was confident that he was going to be set free. But that wasn’t what he meant at all. What kind of deliverance did he mean? He explains it in verse 20. “I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or by death.”

In the Old Testament Job was also confident of deliverance. In Job 13:16 after affirming his hope in God despite all that had happened to him, he said, “Indeed, this will turn out for my deliverance.” What was the “this” that would turn out for his deliverance? Remember that his friends who visited him after the terrible disasters that befell him, after all his children had died, tried to help him get perspective on it and fix the problem. Horrible things had happened to him, worse than anyone else they knew. They knew that God is just and that he is sovereign. Their theology on those points was sound. The reasoning then was obvious. God rewards those who obey him and judges those who do not. Since God is always just, and he let these things happen to Job, it could only be because Job deserved it.

It seemed obvious that if Job was righteous and God let these things happen to him when he didn’t deserve them, then God was not fair, and that was not true. So they preached to Job what had to obviously be true and begged him to admit his wrong so he could repent of it, be forgiven and stop the bleeding. The only problem with their reasoning was that it was all wrong. Yes, God is just and sovereign, but he did not allow these things to happen to Job because he’d earned them. Job knew that. He protested his innocence and argued with his friends. But in the end, all he could do was say, “I know that this will turn out for my deliverance.”

His deliverance would not be defined by all the bad things being undone. What was done was done. His kids were dead and they weren't coming back. There was no way to unwind the grief of that. The deliverance he longed for was vindication. It would come only when God proved his "friends" wrong and declared Job innocent. Paul's deliverance was also vindication. His vindication would come by glorifying and serving his Lord Jesus no matter what happened. If he lived, he would glorify Jesus with every moment of his life. And if he died, he would serve him by being a martyr in his name.

Paul summed it up this way. "For me to live is Christ." He was not about Paul being noticed and applauded. Not about Paul having power or success. Not about Paul being important. Not about Paul getting approval. Not about Paul being comfortable or rich. He was about Christ, and nothing else. That was his passion, and later he would write that he counted everything else in life as a loss compared to Christ.

Serving Christ shined so brightly for Paul that it totally eclipsed the fear of death. He didn't waste time being afraid of dying. He had been right on the edge of death many times in his life. Instead of stressing about it, he focused on serving and glorifying Jesus as long as he was alive. And that's one of the ways we can deal with the fear of death. Instead of being intimidated by it, running from it, focus on a much better way to live. Focus on serving Christ. Strive to make every day of your life be a gift to him that will honor him.

Laurie and I had to go up to the Santa Cruz area a couple of weeks ago to do a wedding for Lauren Bullock and her fiancé Mo. Right before this happened we learned we had a leak in our kitchen that caused water damage. They came and tore out cabinets, floors and wall board. We had to coordinate with our insurance company and deal with contractors to make a plan. We've never done it before and were finding it stressful. But when we went up to the wedding we basically put it all aside. We had to figure out where we were going, which was not trivial. We got lost several times on the two day trip. We had to plot out our steps because we had a narrow window for making our flight home, and it was the last flight of the night for San Diego. We were focused on what was needed for the wedding. These things occupied our minds, so we didn't do much thinking about the house. If we can focus on, "for me to live is Christ" each day, we will be too busy to spend our time fretting about death.

But in order for us to do that there is a crucial component that we see in verse 21.

BE CONFIDENT IN HOPE

The second part of verse 21 says, “and to die is gain.” Paul was in a total win-win situation. If he was acquitted and released, he would go on living his life to glorify Christ. But if he was found guilty and executed he would gain. It would be a plus! The word he used meant profit. In other words, dying would be a good thing, a better thing than living!

In fact, he went on to say in verse 23, “I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.” Paul said if he was given his choice, he would choose to be executed. He wasn’t merely saying, “If I am declared guilty and they kill me I’ll be all right.” He was saying he preferred that outcome. The word translated “desire” is the same word often translated “lust.” So Paul said he actually lusted after dying!

I’ve been to a couple of funerals lately. It is common for people to say of the deceased “they’re in a better place.” But you know what you don’t hear, ever? You don’t hear anyone say, “That lucky dog. How come they got to go and not me? When’s it going to be my turn?” Yeah we all like to say they’re in a better place, but we don’t want to go there, which suggests that we aren’t all that convinced about it. After Michael returned from deployment to Afghanistan a few years ago he and Carissa got to go on what they think of as their real honeymoon. They went to Bora Bora. They said it was spectacular. They showed us pictures, and they were gorgeous. I would say for that time they were in a better place. If they were somehow to go back I would envy them. And I would seriously say, “Man, I’d love to go there.” Laurie and I will have our 40th anniversary next year and we talked about doing something special. I’d jump at an opportunity to go there, but we just can’t afford it. If I said of Michael and Carissa when they were in Bora Bora, “they’re in a better place,” but you said, “Hey, I can send you there if you’d like to go,” and I responded, “No way. I’d like to put that off as long as I possibly can. Actually if it were possible I’d like to avoid ever going there,” you would be right to conclude I don’t really think Bora Bora is a good place at all. If I really thought it is terrific, I’d be anxious to go there. Yet we say those who are deceased are in a better place, and then do everything within our power to not go there. Which clearly must mean we don’t really believe it’s better at all.

Paul, however, was totally convinced. He literally said, “I want to go. In fact, I lust after the chance to go.” He didn’t think it was as good as being here, either one would be fine with him. He thought it was better, and not by a narrow margin. He said it was better by far. He actually emphasized that by using bad grammar to express it. He said dying and being with Christ is “much more better.” Da Jesus Book, which is the translation of the New Testament into Hawaiian Pidgin, renders

that phrase, “Dass mo bettah, yeah.” This wasn’t the only time Paul said this. In 2 Corinthians 5:8 he said he “would prefer to be away from the body (meaning to die) and at home with the Lord.”

What made Paul so confident about dying that he preferred it to living? Honestly, people usually talk about the better place as a way of feeling better about the loss of a loved one. But it’s mostly wishful thinking. Paul didn’t have wishful thinking, he had total confidence. That’s because of two things. First, he’d seen Jesus, risen from the dead, so he knew that the resurrection was for real. Second, according to 2 Corinthians 12 he had actually been given a glimpse of what it’s like in the eternal kingdom of Christ, and he said it is much more better than this life.

I’m going to talk a little about that kingdom, but understand the difference between me and Paul. If you ask me, “Hey, what is Bora Bora like? Is it nice?” I can answer positively. I can tell you, “It’s gorgeous there. It’s warm, with gentle tropical breezes. It is lush and green. The water is spectacular. It’s warm and it is a clear turquoise that you can’t even imagine. The snorkeling there would blow your mind.” Those things are true, but I’ve never been there. I don’t know them for a fact because I’ve not seen them first hand. Now, if you asked Michael and Carissa about Bora Bora, they could wax eloquent about it because they’ve seen it with their own eyes. They were blown away by its beauty. All I can relate to you is what I’ve been told by them. Paul has seen the kingdom, all I can do is relate to you what I’ve been told by people who’ve seen it, like Paul.

Well then what is the Kingdom of Christ like? Honestly most of us aren’t that anxious to go there because we can’t envision what it will be like, and what we do imagine seems a bit unappealing. We’ll be disembodied spirits that spend eternity in something like an unending church service worshiping God. Hey I like church, but not 24/7 without end. Fortunately, that’s a misconception about what the kingdom is like. All right, then what will it be like?

It will not be totally alien

It is helpful to remember 1 John 3:2. It says when we see Jesus we will be like him. We will have character like him, which is great, but we will also exist like him. 1 Corinthians 15 says he is the “first fruit.” Well subsequent fruit is like the first fruit. Back in August the peaches I bought were much like the ones I bought in July, the first peaches. So we will exist as Jesus does. So what was Jesus like after he rose from the dead?

He was physical, very real. He had a body. It was very much a human body that could do physical things, such as eat. It was totally recognizable, even down to having scars from his execution. But it did not have all the limits we have now. It was able to do things that we can't do, like suddenly appear in a locked room.

We will be like that. We will have physical bodies that are quite recognizable. Now in a way, that's a bit disappointing. I was kind of hoping I'd look a lot better in eternity. Have you been in the Under Armour store in the Outlet Mall? They have these mannequins they use to display their clothes, only the mannequins are totally ripped. They're arms and shoulders are huge. I want to look like that.

Um, let's stay on point here. The point is the kingdom of Christ is going to be a lot like this world. It is going to be a new earth. It will be earth restored to the beauty that God intended. We will be interacting there with friends and loved ones, we will be doing things much like we do now, just without the limitations. Similarly, the world around us will be much like it is now, just without the limitations as we'll see in a moment.

It will not be subjected to futility

Romans 8:19-21 says, "For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God."

The New American Standard version says creation was subjected to futility, and that it waits to be "set free from its slavery to corruption." The point this passage makes is that creation itself has been impacted by the sin of humans. It is not in its original, mint condition. The whole thing has been impacted by the arrival of sin and death. But that will end some day. In his eternal kingdom all that will be reversed, and the new earth will have all the beauty and glory of the original before sin and death brought all the futility and decay.

We can't really grasp how amazing it would be for the effects of sin and death to be removed. All of the suffering of this world is directly linked to sin and death. Remove those and life here would be unimaginably better. Just think about the fact that almost every wonderful thing in this world has a "but" attached to it. Laurie and I went to a wedding up in the redwoods a few weeks back. The setting of the redwoods isn't our cup of tea, but we recognized it is beautiful. However, both of

us had significant allergy attacks as a result of our jaunt among the trees. It's a bummer that something beautiful like that can cause that kind of reaction.

You all know that what really touches Laurie's and my heart is the tropical scene. We love warm weather, warm ocean water, and the spectacular turquoise and blue of the ocean there. It just speaks to us powerfully like nowhere else. But do you know what is undeniably out there in that ocean? Sharks, sting rays, and jellyfish. You have to be aware of them or they can ruin your whole day. Unfortunately they can ruin your whole day even if you are aware of them and trying to avoid them. Furthermore, we love the warmth of the tropical sun, but if you're not careful and protecting yourself, you can end up with a painful sunburn. And let's not forget the bugs that are an inevitable part of a warm, humid climate.

When we were in New Orleans a couple of years back we experienced something we'd heard about, but hadn't actually tasted. They're called beignets. They're sort of a New Orleans equivalent of a doughnut. They are delicious. But, of course, as with almost everything that is delicious, they're bad for you. Why is it that so much of what tastes so good is not good for your health? Welcome to a creation subjected to futility.

The future kingdom of God will be a place totally freed from that slavery to corruption, sin, death, decay and futility. There will be nothing to fear. It will be beautiful, enjoyable and free beyond our ability to even imagine. Colors will be more brilliant and vivid, tastes and smells will be more profound, we will have a deeper capacity for enjoyment and we will live totally without fear.

It will be a place of joy

Romans 14:17 says, "The kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." Paul meant it's not a place of rules about what kinds of food are permitted, but a place of peace and joy. We have a taste of that right now as we live in God's kingdom, but in the next age we will have not just a taste, but a feast. We will experience unfiltered, full blast peace and joy. In his book, *Secrets In The Dark*, Frederick Buechner wrote that in the kingdom of God "it will no longer be humans in their lunacy who are in charge of the world but God in his mercy who will be in charge...It's the time above all else for wild rejoicing, like getting out of jail, like being cured of cancer, like finally, at long last, coming home."

In 2 Corinthians 12:4 Paul, speaking of the glimpse he was given of the kingdom of God, of paradise, says he heard inexpressible things, things no one is permitted to tell. He didn't mean there was a gag rule. He meant that human language did not allow him to explain what he heard and saw in that experience of the kingdom that awaits us. In other words, it was literally beautiful beyond description.

Let's think about joy for a few moments. I recently recalled a curious experience I had a few years back. I watched on television the movie *The Rookie*. I'd seen it before, but it captured my attention again. It's based on the true story of Jim Morris, a high school baseball coach whose team insisted that when he threw batting practice he was unhittable. They made a bet with him. If they won their district championship he would have to go to an open tryout for a major league team. Against the odds, they did win their championship. He thought it was ridiculous but at the age of 35 he went to a tryout run by the Tampa Bay Rays. The scout wasn't interested in him, but allowed him to try out as a favor so he could keep his promise to his team. To his shock and the shock of everyone there, he threw 12 straight fastballs at 98 miles per hour. The Rays signed him to a minor league contract, and eventually he was called up to the major league team. There is a moment in the movie when he gets the call and walks into that major league stadium as a player for the first time. Weirdly, even though I know the story and have seen the movie before, when I saw that scene I started getting choked up. I felt some powerful feeling that it is hard to even describe. Human language doesn't permit a complete explanation. It is an ache, a longing, and something indefinable, but also joy. I don't even know why. That indefinable feeling has something to do with longing for joy, to not just get a whiff of it, but to have it full force, to possess it not just for a moment, but continually. And that is what we will experience in God's kingdom.

There have been moments in my life that are so poignant, so touching, so beautiful, so joyful that, again, I can't really even express it. You have had those moments too, those achingly special times. Even as you experience them you know they are going to be brief. They pass and leave only the lingering memory of them. You wish that somehow you could capture them, hold them, feel them permanently. Those moments are moments of real joy. In the kingdom of God we will experience that joy, only it won't be fleeting, it will be there always. It will, at last, be the fulfillment of that longing, the experience of that incredible joy, possessing it and never losing it.

In 1 John 5:13 the apostle John wrote, “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life.” The ultimate question we all face is what is going to happen after I die? John says it is possible to know. Not wonder, not fear, not merely wish or hope, but know. You can know for a fact, without a hint of doubt, that you have eternal life in God’s kingdom. How can we know that? He tells us. Believe in the name of the son of God. In other words, believe in Jesus, trust in who he is and what he did for us. Again in 2 Corinthians 5:8 Paul said we can be confident of this.

CONCLUSION

Death is always going to be intimidating for us. It is the ultimate unknown and it is the most final, irreversible event in all human experience. Sometimes we fear not just the event but the process. Here are two thoughts to conclude:

Hebrews 4:16 says, “Let us then approach God’s throne of grace with confidence so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.” As we trust in God’s grace, we will find the grace to help us in our time of need. That means that as we go through the process of dying, whatever it may be for us, God will give us the grace we need to go through it. We will not be alone. Hebrews 13:5 tells us, “God has said, ‘Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you.’” That means you won’t be alone in that time. 2 Corinthians 1:3 calls God, “the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.” God will be with you, comforting you with his compassion, every step of the way. Romans 8:38-39 says nothing, absolutely nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ. It lists death as one of the things that cannot separate us from his love. In the moments of our death we will still be experiencing God’s love.

Psalms 116:15 says, “Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his faithful servants.” Our death matters to God. He cares about us in those most difficult moments. The more we walk with God, living in his presence now, the greater will be the comfort we receive as we walk through that final trial. This is why David wrote those famous words in Psalm 23:4, “Even though I walk through the darkest valley, I will fear no evil, for you are with me.”

Kate Bowler, prof at Duke, terminal cancer, wrote, “I felt like I was cracked open and I could see everything clearly for the first time...it was mostly that I felt God’s presence. It was less like, here are some important spiritual truths I know intellectually about God. There are 4 of them. I have a PowerPoint presentation. It

was instead more like the way you'd feel a friend or like someone holding you. I just didn't feel quite as scared. I just felt loved by God."

Romans 8:23 says, "Not only so, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for our adoption to sonship, the redemption of our bodies." He's right, we do groan inwardly. Life is hard, and will hold many sorrows as well as joys for us, but the trajectory of life, especially in the second half, is downward. But he says we have something to look forward to. He says we eagerly await it. There was a commercial on TV a few years ago. It depicted Mom and Dad putting their kids to bed, but the kids said, "I'm too excited to sleep." It was an ad for Disney World, and the story was that the next day the family would be leaving for a trip to Disney World. The kids were so eager, so anxiously anticipating the fun of Disney World that they couldn't sleep. The last scene shows Mom and Dad lying in bed in the dark, and Dad says, "I'm too excited to sleep." Paul says the redemption of our bodies, our arrival in God's eternal kingdom, is so fantastic, so joyful, so wonderful, that we eagerly await it. We're too excited to sleep, because what lies ahead is infinitely better than Disney World or any other terrific place in this world. So don't fear it. Look forward to it.