



57A PENTECOST 16A BIBLE STUDY

The meaning of life

Abstract

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. 22 If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know!

Philippians 1:21–22

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PROPER 20

YEAR A

Old Testament & Psalm, Option I

Old Testament Exodus 16:2–15

Psalm Psalm 105:1–6, 37–45

or

Old Testament & Psalm, Option II

Old Testament Jonah 3:10–4:11

Psalm Psalm 145:1–8

New Testament Philippians 1:21–30

Gospel Matthew 20:1–16ⁱ

Paul explains his personal struggles to the Philippians. He says that their struggles are like his. He wants to appear encouraging and commends them for their approach to life in the faith.

This week's resources explore: knowing and choosing your path, and sticking to it when it is difficult.

Welcome and opening prayer

A prayer of praise

We praise you, Lord, for all that you are,
for the creation that is yours,
for its beauty and wonder, its diversity and richness.

We praise you for your presence and comfort
that swaddle us in your purity and enrich us with your abundance.

We praise you for your steadfastness
that perseveres with us, faltering disciples and failing followers.

We praise you that, day by day, you amaze and enrich us
and reveal yourself in new and unexpected ways.

We praise you that you are the same yesterday,
today and for ever – and yet forever new.

O Lord our God, you are indeed,
from the depth of our being,
highly to be praised.

Amen.

Introduction

This week I have chosen the New Testament reading. Paul's letter is written at a time when he is in prison, possibly being ill treated and certainly looking at charges that may well lead to his death. He discusses with his church friends his idea of the meaning and value of life, and the reading prompted me to look at my own life, what gives it meaning, what makes it valuable.

We are privileged today to be able to eavesdrop on Paul and his right-hand man, Timothy. They have been persecuted and imprisoned for sharing the good news of Jesus Christ. Despite their troubles – perhaps because of them – Paul is writing to the Christians of Philippi in Macedonia, Greece.

Philippi was the first place, as far as we know, that Paul visited in Europe. The Philippians are going through tough times, too. They live in a prosperous city of the Roman Empire. But many of them are Greek by birth, so they do not have the citizenship rights of Romans (including Paul). They could not vote. They could not own land. A good proportion of them were slaves. Disabilities were common. Infant mortality was high. Life expectancy for most was no more than 30 years. Therefore, there were a lot of widows and orphans.

Thanks to his visit, Paul was dear to them, and they to him. As you listen to Paul dictating his letter, try to imagine how Paul's words will sound to those ears in Philippi.

Reading

Philippians 1:21–30

²¹ For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. ²² If I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labor for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! ²³ I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; ²⁴ but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body. ²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, ²⁶ so that through my being with you again your boasting in Christ Jesus will abound on account of me.

²⁷ Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the one Spirit, striving together as one for the faith of the gospel ²⁸ without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. This is a sign to them that they will be destroyed, but that you will be saved—and that by God. ²⁹ For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him, ³⁰ since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have. ⁱⁱ

respond

For the word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

Exegesis

New Testament: Philippians 1.21-30

Philippians was written by Paul from prison, though we don't know whether from Caesarea in the late AD 50s or Rome in the early 60s. As we have it now, it is a composite of at least two letters that he wrote – 3.1a is clearly the end of one of them.

We pick up the letter after Paul's greetings to the 'saints' in Philippi (v.1), and an assurance of his prayers for them. In the rest of the first chapter, Paul explains his personal struggles to the Philippians, and says that their struggles are like his (v.30). He wants to appear encouraging and commends them for their approach to life in the faith, even when he's not sure himself if he should stick at it or not (v.22). Paul knows what these struggles are like and how intimidating opposition can be (v.28). He needs the support of the Philippians just as they need his.

Paul makes a good contrast with Jonah. Jonah was afraid to look foolish; Paul presses on with complete fearlessness. Jonah is so miserable he wishes he could die; Paul is so happy in Christ he wishes he could die, in order to be with Christ. Jonah cared nothing for the people of Nineveh; Paul cares so much for the people of Philippi that he would prefer to put off his own final glory if only he can stand by them.

There is also a similarity, for in both books God seeks to address those who have become enemies with a sign. In Jonah, it was Jonah himself, preaching in sackcloth. In Philippians it is the faithful church, confounding its enemies. Paul sees the church's enemies as lost, but also believes that God is not abandoning them but addressing them through the unity of the church.

Study Bible material

1:21 living is Christ and dying is gain As long as he is alive, Paul will be consumed with Christ's concerns, values, and mission. And if Paul dies, he will be relieved of his suffering and dwell with Christ (Phil 1:23).

What Happens When We Die? Devotional

1:22 flesh The Greek word used here, *sarx*, refers in this context to the physical body, but Paul often uses *sarx* in other ways. See note on 3:3.

fruitful labor If Paul continues his ministry, he is certain that he will see more Gentiles come to believe the gospel and be transformed by God's Spirit.

1:23 to depart and be with Christ Refers to dying. Christ's resurrection gives Paul hope in death (3:10–11, 20–21; compare note on Rom 1:4).

1:24 to remain in the flesh Refers to remaining alive, which Paul knows would be better for his churches.

1:27–30 These verses convey Paul's main reason for writing to the Philippians—to urge them to stand together for the gospel in the face of persecution and suffering.

1:27 a manner Paul knows that the way Christians live is important to their witness for the gospel.

standing firm Paul calls on believers to remain faithful to the gospel message through word and deed (Gal 5:1; Eph 6:14; Col 4:12).

Why a Good God Allows Suffering

striving side by side The believers need to band together as they struggle against hardship and persecution (compare note on Phil 1:29). Christian unity is one of Paul's major concerns throughout the letter (e.g., 2:2–4; 4:1–2).

1:28 in no way intimidated Standing firm together will strengthen the believers and give them confidence.

evidence of their destruction Refers to God's final judgment on the Day of Christ (v. 6 and note). The Philippians' fearlessness is evidence that God will rule against their adversaries.

of your salvation Refers to the Day of Christ and God's ultimate act of deliverance for those who put faith in Him.

1:29 suffering for him People in the Graeco-Roman world who became Christians would have faced all kinds of persecution. The problem people had with Christians was not so much that they were

following Christ, but that they were failing to properly worship the community's gods—especially the emperor.

1:30 same struggle Likely refers to the opposition that Paul encountered in Philippi (Acts 16:20–24).ⁱⁱⁱ

The Bible Knowledge Commentary

1:21. Paul's main purpose in living was to glorify Christ. Christ was the essence of his life. Yet Paul knew that if he were martyred, Christ would be glorified through the promotion of the gospel which would result from his testimony in death. And Paul himself would benefit, for death would result in his being with Christ (v. 23). The words **to die** suggest the act of dying, not the state of death.

1:22–24. The apostle's seeming frustration of mind is apparent in these verses. He knew if he could **go on living** there would certainly be fruit from his labor (v. 22). God would bless his work and continue to use him as He had in the past. Yet if Paul had a choice between going on living or dying for Christ, he was at a loss as to how to decide. He simply did not know which to choose. Of course the choice was really not up to him anyway.

Paul was distressed. He was hard-pressed to know which would bring the most glory to God and therefore be to everyone's advantage in the long run. His personal desire was **to depart and be with Christ** (v. 23). This he knew would be **better by far** for him since it would mean his release from the persecutions and other hardships that he suffered. But he also knew that the Philippians needed him. For them it was **more necessary** that he **remain in the body**, or stay alive (v. 24). Paul's selfless attitude is revealed here by his placing his friends' needs above his own desires.

1:25–26. New confidence of his release appears to have come to Paul. (The word **convinced** is the same word rendered "being confident" in v. 6.) By his release and return to them they would **progress ... in the faith** and would experience great **joy** (v. 25).

The rejoicing of the Philippians would **overflow** (v. 26; the same word is rendered "abound" in v. 9), and that exulting would be **in Christ Jesus**, the source of true joy for all believers. ("Joy" in v. 26 is the word "exulting" [*kauchēma*] which differs from the more common word for "joy" used more often in Phil., including v. 25.) They would exult because the one who had taught them about Christ would be with them again.

3. solemn exhortations (1:27–30)

1:27. The apostle had the believers in Philippi on his heart. Regardless of what would happen to him—release from bonds or martyrdom—he wanted them to honor and glorify Christ. The words **conduct yourselves** translate a political word which would mean much to the Philippian believers. Literally it means "live as citizens." Because Philippi was a Roman colony, the Christian inhabitants of the city would appreciate Paul's use of that verb. To live in a way that is **worthy of the gospel of Christ** (cf. Eph. 4:1) is indeed the responsibility of every child of God. This Paul exhorted the Philippians to do.

The saints embraced a common cause, for they each shared in the same body of Christ. Therefore Paul was burdened that they **stand firm** (cf. Phil. 4:1) **in one spirit** and contend **as one man** (lit., "in one soul") **for the faith of the gospel**, the body of truth (cf. "faith," Jude 3). Their **contending** (*synaltheutes*) for the faith suggests a joint effort, like that of an athletic team.

1:28. Paul wanted his readers to live courageously for Christ in the midst of opposition and persecution. True, they would be opposed but this should not frighten them **in any way**. Instead they were to be reminded at such times that their own victorious Christian response would be a sign that their opposers would eventually be destroyed. At the same time it would be **a sign** that the saints of God would be delivered **by God** Himself. This assurance would doubtless be the Holy Spirit working in their hearts.

1:29–30. So that being opposed would not come as a surprise, he gave them a reminder. Both believing on **Christ** and suffering **for Him** had been **granted to** them (v. 29). Suffering for Christ was not to be considered accidental or a divine punishment. Paul referred to a kind of suffering that was

really a sign of God's favor. The Greek word *echaristhē*, translated "granted," is derived from a word which means "grace" or "favor." Believing on Christ and suffering for Him are both associated with God's grace.

Paul and his readers shared a similar **struggle** (v. 30). So Paul encouraged them as they had him. They wanted to know how he fared in Rome. He told them, so they could also be encouraged as they faced hardships.^{iv}

Picture Pointers

- Does this image appear to be more about clarity, or confusion?
- When was the last time you really struggled to make a choice?
- How is it helpful to know that Paul struggled with choices, like we do?



Live your faith

Send a message (e.g. by letter, text, email, phone) of encouragement to someone (or to a group or cause dear to you) that needs support and encouragement to stand firm in the face of obstacles and challenges at this time.

End the session

A personal prayer

In trial and tribulation, God of comfort, be near me.

In loss and devastation, God of grief, grieve with me.

In uncertainty and confusion, God of the way, show me a path.

In want and in need, God of provision, provide for me.

In times of sluggishness and laziness, God of patience, wait for me.

In comfort and in joy, God of love, let me not forget you.

Amen.

ⁱ [Revised Common Lectionary](#). (2009). Bellingham, WA: Faithlife.

ⁱⁱ [Revised Common Lectionary](#). (2009). Bellingham, WA: Faithlife.

ⁱⁱⁱ Barry, J. D., Mangum, D., Brown, D. R., Heiser, M. S., Custis, M., Ritzema, E., ... Bomar, D. (2012, 2016). [Faithlife Study Bible](#) (Php 1:21–30). Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press.

^{iv} Lightner, R. P. (1985). [Philippians](#). In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 2, pp. 651–652). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.