

Semicontinuous

Exod. 16:2–15

Ps. 105:1–6, 37–45

Complementary

Jonah 3:10–4:11

Ps. 145:1–8

Phil. 1:21–30

Matt. 20:1–16

Living Faithfully

Goal for the Session

Adults will articulate their challenges to live faithfully by exploring Paul's witness to faith affirmed in the midst of struggles.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on Philippians 1:21–30

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” David L. Bartlett

For Paul, believers always live in the apocalyptic tension between this age and the age to come, between God's good and the pervasive evil that fights against that goodness. Therefore the faithful are always caught in a kind of dualism: God vs. evil, God's friends vs. God's enemies. For Paul, the very fact of persecution proves that the Philippians are God's friends, as he is. The very fact of persecution proves that their enemies are God's enemies. The Philippians' enemies (and Paul's) will soon face God's judgment—their own destruction.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” William Greenway

Paul rapidly moves to stress to readers and to himself that he is confident that he will remain in the flesh (*sarx*), because it “is more necessary *for you*” (v. 24). The “remain in the flesh” now articulates a conviction regarding what God will choose for the sake of others. All references to desire for selfish gain henceforth vanish. That is, it is not that Paul is not sure he will go on to fruitful ministry *despite* his continuing desire “to depart.” His reascendant “living for Christ” desire *is* for others.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Gilberto Collazo

How do we find hope and meaning in life? It all begins when we are able to look beyond ourselves and our circumstances. Paul in his prison cell looked beyond those dank walls to encourage and teach young communities of faith. We are called to look beyond our own circumstances and help others find meaning. Do we dare believe God's promises that we will experience life and life in abundance if we learn to live a life that trusts God even in the face of our greatest challenges? Nobody is exempt from those moments of feeling locked up, those moments of feeling that the walls are about to cave in around us. When those “prison moments” come, we are invited to model for others what it means to face them with hope.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Mike Graves

Paul is uncertain as to whether he will soon reside with Christ, as opposed to continuing on with the Philippians in the Mediterranean world (v. 21). That same dynamic applies to the readers whom he addresses as “the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi” (1:1). While they *reside* in Philippi, they *live* in Christ. This helps to explain Paul's dilemma about his own fate. He is not preoccupied with the next world to the neglect of this one; rather, he lets his firm belief in the next world fuel his living in this one. His hope for the Philippians is that they will do the same.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE
Philippians 1:21–30

Focus on Your Teaching

Most adults understand by experience that life and struggles go hand in hand. Many adults will acknowledge struggles in their faith journey. These may be triggered by any one of a variety of causes: for example, the extended suffering or untimely death of a loved one, a personal experience of gross unfairness, or blatant social injustices. Today’s session addresses people who face such challenging times. Younger adults may be more open to express struggles related to faith. On the other hand, some older adults who have “weathered storms” may bring steadying perspective.

*Guide me, O God, in my life’s journey—and now in this time of preparation.
May both bring welcomed expectation. Amen.*

YOU WILL NEED

- index cards
- pens
- copies of Resource Sheet 2
- Bibles
- study Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- newsprint
- marker
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 27, 2020

For Responding

- option 1: Resource Sheet 2
- option 2: collage materials (magazines, markers, paste, poster board)
- option 3: Resource Sheet 1

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Welcome participants as they arrive. Introduce any newcomers.

Distribute index cards and pens. Direct participants to write on one side of the index card something that is a struggle for them at this moment.

Give participants the option to find someone with whom to recount their struggle. Honor the choice of some who may not feel comfortable confiding this with another. Caution participants against giving “advice” to their partner about how to solve their struggle. Urge them to simply listen to their partner’s struggle and to offer support.

Say that in today’s passage from Philippians, Paul writes to a beloved community about his own struggles so that they might be encouraged to live faithfully in the struggles and challenges they face.

Offer this prayer or one of your own choosing:

We gather as your people, O God; we come as we are. Open us to your leading, that we may leave as you call us to be. Amen.

EXPLORING

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 and direct participants to read the section titled “The Setting” on it. Lead a group discussion on how those disclosures of Philippians as both a “friendship” letter and an “imprisonment” letter might shape what Paul has to say—and how we might hear those words, given those contexts.

Ask for a volunteer to read Philippians 1:21–30 aloud. Encourage the group to listen, first, through the “lenses” provided by the information on the resource sheet. After the reading, invite participants to tell what they heard as undertones of Paul’s friendship with this community and also of his imprisonment.

Direct participants to work individually or in small groups to search in study Bibles for issues that Paul addresses in Philippians. Ask for brief reports on findings.

Have participants return to the index card used in Gathering. Direct them to work individually, writing on the other side of the card one or more of the struggles they hear Paul articulating in today’s focus scripture. As they do so, encourage them to consider how that struggle connects to the faith and trust Paul affirms in this passage. Gather the participants together. Discuss the struggles identified and the connections to impacts upon Paul’s faith.

Invite participants to imagine they are part of the Philippian congregation, listening to Paul’s letter for the first time. Ask for group discussion:

- ✿ What would you make of one who had been your former pastor saying these things?
- ✿ What would you take away from this portion of Paul’s letter?

Some hear in Paul’s desire to depart and be with Christ a spiritual “selfishness.” You might ask participants: Where do you hear Paul drawing the line between a fearlessness in the face of death and a recklessness that might prematurely abandon life?

Reread verses 21–24. Invite participants to offer their reactions to these words of Paul. Consider raising the question identified in the sidebar to delve more deeply into potential misunderstandings of Paul’s thoughts here by the Philippian community.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on Philippians 1:21–30) and read the “What?” excerpt. Have participants identify any places in today’s text where dualism appears, and discuss the role it serves in Paul’s teaching. In particular, look at verse 28 and the contrast of the “opponents” with the community Paul addresses. Challenge participants to weigh the pros of dualistic thinking with its dangers for the Philippian community (e.g., “God’s friends vs. God’s enemies”).

Post a sheet of newsprint and write on it the following question: What did it mean to live faithfully in a world like Paul’s? Ask participants to review the Philippians text and to find words or phrases that would provide Paul’s answers to that question for himself and for the Philippians. Have participants call out those words and phrases, while you write them down. Afterward, go through each word/phrase and ask: How does this trust or vocation arise out of the struggles of Paul and/or the Philippians?

Post another sheet of newsprint, and write a similar question: What does it mean to live faithfully in a world like ours? Affirm that this is the question the text leaves for us to answer, even as we take it up in the activity(ies) in Responding for today.

EASY
PREP

Be prepared for honesty if you use this in a setting where there have been recent church fights or divisions within congregations or a denomination. Do not minimize expression of residual feelings, whether you agree with their position or not.

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities, depending on the length of your session:

- 1. Living with Hope** Living faithfully in the midst of struggles summons us to live with hope. Read and discuss the section of Resource Sheet 2 titled “The Purpose.” Encourage participants to reflect on how to live faithfully with hope in times of struggle. Either discuss the topic as a whole group or form small groups for a brief discussion. Encourage participants to read the final paragraph of Resource Sheet 2 every morning or evening this week as a spiritual discipline for coping with a struggle they face.
- 2. Worthy of the Gospel Heeding** Paul’s summons to live a life “worthy of the gospel” begins with envisioning what faithful living might look like in our day. Read aloud verse 27a: “Live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel.” Make collage materials available and direct participants to create a collage to serve as a visual presentation of that verse. Encourage them to carry the image of this collage with them as they seek to live faithfully this week. Option: Have participants with cell-phone cameras take a picture of the collage to use as a reminder.
- 3. Struggles For and With Community** Part of the struggle to live faithfully involves the challenges of living in a faith community with its inevitable conflicts. Recall the earlier conversation on verse 28 and the “What?” excerpt, particularly the dangers of dualistic thinking (“God’s friends vs. God’s enemies”) for the Philippian community. Talk about the pitfalls that dualistic thinking presents to the modern church, when conflicts become reduced to “us versus them.” Identify alternatives to such approaches, that still allow us to “stand firm” in the faith. Challenge participants to commit to working for one such alternative in their participation in the congregation’s life.

CLOSING

Ask participants to silently review the struggles they wrote on both sides of the index cards. Have them also reflect on the struggles identified in the option(s) you used in Responding. Direct their attention again to the newsprint with the question “What does it mean to live faithfully in a world like ours?” Ask participants to name something they will take from this session that helps them answer that question, particularly when it comes to a struggle they may be facing. Give everyone an opportunity to respond, but respect the silence of those who do not feel comfortable doing so.

Offer the following prayer or one of your own choosing:

Holy God, gracious God, hold us together: in times of harmony, in times of struggle, gather us as community, send us in mission, as your people in Jesus Christ. Amen.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for September 27, or e-mail it to the participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and resource sheet prior to the next session.

Focus on Philippians 1:21–30

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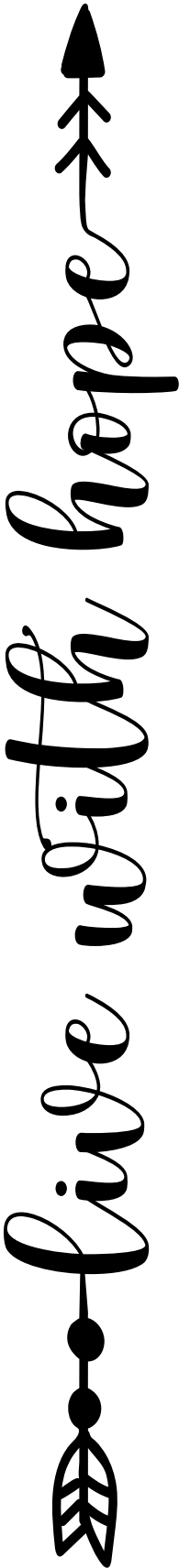
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Philippians: Setting and Purpose

The Setting

Philippians is the most unabashedly affectionate of Paul's letters. There is nothing here like the frustration of Galatians or the chiding of the Corinthian letters. Indeed scholars who study the writings of Hellenistic authors of Paul's time suggest that the letter is a typical letter of friendship, written to strengthen the bonds of affection between author and recipient.

The poignancy of the friendship letter is only increased by the fact that, when Paul writes it, he is himself in prison, uncertain whether he will ever be released to visit his friends in Philippi again.

—Excerpted from David L. Bartless, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 87

The Purpose

Paul writes this letter from prison, facing capital charges. Issues of life and death are no joke in this setting; yet he instructs people to rejoice in the midst of their circumstances, no matter how difficult they may be. Many opinions exist about the purpose of this letter, but I would like to suggest that Paul is challenging people to find joy and hope in the difficult moments of life. Bette Midler in her song "The Rose" seems to offer a word of rebuke for those who are so afraid of dying that they never learn to live. Life happens, yet we have become so complacent and take things so for granted that when the hard times come, these bad incidents become like prisons that snuff out our life.

We are called to live with hope. Viktor Frankl, the famous psychoanalyst and Holocaust survivor, in his book *Man's Search for Meaning* presents his thesis on how people find meaning in life and the importance of this fruitful search for a life of hope and joy. In explaining the phenomena of the concentration camps, where hundreds of prisoners acquiesced to dozens of soldiers, Frankl speaks of the loss of hope, which robs people of their will to live and to face life's difficulties. People start dying when they lose hope. That was why the words *Arbeit Macht Frei* ("Work Creates Freedom"), which adorned the entrance of the first German concentration camp at Dachau, could have more appropriately been replaced by the words from Dante's *Divine Comedy*: "Abandon hope, all who enter this place." Frankl speaks of the freedom we possess that helps us determine our attitudes and spiritual well-being. The person who has nothing to live for will lose hope and die quickly. That is what Paul is trying to counteract in this passage. It is God's will that we experience life and not death.

—Excerpted from Gilberto Collazo, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 86 and 88