

Ministry Matters™ | Articles | Group Study: Sharing Gods Grace

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Scripture: Philippians 1:18b-29

Background Scripture: Philippians 1

Key Verse

Most important, live together in a manner worthy of Christ's gospel. Do this, whether I come and see you or I'm absent and hear about you. Do this so that you stand firm, united in one spirit and mind as you struggle together to remain faithful to the gospel. (Philippians 1:27 CEB)

Focus

Under adverse circumstances, our commitments may be challenged. When, if ever, should circumstances lead us to compromise our commitment? As we remain faithful, God sustains us in all circumstances.

Goals

1. to examine Paul's message to the church in Philippians 1 about serving Christ in spite of circumstances.
2. to analyze feelings about God's power to sustain them.
3. to work toward never compromising their faith in God, no matter the circumstance.

Pronunciation Guide

Philippi (fi lip' i) or (fil' i pi)
Praetorium (pri tor' ee uhm)
politeuesthe (pah lee too' eh steh)
ta diapheronta (tah dee ah fehr' ahn tah)
politeuma (pol it' yoo mah)

Understanding the Scripture

Philippians 1:1-2

Paul writes as a prisoner, probably in Rome, which would make the letter one of Paul's last (between A.D. 60 and 62). It is in Rome that one finds "the whole Praetorium" ("imperial guard," 1:13) and "the emperor's [Caesar's] household" (4:22) in their most impressive sense. In Rome, Paul was in chains under house arrest, awaiting a verdict of life or death (1:12-13, 19-26).

Philippians 1:3-8

The Philippians have held a special place in Paul's heart. This is the only church that he addresses as his "partners" (the deeper sense of the Greek words rendered "sharing" and "share" in 1:5, 7; see also 4:15-16), both in receiving the good news and supporting Paul's missionary endeavors to

share that good news. The church in Philippi was a source of constant refreshment for his heart and his mission, giving Paul internal encouragement (1:3-4) and material aid (1:7; 2:25; 4:10-20), sharing in a “grace” relationship (1:7). The NRSV tries to clarify the Greek by adding the word “God’s” before “grace,” but this may actually obscure the point. Paul and the Philippian Christians enjoyed a reciprocal relationship of friendship, exchanging benefits both spiritual and material. It was in this kind of social relationship, whether between friends or between patrons and clients, that “grace” language was most at home in the ancient world. Paul’s acceptance of monetary support from the Philippians was not just a sign of their devotion to the apostle but also a sign of the apostle’s confidence in the church that they would not use gift-giving as leverage on the apostle, as a sign that they “owned” him, in effect. Paul dared not accept money from the Corinthian Christians, since he sensed (and rightly so) that such gift-giving would be misinterpreted and exploited by the patrons in the church.

Philippians 1:9-11

Paul concludes the letter-opening by sharing the content of his prayer for the church, namely that their love will continue to be combined with the God-given knowledge and insight that enables discernment of what is essential (*ta diapheronta*) to being found sincere and blameless at the last day (1:10). The NRSV does not precisely capture the meaning of *ta diapheronta* when it reads “what is best.” It means, rather, “the things that really matter,” those essentials of Christian faith and practice, as opposed to other issues about which Christians should be tolerant and not become divisive. Love coupled with such a focus provides a remedy for the inner-church quarrels, no doubt over indifferent matters, which were weakening the congregation (4:2-3).

Philippians 1:12-18a

While imprisoned and “off the circuit,” as it were, other preachers have sought to distinguish themselves in the spreading of the gospel (most probably in Rome itself). Paul considers that some do this out of a sincere heart for God, but he knows that others do it out of a sense of rivalry with Paul, trying to replace him in the limelight of the churches. Thinking that Paul has the same spirit of reputation-seeking that the rivals do, the rivals believe their activity will grieve Paul as he watches others increase in fame at his expense (1:17).

Paul does not respond, however, as these rivals suppose. He is not drawn into a spirit of rivalry and competition on account of what other people are doing, but rather sets his eyes on what the Lord is doing. He sees that, whatever people’s motives, the gospel is spreading even more since his imprisonment, and that is his only concern. The rivals are brought in here as negative examples, embodying strife, rivalry, and selfish ambition. Paul models how to rise above partisanship and rivalry. Discerning what really matters in the situation, he rejoices in the Lord (1:18). Paul draws attention to this aspect of his own situation in order to help the Christians in Philippi deal maturely with the emergence of rivalry and selfish conceit in their midst.

Philippians 1:18b-26

Paul defines his life as an opportunity to serve God (1:22). He does not demand comfort or safety but only seeks that the word of the Lord spread as a result of his life and that Christ be honored whether in his continued existence or his execution (1:20). His confinement has emboldened the witness of other Christians and allowed him to infiltrate the Praetorium itself with the knowledge of the gospel, and for that reason he does not chafe at his chains, though they no doubt chafed on him (1:12-14).

Paul regards death with confidence, not as an evil but as the gate through which he will pass to enter the brightness of the presence of the Lord (1:23). Dying is, therefore, “gain” (1:21). Early Christian leaders were well aware of the power of the “fear of death” in the lives of the people around them. The author of Hebrews regards the fear of death as the means by which Satan keeps people enslaved (Hebrews 2:14-15). Greco-Roman philosophers likewise recognized the fear of

death as a great impediment to freedom. The person who feared imprisonment or death gave away his or her freedom to whoever had the power to imprison or kill them. Single-hearted dedication to Christ gave Paul back this freedom. Since the aim of his life was serving Jesus, no external circumstance would hinder his finding meaning in his life or fulfilling his deepest desires. Only the person who can say, “for me, to live means Christ” can also say “to die means gain.”

Philippians 1:27-30

As in Thessalonica, so in Roman Philippi, the confession of Jesus as “Lord” and “Savior” (in a context where Augustus and his successors were already lauded with those very titles) and the expectation that he would come as king, brought Christians into conflict with their neighbors. The difference in the situation addressed by Philippians is that the addressees have been Christians for at least six years by this time, and possibly as long as ten to twelve, so that this hostility is not a new reality for them.

It was of utmost importance to Paul that his friends in Philippi match hostility from outside with internal unity, support, encouragement, and aid. If harmony and unity were to erode from within, the assaults from without would stand a better chance of achieving their objective, namely wearing down the believers and bringing them back into conformity with “good Roman values.” He wants them to remain strong so that they will maintain their witness of courageous perseverance. As they face off with an unbelieving world, unafraid and unshaken, they testify with a voice more eloquent than words that Christ is worth everything and that God—and God’s judgment—is real. In such a way, endurance of persecution becomes a proclamation of God’s triumph over the world.

Interpreting the Scripture

The Christ-Centered Life

Paul shares a great deal of his own heart in Philippians, continuing his strategy of teaching by example (see Philippians 3:17). In the Thessalonian letters, Paul focused attention on the example of his lifestyle. Here, he focuses attention on the example of his deepest desires and how these shape his general outlook. Paul shows himself to be astoundingly Christ-centered. He seeks to lift up Jesus, to promote Jesus, to bring honor to Jesus consistently in the midst of any circumstances and through all his speech and action. In regard to his present imprisonment awaiting trial, Paul is confident of the outcome—deliverance (“salvation”) and freedom from being put to shame. It is not the circumstances in which he will find himself after the verdict that matter to him but rather his fidelity to bear witness to Christ and glorify Jesus with his own steadfastness. A verdict of “guilty” and sentence of death brings him no shame, since he would have kept his own faithfulness to Christ intact and used the occasion to testify to the excellence of the Lord.

Paul’s goals and outlook—which he offers to us as a model to be internalized—are very different from the goals that our culture, and so many culture-driven preachers, hold out before us. One adult Sunday school group in our church recently worked through a popular “Christian” book that positioned readers to remain stunningly self-centered in its packaging of the gospel, a kind of variation on the theme of positive thinking helping people get what they want, from a parking space close to the entrance of the mall to a courtesy upgrade on an airplane to a bigger house. Paul’s understanding of his best life now is entirely Christ-centered. There is no room for Paul’s own personal preferences, no room for concern about Paul’s enjoyment of particular creature comforts. Paul doesn’t cloud his heart with such distractions. He seeks one thing: to bring honor to Christ by the way he lives, and the way he dies. One of the remarkable benefits about this focus is the sense of peace in the face of death that Paul enjoyed. Directing his entire being toward the One who had already crossed beyond death into resurrected life, Paul’s deepest desires could not be thwarted or threatened by death, but only realized.

Clearly Christ is important to you, since you are undertaking the study of God’s Word. What other things are important to you in your life? What do you want to get out of life before you die? To what

extent would it be true for you to say, “to live means Christ”? Does your own death threaten your enjoyment or achievement of what is important to you, or have you come to a place in your life where you too can look at death with Paul’s confidence?

The Privilege of Suffering

Paul asserts that the experience of suffering for Jesus is an experience of God’s gracious privilege, a sign of God giving the believers a special favor (1:29). To this, we might be conditioned to respond, “Don’t do me any favors!” The insults, slander, vandalism, assault, and marginalization that would have been part and parcel of the experience of a targeted, deviant group are far from pleasant experiences. Why should the endurance of hardships encountered for the sake of Christ be thought of as a privilege?

Paul will say more about this in 3:7-16, in particular. Paul understood that God’s primary aim for our lives was to make us more like Jesus. Almost every Christian knows and can quote the famous line from Romans, “All things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). Few indeed keep that purpose clear in their contexts as they quote that verse: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Romans 8:29). Paul sought this “conforming” in his own life, which for him meant enduring some share of the sufferings of Christ (“becoming like him in his death,” Philippians 3:10). Suffering for the name of Christ has a way of clarifying our purpose and our intention, for example, to live for God’s will, not for what people ordinarily crave (1 Peter 4:1-2). It nurtures in us the same commitment, focus, and obedience that characterized Jesus in his incarnation and death. The good news, of course, is that living the cross-shaped life of Jesus gives us assurance of living also the resurrected life with Jesus. Once again, we need to remind ourselves that not all suffering should be considered “suffering for Christ.” There is a great deal of suffering in the world that we are called to resist and to stamp out in the name of the just God who seeks the wholeness—the *shalom*—of all peoples. Some of this is far from our shores; some of it is within the homes of neighbors and fellow Christians, possibly even our own.

Good Citizenship

Paul uses political language at a number of points in this epistle. In Philippians 1:27, he urges the disciples to “order their common lives as citizens” (*politeuesthe*) in a noble manner. In Philippians 3:21, he will draw attention to the location of their “body of his glory,” also translated as “commonwealth” (*politeuma*), which is the divine realm, the place from which Christ will return. The Philippians would have been familiar with the Greek and Roman political virtues, having been taught to value harmony, solidarity, and unity as marks of the strong and honorable commonwealth, and to avoid factionalism, partisan strife, and civil unrest as attitudes and actions that bring weakness and disgrace to a city.

Paul reminds them here of their civic duty to another realm, the city of God. The seat of the kingdom of God—its capital, as it were—is located in the divine realm, and the Philippian congregation is a colony of that capital (much as Philippi itself was legally a colony of Rome, a “little Rome”). What will be the witness to the nobility and strength of the kingdom of God manifested by its citizenry in the here-and-now of Christian community?

As Paul will challenge his friends to embrace the core values of cooperation, of “pulling in the same direction,” and banishing self-serving partisanship, his words continue to challenge us in our congregational life to live out a good witness to the nobility of God’s people. “They’ll know we are Christians by our love,” the chorus of a wellknown hymn, captures something of this ethic. If Christians within congregations and across denominations work together with a united front, we will move closer toward bearing that witness to the world that will testify to the power of God truly being at work in Jesus Christ (see John 17:20-23).

Sharing the Scripture

Preparing Our Hearts

Meditate on this week's devotional reading, found in Acts 9:10-16. In this passage, which is part of the larger story of the conversion of Saul/Paul, we hear Ananias question God about Saul. God responds that Saul is a chosen instrument and that God "will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (9:16). Paul relates some of this suffering in his Letter to the Philippians. In chapter 1 he writes that his suffering and imprisonment have allowed him to spread the gospel. Think about your own view of suffering. Are there circumstances under which you view suffering as positive? How have you been able to spread the gospel in times when you were suffering?

Pray that you and the group will commit yourselves with unreserved zeal to Christ and his cause, even if that commitment requires suffering.

Preparing Our Minds

Study the background from Philippians 1 and session scripture, verses 18b-29. Consider if there is ever a time that circumstances should lead you to compromise a commitment.

Leading the Group

- Pray that all who have come today will experience God's grace and renew their own commitments.
- Read this definition from *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*: "compromise: to adjust or settle by mutual concessions."
- Note that some people find "compromise" to be negative, whereas others see it as neutral, and still others as positive, as these three quotations illustrate:
 1. Compromise is but the sacrifice of one right or good in the hope of retaining another—too often ending in the loss of both. (Tyron Edwards, 1809–1894)
 2. Compromise makes a good umbrella but a poor roof; it is a temporary expedient (James Russell Lowell, 1819–1891)
 3. People talk about the middle of the road as though it were unacceptable. Actually, all human problems, excepting morals, come into the gray areas. Things are not all black and white. There have to be compromises. The middle of the road is all of the usable surface. The extremes, left and right, are in the gutters. (Dwight David Eisenhower, 1890–1969)
- Talk briefly with the group about their perspective on compromise. How do they view this concept, particularly in light of their faith?
- Read aloud today's focus statement: **Under adverse circumstances, our commitments may be challenged. When, if ever, should circumstances lead us to compromise our commitment? As we remain faithful, God sustains us in all circumstances.**
- Present a brief overview from Understanding the Scripture for Philippians 1:1-2, 3-8, 9-11, 12-18a in order to set the stage.
- Choose a volunteer to read Philippians 1:18b-29.
- Focus on today's key verse, Philippians 1:27.
- Encourage the group to talk about what a life that is lived "in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ" looks like. What kinds of attitudes and actions mark the lives of believers?
- Consider how they corporately "are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel" (1:27).

- Look at Paul's comments about his suffering in verses 21-24. Note that while he would be relieved of suffering in death and be with Christ then, he feels he should remain alive to continue spreading the gospel. Ask: In light of the obstacles that Paul faced, what motivated him to continue to preach the gospel? What would motivate you to endure what Paul endured for the sake of Christ?
- Read or retell "The Christ-Centered Life" from *Interpreting the Scripture* to wrap up this part of the study. Draw the group in by encouraging them to answer the questions in the final paragraph.
- Point out that Paul considers it a privilege to suffer for the sake of Christ. Read "The Privilege of Suffering" from *Interpreting the Scripture*.
- Distribute paper and pencils. Invite the group to write about how Paul may be an example for them. Suggest that they consider any current situations that would prompt some form of suffering or ostracism. For example, neighbors may be fighting the opening of a shelter at the church. To make this shelter a reality, some members will have to face opposition from other members of the community. What might Paul do in this case, for example?
- Provide an opportunity for volunteers to talk about how they see Paul as an example.
- Conclude this portion of the study by challenging the adults to write one sentence in which they express a commitment to remain strong in faith regardless of the situation.
- Pray that all who have come today will go forth to share the good news that God's grace sustains us even in the worst of circumstances.
- Challenge the group to complete one or more of these activities for further spiritual growth:
 1. Encourage someone who is having a problem to remain strong in the faith.
 2. List ways that you have suffered because of your faith in Christ. Remember that suffering for Christ often entails resisting evil or injustice and proclaiming the gospel in the face of opposition.
 3. Use words from Philippians 1:3 to open a letter to a missionary, a person in the armed forces, someone who is ill, or another person who needs support.
 4. Sing or read aloud "Praise, My Soul, the King of Heaven."
- Conclude today's study by leading the group in this benediction adapted from 2 Thessalonians 1:11: **Go forth with the assurance that we are always praying for you, asking that our God will make you worthy of his call and will fulfill by his power every good resolve and work of faith.**

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