

## 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 resendant “living for Christ” desire *is* for others.

### SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

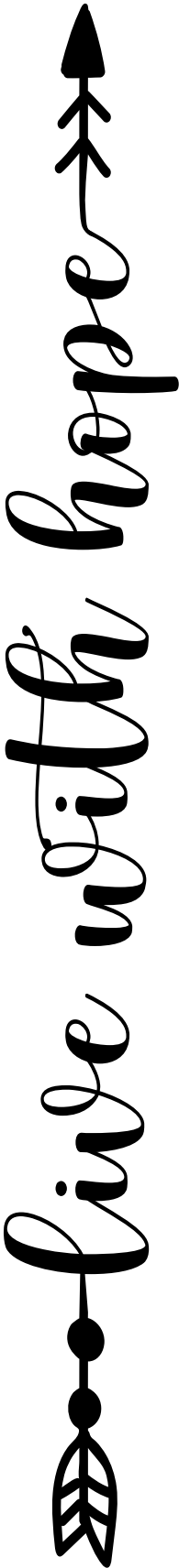
— From “*Pastoral Perspective*,” Gilberto Collazo

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.



## 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