

UNDER PRESSURE

Press On – Together in Christ

October 1, 2023

Overarching Theme: 2023 – Living the Dream

Instructions:

When using this material as teacher, feel free to pick and choose the point you want to emphasize in the lesson. *The format of the curriculum is designed to have an abundance of information in which to refer as desired.*

Core Point:

2023 can be a year of living the dream of faithful discipleship as we take a next step forward in following Jesus Christ.

Reflect on this Scripture:

Philippians 1:27-30 NRSV

²⁷ Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸ and are in no way intimidated by your opponents. For them this is evidence of their destruction, but of your salvation. And this is God's doing. ²⁹ For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well— ³⁰ since you are having the same struggle that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Commentary:

After the typical pattern of the starting of Paul's letters, i.e., greeting or address followed by thanksgiving to God that merges into a prayer of intercession for the ones to whom he's writing, we see that he turns to giving pastoral advice to the Christians in Philippi who were a community facing opposition and persecution for their faith in Christ as well as having some potential differences among themselves.

This section toward the beginning in a way summarizes Paul's teaching in this letter by emphatically opening with the statement about the most important thing that he wants his readers to pay attention to. He refers to their citizenship of God's Kingdom through their faith in Christ and by doing this he reminds them that as Christ-followers, their allegiance belongs to Christ rather than Rome, which will threaten their standing in Greco-Roman culture because many of them were Roman citizens, just like him, and faced the pressure to pledge their allegiance to the Emperor, even as their God. Paul subverts the privileges of Roman citizenship

by calling the Philippians to live in light of a new citizenship rooted in the Gospel, to embody the values of a different kingdom—that of the crucified and risen Messiah Jesus. Following Jesus requires a full shift of allegiances and an embrace of a new status. Therefore, as a whole community, they are to live in a way worthy of the Gospel of Christ and this involves standing firm and struggling together in unity as one body to resist opposition, which is possible by all of them continuing to be faithful to Christ and by the Holy Spirit enabling them.

It is not clear who the opponents of the Philippian Christians were because of which they were really suffering but it most likely was from outside the church. Paul mentioning that the Philippians shared in the same struggles that he himself was facing, i.e., his imprisonment on capital charges by the Romans when he wrote this letter, suggests that their problem may be with civil authorities. In Acts 16 we see that Paul met opposition in Philippi from businessmen who were annoyed because his mission was undermining their financial interests. The opposition faced by the Philippian community could well have arisen from similar grievances, leading to unrest before civil authorities. Paul encourages the Philippians not to succumb to fear. In fact, he declares that the unified witness of the Philippians in response to opposition serves a dual purpose. It signals to those persecuting the church that they will ultimately fail and will face destruction. Simultaneously it encourages believers of their salvation in Christ and this is the work of God. When the Gospel is lived out in an appropriate way, then that is a proclamation of its message, a living demonstration of the salvation from destruction that it offers. The Philippians' behavior will at one and the same time be evidence of the truth of the Gospel and a warning to those who oppose it. Paul is not gloating about the destruction of their enemies; he's writing to persons under intense persecution who need assurance about their decision to risk all for the Gospel.

Therefore, the suffering faced by the Philippians for their steadfastness in Christ is a privilege granted to them because it is suffering on Christ's behalf. Christ has suffered and died for them and they in a reciprocal relationship should now be willing to suffer for Christ. They have died with Christ and share in his redemptive work and so their sufferings are in reality Christ's suffering and can, therefore, be used by him. The Philippians can take comfort that they are suffering like the way they saw Paul suffer in the past in Philippi and his suffering in the present and thus know that it will be used for Christ's name to be glorified. The believers in Philippi were experiencing hardships because of their allegiance to the Gospel. Yet Paul considered suffering a privilege from God in the same way that faith itself is a gift. Belief and suffering for that belief are realities in a world of competing allegiances.

- Adapted from The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Vol XI, pp. 479, 495-8 and Wesley One Volume Commentary, pp. 799-800.

Questions to Ponder for Accountability in the Group:

1. Are belief and behavior inseparable? What is the relationship between doctrine and discipleship, theology and ethics?
2. What role does Christian unity play for believers in Christ being steadfast in their faithfulness to the message of the Gospel?
3. In what situations in today's world are we as Christians required to be reminded of our citizenship of God's Kingdom? How can aligning with King Jesus and confessing him as 'Lord' be found costly for the Christian today, especially in the west?
4. How does suffering for Christ strengthen our Christian discipleship? Why and in what ways do we avoid seeing suffering as a part of the Christian life?

Activity for the Life of a Disciple:

1. Remember to find encouragement for the day by reading the daily devotional from FUMCC.
2. Ponder and pray on this scripture this week: Philippians 1:29 NRSV
29 For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well—