



MOMENTS TO PONDER
UNVEILING JOY:
EXPLORING THE BOOK OF PHILIPPIANS

Episode 87: Phil. 1:20-30

Hi Friends! Welcome to Moments to Ponder. This is a podcast designed to help you spend a few moments in God's Word whether you're in the car pool lane, getting ready for your day, or taking a walk. It's my prayer that as you listen, you will take find something to ponder.

We live in a loud, busy world that can make it hard to find the time to get into God's word, so I'm grateful for these few moments we have to ponder the book of Philippians. I'm Betsy Marvin and this is episode 87.

(music fades)

As I prepared for today's podcast, my focus honed in on our opening verse for this section – verse 20 in Philippians 1. Paul wrote:

For I fully expect and hope that I will never be ashamed, but that I will continue to be bold for Christ, as I have been in the past. And I trust that my life will bring honor to Christ, whether I live or die.

I am wondering - what is behind these words? Paul has been bold during his entire ministry. He has stood unashamed continually, yet here he speaks of trusting that his life would bring honor. Why is he hoping this? What is he facing that would bring these type of thoughts?

These questions led me to do a bit of research on what's happening around Paul at this time which led me to the Emperor of Rome. Paul has asked to see Caesar and the dates behind this letter help us place Paul in approximately 62 AD during the reign of Nero.

Bear with me as my history brain dives in a bit to give us context around the political drama happening as Paul waits in prison.

Nero lost his father at a young age and was raised by his mother, who it is said killer her 2nd husband to marry her uncle, Emperor Claudius. Through her influence, Nero is the one to succeed Claudius, not Claudius' own son, and in 54 AD at 16 years old, he comes into power with his wife, who was also his step-sister, whom he married when he was 15. Yes, Nero had some issues and the Roman court was messed up!

At first, Nero was a generous leader, he reduced taxes, banned capital punishment, and began competitions in athletics and poetry. He loved the theater. He was well liked by his people and even by slaves, as he gave slaves the right to prosecute abusive masters. He started out strong.

But, after 8 years in the role, much has happened to Nero. At 23 years old, he has become indulgent, sexually pushing every boundary there is, and able to do whatever he wanted. I mean, he's 23 with all the power and wealth he can imagine but he also had to lead a country. He did have great plans for the city, strategies for growth – but with wars in Gaul and far off lands as well as internal conflict (he even had his mother killed), it's no wonder a simple preacher sat under house arrest for a long time waiting for an audience with him. Nero was more concerned with his own amusement and vice than governmental affairs, so a Jew demanding to see him would not be high on his list of priorities.

Then, in June of 62, something interesting happens, Nero orders the murder of his step-sister and wife, Octavia. Married when she was 13, Octavia would have been about 22. Their marriage had secured his throne, but at 23, he desired a new wife so he does away with the old one...and this seems to kick off the downward spiral of the Nero we often think of – one that acted insane and would later persecute Christians.

In the Roman world, Caesar is seen as lord which has obviously gone to Nero's head – so a preacher speaking of a gospel and Lord God, wouldn't bring Paul any favor in Nero's eyes. Faith and politics was one in the same in those days, and to not declare Nero as Lord could bring a death sentence. Even in prison, I'm sure the palace guards were keeping Paul up to date on all that was happening, so hearing of all the murder, sex, and drunkenness would definitely affect Paul's situation.

It's in this context that Paul looks to his trial, saying, I pray that I'll be bold as I always have been, I can't back down now just because he's Caesar. My hope is that I'll stand unashamed and speak the truth boldly – even if it means I die. He goes on in verse 21:

²¹ For to me, living means living for Christ, and dying is even better. ²² But if I live, I can do more fruitful work for Christ. So I really don't know which is better. ²³ I'm torn between two desires: I long to go and be with Christ, which would be far better for me. ²⁴ But for your sakes, it is better that I continue to live.

In some ways, it feels like Paul is verbal processing here. Living is Christ, but dying is even better. What? Yes, it's in these words that we see that Paul understands what it means to leave this earthly life to go be with his Lord. He's saying, I'm not sure if I'll live or die, yet as I reason it out, if I live, I get to be with you, the church, which is good, but, if I die I'll be with Jesus which is better. And after all that, Paul says, ²⁵ *Knowing this, I am convinced that I will remain alive so I can continue to help all of you grow and experience the joy of your faith. ²⁶ And when I come to you again, you will have even more reason to take pride in Christ Jesus because of what he is doing through me.*
Phil. 1:21-26

He writes this before he ever sees the Emperor, did this realization embolden him for his trial? We'll never know what Paul said to Nero, or what Nero says to Paul but we do know that Paul is released at this point.

In fact, with the influence of Josephus, a Jewish historian, Nero freed all Jewish prisoners in 62 AD. This leads us to the understanding that Paul took a 4th missionary journey where he does revisit the Philippian church and much more – but I'm getting ahead of myself.

So why go into the history lesson?

Because I think we all face "Neros" in our lives in some way and I wonder if we would have the confidence we see in Paul. By this I mean, those moments when we come up against something hard that causes us to make a choice that is based on our faith, on what we believe, and - it has consequences that we may not like.

This is a simple example, but in high school I can remember applying for jobs and in our family the rule was – no working on Sunday. As I interviewed, I would tell the manager that I wasn't able to work on Sunday because I had church and youth group – and that ended a few opportunities right there. Not getting those jobs wasn't a huge consequence, but I did learn that choosing to honor Sunday, would have a price.

When we face those moments where we have to decide if we'll speak or not, stand strong or not, we can't let fear dictate our choices. We won't face physical death when we take a stand, but we might face the death of a relationship or a job. We might have to deal with backlash, ridicule or slander – it's a reality. Living for Jesus has a price. Paul knew this, we should know it as well.

Thankfully, my choice to not work on Sundays back then didn't have a painful price – but I can tell you that I have faced some hard choices and I haven't always chosen the better road. I have found that the desire for acceptance or to please someone can lead to compromise and painful prices to pay.

Paul reasoned out his predicament and he realized he was in a win/win situation even though to everyone else it might have seemed like a no-win moment. How? Because Paul knew that choosing Jesus was a win no matter the outcome. To live meant more time to share him and to die meant to be with Him – win/win.

Do we live like we believe that choosing Jesus is always the answer – no matter the outcome? It's something to ponder isn't it?

Even if choosing Jesus means you'll be single.

Even if choosing Jesus means you'll have to find a new job.

Even if choosing Jesus means you need to have some hard conversations.

Paul is showing us something so fundamental here – He is living in the tension between life and death, life with his church family doing work he loves or a physical death which would bring him to Jesus. It's a tension we all live with. We love our people and this life and we don't wish to leave it, yet, death means being with Christ. It's something we don't fully understand, but in his processing Paul lets us see his willingness to leave his future up to God. He just wants to honor Christ in the process – whatever may come.

As we close chapter 1, we have Paul's words to the church

²⁷ Above all, you must live as citizens of heaven, conducting yourselves in a manner worthy of the Good News about Christ. Then, whether I come and see you again or only hear about you, I will know that you are standing together with one spirit and one purpose, fighting together for the faith, which is the Good News.

²⁸ Don't be intimidated in any way by your enemies. This will be a sign to them that they are going to be destroyed, but that you are going to be saved, even by God himself. ²⁹ For you have been given not only the privilege of trusting in Christ but also the privilege of suffering for him. ³⁰ We are in this struggle together. You have seen my struggle in the past, and you know that I am still in the midst of it.

Dear One, you will face moments with hard choices, fear may rise, and consequences may be steep. Yet as you face those "Neros", may you lean into the power of the Spirit within you and stand. May you never be intimidated by an enemy in faith - hold onto your trust in Jesus and take the road less travelled. It is one you will never walk alone.

You are one in whom Christ delights.
He will never leave you or forsake you.

Amen.