

December 6, 2009

# THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

## *Stand Firm Thus in the Lord*

### Philippians 4:1 – 9

Paul begins this final chapter with a 'therefore'. *Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.* Philippians 4:1 It is a 'therefore' with all of the force of the preceding encouragements, admonitions, warnings and doctrine, but most particularly, it is with the view of chapter three in sight that gives it its emphasis: ***Therefore – since you are of the company of the children of the burning heart – since you make it your ambition to count all things loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ – since you joyfully suffer the loss of all things and count them fit only to be thrown on the rubbish heap in order to gain Christ – since your great goal is to know Christ and to be found in Christ – since you are pressing on to lay hold of Christ, forgetting what lies behind and stretching out to what lies ahead – therefore stand firm thus in the Lord.***

It is a 'therefore' that captures all the strength of what he has already written and looks ahead to what that means practically in the Philippians' lives – namely, **to stand firm in the Lord.** The word translated 'stand firm' means to stand still, to persist, to endure. It is the same sentiment Paul expresses in chapter one: *Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,* Philippians 1:27 The pressing need of a believer is to stand firm because there are winds gusting in this world that threaten to blow us away from the faith – to get us off track on to other things. Our priorities are constantly challenged – our choices are never free from options that would lead us to abandon our pursuit of Christ in favor of the things of this world. That is why Paul tells us in chapter three: *Only let us hold true to what we have attained.* Philippians 3:16 Don't let go of your relationship with Christ – hold fast to what you know of Him and strive to know Him more.

**Our salvation is dependent upon our standing firm in the faith – of persevering.** I don't say this to intimidate you or set you up for a kind of legalistic religious experience. I say this because the Bible says it. Make no mistake – we are saved by grace through faith alone – that is indisputable – I will never be moved from this foundational truth. **But grace is not the idea that God cuts me slack from time to time.** I think that is the most common misconception that Christians have about grace. We say things like, 'I'm not feeling well today – give me some grace' – by which we mean, 'Cut me some slack here'. **Grace is the power of God to do in us what we could never do ourselves.** Paul says in 1 Corinthians: *But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me.* 1 Corinthians 15:10 Paul was working – **on the basis** of God's grace that was working in him. Paul persevered to the end **because** he was dependent upon the grace of God. And he recognized that his salvation was dependent upon his persevering to the end.

Listen to what he told the Corinthians: *Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.* 1 Corinthians 15:1-2 So the implication is, if you hold fast the word of the gospel all the way through, that will save you, but if you stop believing that proves your believing was in vain.

In the letter to the Colossians Paul says: *And although you were formerly alienated and hostile in mind, engaged in evil deeds, yet He has now reconciled you in His fleshly body through death, in order to present you before Him holy and blameless and beyond reproach - if indeed you continue in the faith firmly established and steadfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel that you have heard, which was proclaimed in all creation under heaven, and of which I, Paul, was made a minister.* Colossians 1:21-23

We call this the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints, and it says something like this: Those whom God has chosen and called and sanctified by His Spirit, can neither totally nor finally fall away from the faith; but will surely persevere all the way to the end, and be eternally saved. In other words, When we come to Christ, He makes us a new creation in Him with new longings, aspirations, priorities and affections that are centered in Him. Our slavery to sin is broken, our desire for holiness is ignited and we are set on course for heaven.

However, although slavery to sin is broken, and our sinful desires are progressively weakened by the power of a superior joy and satisfaction in God, there still remains remnants of corruption in every heart that give rise to constant war, and call for endurance and vigilance in the lifelong fight of faith. What the doctrine of perseverance says is that **all who are justified will win this fight**. They will persevere in faith and never surrender to the enemy of their souls. This does not mean there won't be seasons of wandering and backsliding but does mean that there won't be an ultimate surrender to sin. It is not, as some have called it, the doctrine of eternal security which means to most people that you are eternally secure no matter what you do. **It does make a difference if we continue in the faith**. Colossians 1:21-23 points up the fact that the doctrine of perseverance says we are secure because it is God who keeps us and won't let us make shipwreck of our faith. **That is grace**.

Another verse that confirms that we must persevere in order to be saved is in 2 Timothy: *It is a trustworthy statement: For if we died with Him, we will also live with Him; If we endure, we will also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us; If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself.* 2 Timothy 2:11-13 The fact that Paul uses conditional clauses – 'if-then' statements, to describe our salvation, should not lead us in any way to conclude that our salvation is decisively dependent upon our initiative. The first is **'if we died with Him – then we will live with Him'**. This simply points to the reality that if we have not died with Him here we cannot expect to live with Him there. That is, if we have not experienced the death of the old creation in being justified by His blood and redeemed from the Fall – then we cannot expect to inherit heaven. Furthermore, **'if we endure we will also reign with Him'** means that it is a life-long pursuit of Christ that counts in the end. **That proves we have really laid hold of Him, and therefore salvation**. And the fact that **'if we are faithless, He remains faithful'** does not mean faithful to us – but to Himself. If you do not have faith, if you are faithless, that is you have never committed your life to Christ, His faithfulness does not commit Him to save you.

And finally I want to point you to the Gospel of Mark: *You will be hated by all because of My name, but the one who endures to the end, he will be saved.* Mark 13:13 This is why Paul exhorts the Philippians to stand firm in the Lord. On the one hand, Christ is committed to save all those whom God has chosen and called and sanctified by His Spirit. On the other hand we are called to a lifelong endurance and vigilance in the fight of faith all the way to heaven. **Therefore stand firm thus in the Lord**.

And then Paul goes on to give us the practical application of the charge by giving us five important ways to stand firm in the Lord: **in unity, in joy; in forbearance, in prayer, and in holy thinking**. First of all he tackles the problem of unity: *I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.* Philippians 4:2-3

**We need to stand in unity.** Euodia and Syntyche have gone down in church history as examples of what not to do. Your life can either serve as a warning or an example – and I don't believe that either of these women would have chosen their lasting impression for generations of Christians to be a warning of what not to do. Neither woman was living up to her name: Euodia means **'prosperous journey'** and Syntyche means **'pleasant acquaintance'** and from the tone of this letter, being around these women was not a pleasant journey. They were arguing, squabbling, not getting along, and so Paul steps in as the authority to compel them to stop.

I find it instructive that we are not told what the issue was – in fact if we had been, we might have been content to apply only a narrow lesson from this Scripture. But the fact that we are not told implies, at the very least, that it is usually never the issue that is the thing – it is the sin involved that is the problem. They could have been arguing about the color of the sanctuary carpet for all we know – I would however, tend to think it might be something a little more important. But whatever the case, their disagreement in Philippi was causing rumbling in Rome and it threatened the unity of the church.

**Unity in the church is one of the highest priorities we have as believers.** Unity is the very nature of God – thus, disunity does not reflect His glory at all. Unity is where God's blessing is directed as we see in Psalm 133: *Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity! It is like the precious oil on the head, running down on the beard, on the beard of Aaron, running down on the collar of his robes! It is like the dew of Hermon, which falls on the mountains of Zion! For there the LORD has commanded the blessing, life forevermore.* The main tactic of the enemy against the church is against unity. And our squabbling is evidence of his work. When we argue and squabble and bicker, about great things or small things, it provides an open door for the enemy to move into the church. **Our disagreements are his avenues into the church**.

What I am not saying is that we all *must* have the same opinion about everything and we all march in lockstep like automatons. But what I am saying, and I believe what Paul is saying, is that we cannot let our opinions divide us into camps. That happens when we value our opinion over our relationships – and it happens when we walk pridefully and not humbly. Our rule of walking together as brothers and sisters in the Lord ought to be Isaiah 66:2: *But this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and trembles at My word.* If we deal with one another humbly, contritely, trembling for ourselves and them at the word of God, then there is no gateway for the enemy to enter the camp.

In the church we will have differing opinions and differing gifts. God made each one of us unique and that is something about which to rejoice, not mourn. But where we differ in opinion or in gifts, let that be cause for joy and not sorrow, recognizing that we all have gifts that differ and God intends that each gift serve a particular and important part in the church. And recognizing that our opinion may not be the best. I know to many of you that will come as somewhat of a surprise. But the reality is that there are other opinions in the church that are better than yours. ***Where we differ, let us be guided by humility and the word of God.***

**We also stand firm in joy:** *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.* Philippians 4:4 Paul doesn't leave any wiggle room here – always, always, always, rejoice. Don't we have grief and woe? Yes, but the Bible says rejoice in the Lord. Don't we have setbacks and trials and suffering? Yes, but the Bible says to rejoice in the Lord. I hope you notice the qualifier here – ***rejoice in the Lord.*** We are not called to rejoice in something but rather someone – Christ. We have been delivered from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light – we have been saved from slavery to sin and damnation to hell, to the glorious freedom and joy of eternal life – ***through Christ.*** D.A. Carson writes: *'If we fail to respond with joy and gratitude when we are reminded of these things, it is either because we have not properly grasped the depths of the abyss of our own sinful natures and of the curse from which we have been freed by Jesus or because we have not adequately surveyed the splendor of the heights to which we have been raised.'* If our joy is wrapped up in things – when things go south our joy follows. But if our joy is in Christ alone – then whether we have things or don't have things, we always have joy.

**We stand firm in forbearance.** Paul says: *Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand;* Philippians 4:5 I like the word ***forbearing spirit*** as the NASB translates it, better here because the Greek word means does include the meaning of being reasonable – but it includes so much more. It means to be satisfied with less than what is owed you and includes the idea of being willing to forgo retaliation when we are threatened or provoked. It means that we hold on to our relationships in the love of God as misunderstandings arise, as cutting words are said, as deliberate or unintentional offenses are given, as unkind and even hurtful things are done. **To have a forbearing spirit is to take the offense and turn it into prayer.** It is to take the hurt and bury it with love. It is to take those cutting words and make them a sacrifice of praise to God. **It means that we reject the breaking of our relationships with one another in view of the sin-covering love that Christ demonstrated for us at Calvary.** A forbearing spirit overlooks the offense for the sake of Christ. Having a forbearing spirit is to give up any right we think we have to even the score or set the other person right or to nurse a grudge or wallow in self-pity. It means putting our relationships before our pride and not insisting on our relational rights.

**We stand firm in prayer as Paul says:** *do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* Philippians 4:6-7 There are things to be anxious about – we have worries – and this passage does not deny their existence, but it tells us what to do with them. Anxiety and worry are meant to drive us to prayer. **We live under the cloud of worry and anxiety precisely because we don't pray.** Look at the rock-solid promise of this verse – pray, and the peace of God ***will*** guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Guard them from what? From worry and anxiety.

***The peace of God will kill your worry and anxiety.*** When was the last time you really took your worries to God in prayer and thanksgiving? I am not just talking about a 30 second burst – but taking your worries and anxieties to the Lord in prayer, recounting them one by one, laying your burdens on His shoulders. Time is what is needed here – time to linger in His presence. We cannot pray too much – we may pray too little. If you have worries and anxieties and you take them to the Lord in prayer and you find at the end of it you are still plagued by these peace-stealers – keep praying! **Much prayer – much blessing.** Little prayer – little blessing. No prayer – no blessing.

**Finally we stand firm in holy thinking:** *Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me--practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.* Philippians 4:8-9 Our thought life is one of the most critical factors in standing firm. Proverbs 23:6 tells us that the way a man thinks determines how he lives. **Our thoughts will either bend us toward sin or bend us toward God.** Paul is exhorting the saints to have holy thinking – meditate on whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise. Because that will determine how you speak and act. Jesus tells us in Matthew: *But what comes out of the mouth proceeds from the heart, and this defiles a person. For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false witness, slander. These are what defile a person.* Matthew 15:18-20

**Our thinking is absolutely vital in the church.** The real measure of maturity lies in our thought life – not so much in what we do. If we stand firm in holy thinking, that will be borne out in our speaking and our actions. On the other hand, we can fool people for a while with our actions, but in the end if our thought life is a cesspool of corruption, that too will be borne out in what we say and do. Jesus told the Pharisees who were very good at outward religious observance this: *You brood of vipers! How can you speak good, when you are evil? For out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks.* Matthew 12:24 What we fill our hearts with in our thinking will come out of our mouths. It is the old adage – garbage in, garbage out. Good stuff in – good stuff out. The cure for this is to dwell on Philippians 4:8. A thing might be true but not honorable – it might be lovely but not true – it might be just but not pure. This is part of rehearsing the gospel.

It is of paramount importance that we take control of our thoughts because that is another avenue Satan uses to infiltrate the church. Paul told the Corinthians: *We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ,* 2 Corinthians 10:5 Philippians 4:8 is how we take our thoughts captive. **If we fail to take our thoughts captive to the obedience of Christ – our thoughts will take us captive in chains of bitterness, envy, jealousy and anger.** But if we are rehearsing the gospel to our souls, thinking on the true, the honorable, the just, the pure, the lovely and commendable – we are more and more transformed into the image of Christ as our minds are renewed.

This is how we stand firm in the Lord – we stand in unity, we stand in joy, we stand in forbearance, we stand in prayer and we stand in holy thinking.

*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.* Philippians 4:8

*Our gracious God and heavenly Father,*

*Grant us the grace to stand firm in the Lord through every storm that threatens to undo us. Help us to fight the fight of faith all the way to the finish. Deal with those remnants of corruption that still plague our lives and help us never to surrender to the enemy of our souls. May we prize and cherish our blood-bought unity in Christ and never give the devil an avenue of invasion. May our joy in Christ trump all our trials and all our woes and make us a people who treasure Christ above all. Let forbearance be the hallmark of ruined lives made new and help us to persevere in prayer until we find that sweet place of peace that knows no worry and no fear. Gracious Lord, help us to daily rehearse the truth of the gospel – and to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ until our minds are renewed in holy thinking. May our joy and delight in You spill out through the gospel to all people everywhere for Your great glory and for the sake of Your name we pray, Amen.*