

Philippians 1. 27-30. Bethesda Lord's Day Morning Bible Teaching. 1 June 2008.

Our reading for this morning is taken from Philippians chapter 1 verses 27 to 30.¹

Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you stand firm in one spirit, with one soul striving together for the faith of the gospel, and not frightened in anything by your adversaries, which is a sure token to them of destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. Because to you it was granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him but also to suffer on His behalf, having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear to be in me.

But before we look at any of these details, the opening word – ‘only’ – tells us that we need to pick up the threads from the previous section – which we considered last week.

At the time of writing, Paul was in chains – to which he refers no less than three times in verses 13 to 16 – pending the outcome of his trial before Caesar.²

From verse 20 down, Paul has been speaking of his dilemma. He was, he said, hard pressed from two sides – having, on the one hand, the strong desire³ to depart this world and to be with Christ, which he knew to be far better,⁴ and yet, on the other hand, recognising that for him to remain was more necessary for the sake of the Philippians. But he knew that the outcome of his trial didn't rest with him. He was confident that it had already been settled – not, however, by Nero in Rome but by God in heaven – and that he would in fact remain in the flesh that he might visit them again and contribute to their spiritual progress and joy.

And in this earlier section the apostle has let us see something of his faith, his hope and his love.

(i) His faith ... in that his expectation of his release clearly rested, not on the whim of Emperor Nero – to whom the Philippians' well-being was certainly not a governing factor, but on the providence of God. For Paul was confident that the God who had earlier overruled for good his imprisonment in Rome in the first place was well able to secure his release from that imprisonment now if He so chose.

(ii) His hope ... in that he saw death to be – not loss (as, according to the opening of chapter 3, he counted all his Jewish privileges and previous achievements) – but as gain, as advantage. For him to depart this life – whether by execution or in any other way – was for him ‘to be with Christ, which is far better’ ... far better, yes, that he deserved ... far better, yes, than he could imagine ... but, in the context, far better than even living for Christ.

(iii) His love ... in that his concern for the Philippians was such that, when the prospect of being with Christ was set in one pan of the scales over against this concern in the other pan, it failed to tip the balance – the beam stood horizontal – ‘which I shall choose I know not’.⁵

‘I have you in my heart’, he had said in verse 7 – and so he did! What amazing affection he must have had for Lydia, the jailor and the rest – that he was prepared to forego heaven and the presence of Christ for a time for their sake.

Ah, but, he says in the opening of our section for this morning, ‘whatever you do, don't wait for me’. Although confident that he would be set free, Paul knew that he had no guarantee to that effect – and, indeed, even if he did manage to see them again, it could only be for a relatively short time. But, regardless of what happened to him – whether he saw them again or not, one single instruction would suffice – for their responsibility was to ‘the gospel’, and their accountability was to ‘Christ’ – and not to him.

‘Only’, he says, placing the word at the beginning – ‘lifted like a warning finger’⁶ to catch their attention.⁷

‘Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ ...’. Although we already have 26 verses behind us, this is in fact the first exhortation in the epistle – revealing as it does one of the main reasons the apostle had for writing.

It wasn't unusual for Paul to urge the churches to ‘walk worthy’, whether : of their ‘calling’, Eph. 4. 1; of ‘the Lord’, Col. 1. 10; or ‘of God’, 1 Thess. 2. 12 – translating what they had been taught into practice.

But here, in Philippians 1 verse 27, he uses a very different term – not that they should ‘walk’ worthy – but, as the word should almost certainly be understood, that they should ‘exercise their citizenship’ in a manner worthy of the gospel.⁸ At the close of chapter 3, he will assure them, ‘our citizenship is in heaven’, and here, using more or less the same word, he urges them to live in a way consistent with their privilege – to behave as good citizens of heaven.

Such a word picture was, of course, natural to Paul – himself a Roman citizen, whose very presence then in Rome was due to his having exercised his right as a Roman citizen to lodge an appeal to Caesar.

But such an exhortation was particularly apt for his readers too. For, as is well known, Philippi had been made a Roman military colony by Caesar Augustus some 100 years before – and, with their colonial status, the residents of Philippi, although a thousand miles distant from Rome, were themselves reckoned as Roman citizens, sharing more or less all the rights and privileges of the citizens of the imperial city itself.

But, by grace, those whom Paul addressed were citizens of a better – of an heavenly – city, whose members enjoyed far greater privileges than Rome could ever bestow.

But the *residents* of Philippi also understood well the responsibilities associated with their Roman citizenship, and the apostle now demands of the *saints* of Philippi that they act in a manner suiting those who enjoy heavenly citizenship – to live in *this* world as citizens of *another* – in effect, to walk on earth as heavenly men and women.⁹

Perhaps one of the best commentaries on Paul's exhortation is found in the Epistle to Diognetus, a Christian writing dated about 90 years later: 'Christians are not distinguished from the rest of mankind either in locality or in speech or in customs ... They find themselves in the flesh, and yet they live not after the flesh. Their existence is on earth, but their citizenship is in heaven'.¹⁰

'Exercise your heavenly citizenship', Paul says, 'in a manner consistent with the gospel of Christ, because, in the same way that *you* once saw, and now hear, of my conflict and sufferings (verse 30), so, if I come, I want to see, or, if I don't come, I want to hear of your steadfastness, your unity and your courage.

First, 'stand firm' – stand fast, hold your ground when under attack – a military word picture hardly lost on those who lived in a military colony. But do so, the apostle adds, 'in one spirit, with one soul striving together for the faith of the gospel'. Because, whereas standing firm certainly required resolve and determination on the part of each individual, it was also a shared activity of the entire church fellowship.

They were to 'strive' (to 'contend') together – the word referring properly to an athletic contest – whether to wrestling, racing or as a gladiator in the arena. The point is that they should both stand and strive – not in isolation – but together in oneness of spirit and soul – united, that is, by a common goal and purpose.

And we recall from verses 15 to 18 that the churches of Rome (the city from which Paul was writing) were *anything but* united in the driving force behind their gospel work.¹¹

But this mustn't be so at Philippi! 'Strive in concert', the apostle says, 'side by side, shoulder by shoulder'. No, all do not have the same role or the same gift – of course not – but let all be united in what they yearn to promote – 'the faith of the gospel' – which I understand to mean 'the body of truth which is the gospel'.

It is sad to note the context in which Paul uses the very same word translated 'striving together' in the opening section of chapter 4: 'I beseech Euodia and I beseech Syntyche', he writes there, 'to think the same thing in the Lord. Yes, I ask you also, true yokefellow, help them, *who strove together with me in the gospel ...*'. Yes, once they had *striven together* 'in the gospel'. Now, alas, they were *striving with each other*.

Indeed, it may well be that those verses in chapter 4 hold the key to much of what Paul says through the previous chapters. That the way in which these two (one time outstanding) sisters were now at loggerheads was endangering the unity and peace of the whole assembly – and that, like a shrewd physician, the apostle has, in effect, been applying the remedy to the underlying spiritual illness there before ever he let on that he was aware of its correct diagnosis.

In other words, the key to this particular letter may well be found in the back door rather than in the front door. And this would explain the many 'loaded' occurrences of the word 'all' – for example, 'to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi', 1. 1; 'every prayer of mine for you all', 1. 4; 'it is right for me to feel this way about you all', 1. 7; 'I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus', 1. 8; 'I know that I will remain and continue with you all', 1. 25, and so on. Paul made it very clear that he wasn't in the business of taking sides.

'With one soul striving together', Paul says. The saints at Philippi were, that is, to present an unbroken front to their adversaries – who come in for mention in the following verse.

You may well be familiar with the incident which took place on HMS Victory the day before the historic Battle of Trafalgar in October 1805. Admiral Collingwood, who commanded HMS Royal Sovereign, boarded the Victory to receive instructions from Admiral Lord Nelson for the forthcoming battle. Nelson inquired where Collingwood's captain was, only to be told that the two men were not on good terms with each other. 'Terms!', roared Nelson, 'good terms with each other!' He immediately sent a boat for Captain Rotherham, and led him, as soon as he arrived, to Collingwood. Declaring, 'Look; yonder are the enemy!', Nelson invited them to shake hands like Englishmen. Which they did. And the following day, Admiral Collingwood, delighted at firing the very first shot of the battle, turned to his captain with the now famous words, 'Rotherham, what would Nelson give to be here?'¹²

I have no doubt that the apostle could have related to that incident. 'Brethren', I can almost hear him saying, 'Look, yonder is the enemy!' 'Euodia ... Syntyche, look, yonder is the enemy!'

But Paul would have the saints, not only *undivided*, but *undaunted*.

'And not frightened in anything¹³ by your adversaries, which is a sure token to them of destruction, but of your salvation'.

The word translated 'frightened' is sometimes used outside of scripture of the terror of a startled horse. For example, one Greek historian, who flourished about 100 years before Paul, wrote of the chariot-horses of Darius at one great battle, '*Frightened* by the multitude of the dead heaped round them, they shook off their reins'.¹⁴

Paul's word picture is clear enough. Don't be terrified, he is saying, at any attempts to intimidate you and pressure you to turn away from the faith of the gospel.

'A sure token' translates a Greek legal term, describing the proof that something is true by an appeal to some fact or facts. And the failure of all attempts by their opponents to terrify and intimidate the believers was clear evidence of the truth and the power of the gospel, and thereby of the fact, whether they realised it themselves or not, that they (the persecutors), were on the road to utter and eternal destruction, while the Christians were in the good of God's glorious salvation.¹⁵

The apostle's words remind me of Derek Malcolm's recent note circulated by Echoes, about the latest hearing of the trial of the young men who murdered the three believers in Malatya, Turkey. 'One harrowing feature of the trials is the constant stream of gory detail that emerges with each person's account ... We can only imagine', Derek comments, 'what our dear brothers suffered during those hours. But they did not deny their Lord ... '! A 'sure token' indeed of the truth and power of the gospel of our Lord Jesus.

One leading commentator¹⁶ suggests that, with his words 'and that from God', Paul, with his mind still on the imagery of 'striving', alludes here to the sign of life or death given by the spectators following a gladiator's fight in the amphitheater, when the spectators turned their thumbs up or down.¹⁷ The Christian's courage in the face of persecution, that commentator suggests, is itself 'a direct indication from God.'¹⁸ The Christian gladiator does not anxiously await the signal of life or death from the fickle crowd. The great Director of the contest Himself has given him a sure token' of salvation.¹⁹

'Because to you it was granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him but also to suffer on His behalf, having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear to be in me'.

If it was the privilege of the Philippians to *believe in* Christ, Paul says, it was equally their privilege to *suffer for* Him.²⁰

And finally he encourages the saints in their sufferings by pointing out that they are in good company – for they are engaged in the same 'conflict' – the same 'struggle' – they had once seen Paul endure, and which they knew him to be enduring still. They knew – and no one better than the jailor – that when the apostle was *at Philippi*, his feet had been secured in the stocks of the prison there – and they knew that now *in Rome* he was in chains again.

And I note that the word rendered 'granted' carries the idea of '*graciously* granted or given'. Not long after leaving Philippi the apostle had told the Thessalonian church how he and Silas had suffered and been shamefully treated there.²¹ And yet it is clear from *our* passage that Paul viewed his sufferings for Christ, not only in terms of being *disgraced by men* but of being *graced by God*.

Endnotes

¹ One single sentence in the Greek.

² That the trial itself had taken place is implied in chapter 1 verse 7 – hence the reference to the way in which he had accounted for himself in defending and confirming the gospel. For the background, see Acts 25. 11-12, 21.

³ The word translated 'desire' is rendered 'lust' or 'concupiscence' in the King James Version on 34 of its 37 occurrences in the New Testament. It expresses an intense and passionate desire.

⁴ To be 'much rather better', literally.

⁵ Compare 'with Christ', Phil. 1. 23, and 'with you', Phil. 1. 25.

⁶ Karl Barth.

⁷ As if he said, 'This is the one thing which you must go for – nothing else must distract you from this'.

⁸ Just as they had been counted worthy of God's kingdom, 2 Thess. 1. 5, they should behave themselves as citizens of that kingdom.

⁹ Compare Eph. 2. 19, written perhaps a little later.

¹⁰ Paragraph 5. There is a striking parallel in Polycarp's letter to the Philippians; 'If we live as citizens worthy of him, we shall also reign with him', paragraph 5. A similar phrase is found also in Clement of Rome to the Corinthians, chapter 21.

¹¹ Many there were anything but at one with Paul in his service for Christ.

¹² '(Admiral Lord Cuthbert) Collingwood, delighted at being first in the heat of the fire, and knowing the feelings of his commander and old friend, turned to his captain, and exclaimed: "Rotherham, what would Nelson give to be here?" Both these brave officers, perhaps, at this moment, thought of Nelson with gratitude, for a circumstance which had occurred on the preceding day. Admiral Collingwood, with some of the captains, having gone on board the Victory to receive instructions, Nelson inquired of him where his captain was and was told, in reply, that they were not upon good terms with each other. "Terms!" said Nelson, "good terms with each other!" Immediately he sent a boat for Captain Rotherham; led him, as soon as he arrived, to Collingwood; and saying, "Look; yonder are the enemy!", bade them shake hands like Englishmen'. The Life of Horatio Lord Nelson by Robert Southey. www.fullbooks.com/The-Life-of-Horatio-Lord-Nelson5.html.

On October 21, 1805 the combined forces of France and Spain were annihilated by the English fleet.

Admiral Lord Collingwood fired the first shot at Trafalgar, and took over command of the British fleet after the death of his friend Nelson. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/insideout/northeast/series7/collingwood.shtml>

¹³ Literally, 'in nothing' – a double negative in the Greek for emphasis.

¹⁴ The Battle of Issus, Diodorus Siculus, *'Bibliotheca Historica'*, xvii. 34. Plutarch records, 'The multitude is not easy to handle so that it is safe for any one to take the reins; but it should be held sufficient, if, not being *scared* by sight or sound, like a shy and fickle animal, it accept mastery'.

¹⁵ Paul had earlier said much the same to the other suffering Macedonian church – that at Thessalonica: 'We ourselves boast about you in the churches of God for *your steadfastness and faith* in all your persecutions and in the afflictions that you are enduring, *a sure token of the righteous judgment of God*, that you may be accounted worthy of the kingdom of God, on behalf of which you also suffer, since it is a just thing with God *to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant rest to you who are afflicted along with us*, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire ...', 2 Thess. 1. 4-8. Paul had himself been a persecutor of Christians once and may still recall the steadfastness of those he maltreated – which evidently troubled him greatly at the time, acting as goads against which he continued to kick, Acts 26. 14. Perhaps Stephen in particular?

¹⁶ J. B. Lightfoot.

¹⁷ Compare, 'Where influenced by the rabble's bloody will, with thumbs bent back, they popularly kill', Juvenal, Satire 3: 36.

¹⁸ "'And that by God" refers grammatically neither to "salvation" nor to "sign" (both of which are feminine nouns, for which the feminine form of "that" would be required, rather than the neuter, which was used), but to the entire fact that believers have been granted courage from God to stand firm in their struggles'.

¹⁹ Or, possibly, Paul means that 'your courage in the face of persecution clearly comes from God'.

²⁰ They had come to believe in the Lord Jesus through hearing the gospel, and for that they were no doubt grateful to God. But they should be grateful also, Paul says, that He had granted them the opportunity to suffer for Christ.

²¹ 1 Thess. 2. 2.