

Stand Firm in the Lord

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Philippians 4:1-9

The title of our lesson today is “Stand Firm in the Lord” or as Eugene Peterson says, “Don’t waver. Stay on track, steady in God.” And, it goes without saying that we are in perilous times and finding it hard to stand firm. The book of Philippians will help us a lot.

Philippians is one of my very favorite books in the Bible. I like it for many reasons, but primarily because it is a book of joy—exuberant, joyful, joy. This is a book that Paul wrote while in prison, chained to a Roman guard. Note his response to this condition, 1:12-13: “. . . what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard. . .” v18, “What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed and in that I rejoice.”

Philippians also contains a favorite passage of Jesus’ work on earth. In chapter 2, Paul writes of the incredible “kenosis” or emptying of Jesus and what that means for us. Following up with that, we have Paul’s personal testimony of his faith and walk with God. He has followed the footsteps of Jesus by emptying himself of everything, counting all that he lost as dung, enduring the suffering and planning on the same glorification at the end of his life that Jesus had. This section also contains my goal for my life with Christ “that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.”

He continues in that same vein in chapter 3 when he talks about moving forward in his journey, pressing on the mark of the high calling, etc. He describes himself in these passages as a determined, dedicated individual consumed with a passion to be like Christ. Movement, movement, movement.

Things change in chapter 4. “Therefore my brothers and sisters. . . stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.” Suddenly, we are no longer moving and putting great effort into this spiritual journey, but rather asked to **STOP**.

What are we to learn.

Peterson’s translation: “Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, *revel* in him.” It is so easy for us to dwell on everything in our lives except our faith, our God. We tend to think of him only when we need him. We celebrate him in community worship as we are doing today, but often we allow our lives to become consumed by life: children, jobs, economic security, relationships, etc. These are all things that have to be done, but Paul says this is not what we are to rejoice in. We are to rejoice in God daily. Perhaps our job should not be rejoiced in because it provides our living, rather we should rejoice in God that the job is ours and that our needs are being met. If we can concentrate on the job as a gift to meet our needs, that is what we then rejoice in—not in what social or economic status in which our professions/jobs place us. In truth, as Paul says earlier, we rejoice, period. We need nothing to rejoice about except that God is in our lives and we have a relationship with him. Dietrich Bonhoffer once said that if he were left naked in the streets, he would have no choice but to praise God. God inhabits our praises. When we rejoice and praise him, he speaks to us.

Secondly, Paul says we can stand firm in the Lord by prayer and gratitude. I am convinced from personal study and experience that this is one of the greatest truths in Scripture. Gratitude. Notice there are no boundaries for this gratitude; we are not instructed to be grateful for good things, simply be grateful. As mentioned earlier, Paul was grateful for being chained to a soldier for several years in prison. Can you imagine, grateful? Then he explains why—the gospel was being heard and believed throughout the Roman Imperial Guard and throughout the prison.

Have you ever been in that place where you have no idea how you will survive a particular situation? How the bills will be paid? How can you endure the end of a special relationship? When will I ever find a new job? What has happened to my 401K? These are all common conditions of our lives. Many of you know from my earlier visits here that I have a semi-disabled son who is the sole parent of 2 children whom some of you met a few weeks ago.

When I suddenly was confronted with this physical disability in one so young, I was devastated. However, he had a wife who had a good job and she would take care of everything. Then, the wife left the marriage and the children. Again, how can I deal with this? My impulse was to whine, to question, and to worry. This to some degree remained my response for some time. My spiritual journey went "On Hold," as it were. I never stopped believing, but I could not rejoice as well as I once did.

Paul in this scripture combines gratitude with a major spiritual discipline. He says, "with thanksgiving let your requests be known unto God. And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." I had read and taught that passage many times, but I had never experienced it in this serious way. The situation with my son and grandsons forced me to do so.

After the wife left, the unemployment, insurance and all other forms of financial resources ended with my son almost 2 years ago. I now had a son who could not work, had no wife and mother in his home, had no income and had 2 children to care for. So it became necessary for me to support myself and support most of the financial needs of my son. By doing this, we were all in jeopardy. It also meant that I had to go to Modesto at least twice a month and clean his house, do major shopping, etc. and keep up working. How could I possibly do that?

This Philippian passage and the Matthew passage on worry spoke in large, bold, underlined print. Charlotte, be grateful. This became a discipline to me. It wasn't easy. I learned to live in the day. I spent time daily thanking God that all of us had shelter for that day, food for that day, transportation for that day, etc. When the gratitude became integral to my prayer life, I found peace. We often ask God to do things for us and are disappointed when that doesn't happen. Somehow, we can't find that peace that surpasses all understanding. If we can change our thinking about prayer and concentrate on gratitude, our whole world of worry and whining changes. We find the peace that God promises.

One of the last things Paul recommends is that we create peace in our own personal lives by filling our lives and minds with what is true, pure, pleasing, and commendable. This is a choice we make. We can choose to fill our minds with all the evil that is happening in our world such as the evil of war, the economic meltdown, crime in our cities, etc. We can fill our minds with false ideas and people and suddenly become too stubborn to listen to what just might be the truth. We can fill our minds and our spirits with images and ideas that certainly are not commendable. We can do all these things and if we choose them, we cannot stand firm in the Lord. Our Lord is true, pure, pleasing and commendable. He doesn't fit well in any other place which, of course, decreases our ability to be grateful, our ability to pray and suddenly we are in that vicious cycle of asking God for things, which we don't receive, we complain, fill ourselves with more "stuff," pray, become disappointed, etc., etc.

With this scripture in my head, I have now been through 2 years of what could have been continual worry, fear and doubt, and certainly there are days like that. But, unlikely as it seems, I and my family have generally survived in peace that is absolutely not to be understood. We have stood firm and in peace because of our gratitude and the gift of faith God has for us all.

This lesson can be applied today in our very uncertain world of economic collapse, wars, injustice and all the other evils with which we co-exist. We can stand firm in Christ Jesus and we can be grateful. In our prayers of gratitude, we will find peace—perfect peace.