

The Path of True Joy: Part 4
Stand Firm in the Lord
Philippians 3:17-4:1
Sunday, March 16th, 2025

Scripture:

Philippians 3:17-4:1

[17] Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. [18] For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. [19] Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things. [20] But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, [21] who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

[1] Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

Let's Pray

Introduction

Every year or two our family, along with some friends, spend a week or so at a cabin in the Hayward, WI area. Now, if you have ever been there, you know that there are a lot of fun touristy things to do.

For my kids, they love a place called Tremblay's Sweet Shop, where you are encouraged to fill a giant bag of candy, because you pay by the pound and not by the package. Likewise, we all enjoy the Wilderness Walk Zoo, where you may or may not get chased by baby goats while you're there.

But one of the things that I have enjoyed the most is the immense amount of fishing spots in the area. In fact, Josh and I like fishing this one particular river that is sort of off the beaten path.

To get there we have to park on the side of a small road and walk through thick brush and trees until we reach the edge of the river. Once there, to actually get a good spot, we need make our way out on to rocks that are in the middle of the river until we find a sturdy and stable one that we can fish from.

Because, if you have even been in a river on unstable rocks, you know what happens when you try to shift your weight back and forth, right? **You fall in because the rock you were standing on wasn't stable enough to hold you up.**

In our passage for this morning the apostle Paul is finally at the end of a discourse that he started all the way back in Philippians 1:27 when he said:

[27] 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,

Before Paul gave the Philippians any specific instructions on how to endure persecution and be united through service, he first reminds them that they are to live as heavenly citizens (that's what "let your manner of life be worthy" means), and as heavenly citizens they are to reflect the greatness of Christ.

Because he wants them to be able to "stand firm" in their faith as they work together to proclaim the gospel in Philippi.

And everything that Paul has said from then on, has been written so that they would have a practical picture of what it looks like to stand firm in their faith as they live out their heavenly citizenship.

But now, he is bringing this whole section to a close with another strong reminder to "stand firm." As he says in Philippians 4:1:

[1] Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

First, we need to recognize how much Paul cares about the Philippians. He calls them his brothers and sisters that he loves dearly and longs to be with.

They are his "joy and crown" because he is hopeful and excited that they will stand with him, in the presence of God, when Christ returns.

This kind of love and affection for God's people should be the mark of everyone who calls themselves a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ.

But it's also a picture of a pastor or shepherd's heart. A heart that genuinely loves God's people and is excited about their growth in Christ.

So then, when he gives them, this repeated command to "stand firm," they won't receive it as a harsh call to get their life together, but they will see Paul's heart, which desires their progress and joy in the faith (Phil. 1:25).

And to be sure that they continue on and have joy in their faith he once again says "stand firm" or "persevere in your faith."

But he isn't just calling them to stand firm on any kind of surface or foundation. Rather, he has a specific rock or stable foundation in mind that will help them persevere. It is the rock of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus, who humbled himself, took the form of a servant, went to the cross on our behalf, took the punishment for sin we deserved, and made us children of the living God, is our only sure foundation and hope as we wait for the day when we will reach the prize of our eternal home.

But if Jesus is our rock and our sure foundation, there is still this question: How do we stand firm in Christ until we reach our heavenly home?

And by the grace of God Paul has answers for us. Because when he uses the word “Therefore” in 4:1, he’s telling us to look back at 3:17-21 for our answer.

So as we look at those verses today we are going to see that Paul has three things that we should do so we can confidently “stand firm” or “persevere” in the Lord Jesus Christ. The first thing he tells us to do is to:

Imitate those who live like Paul.

Philippians 3:17

[17] Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.

Growing up, I used to love playing video games. And my favorite kinds of games were adventure games. Where you would gather characters, level them up, fight bad guys or monsters, and ultimately destroy whatever evil was threatening the world.

And within one of these games there was a character who had an ability called “**mimic**.” This ability was super powerful if you knew what you were doing because it would “mimic or imitate” the last attack from either an enemy or one of the other characters in your group.

So, if one of your characters did 5000 points of damage, then the character with “mimic” could imitate the same attack and do the same amount of damage.

Now, I realize that there are probably 1 or 2 of you geeking out with me, and the rest of you are like, “is this really our pastor?”

But, I like this illustration because it gives us a picture of what Paul is saying when he calls the Philippians to “imitate me and to keep your eyes on those who walk like me.”

However, if you’ve been here for this series, or have been following along online, you might be thinking, “wait, didn’t Paul already tell us to do this?”

Yes he did. In his commendation of both Timothy and Epaphroditus he said in Philippians 2:29:

[29] So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men,

Paul highlighted the examples of Timothy as a humble servant and Epaphroditus as a suffering servant so that the Philippians would have real-life pictures of Christ's humble and obedient servanthood among them.

And Paul's command was to receive them with joy and to hold them in high regard as examples of Christ. This meant that they were to honor and live like those men.

So then why is he bringing this up again in 3:17?

One, is because he now broadens the scope to include himself, his associates (Timothy and Epaphroditus), and anybody who walks according to their example.

Two, is because it's an important reminder that will protect the Philippians and will help them to stand firm in the Lord.

It will protect them from living like false believers, who we will talk about next, and it will help them to stand firm in their faith, as they imitate Paul's example. This probably includes his way of life that he wrote about earlier in Philippians 1, but it primarily has in view what he has said in 3:1-16.

This includes: His focus on rejoicing in the Lord (3:1). His desire to boast in Christ and not in himself (3:2). His rejection of his heritage and his works as things that can make him right with God (3:4-7).

His desire to count everything as loss so that he can know Christ (3:8). To gain a righteousness that comes from Christ and not from himself (3:9). To know Christ by becoming like him as he eagerly waits for the resurrection (3:10-11).

And finally, his understanding that he can't obtain the resurrection on his own, but must press on by the power of Christ in him, so that he can reach the finish line and receive the upward call of God in Christ Jesus (3:12-14).

The common thread through this whole section is the truth that Paul has rejected himself as a means of getting right with God and instead has put his full hope for his salvation and resurrection in Christ and Christ alone.

Therefore, more than anything, what he is calling the Philippians and us to imitate is his gospel hope.

A hope that he very clearly points to all over the New Testament. Look with me at a couple of examples:

Romans 1:16

[16] For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Ephesians 2:4–7

[4] But God, being rich in mercy, because of the great love with which he loved us, [5] even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—[6] and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, [7] so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus.

It's this gospel hope which allows Paul to suffer the loss of all things. Which motivates him to say "Christ will be honored in my body whether by life or by death" in Philippians 1:20. And it is this hope which keeps his focus on Jesus even in the midst of persecution and imprisonment, because he knows that Christ is for him and will be until the day he goes home to be with Jesus.

This is the kind of hope that we need to imitate as believers. But we're not imitating a hope that we don't have. Rather, he is telling us to imitate his example of gospel hope, because that same hope is ours through Christ.

Which means that we can stand firm in our faith, and we can press on toward the eternal goal, like Paul, and others like him, because the triune God who saved Paul, is the same God who saved us.

Application

Now, when I talked about Timothy and Epaphroditus back on February 16th, I spent a lot of time, at the end of that message talking about the importance of looking to and emulating godly examples in our lives.

But instead of traveling that road again, I want to ask you this question: Who are the people in your life who continually bring you back to the hope you have in Christ? Who is calling you to look to Christ, to love Christ, to rely on Christ, and to press on, by the power of Christ toward the heavenly prize?

It could be a mom, dad, a grandparent, spouse, friend, or one of your dear brothers and sisters in Christ within the faith family. Whoever they are, my encouragement to you is to imitate their hope in the living God that both lives in them and in you.

This is one of the reasons that I would encourage many of you to seek out an older mentor in the faith. Someone who has walked through and experienced the many ups and downs of the Christian life and is still clinging to Jesus.

Because they will not only give you a living example of what it looks like to stand firm in Christ, but they will help you see through the false messages of hope and fulfillment that our culture is trying to give you.

And they will tell you, both from their experience and from the truth of the Word that this world can't save you, and it can't give you the lasting joy and hope that you need and long for, only Christ can.

In fact, this is the exact message that Paul has for us in the next couple of verses. Look with me at Philippians 3:18-19.

Beware of the worldly mindset.

Philippians 3:18-19

[18] For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. [19] Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.

There is something that is happening in our current culture climate. Maybe you feel it or maybe you are unaware that it is happening, but there is a redefining of what it means to be a gospel believing Christian.

Christians are abandoning long-standing and traditional views on marriage, gender, sexuality, and even the nature of God. And as they do this, they are either abandoning or redefining what the Bible says to suit their own worldly desires.

This phenomenon in our culture is known as ***Religious Deconstruction***. And according to John Bloom in his article, "What Does 'Deconstruction' Even Mean?" he defines religious deconstruction this way:

Deconstruction is a critical dismantling of a person's understanding of what it means to be an evangelical Christian...

Now, in one sense we all go through a process of deconstruction. If you grew up in a Christian home, there are probably ways that your beliefs about Christ look a little different from your parents. Also, I can imagine that for most of us, our beliefs over the years have changed and grown as our understanding of God and his word have grown.

But the kind of deconstruction that Bloom is talking about is really a complete rejection of biblical truth in favor of a version of God that either seems easier to follow or is more open to things that were previously considered sin.

Well, as the author of Ecclesiastes says, **"...there is nothing new under the sun."**

Because this is what happened to some in the Philippian Church. They were once faithful, scripture believing, apostle following Christians. **But Paul now says with tears, that they have become enemies of the cross.** But why? What happened to them?

To be honest, we don't have all of the details surrounding these people, but Paul sheds light on the condition of their hearts as he tells us three things about how they are living.

The first thing that he tells us in verse 19 is that ***“their god is their belly.”***

Now, belly in this verse actually means the inner cavity of a person and is used to describe the heart and the desires that come from inside a person.

So instead of focusing on Jesus as their God, they are consumed by their inner desires and passions. These are the kinds of people that are talked about in James 4:1-3 when he says:

[1] What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? [2] You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask. [3] You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.

By their actions, they are making it clear that their god is their inner appetite for things like sex, money, prestige, and all other forms of worldly gain.

Secondly, Paul tells us that ***“they glory in their shame.”***

These are people who boast in their evil acts as if they are good, and have somehow convinced themselves that they are in the right.

We, of course, can see this all over the place outside of the church. The transgender movement, the cultural acceptance of homosexuality, the sexual culture as a whole, and in our particular area, the widespread acceptance of drunkenness as if it is a badge of honor to be achieved.

But the church isn’t immune to this either. Things like division over preferences, hypocrisy, greed, fighting for power, idolizing pastors and teachers, the prevalence of pornography, infidelity, promiscuity, and couples living together before marriage are but a small sampling of what some Bible believing Christians have begun to believe is okay.

They are boasting in what the bible clearly says is sin.

Finally, Paul says that they do this ***“with minds set on earthly things.”***

It’s important to understand what Paul is saying here and what he isn’t. These people haven’t necessarily rejected their faith on an intellectual level. There is a good chance that they still would call themselves Christians.

But what they have done, is they have taken their eye off of the prize. They have stopped pursuing Jesus as their first love and their only hope, and instead, their minds and their hearts are consumed with worldly things.

And so with tears in his eyes, Paul has to say to them, ***“you are enemies of the cross and your end is eternal destruction.”***

Or as Jesus said in Matthew 7:23:

[23] And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'

Application:

We need to be so keenly aware of the fact that we are consistently being tempted to compromise our faith. To knowingly or unknowingly make something besides Christ our only hope and our only treasure.

In fact, I know that once we leave this building today, many of us will probably experience some of these temptations.

But Paul, with tears in his eyes, wants us to see that anything that we try to stand on besides the foundation of Christ will only lead to a dead end and destruction. As Jesus said in Luke 6:47-49:

[47] Everyone who comes to me and hears my words and does them, I will show you what he is like: [48] he is like a man building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on the rock. And when a flood arose, the stream broke against that house and could not shake it, because it had been well built. [49] But the one who hears and does not do them is like a man who built a house on the ground without a foundation. When the stream broke against it, immediately it fell, and the ruin of that house was great."

This is why we so badly need people in our lives who can continually point us back to Christ as our only hope and foundation. So that we don't end up putting our hope and our satisfaction in earthly pleasures and worldly gains, that can't save us. **But instead, we will put our full hope and our full focus on Christ and the eternal prize that he has secured for us.**

As Paul writes in Philippians 3:20-21:

Focus on your heavenly citizenship.

Philippians 3:20-21

[20] But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, [21] who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

Paul once again is bringing back this our heavenly citizenship that he introduced in 1:27. Because he wants us to unequivocally understand that this world isn't our home.

Notice that he doesn't say to the Philippians, "Hey, your Roman citizenship is good, but your heavenly one's a bit better."

No, rather, he says in contrast to those who are focused on earthly things, our citizenship is in heaven, full stop

That is what we were made for, that is where we belong, and it is where we are going. So right now, we exist here on planet earth as sojourners and exiles according to 1 Peter 2:11.

And as sojourners and exiles, Paul says that we “await” a Savior. Now, that word “await” means to **“eagerly anticipating or to wait expectantly.”**

It is an excited anticipation that comes when you already know the outcome of a situation and you know that it’s going to be really good.

As Christians, we know what the end of the story is. We know that Christ is victorious, that one day he is going to come back, having fully defeated sin and death, and that he is going to make everything that is wrong right.

This will include a complete renewal of his creation and the complete transformation of our bodies from imperfect flesh to a glorious heavenly body. **One that will never fade, never perish, and never end.**

But most exciting of all, as Paul said in Philippians 3:8, we will fully know and experience the surpassing worth of knowing and communing with our Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. **We will know him fully as we are fully known.**

I hope that reality makes your heart leap for joy this morning.

And yet, we need to realize that there’s still a long road home. We are not there yet, and nothing in this world or on this journey can ever be a substitute for our eternal home.

Which means that we need to wait. Patiently, eagerly, and with joyful expectation for our Savior to come back. Not worried about whether we will get there, but with the help of other believers, persevering in our faith and standing firm on the rock-solid hope that we have in Christ.

Because he is the one who saved us, he is the one who has made us his own, and by his power, he is the one who will complete his good work and will bring us all the way home.

As Jesus said in John 14:1-3:

[1] “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. [2] In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? [3] And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also.

To which we can and should joyfully respond: ***Amen, Come, Lord Jesus!***

Let’s Pray