

Stand Firm

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Preacher: Nick Lauer

[0 : 0 0] Good morning, church. It's good to see you this morning. Our text for our sermon today is Philippians chapter 1, verses 27 through 30. Let me encourage you to follow along in the Pew Bible. It'll be helpful to have the text in front of you as we look at it this morning. That's page 921 in the Pew Bible, if you want to turn there. And let me pray as we come to God's Word today.

Our Father in heaven, we thank you that as we gather before you this morning, we come as those who are cleansed and forgiven and sanctified through the work of Jesus. Lord, that we come as those who've been set free by your powerful grace. Lord, we also come as those who by your Spirit are hungry to hear a word from you so that we might know more fully how to live in line with the glorious reality of you and all that you've done in Jesus.

So give us ears to hear what you are saying to us this morning in this text, and give us power by your Spirit to live it out this week that others might see your glory through us. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. All right. Let me read Philippians 1, 27 through 30. Remember, this is the Apostle Paul writing to the church in the Roman colony of Philippi. Verse 27.

He says, only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or I'm 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, and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation and that from God. For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him, but also suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had, and now hear that I still have.

Okay, so imagine. It's late in the fourth quarter. You and your teammates take the court. The score is tied. The referee hands you the basketball. You give the inbounds pass, and suddenly it happens.

[2 : 2 8] Your opponents move into a full court press. The pressure is on. The heat is up. The double team locks in, and quickly you call a timeout. And you gather around your coach. And what do you imagine that he or she says? Well, in that situation, the coach is probably going to say something like this. Don't panic. Play our game. Stay in system. Do what we trained to do. Keep your head high. Play with confidence.

We got this. Play your game. Because the worst thing you can do when the pressure comes on, when the heat gets turned up, is to suddenly freak out and forget everything and start scrambling around like mad, everyone for themselves, in fear and in disunity. The opposing team would love for the full court press to make your team fractured and afraid. So you need to keep your head and play your game.

And that's basically what Paul is telling the Philippians at the end of chapter 1. Outside pressure will come. The heat will get turned up. And Paul says, keep your heads and play your game. Well, literally, he puts it like this. Stand firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, and don't be frightened in anything by your opponents.

Now, I think the church needs to hear this today. Because just like in the first century, in the 21st century, as well, external pressure or opposition can lead to fear, and fear can lead to fracturing.

It's too easy for the church to be afraid and divided when we ought to be confident and united. Do you remember when Paul preached the gospel for the first time in Philippi? You read it in Acts 16.

[4 : 36] One of the first converts in the city of Philippi was a slave girl who was being used by her owners as a fortune teller and who made them a lot of money. But when the gospel of grace came to her, and the Lord Jesus liberated her, which is what the gospel does, it sets us free, suddenly her owners weren't so happy anymore. Because this girl's spiritual liberation meant that she wasn't going to be making them all that money anymore.

So you see, the gospel wasn't just liberating individuals. It was starting to shake up economics and the way we do things around here. And so the slave owners drug Paul and Silas before the Roman authorities, accused them of being bad for the city, and Paul gets thrown in jail. So the gospel of grace, the liberating power of Jesus, is going to shake things up.

It's going to unsettle the status quo, and not everyone is going to like that. And that might make us afraid. And in fear, we might start dividing and turning against one another.

But Paul says, stand firm in one spirit, with one mind. Now, stand firm is actually a military metaphor. It's sort of the picture of soldiers in close formation, in lockstep, moving as one.

And Paul also says, don't be frightened. That word means scared or intimidated. So Paul has this picture of unity and confidence. And at the center of his exhortation is this beautiful word, striving side by side. Now, that is actually one word in the Greek, and it's an athletic word.

[6 : 22] The picture is of a team operating with the same goal, pressing on for the same prize. You know, you can imagine a crew team out on the water, each member in the boat pulling in unison, in perfect harmony with one another, pulling and striving and co-competing towards the goal.

And when they're doing that, it's a beautiful thing, right? It almost looks like it's effortless, the way they glide through the water. And that, Paul says, is what the church should be like.

A team united by the same goal, the faith of the gospel, and operating without fear and without division, regardless of what opposition comes. So our passage today is exhorting us to stand firm.

To strive in unison for the gospel, to not be afraid, to stand firm. Now, the rest of our text is Paul basically motivating us to do that. Because, as you know, it's not easy. It's not easy to keep your head and not lose your nerve, and for us to work together for the faith of the gospel.

So Paul, in this passage, motivates us to stand firm in three ways. He motivates us to strive side by side for the faith of the gospel without fear in three ways. And the first one is in verse 27, the beginning of verse 27. Paul basically says, we must stand firm because this is what it means to live in a manner worthy of the gospel. Stand firm because it's worthy of the gospel of Christ.

[8 : 09] Now, the beginning of verse 27 is, in many ways, the kind of central exhortation of the whole book of Philippians. Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ. And as we've said over the past couple of weeks, and as the ESV footnote points out, that phrase, let your manner of life, literally means live as citizens. That is our public, our corporate identity, our allegiance as the church is to Christ before anything else. At the end of chapter 3, Paul will call the church, we're citizens of heaven. Think about it. The church is the colony of God's new creation right in the midst of the old. We are meant to be a signpost of God's future of eternity right here and right now. And that means the primary exhortation, the goal of all Christian living, is to be who we truly are, to be who God has made us to be already in Christ. Because when we forget who we are, when we lose our bearing to what is true about us and the world in light of the gospel, it gets really hard to stand firm. Imagine walking into the corporate headquarters of a Fortune 500 company, and rather than just sort of, you know, rather than checking in with the receptionist like you would normally do, you just sort of walk right past, make your way to the elevator, and you just start heading on down to the CEO's office. Well, pretty quickly, you find that two strong, uniformed security guards grab you under each arm and escort you right back to where you came from. But who are you?

If you're simply an intruder, then you might have good reason to be afraid. You might start weaving a story, trying to lie your way out of it, or claiming ignorance. I just didn't know. But who are you? If you are, in fact, not merely an intruder, but if you are the very son or daughter of the CEO, then you need not lose your nerve. You can stay confident, calm, probably make a simple phone call and be on your way. What does a life worthy of a gospel of Christ look like?

It looks a little bit like that. Now, remember, the gospel is news. That's what the word means, good news. The gospel is not advice on how you must perform or act in order to save yourself. The gospel is news about what God has done for you. It's news about Jesus, the Christ that is the king.

Now, you know, there's a difference between living in light of good news and living in light of good advice, right? Living in light of good advice means paying your rent or your mortgage on time, maybe even sort of adding a little extra to the principle each month so you can pay off your mortgage early, right? Make that 13th payment and suddenly all your financial dreams will come true. That's good advice, right? And you can live by that good advice. But it's ultimately something you have to do. But living in light of good news is very different. Living in light of good news means getting a letter in the mail saying that some benefactor has paid your mortgage in full.

And now you don't owe a single payment anymore. Now, that's not advice. That's news, right? And what do you do? How do you live in light of that? Well, you might be pretty excited. You might take your family out to dinner, right? Just think of all the extra things you can do now. Just think of how generous you can be towards others now that you don't have to pay your mortgage every month or pay your rent. You see, there's a difference, right, between good advice and good news. And Christianity is good news. It's good news that the debt that you and I have been accumulating our whole lives, the debt of sin because you haven't loved God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and the debt that you've been accumulating because you haven't loved your neighbor as yourself, the debt that you owe to God because he made you and because he's infinitely good, the debt that requires really your whole life as a payment. Christianity is good news that the debt's been paid. Jesus lived a fully human life and died on the cross to pay your debt. What does it mean to live in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, this good news about Jesus? It looks like a deep internalized knowledge that the

[13 : 10] God of heaven, the creator of all things seen and unseen, sent his son to die and rise again to forgive the sins of all who believe on him, to make us his beloved sons and daughters, to fill us with his spirit, and to make us the heirs of the new creation. It means to be the people who know deep down in our bones that Jesus is king and will be forevermore, and that one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father. And if you know that, if we know that, then we'll stand firm. Is there really anything to be afraid of if we really believe the news about Jesus? What if your allegiance to Jesus means losing friends as a result? What if your allegiance to Jesus means taking a financial loss? What if it means social ridicule? What if it means, like it did for

Paul, imprisonment or even death? Remember who you are and remember who's on the throne. Live a life worthy of the good news about Jesus. You're a child of the King, and one day, no matter what happens in this life, every knee will bow to Christ. I recently ran across this account from the life of Martin Luther King Jr. that brought this home for me. The story goes like this. Late one night in January of 1956, Martin Luther King Jr. sat by himself in the kitchen, a cup of coffee by his side, and felt the darkness of despair creeping towards him. A few weeks earlier, Rosa Parks had refused to move her seat on a public bus in Montgomery, Alabama, sparking the Montgomery bus boycott. King, who had just turned 27 and served as a minister at a Baptist church, was the leader of the boycott, and had received an endless stream of death threats against himself and his family. He reached a point when the forces arrayed against him seemed impossible to overcome. He wrote, I was ready to give up. In this state of exhaustion, when my courage had all but gone, I decided to take my problem to God. With my head in my hands,

I bowed over the kitchen table and prayed aloud. At that moment, I experienced the divine, the presence of the divine as I had never experienced him before. It seemed as though I could hear the quiet assurance of an inner voice saying, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for truth, and God will be at your side forever. Almost at once, my fears began to go, my uncertainty disappeared, and I was ready to face anything. Later, King will mention that this experience was a big turning point in his life.

He writes elsewhere, early on a sleepless morning in January 1956, rationality left me. Then almost out of nowhere, I heard a voice that morning saying to me, preach the gospel. Stand up for truth. Stand up for righteousness. Since that morning, I can stand up without fear. Now, three days after this kitchen table experience, a bomb exploded at King's house thrown by an unknown attacker. Luckily, he and his wife and child were unharmed. A group of his followers soon gathered at the house, armed and ready for vengeance. And King spoke to the crowd and calmly diffused their rage and their anger. And he gave them a living example of how to stay true to the principle of nonviolence, to the way of peace that Jesus leads us in, in the most challenging circumstances imaginable. Now, brothers and sisters, like Dr. King, we too are citizens of the gospel. We too have a God who is near to us. And because of that, we too can stand firm. But Paul goes on. At the end of verse 27, he gives another motivation to stand firm, not just because this is worthy of the gospel, but also because it's a sign to unbelievers. Paul says, stand firm because it will be a sign to unbelievers. After Paul says, strive side by side for the faith of the gospel and don't be afraid of your opponents, he then says that such confident unity in the face of opposition, such calm, consistent witness, not giving way to anger or fear or violence, this will be, he says, a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation and that from God.

You see, when the world gives us its worst and we in turn give it our best, or as Paul will say in Romans 12, when we are cursed, when we are cursed and instead of cursing back, we bless. Well, that says something, doesn't it? That will get people thinking. That will get people thinking, what do they have that I don't have? Why aren't my weapons of intimidation or fear or anger working? Why don't they play by the same rules? Could it be that there really is a God and that Jesus is who they say he is, a king of grace, a Lord of love? And could it be that I need a relationship with that God more than anything else? A clear sign. Friends, Jesus said to pray for our enemies, to pray for those who persecute us. You know, if you look closely at this passage, Paul does not say strive side by side against your opponents. No, he says strive side by side for the gospel. We are for the gospel and we pray for our opponents. You see, when we don't buckle under pressure, it's proof that the world's way is eventually going to pass away. Paul uses the word destruction here. The world will be completely judged and completely done away with. Those who play by the world's rules will go the way of the world.

[19 : 29] But those who count the cost and take up their cross and follow Jesus on the road of the cross, on the way of peace, the last word for them will be salvation. And all this comes not from us, but from God. God alone is judge and God alone is the Savior. So you see, friends, our very witness is at stake in how we respond to pressure. Will we react like the world reacts with fear and fracturing and hatred or in the power of the Spirit? Will we react the way Christ reacts? Not retreating from the world, but not becoming like the world, but living in the midst of the world as salt and light.

So we must stand firm then because it will be a sign, a witness to unbelievers that Jesus is King, that a new world is beginning and has begun, and that the threats of the old world just don't work anymore. But last, in verses 29 through 30, Paul says that we must stand firm, not just because it's worthy of the gospel, and not just because it's a sign to unbelievers, but we must stand firm because suffering for the gospel is a gift. Stand firm because suffering for the gospel is God's gift to you. Now, I know that that sounds very strange on the surface, but look again at the passage. Paul has been saying, strive by side for the gospel without fear. And then at the end of verse 28, almost as a kind of parenthetical kind of aside, he says that's going to be a sign to unbelievers. Then he picks up the main argument in verse 29. Don't be afraid when you face opposition. Why? Because it has been granted to you. Now, that's what's sometimes called a divine passive. In other words, the implied subject of that verb is God. God granted to you. God has gifted to you. Well, granted what? That for the sake of Christ, you should not only believe in him. Now, pause there. Did you catch what Paul just said? He said that believing in Christ is a gift that comes to us for the sake of Christ. That is because of something Christ did for us. In other words, faith itself is a gift that Jesus won for us through his person and work. It's a gift that God gives to us. Even faith comes to us by God's grace, not of ourselves, which means if you're here and you're searching for God, ask him to open your eyes. Ask him to grant you faith, to give you this gift, and trust that God is a loving heavenly father who knows how to give good gifts to his children.

But it's not just believing that God has granted to us. Pick up at the end of verse 29. It says, but also to suffer for his sake, engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have. God grants us the privilege, the gift, not just to believe in Christ, but also to suffer for Christ. Of course, not all suffering is suffering for Christ, is it?

Sometimes we suffer because of our own foolishness or because of our own hard-heartedness. If I'm consistently rude to my co-workers and they don't want anything to do with me, that's not suffering for Christ. That's the natural result of being a jerk to my co-workers, right?

What Paul is talking about here is the kind of suffering we face out of allegiance to Christ because we've taken up our cross and we've followed him. And the liberating power of the gospel of grace is shaping our lives, and it's shaping our lives together, making us a countercultural people. When we start asking how the gospel of grace and the lordship of Jesus and the loving authority of his word shape our approach to all of life, to money, to sex, to power, to race, to gender, to class, when it starts to be transformed by the good news, all of it, then we'll inevitably find two things happening at once. The world will be both attracted to that and repelled by it. It doesn't matter what culture we find ourselves in. Every culture is going to be attracted by some aspects of the gospel and offended by others. Of course, it's not always the same things from place to place.

[23 : 59] Our culture loves what the gospel has to say about freedom, right? But is at times quite offended by what the gospel has to say about authority. More traditional cultures love all that authority stuff, but they start to writhe at all this talk about freedom. Now, there will be times when those areas of offense turn into areas of suffering, of real hardship, of conflict. But Paul wants to assure us that when we suffer for Christ, we're not experiencing some failure in God's plan, some mistake. No, he says, this too is God's gift to us. His gift to draw us closer to himself, to make us more like Jesus, to lead us into deeper levels of repentance and humility and courage in him. Paul wants to assure us that we're not alone. The word conflict in verse 30 was the word used for conflicts or contests in the ancient arenas. So when we're forced into the arena, we can know that we're joining a great company of saints, Paul and all the apostles, the church fathers and mothers, the missionaries and reformers, the activists and evangelists. We're joining that great company as we get thrust into the arena.

And at the head of them all is the Lord Jesus himself. At the end of Paul's life, imprisoned again, he will write in his second letter to Timothy, at my first offense, no one came to stand by me, but all deserted me. May it not be charged against them, but the Lord stood by me and strengthened me so that through me the message might be fully proclaimed and all the Gentiles might hear it. In our suffering for the gospel, the Lord Jesus draws near. And our lives become a testimony like never before. So friends, don't be frightened.

Stand firm. Yes, it is the fourth quarter. Yes, the pressure is on. Expect the full court press. Expect a game down to the end. But Paul is saying, and God is saying to us, don't lose your nerve.

Let's keep striving side by side for the faith of the gospel without fear. Because friends, the reality is the score of this game isn't tied. The victory has already been won. Jesus is Lord. And when the buzzer sounds, every knee will bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus is Lord to the glory of God the Father. So stand firm. Let's pray.

Oh, Lord Jesus, we reflect on a passage like this, and we realize that we need your Spirit. The Apostle tells us to stand firm in one Spirit, and we ask that by your Holy Spirit, we would be able to do just that, to stand and to strive. And God, we pray that through us, you would be spreading your gospel of grace to many in our city. God, perhaps even this morning, there are some here for whom the gospel is new news. Lord, we ask that you would grant them faith, as this passage says. Grant them believing in Jesus so that they too might know this liberating power of forgiveness and new life. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.