A Study of the Book of Philippians

Making Sense of Suffering (Philippians 1:27-30)

“Afflictions are light when compared with what we really deserve. They are light when compared with the sufferings of the Lord Jesus. But perhaps their real lightness is best seen by comparing them with the weight of glory which is awaiting us.”

~ A. W. Pink

I. Overview

Having discussed his present situation, Paul now directs his attention to the Philippian believers. In these four verses, the apostle Paul delivers an exhortation that will be developed throughout the rest of this letter (see D. F. Watson, “Rhetorical Analysis,” NovT 30 [1988], 79). The call to live a life worthy of the Gospel becomes the central command for the believers—a command that entails standing firm and being united.

II. The Call for All Believers (1:27-30)

v. 27 - This sentence begins with a term that can be translated “only and always”. This word stresses that what follows is “the one essential thing”. The following exhortation will be comprehensive as the entire section 1:27-2:18 will expand upon this command.

“conduct yourselves” - This term refers to living as a good citizen—a citizen who is discharging his/her obligations as a member of the society. While this is not a word Paul normally uses to describe Christian conduct, it is a term that would have resonated with residents of Philippi. Many of the residents of this prestigious Roman colony would have been Roman citizens. And now, because of the Gospel, the Philippian believers have gained a heavenly citizenship and membership into the Church. It is this Gospel which becomes the standard in which they are to live.

“stand firm” - This word “conveys the idea of firmness or steadfastness, or unflinching courage like that possessed by soldiers who determinedly refuse to leave their posts irrespective of how severely the battle rages (cf. 1 Col 16:13; Gal 5:1; Phil 4:1; 2 Thess 2:15)” (Hawthorne, Philippians, 56).

“one spirit” - While several scholars argue that “spirit” refers to the Holy Spirit, the human spirit seems to be a better choice. The parallel phrase, “one mind,” only serves to heighten this call for Christian unity.

Paul identifies two ways in which the believers can stand firm as they live out the Gospel:

• **Contending together for the Gospel** (v. 27b). Paul changes his imagery from citizenship of a state to a competitor in a gladiator game.
“Faith” is often used as a technical term for Christian doctrine (see 1 Tim 3:9; 4:1, 6; 5:8; 6:10, 21). Failure of the Church to be unified distorts, undermines, and even destroys the Gospel. One commentator aptly writes, “The Philippians are to stand united in their struggle for the cause of the faith—its spread and growth, the same goal that was set before all of Paul's work” (O'Brien, Philippians, 152).

- **Contending with boldness for the Gospel (v. 28).** The word paints a colorful image to denote an uncontrollable stampede of startled horses (see BAGD, 727). Unity among the believers is essential if they are to avoid panic or terror. Paul further notes that their suffering is what he also encountered at Philippi and is currently undergoing in Rome (see v. 30).

The latter part of verse 28 is difficult to translate. According to a leading Greek grammarian, Dan Wallace, the grammatical construction of this verse indicates both reference (“which is a sign of destruction with reference to them”) and disadvantage. “The enemies of the gospel do not possess their destruction, but are unfortunate recipients of it; but believers do possess their salvation. The contrast is not merely stylistic, but involves rich subtleties that are often not brought out in translation” (Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics, 143-144). Support for this interpretation is the use of the term “evidence” in 2 Thessalonians 1:5. The Christian's endurance of persecution is clear proof of future relief for the believer and God's impending judgment on his/her persecutors.

By resting confidently in one's faith, the believer conveys to the world a message from the Lord—a message that the Gospel is true, and that how one responds to this Gospel will determine his eternal state.

v. 29 - This verse could be rendered: “For that which is on behalf of Christ has been granted to you—namely, not only to believe in Him but also to suffer for Him.”

What implications does Paul make when he compares our faith with our suffering?

Note that it is the hand of God which allows for the persecution, sustains them in the midst of the trial, brings merit to their suffering, and ensures them of a future salvation.
“suffer for him” - This phrase suggests that we have joined in Christ’s sufferings (Phil 3:10; Col 1:24-25). Their suffering was not due to some divine oversight or vengeful God. Instead, their suffering was a gracious gift given to them. Observe that Paul refers to God’s grace in bestowing both faith and suffering. The use of the passive voice only reiterates this divine origin.

v. 30 - “encountering the same conflict” - Once again, Paul uses athletic terms to describe the Christian faith. While their circumstances were different, the reason for their suffering was the same. Their “fellowship in the Gospel” (1:5) afforded them the opportunity to join him as partners in God’s grace (1:8)—grace that even entailed suffering.

Addressing the topic of suffering in Paul’s writings, one scholar observes that the believers’ willingness to imitate Paul by joyfully continuing in faith, hope, and love in the midst of their own afflictions “became a sign for Paul for the legitimacy of their standing in Christ, even as it was a sign of his own legitimacy as an apostle” (S. Hafemann, “Suffering,” in DPL, 920).

III. Intersect

A. Our God is very familiar with suffering. Christ’s own sufferings become the basis of our glorious faith and that which provides hope for the future.
   1 Peter 3:18 -

   “Come, and see the victories of the cross. Christ’s wounds are thy healings, His agonies thy repose, His conflicts thy conquests, His groans thy songs, His pains thine ease, His shame thy glory, His death thy life, His sufferings thy salvation.” - Matthew Henry

B. Suffering for standing firm in the Gospel assures us of our salvation.
   Romans 5:3b-5 -

C. While God is not the author of suffering, He uses suffering to serve His own good purposes. Rejoice that the Lord would afford you the opportunity to share in His sufferings.
   Genesis 50:20 -
   1 Peter 4:13-14 -
For further thought . . .

Based upon our study this morning, you may want to spend some additional time this week interacting with the following:

Take some time to read Paul’s words to the church at Ephesus in Ephesians 4:1-16. Similar to Philippians 1:27-30, the apostle Paul calls for believers to live worthy of their calling. Observe how Paul instructs the Ephesian believers to carry out this task (particularly note verses 2-3).

Based on the list of instructions that Paul provides, what specific area needs to be addressed in your own life? Identify a specific way you can address this area this week, and then take an inventory each day to see how you are doing.

For example, Paul instructs the believers in verse 2 to live worthy with all humility. Each day this week, consciously seek to listen to others and ask them questions. Avoid talking about yourself or providing unrequested advice. At the end of each day, evaluate your conversations. How can you improve in putting others first?

“All experiences of suffering in the path of Christian obedience, whether from persecution or sickness or accident, have this in common: They all threaten our faith in the goodness of God and tempt us to leave the path of obedience. Therefore, every triumph of faith and all perseverance in obedience are testimonies to the goodness of God and the preciousness of Christ – whether the enemy is sickness, Satan, sin, or sabotage. Therefore, all suffering, of every kind, that we endure in the path of our Christian calling is a suffering "with Christ" and "for Christ." With Him in the sense that the suffering comes to us as we are walking with Him by faith, and in the sense that it is endured in the strength that He supplies through His sympathizing high-priestly ministry (Hebrews 4:15). For Him in the sense that the suffering tests and proves our allegiance to His goodness and power, and in the sense that it reveals His worth as an all-sufficient compensation and prize.” ~ John Piper