

Stand Firm
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Philippians 3:17-4:1

¹⁷ Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. ¹⁹Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. ²⁰But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. ¹Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

Luke 13:31-35

³¹ At that very hour some Pharisees came and said to him, ‘Get away from here, for Herod wants to kill you.’ ³²He said to them, ‘Go and tell that fox for me, “Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work. ³³Yet today, tomorrow, and the next day I must be on my way, because it is impossible for a prophet to be killed away from Jerusalem.”’

³⁴Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it! How often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you were not willing! ³⁵See, your house is left to you. And I tell you, you will not see me until the time comes when you say, “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”’

Paul urges his readers, the Philippians then and now us, to stand firm. Stand firm. Does the thought of that exhaust you? Are you tired of standing firm right now? Maybe standing firm on things which don't feel obviously connected to your faith? As people of faith, or maybe people trying to be faithful, when we are at our best, we see how everything is connected to our faith. If you are standing firm and you are tired, are you standing firm against the not-right things? Standing firm against vulnerability; against forgiveness; against accountability? Standing firm in avoidance or because of fear or with a grudge? Something that once seemed so right / so fitting / so easy has become exhausting.

That's not the kind of standing firm of which Paul speaks; that's not the kind of standing firm Jesus was doing. All standing firm involves conviction. But conviction to what? For both Paul and Jesus, their conviction was to God's will. For us, when we refuse to show or allow vulnerability? For us, when we refuse to forgive? For us, when we refuse to take responsibility? For us, when we avoid situations or people for whatever reason? For us, when fear makes our decisions for us? For us, when a grudge holds us firmly to a course of action? For us, these convictions in some form or another are about self-reliance. We can handle this our way just fine, thank you very much. But we are tired, exhausted even.

What about Jesus and Paul, convicted to God's will? Paul invites us to imitate him because he is imitating Jesus. If we do that, if we stand firmly in our conviction to the will of God, what could that look like? I don't promise that conviction to God's will won't ask a lot – look at the lives of Jesus and Paul. Paul is speaking to people who need encouragement to stand firmly this way, not unlike ourselves. This conviction to God's will, like other convictions, does indeed take from us, require a lot of us. **This** conviction, though, also gives.

Paul calls it glory. For Jesus, it looks like obedience. It seems odd to say that we're **given** something with obedience but obedience, obeying God's will, takes away doubt, takes away shame, takes away helplessness. And that gives us rest in God's will. If we are obeying God's will as we are guided through the teachings of Jesus and the whole of the Bible, then we do not doubt our actions. If we are obeying God's will and loving others, there is no reason to be ashamed. If we are obeying God's will and serving others, we demonstrate that we are not helpless in the face of sorrow or violence or hatred. Conviction to God's will requires much and gives more.

When Jesus is approached by the Pharisees who come, for motives unknown, to warn him that Herod is coming to kill him, he stands firm. He says, "Go and tell that fox for me, 'Listen, I am casting out demons and performing cures today and tomorrow, and on the third day I finish my work.'" Last week, in talking about the temptations Jesus faced and resisted in the desert, I said "He resisted temptation so that he would continue to help God realize God's hopes and dreams for the whole creation. Had he given in then and there,

there in the desert, he would have given up on us. He would have given in to serve himself, which is antithetical to God's pledges to us, God's unconditional love of us." Jesus refuses to be threatened by Herod for the same reason. He stands his ground against Herod out of obedience to God's will, in order to continue demonstrating God's unconditional love of us by his ongoing work of restoring people to community – casting out their demons and healing them so they were no longer considered unclean.

I began today by saying, "As people of faith, or maybe people trying to be faithful, when we are at our best, we see how everything is connected to our faith." Jesus is our greatest teacher of this – when we meet him today, he is not standing firm in the temple, reading Scripture, hearing a teaching, or making an offering. Those things all have their places. In many, many more of the accounts of Jesus, he is in the world standing firm in faith. Where he east, to whom he reaches out, with whom he speaks – these are all also grounded in faith. Likewise, we can look at the lands traversed by Paul, the hardships he suffered, and the passionate letters he wrote and see clearly how he imitated his teacher and stood firm in faith. I think you know where I am going with this. Everything is meant to be connected to our faith. Sometimes, in some situations, that's easy. And then there are the times when standing firm is most definitely not easy.

The era of the early church, for Philippi and Corinth and Rome, was definitely one of those difficult times. As the church today we are far less threatened by those who rule the land. The threats we perceive most immediately are usually personal, meaning to our persons. When times are tough, we fall to what's easiest and what's familiar (i.e. the vanishing resolve around New Year's resolutions). As humans, who like to do things ourselves, whose tendency is to turn away from God rather than toward, what's easiest and what's familiar is infrequent turning to God. And, if this is not true in your case, please tell me your secret. Overwhelmingly, we turn inward and get Darwinian, looking out for ourselves, protecting ourselves. This I get.

But Paul says of Jesus, "He will transform the body of our humiliation so that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and

crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.” The hymn *My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less* has this refrain: “On Christ, the solid Rock, I stand; all other ground is sinking sand; all other ground is sinking sand.”¹ Whether it’s someone running to us to tell us we are being threatened, like the Pharisees, or our own internal alert system, pause before you descend to the familiar and remember that you can also choose to ascend to the solid Rock, where you can stand firmly. So may it be for you and for me, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Let us pray: God of unconditional love, lead us again and again to stand firm in you, we pray. Amen.

¹ *Glory to God* hymnal, hymn 353.