

## **The Victory Before the Victory (Phil. 1:27-30)**

There is a kind of exertion in the middle of competition that already feels like victory. I occasionally experienced it when I wrestled in high school. It is that feeling of using your abilities to their max, of feeling the resistance of your opponent, and of yet withstanding their best efforts. When you are simply defeated, you rarely have this feeling of exertion. This also happened to me while wrestling. There would be another guy who clearly outgunned me from the start in both physical condition and skill. In such cases, I simply lost, without that sense of pushing myself to the max. The match I most remember from seven years of wrestling was a victory in which I couldn't pick my arms up for thirty minutes afterwards. I could imagine others having a similar experience. Think of a long-distance runner. Lungs burning. Legs crying out in pain. And yet she is holding her position, not losing ground, not being overtaken by the pack. The person at the back, for whom defeat is certain, does not feel this ache. For Paul, writing this letter to the Philippians from a Roman prison, there was a victory of faith amid the agony. This is what he wanted for his audience as well - not that they would be removed from suffering but that **they would experience victory even as the battle raged on.**

We who seek to live for Jesus today need to know the same kind of victory. We need to know for two reasons. First, we need to know this victory of faith because **we really are living during a battle.** Mainline Protestantism in the twentieth century deceived itself into thinking that the United States was a Christian nation in which Christian institutions had influence and power. People went to church because it made social and business success easier. What we forgot is that this world is harassed by principalities and powers. We are now remembering this truth in the US. We do not live on neutral ground. There are spiritual enemies and impinging darkness. A battle takes place every day. Second, we need to know this victory because **we too often feel defeated.** Some of us know that life is a battle, and we fear that victory is out of our reach. Maybe it's the tired mother struggling to put a shirt on the rowdy toddler. Maybe it's the government employee who feels like compromise and corruption are all pervasive and impossible to avoid. Maybe it's the working

guy with too few hours and too many bills. Maybe it's the pastor who struggles with the thought that people out there are dying and yet seem to have no urgency or interest in figuring out the most important things about heaven and hell. Whoever you are and whatever your struggle, you need to know that **there is victory amid the battle.**

But don't take my word for it. It's right here in our passage. In v. 27, Paul exhorts the Philippians to live in a manner **worthy of the gospel of Christ**. He wants this for them whether he lives and is permitted to see them again or whether he dies without the chance to come and see them again. Two words need more careful thought – *live/conduct* and *worthy*. *Live/conduct* might sensibly be translated as *express your citizenship*. Later in the letter, Paul counsels them that their “citizenship is in heaven” (3:20). The word translated *citizenship* in that verse is the noun form of the verb used in 1:27. For this reason the CSB translates our verse thusly: “As citizens of heaven, live your life worthy of the gospel of Christ.” The word *worthy* should not be understood in any meritorious sense. Paul is not saying that Christians need to live in such a way as to earn things from God. The word more accurately suggests the balancing of weights. The thought here might be expressed: You are a citizen of heaven. You have received the gospel of Jesus Christ. Live your life, therefore, in a manner which corresponds to this calling. Live a life which is weighty and substantial, mirroring the grace which you have received from Jesus. The indicative, that which is true, is rooted in the gospel of Christ. Christ died for us that we might have peace with God. The imperative, that which we must do, is to live a life which corresponds to the gospel.

Paul further elaborates what this worthy life looks like: it is one in which they **stand firm in one Spirit and with one soul or mind**. I take the one Spirit of v. 27 to be a reference to the Holy Spirit who unites all Christians to Christ and one another. To stand firm with “one soul” (some translations use *mind* or *accord*) is to be in sync with others, sharing not just a statement of belief but a direction of life. It is this *standing firm* which constitutes a life worthy of the gospel of Jesus. It is this *standing firm* which is the victory before the victory. To better understand this point. We need to handle two questions. **How do we stand firm? Where do we stand firm?**

**How do we stand firm?** Paul is a master teacher, and he doesn't leave us hanging concerning the meaning of *standing firm*. Here he gives us two component parts. First, we are called to strive together for the faith of the gospel. To stand firm in a world of conflict requires that we constantly be on the move. Here is the sense of exertion. The gospel is worthy of our effort. It is our high calling to join with brothers and sisters in Christ to grow in our knowledge of Jesus and tell others about him. It is worthwhile to remind you of our evangelism goal for this year. Will we have *1000 Spiritual Conversations* with people who are not a part of our church before the end of the year? As the summer progresses, we will hear testimonies from one another concerning what gospel conversations look like in practice. I hope that hearing from one another will be an encouragement to each of us to keep striving to speak of Jesus in our day-to-day conversations.

Second, we are called to not be frightened by those who oppose us (v. 28). Faithfulness to Jesus will arouse opposition. This does not mean that we have a license, therefore, to be jerks for Jesus. If you a jerk and get called out for being a jerk, then so be it. The point is not that the opposition comes from our bad behavior but from our commitment to Jesus in a world that is fallen. Kindness will be met with hostility. The New Testament teaches us clearly that fidelity to Jesus will cost us friendship with the world. The reverse is also true by the way. "Therefore whoever wishes to be a friend of the world makes himself an enemy of God" (James 4:4). **We can either flow with the ways of God or flow with the ways of the world.** How does the opposition come? It comes from those who malign us for our moral commitments or who attempt to silence our confessions of faith. I rejoice in our religious freedom here in the United States, but there are kinds of opposition which are common to our culture. One of the most prominent is the way in which sincere Christian belief is maligned as a liability in the workplace. We all can think of situations from the last few years in which a figure was scorned by pundits, politicians, and Twitter warriors simply because they were involved with a traditionalist or evangelical church. There are sectors of our society in which church attendance is viewed as either mental weakness or malicious intent.

Yet, here is the important point. Opposition may come, but we need not be frightened by our opponents. **We know the men and women who oppose us are people who need the love and mercy which come from Jesus.** So, we

pray for them even as they punish us. We know that we are not ultimately fighting against them but against the forces of evil in the heavenly places. The good news is that Jesus in his death and resurrection has already dealt Satan a fatal blow. Our ability to stand firm by striving together and shunning fear of opposition is a sign that we have already won. Our opposition will be destroyed but we ourselves will be saved (v. 28). The battle may be intense. Our lungs may be burning and our legs crying out with pain. But we are still at the head of the pack and our enemies cannot defeat us.

**Where do we stand firm?** We stand firm amid a *struggle/conflict* (v. 30). We are in a battle. Paul continued to carry out a battlefield ministry. The word translated *struggle/conflict* is the Greek word from which we get *agony*. **We have been drafted into a war, and it is intense.** He knew that the Philippians would not be spared such struggles. I translate v. 29: “That to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him but also on behalf of Christ to suffer.” Pay very careful attention to this verse. It says that you have been gifted or graced on behalf of Christ with both belief in Jesus *and* suffering. The one does not come without the other. This does not mean that we will all suffer alike, but it means we will all suffer. Traditionally, we identify our opponents as **the world, the flesh, and the devil**. Your faith in Jesus puts you at odds with these three realities. The world wants to press you into its mold. Your own fleshly desires and impulses struggle within you and call you to gratify yourself before caring for others or giving glory to God. The devil wants you bound, riddled with guilt, and bereft of all comfort and hope. You will suffer because the world is broken. Real evil befalls us, and death pursues us. Real darkness surrounds us and sometimes takes up residence inside us. And this is the place in which we stand firm. We exert ourselves and refuse to be afraid of our enemies. In doing so, we experience the victory before the victory.

This is not Stoicism or fatalism. This is not *que sera, sera*. We have victory because we have hope. Let us return to v. 27. We are to live as citizens of heaven. We are to live worthy of the gospel. The gospel is not wishful thinking. It is the story of Jesus coming to rescue us when we could not rescue ourselves. Because he has won heaven for us, we know that we will stand right now and keep right on standing until the end. In Jesus, we have the victory.