

... stand firm in the Lord in this way

Genesis 15:1–12, 17–18

Psalm 27

Philippians 3:17—4:1

Luke 13:31–35

Text: Philippians 4:1

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.

Introduction

In 2020 one of my granddaughters graduated from high school. In a conversation that year I asked her what she was reading in her English class and was surprised to learn that Shakespeare had fallen out of favour; it is considered to contain ideas deemed offensive to current moral pities (at least of this one teacher). It is one thing that historic figures have fallen from favour, what may be surprising is how things popular even a decade ago are falling from grace. Constance Grady, a staff writer for VOX media, [noted](#) recently how quickly yesterday's celebrated pop culture slides out of favour. She cited the example of the rapid fall of the 2015 hit musical *Hamilton* and its creator Lin-Manuel Miranda. Moral tastes change quickly in a society with no solid foundation on which to build its moral codes. There is no agreed upon moral compass. There also exists a deep suspicion of any attempt by any one group to make its truth normative, out of fear that the result will be oppressive and unjust.

Liel Leibovitz is a senior writer for Tablet Magazine and a host of its popular Unorthodox podcast. In a recent [article](#) about current culture from another angle of vision he writes; “We don’t need soothing sermons or soft metaphors. We’re feeling the crushing emptiness of a godless life, and we’re frantically looking for a way out.” It is one thing to decry the moral relevance of our world—what Leibovitz challenges us to hear is the pain of a crushing sense of emptiness that moral relevance leaves in its wake.

1. The gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ that the Apostle Paul proclaims, asserts that there is a true story of the world. It describes the emptiness so many feel as, at bottom, a longing for a lost relationship; relationship with the God who created us and who loves us. Countless Christians testify that they don’t feel alone even when by themselves because of the Lord’s presence in their lives. The gospel asserts that right and wrong are real categories and that one day all wrongs will be

set to rights by the One true judge of this world. This is a very different story than the self-understanding of our world—which self-understanding judges the gospel to be out-of-bounds, oppressive, unjust. I ask you to consider the possibility that not only is the world’s self-understanding helpless in addressing the emptiness so many feel but, in fact, aggravates it.

The city of Philippi was a Roman colony that mirrored the culture and values of Rome, the cultural centre of the world in which the Apostle Paul inhabits. The Apostle writes to the Philippian church to encourage them to stand firm in the Lord and a way of life patterned after Jesus. The self-understanding of that world, albeit different than ours, had some similar markers—a mindset that this world is all there is, so fulfil your desires. The Apostle commissions “standing firm in the way” that is Jesus because the believer inhabits another world that intersects this world and that other world is our future. It is from that other world that we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. We are to live life oriented to our relationship with Him and that great future promised in Him. And we find, in this relationship, the life we were created to live and know. This is the promise of the gospel.

Today is the second Sunday of the church season Christians call Lent. The stories we are reading Sunday by Sunday from Jesus’ life take place as he is on his way to Jerusalem. It is there that he will be crucified giving his life for us to free us from the penalty and power of sin, the sin that resulted in our separation from God; offering himself so that the severed relationship could be restored between us and God.

Lent is a time when Christians are called to reflect on their following of Christ; to consider afresh the call to live life after the pattern of our Lord; to contemplate the possibility that there might be something to give up or to take up. The gospel is the announcement that the salvation of God in Jesus Christ is both what God has done for us and what God does in us. God saves us both from the penalty of sin so that our relationship with God is restored and from the power of sin so that we might live for him. Jesus’ death on the cross is what God does *for* us; Jesus’ presence in our lives empowering our walk with him is what God does *in* us. Today we have read from the section of Paul’s Philippian letter where he addresses the subject of the work that Jesus does *in* us. “Stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.”

I invite you to underline the phrase ‘in this way.’ The Apostle is talking about a way of life, a pattern of living. Jesus said, “I am the way, and the truth, and the

life.” The way Paul has in mind is the way our Lord lived his life and is this way that He is. The long middle section of the Philippian letter is bookended by this idea of standing firm in this way. The section begins in the first chapter where Paul writes, “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that, whether I come and see you or am absent and hear about you, I will know that you are standing firm in one spirit, striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.” (Philippians 1:27)

Notice how Paul describes this way of living in which he encourages believers to stand firm; “live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.” Believers are to live such that we do our best not to contradict the gospel. The highlight of this middle section is in the second chapter where Paul writes, “let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” and then cites the wonderful hymn of the humility of Christ. Jesus was obedient to the one he called the Father even to the point of death. The theme of this hymn is the self-forgetful, self-giving of our Lord for our sakes. And because Jesus gave himself without remainder, God has highly exalted him so that every tongue should confess that Jesus is Lord.

In my own faith experience I can’t remember a time I did not believe. So I can’t say that I know what it is like to experience what Leil Leibovitz calls the crushing emptiness of a godless life. I take him at his word that it is the experience of people who have no ‘true north’ on the compass that guides their life, or no compass at all. I believe him that people feel an emptiness and it is crushing of life. I do know a little of what it means to live life oriented to Jesus Christ—I claim no perfection—but I do find in my halting discipleship that it is life and light. I also know that countless believers would say the same and some of those believers knew, prior to believing, something of this crushing sense of emptiness.

2. “Brothers and sisters,” writes Paul, “join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us.” Does this sound a little self-serving to you? (Just a note, the ‘us’ Paul refers to in, the example you have in ‘us,’ are likely Timothy whom Paul mentions in his greeting and Epaphroditus who is likely the congregations’ minister (2:25)). What is Paul asking them to imitate?

In the logic of this section of Paul’s letter the high point is, let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus—which we noted a moment ago. All our discipleship is to be cruciform. Denying ourselves we are to take up our cross and follow Jesus. This is bedrock for Paul. Following Jesus is the key. When we get to chapter 3 we find Paul addressing the problem of false teachers who say that to be Christians you need to first become Jews. In the great shift that went on in Paul’s

thinking after he met Jesus on the road to Damascus, the centre of his worldview shifted from the Torah (first five books of the Bible) to Jesus Christ the Son of God. And so he writes to the Philippians, “I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.”

But then Paul is careful to write, so that he does not give the impression that he has somehow spiritually arrived, “Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own.” The believer is ever a work in progress until that day when Jesus “will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be transformed to the body of his glory.”

Notice two things crucial to Paul’s worldview. First, with utter clarity, it is Jesus Christ who stands as the centre of his life—“I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death.” Second, the humility expressed in the fact that he knows that the goal of being like Christ is an ongoing vision for life. I think this is what Paul has in mind when he talks about imitating him. Just before Paul writes about imitating him, he notes, “Let those of us then who are mature be of the same mind.” The word translated ‘be of the same mind’ has the idea of taking the same viewpoint. It is this same word he uses to say that we are to ‘be of the same mind’ as Jesus. And then Paul adds “and if you think differently about anything, this too God will reveal to you.” In other words, if we are oriented to Jesus Christ and committed to growing in faith God will reveal the way that Jesus is.

I find that in life we humans are much more followers than we care to think. Don’t you find that in spite of the cultural mantra to ‘express yourself’ there is a sameness about dress and behaviour that permeates nonetheless. You only have to look at family wedding pictures from various eras to note this human tendency. I would also say, pastorally, that having spiritual mentors is a good thing, those we emulate and who inspire us in our own discipleship. Paul is a pastor and knows the value of walking in company with others in faith. We are both inspired and an inspiration. This is one of the reasons for the church. Jesus is always with his disciples and the mark of his disciples is love for each other. A churchless Christian is a contradiction in terms.

3. The Apostle juxtaposes two ways of living; as enemies of the cross and as citizens of heaven. We are not sure who Paul has in mind as ‘enemies of the cross;’ they may be false teachers. The way of life they advocate was clear—live oriented to satiating your appetites, glory in whatever behaviour excites you, this

world is all there is. Paul also says, chillingly, their end is destruction. To be an enemy of the cross is to tell God, “I don’t need your Saviour.” To persist in unbelief of God, persisting in telling God we want nothing to do with Him, eventually comes to the place where God gives what is asked for—existence without him, and that prospect, everywhere in the Bible, is said to be horrifying. Paul calls it destruction. Please note that Paul takes no joy in saying this; “I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears.”

We heard, in today’s gospel reading, the same broken heart, this time of our Lord in his haunting lament over Jerusalem. “Jerusalem, 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! See, your house is left to you.” Jesus takes no joy in saying, ‘your house is left to you.’ Luke later tells us that while approaching Jerusalem on the day of his triumphal entry Jesus wept over the city. (Luke 19:41) These warnings are in the gospel for our benefit; the salvation Jesus won for us is so we would never have to hear these words, “your house is left to you.’ (Dominus Fleuit (Latin, "the Lord wept"))

The city of Philippi that Paul knew was a Roman colony where many military veterans and their families were settled. It boasted a Roman system of government enjoying Italian legal status and certain tax exemptions. The people of the city were proud of their colony status enthusiastically embracing Rome’s view of the world and its moral values. In the midst of that city Paul reminds believers that they are to live as citizens in heaven. Believers are to embrace the values and worldview of that place from where we are expecting a Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ. I understand that the colonial history of our own country is not held in high esteem in today’s cultural mindset. Even so, in the backdrop of Philippi as a colony of Rome, Paul’s admonition that we are citizens of heaven suggests that the church is to live as a colony of that other world.

One final point on living as citizens of heaven. It was two years ago during Lent on Sunday March 15 that we began two weeks of lockdown to ‘flatten the curve’ hoping to curb the spread of a coronavirus. As a pastor, gently but straightforwardly, I point out that surely this pandemic has underlined the stark reality of human mortality. Each of us is going to die and it is wisdom to live life ready for that which is inevitable. Be ready to die. Our world’s self-understanding seems fixated on earthly things, things like safety. As citizens of heaven we live with a different understanding, as the Apostle points out, Jesus “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.” I point out to you that Paul is in prison as he writes this letter unsure of his future. I am encouraging you to let the wonder of the Lord’s promise that the best is always yet to come seed your hearts and imaginations such that you live joyfully for him in the freedom of his love.

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.