

WORTHY CONDUCT IN THE FACE OF OPPOSITION
PHILIPPIANS 1:27-30

I.

Paivi Rasanen is a Finnish medical doctor. (PROJECTOR ON--- PAIVI RASANEN) She has also occupied a seat in the Finnish Parliament since 1995. She has served as the Minister of the Interior in her country for four years and has been chairman of a major political party since 2004. She is also a Christian. Her husband is a pastor.

In June of 2019 Paivi Rasanen tweeted a picture of several Bible verses. Some people complained. A government investigation was begun to see if she had violated Finland's hate crime laws. The investigation discovered that in 2004 she had authored a pamphlet describing classical Biblical teaching about sex being reserved for marriage and about marriage being defined as a union between a man and a woman. Federal prosecutors just concluded their criminal case against her for violation of hate crime laws, for which she could be punished by up to two years in prison. A decision is due on March 30.

Paivi Rasanen commented on Feb. 17, **"This case is about whether it is allowed in Finland to cite the Bible and to agree with it in topics that go against the tide and challenge the current ethos and thinking."** A defense attorney argues, **"If the prosecution wins, the ability of pastors to preach the gospel is effectively over in Finland--- without criminal sanction."** The executive editor of *The Federalist* comments, **"If the prosecutor wins the case, it would mark an unprecedented expansion of identity laws that exist in most European countries, many US cities and states, and that US Democrats are trying to make a nationwide law in The Equality Act."** (The Federalist, 2/18/2022) (PROJECTOR OFF)

Religious freedom used to be a bedrock principle of Western democracies. Unfortunately that freedom is under assault. American colleges have too often become institutions dominated by secular, atheistic, and materialistic thinking and which too often object to religious thinking. Dr. George Yancey is a black sociologist who has taught at North Texas State University and Baylor University. He says that he has faced more discrimination on campus for his Christian beliefs than he does off-campus for the color of his skin. (Breakpoint, 7/15/2016)

Fortunately, persecution for our Christian beliefs is still a relatively minor situation for most of us Americans in comparison with the treatment that Christians receive in many parts of the world. Nina Shea, the director of Freedom House's Puebla Program on Religious Freedom, says, **"Christians are in fact the most persecuted religious group in the world today, with the greatest number of victims."** (*Christianity Today*, 7/15/1996) Although there are 2.2 billion people in the world who call themselves Christians, followers of Jesus are a religious minority in 87 countries and territories, and in many of them Christians are persecuted.

Michael Horowitz, a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute, and a former Reagan administration official, says that evangelicals in particular have become “**the Jews--- the scapegoats**” of the 21st century. “**As a Jew,**” he says, “**I find what is going on with the persecution of Christians throughout the rest of the world eerily parallel to what happened to the Jewish community in Europe during the late 19th century.**” (*Christianity Today*, 9/2005)

Wherever we are in the world, the Bible indicates that when we seek to live godly lives, we eventually do receive opposition of some kind. It may be opposition from family or friends. It may be discrimination at work because of our moral standards. It may be ridicule at school for our Christian convictions. It may be persecution from government for supposed violation of discrimination or hate crimes laws.

If any one knows what opposition for one’s Christian convictions is all about, it is the Apostle Paul. He was beaten, stoned, arrested, thrown in jail, and attacked by angry mobs because of his preaching of the gospel of Christ. At the time of the writing of the letter to the Philippians he was a prisoner in Rome awaiting trial before the emperor’s representatives with his life on the line.

In spite of these difficulties Paul in this letter seeks to have his readers learn how to rise above their circumstances and experience joy. In vv. 12-18 of #1 we have seen the apostle describe the progress of the gospel. Last week, in vv. 19-26, we saw him describe how he was dealing with his own circumstances. Now in vv. 27-30 we find him addressing the circumstances which the Philippian Christians face. In our passage today he tells them how to respond to persecution for their faith. From his instructions we can learn something about how we should likewise respond when we take flack for what we believe.

I.

First, in v. 27 (p. 980) Paul describes THE NEED FOR WORTHY CONDUCT. (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE NEED FOR WORTHY CONDUCT) He says at the beginning of the verse, “**Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ...**” Christians ought to be characterized by this all of the time, but the apostle is here talking about situations of opposition or persecution. In v. 28 he speaks of opponents. In v. 29 he speaks of suffering. In v. 30 he speaks of conflict.

The Greek verb translated here as “let your manner of life be” is very uncommon in the New Testament. It is *politeuomai*, which is related to our word “politics.” The Greek verb means literally “to perform your duties as citizens.” (PHILIPPI MAP) You may remember that Philippi, though located in Greece, was a Roman colony. A high percentage of its residents were Roman citizens, and that citizenship was a big deal to them. The Philippians were proud to be Roman citizens. Philippi, more than all of the other cities where Paul had established churches, had strong ties to Rome. The Roman citizens there had special rights and privileges which most other people in the Roman Empire did not.

Here Paul tells these Philippian Christians to conduct themselves--- to perform their duties as citizens--- in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. For their citizenship is not just in Rome, it is also in heaven. In #3 v. 20 (PHILIPPIANS 3:20) he uses a variation of this same Greek word and says, **“But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ...”** So these Christians are instructed to function as a colony from heaven in Philippi.

As Christians who live in a prosperous country with freedom of worship we have much for which to be thankful. Paul encouraged all Christians to be subject to the civil authorities. So there is nothing wrong with national loyalty and patriotic feelings toward our country and our national heritage. But the only citizenship we possess that will have eternal benefit is our citizenship in heaven. (PROJECTOR OFF) When there is a clash of duty, when the government tells us that we cannot tell people what the Bible says about human sexuality, when the government tells us that we must have our supreme loyalty to country--- we must disobey. Our commander-in-chief is the Lord God of heaven.

The standard by which the Christian's conduct is to be measured is the gospel of Christ. The term “gospel” most often has reference in the New Testament to the good news that eternal salvation comes to an individual by trusting in Jesus who died for our sins and rose from the dead. But here “gospel” means a little more than that. It refers to the broader cause of Christ. It was this great cause that Paul had in view in the first part of the chapter. Because it was such a great cause, he was willing to tolerate imprisonment and even death. Therefore all of his circumstances were evaluated in terms of the opportunity for advance of this cause. Because this cause promises forgiveness of sins and eternal life, the conduct of Christians should be directed toward what would best promote this cause.

The Philippians were apparently faced with persecution because of their Christian faith. Paul is telling them: “This is a great cause. Don't cave in to the pressure. Do what is right.

I am sacrificing my life for this cause. I was jailed and beaten at Philippi when I first preached the gospel to you. I don't regret it. You need to respond with the same kind of commitment.”

The natural tendency we face even in the relatively mild persecution that we get in this country is to think, “How am I going to be affected? If I refuse to go along with this business deal that is going to shaft the customer, I may lose my job. If I start talking about my Christian beliefs right now, I may lose the respect of my co-worker. If I question the theory of evolution in biology class, the teacher may make fun of me.”

Conduct that is worthy of the gospel should instead focus upon these concerns: “What opportunity is here for advancing the gospel? How can I best exalt and please God in this situation of opposition? Given that I am a follower of Jesus, what is the right thing to do? What constitutes worthy conduct for the Lord?”

Christians are never to respond to opposition with revenge. At the end of the second century Rome was governed by emperors who persecuted Christians. In a public letter a Christian leader by the name of Athenagoras responded in this way: **“With us... you will find unlettered people, tradesmen and old women, who though unable to express in words the advantages of our teaching, demonstrate by acts the value of their principles. For they do not rehearse speeches, but evidence good deeds. When struck, they do not strike back; when robbed, they do not sue; to those who ask, they give, and they love their neighbors as themselves.”** (Athenagoras, A Plea Regarding Christians, 11) Such is the need for worthy conduct.

II.A.

The rest of the passage (PROJECTOR ON--- II. THE REQUIREMENTS FOR WORTHY CONDUCT) deals with THE REQUIREMENTS FOR WORTHY CONDUCT. In the face of opposition what does worthy conduct require? The second part of v. 27 indicates that one element is UNITY. (II. THE REQUIREMENTS... A. UNITY) Paul finishes the sentence begun in the previous verse, saying, **“...whether I come and see you or am 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...”**

The word for “mind” here is actually “soul.” When “soul” and “spirit” appear together like this, “spirit” usually refers to the mind with its activities of thought and reflection, and “soul” refers to that part of man which includes desires and emotions and will. Paul’s desire is that the Philippian Christians be united in mind and emotions and will in their desire to promote the cause of Christ.

This united effort requires both an offensive aspect and a defensive aspect. The defensive aspect involves “standing firm.” This implies that there is an attack that needs to be resisted. Indeed, v. 28 indicates that there are opponents. When Paul first entered Philippi, he discovered that there were not enough Jews in the city to form a synagogue. So the opponents of the gospel were not Jews. The opposition that Paul and Silas received came from an angry mob and from the civil authorities.

So the opponents of Christianity were the native Philippians, many of whom were of Italian descent. Since Philippi was a Roman colony, they were pro-Roman in their outlook. The Romans were used to dealing with idolaters and polytheists. They accepted people with other religions as long as they added the Roman emperor and one or two other Roman gods to their system of worship. Most people in the Roman Empire were willing to do that. They tended to be polytheistic. The Christians were not. They took flack for their belief in one God. They were regarded as unpatriotic. The exact extent of the opposition is not indicated. But clearly it was a problem.

Likewise in our day it is OK to have a belief in God or gods. Most Americans do. But as with the Romans the politically correct view is that there are many roads to God. When Christians come along and say that there is only one way to God and that this way is by faith in Christ alone, then that produces reactions. We are treated as inflexible

absolutists. We are regarded as narrow-minded. In the face of that reaction we need a good defense. We need to stand firm.

In 1 Peter #3 v. 14 (1 PETER 3:15) the apostle writes, “**...in your hearts honor Christ the Lord as holy, always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and respect...**” The Greek word here for “defense” is *apologian*, from which we get the term “apologetics,” which is the defense of Christian doctrines.

Christians also have to go on the offensive. Paul speaks in v. 27 of “**striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.**” (PROJECTOR OFF) A Christian offensive means spreading the gospel, pointing people toward faith in Christ. To be successful requires a united effort. It requires many people working together to point people to faith in Jesus.

A church is similar in some ways to a football team. Every football team has a defensive unit and an offensive unit. Professional teams don't get to the Super Bowl unless they have strong units on both offense and defense. Football teams are also ineffective unless they have unity. Players have to submit themselves to the coach. The guys on offense have to take their signals from the quarterback. The defensive unit has to listen to the defensive captain and/or the defensive coach. Players need to learn their position and play it well. If you have an offensive or defensive unit where the players are arguing with each other during the game about who is going to play what position, where they are fighting about what plays they want to run, where they are disobeying orders from the coach, you are going to have a team that is successful at losing.

In a similar way as a church to be successful we need to make sure that we are getting our orders from our heavenly coach. We need to be finding our spiritual gifts and our niche in the church and learning how to play that position. We have to stop worrying about our own glory and our own recognition and work together as a team toward the goal of spiritual victory. Unity is essential to worthy conduct in the face of opposition.

I think that we have that unity in our church. We need to be diligent to preserve it. Besides praying toward that end, we need to guard against gossip, backbiting, fighting to get our own way, and complaining.

B.

A second element that is essential to worthy conduct under fire is STEADFASTNESS. (PROJECTOR ON--- II. A. B. STEADFASTNESS) That is the focus of v. 28. Paul continues the sentence that he began in v. 27, “**...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...**” Literally the verse begins by saying “**not alarmed by nothing.**” That may be bad English, but it was good Greek. The verb means “to be frightened or skittish.” It was often used to describe horses that balked or hesitated as they were going into battle.

A fire alarm that goes off is good in that it warns us about a problem. The kind of alarm that Paul was describing was a reaction that kept one from going into battle. He was describing a response where a Christian becomes ineffective. To return to the football analogy this is the situation where a guy is playing the position of a lineman, and the player across the line from him says, "Buddy, I'm gonna knock you on your behind and run right over you." Even though he may be as big as the opponent is, the first player may get alarmed, and because of that, get run over.

In spiritual battle this is the situation where we are faced with some kind of trial or challenge, and the forces of evil are right there whispering to us, "You are going to blow it this time. This situation is just too much for you to handle. You are going to lose. You are going to be all alone. You are going to be humiliated. People are going to laugh at you. The world is going to cave in around you. There is no hope." We get all shook up and bent out of shape and become ineffective.

Paul had, in one sense, good reason to be alarmed. He was under house arrest. He was going to be tried by high Roman officials. The right of Christians to preach the gospel was on the line. In 2 Timothy #4 v. 16 we learn that fellow Christians deserted him before the trial. If he made a poor defense, other Christians would suffer for it. He might be killed.

So how did he deal with that? One way he dealt with the situation was by considering the worst case scenario. What was the worst thing that could happen to him? He could be killed. What would that mean? He would go to paradise and be with Jesus. "...to die is gain." That didn't sound too bad. As Martin Luther put it in his hymn: **"The body they may kill; God's truth abideth still. His kingdom is forever."**

What was the alternative? He would be freed and allowed to live. That would mean that he would be able to continue to tell others about Jesus. Thus we saw last week in v. 21 that the apostle concluded, **"For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."** It was a win-win situation.

In v. 28 Paul encourages Christians to be steadfast by reminding them that godly behavior in the face of opposition is somehow a sign to the opponents that they will be destroyed. The Greek word for "destruction" here is normally used in reference to eternal destruction. By contrast the steadfastness of believers is a sign of salvation. How is godly conduct a sign to unbelievers of coming destruction? Perhaps in the sense that when Christians respond to oppression in a godly, peaceful, non-vindictive way, it shows that their cause is right. Their steadfast reaction to persecution is not natural. It is supernatural. It demonstrates the superiority of their cause. When people have to resort to force to impose their ideas on others, it is usually a sign of the weakness of their own position.

William Wilberforce (WILLIAM WILBERFORCE) demonstrated this steadfastness. He was a member of Parliament in Great Britain and an evangelical Christian. In 1787 he became convinced that he had to take up the cause of abolition of slavery in the British

Empire. Repeatedly his efforts were defeated in Parliament. At times he was tempted to quit. He kept a letter from John Wesley in his Bible which helped him to remain steadfast.

In this letter Wesley wrote, **“Unless God has raised you up for this very thing, you will be worn out by the opposition of men and devils. But if God be for you, who can be against you? Are all of them together stronger than God? Oh, be not weary of well-doing. Go on in the name of God and in the power of His might.”**

Wilberforce remained steadfast. Finally in 1833 the British Parliament passed the Slavery Trade Act, abolishing slavery in the British Empire. William Wilberforce died three days later.

C.

Worthy conduct in the face of persecution requires unity and steadfastness. (I. A. B. C. RECOGNIZING SUFFERING AS A GIFT) In vv. 29 & 30 we also learn that worthy conduct requires RECOGNIZING SUFFERING AS A GIFT. The ancient Greeks and Romans generally said that suffering was something to be overcome. It hardly was to be regarded as a gift. Yet that is what Paul says in vv. 29 & 30: **“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, 30 engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.”**

The word for “granted” is directly related to the Greek words for “gift” and “grace.” God’s Word is saying: **“For it has been given to you as an act of grace on behalf of Christ, first of all, to believe in him.”** Did you catch that? Belief in Christ is itself a gift from God. We are often inclined to think that we have become followers of Jesus because we chose to trust in Christ. In a sense that is true. But why is it that some believe and others do not? Are some of us naturally smarter than others? Are we somehow more deserving of salvation than other sinners? Certainly not.

God’s Word says here that we Christians respond because of God’s sovereign and unmerited grace. Believing is itself a gift from God. Jesus Himself (JOHN 6:44) declared in John #6 v. 44, **“No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him. And I will raise him up on the last day.”**

Not only is belief a gift from God, but so also is suffering--- in this context, suffering that is the result of persecution. That isn’t the way we are always inclined to look at it. (PROJECTOR OFF) Our initial reaction so often is: “Why me, Lord?” But the apostle says here that suffering in the face of persecution is a gift. Recognizing it as such will help us to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

1.

How is it that suffering is a gift? Paul doesn’t tell us that here. But we can figure it out by looking at his own experience and by looking at the rest of the Bible. First, suffering--- and a response of worthy conduct--- **DRAWS OTHER PEOPLE TOWARD FAITH IN**

JESUS. (II. A. B. C. 1. DRAWS OTHER PEOPLE TOWARD FAITH IN JESUS) Earlier in this chapter we saw from Paul's description of his circumstances that many in the elite Praetorian guard had come to faith in Christ. They had been responsible to guard Paul around the clock. So these guards had a chance to observe his behavior and listen to his words where he was in a situation of persecution for his faith. They were impressed. Many were converted.

Remember also the story of the Philippian jailer. This jailer had tossed all kinds of characters into the brig. But he had never encountered one like Paul. When Paul and Silas were beaten and thrown into the worst part of the prison, they sang hymns and prayed. When an earthquake freed all of the prisoners, Paul kept them from leaving. When the jailer was about to do himself in as a result of seeing the prison gates open, Paul kept him from doing it. Paul's suffering and his worthy conduct in the face of it brought this guy to Christ.

2.

(II. A. B. C. 1. 2. DEVELOPS OUR CHARACTER) A second way in which suffering should be regarded as a gift is that it DEVELOPS OUR CHARACTER. This is what the New Testament writer James says in #1 vv. 2-4 of his book (JAMES 1:2-4): **"Count it all joy, my brothers, when you meet trials of various kinds, 3 for you know that the testing of your faith produces steadfastness. 4 And let steadfastness have its full effect, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking in nothing."**

One of the times of greatest spiritual growth for me came as a young pastor when I was unjustly forced out of a church. We had a new baby and a new house, and suddenly I was without a job. The situation was due primarily to the ungodliness of church leaders. I learned to trust God in that challenging circumstance in a very practical way.

3.

There is also a third way in which suffering is a gift and a privilege. Experience with suffering ENABLES US TO HELP OTHERS WITH THEIR SUFFERING. (II. A. B. C. 1. 2. 3.(ENABLES US TO HELP OTHERS...)) That is an implication that comes out of v. 30 in our text. The Christians to whom Paul was writing were going through the same kind of struggle that he had experienced--- perhaps not to the same extent of suffering, but of the same general kind--- and Paul is able to encourage them by his words and by his example. For both of them suffering was the result of their identity with Jesus and the opposition which that aroused.

Some 2000 years later believers who proclaim the gospel of Christ are still persecuted in Greece. (SPIROS ZODHIATES) Spiros Zodhiates, the founder of a missions outfit called AMG International, was doing missionary work in Greece. He put a paid ad in a local newspaper in the town of Pyrgos. The assistant bishop, who later became the bishop of the area, sued him for violating Greek religious laws. Zodhiates was put on trial in that town for teaching doctrines contrary to the Greek Orthodox church by claiming that if one believes on the Lord Jesus Christ alone, he can be saved. He ended up paying a small fine.

On another occasion Zodiates was sentenced by the courts of that town to five months in jail for having written in the local paper about the work of a certain missionary in Irian Jaya and for having appealed for financial help for the guy's ministry. During the recesses in both trials the defendant and his witnesses would go to a nearby shop for refreshments. Because the trials were hot topics of conversation, there were many opportunities for witness. One of the people influenced by these events was the owner of the shop, who eventually became a Christian and a fervent evangelist.

Looking back at these events Spiros Zodiates wrote, **“What a glorious thing to say with the Apostle Paul, ‘For unto you it is given in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for his sake.’”**

In 2 Timothy #3 v. 12 (2 TIMOTHY 3:12) the Apostle Paul later said, **“Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted...”** If we as individuals who have trusted Jesus Christ as our personal Savior want to conduct ourselves in those situations in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, we must exhibit unity, we must have steadfastness, and we should come to see suffering as a gift from God.

Thomas a Kempis was a godly man who lived in the fifteenth century. He was an Augustinian monk originally from Germany. He wrote a book entitled *The Imitation of Christ*, which became a favorite of Christians of all denominations. In it he writes, **“Christ was despised on earth by men, and in his greatest need, amid insults, was abandoned by those who knew him and by friends; and you dare to complain of anyone? Christ had his adversaries and slanderers; and you wish to have everyone as friends and benefactors? Whence will your patience win its crown if it has encountered nothing of adversity?”**

In the midst of the relatively minor persecutions that come across our path, let's focus on right behavior. Let's be steadfast. Let's regard suffering as a gift.

The other thing which we can do is to look for opportunities to connect with persecuted Christians. Paul was separated from the persecuted Philippians by hundreds of miles. He did not have the modern means of communication available to us today. Yet he found ways to encourage his fellow Christians.

I have suggested on several occasions that one manageable way for us to be supportive of missionaries is to pick out one or two individuals or families on our church missionary list and try to pray for them in a regular way. We have two sets of missionaries who work in countries marked by persecution of Christians. Our church also supports the missionary organization Voice of the Martyrs. Each month our missions committee publishes updated news about our missionaries and missionary organizations. One way to connect with persecuted Christians is to decide to make the Voice of the Martyrs or one of our two missionary families or individuals a regular subject of prayer.