Discipleship In A Hostile World
(The Nature of Christ)
Philippians 1:27-2:11

Introduction

Just as Paul faced opposition from Rome and others, the Philippians had their own enemies. Suffering would be a part of a disciple's life in a hostile world just as it was for Jesus and Paul. The community of faith would play a vital role in the individual disciple's ability to face suffering from enemies of the gospel. It is paramount for disciples to take a unified position against their enemies. Otherwise, they might be overcome and the advancement of the gospel be impeded. Suffering for the gospel should not be considered as strange to a disciple of Christ. This was the life Jesus chose. The Christian community is to take up the nature of Christ and be willing to suffer for the needs of others and the glory of God.

Stand Firm In One Spirit: 1:27-30

Exhortation to Stand Firm: 1:27-28

This whole section is one long sentence. Knowing this helps modern readers understand there are no independent thoughts in these verses. Everything is connected. After the initial imperative to live a life worthy of the gospel, everything else is a modifier of that statement. Paul opened his section with the word "only." There was only one thing that should be at the heart of a disciple's life, living life in a manner worthy of the gospel. The word translated "conduct" in the NIV and "live" in the NRSV meant more than simply one's behavior. It is not the word Paul normally used to speak of behavior. This word comes from the noun that means "commonwealth" or "citizenship." Noting this word is important in this letter. Citizens of Philippi had been given special status as Roman citizens. Not all cities had that status. The Philippians understood that such a privilege obligated them to live in such a way that honored Rome. Paul was making the point that being citizens of God's kingdom obligated them to honor their king. This word not only conveyed the idea of citizenship, it did so within a context of community. This is the way Roman citizens would have understood it. They were part of the bigger whole. Hooker (pg. 496) translates this, "Let your life as a community be worthy of the gospel." Scripture very rarely speaks of life as individuals.

The worthy life is one of a community standing or holding firm in one spirit. Based on the way Paul uses "spirit" in 2:1 and in other writings, the word "spirit" probably refers to the Holy Spirit that forms disciples into a community. The ability to stand firm does not come from one's own power. It is made possible by the Spirit of God. This empowerment makes it possible for the faith community to strive together with one mind. "Striving" or "contending" is a term used of athletic competition. This striving is not individual effort. It is "side by side." The NRSV's "side by side" probably represents the meaning of the word better than the NIV's "as one man." It would be used of an athletic competition where a team strives together for a common goal.

"One mind" does not mean disciples think the same way about every theological issue. This is about attitude, not intellectual thought. It is a bigger picture than

individual issues. The one mind relates to living the worthy life that promotes and defends the gospel in a pagan hostile world. It is the community understanding their citizenship is in heaven and living in a way that is not dominated by Roman culture but dominated by Christian culture. Unity among disciples was vital in such a hostile environment. It is through mutual trust in the Christ event that the Philippians would be able to stand firm against their opposition.

Verse 28 serves as a hinge that moves the reader from the exhortation to stand firm into the following conversation of suffering in verses 29-30. The Philippians were apparently facing local opposition. Since the Philippians and Paul knew who the opponents were, the opponents are not specifically identified in the text. However, the focus on Jesus' Lordship and the Philippians' heavenly citizenship makes it most likely that these opponents were supporters of Rome who were putting pressure on the Christian community to maintain their public allegiance to Rome rather than to Jesus.

Paul exhorted the Philippians not to be intimidated by whatever tactics the opponents were using. If the Philippians held on to the same eschatological expectation that Paul expressed in the earlier statement "to die is gain" (1:21), the disciples' opponents would not intimidate them. Although Paul does not use the word, he probably means that the disciples standing firm side by side in the face of opposition would be an *omen* of their opponent's future destruction and of the disciples' future salvation. "The Philippians' behavior is thus at one and the same time evidence of the truth of the gospel and a warning to those who oppose it" (Hooker, pg. 497). It might be compared to a bully trying to intimidate someone and that person standing firm taking the abuse remaining resolved in their position. Eventually, the bully begins to get the idea he/she is not going to win and the one being abuse is encouraged by his/her ability to take the abuse and remain steady.

The most encouraging thing is that this is all God's doing or work. It is not clear to what "this" refers to at the end of verse 28. Paul could have been referring to the ability of the Christian community to stand firm or the eventual destruction of the opponents and salvation of disciples. Or it could be Paul intended both to have been made possible by God. This seems more likely.

The Gift Of Suffering: 1:29-30

The idea of fellowship or sharing is a big part of Philippians. The Philippians shared in the gospel with Paul (1:5). In 3:10, Paul will talk about his desire to know the suffering of Christ. Included in the blessing of being united with Christ in his death and resurrection is the blessing of sharing in Christ's sufferings. Jesus brought grace and joy to the world through the suffering he chose to endure during his life and in his death. Being able to share in the life of Christ is a gift ("it has been granted you the privilege"). Just as Christ brought grace and joy through his suffering, disciples who live a life worthy of the gospel are a channel through whom God continues to bring grace and joy to the world. Suffering for the sake of the gospel is sharing in the redemptive work of Christ. This suffering should not be considered as strange.

The Philippians saw Paul's struggles when he first preached the gospel in Philippi. Paul was not asking them to do anything they had not seen him do and certainly did not ask them to do anything Christ had not done. The next section speaks eloquently of the suffering of Christ for the sake of the world.

Christ The Pattern: 2:1-11
Communal Life In Christ: 2:1-4

"If" should probably be understood, and can be translated "since." There is no doubt about the truth of what Paul was about to say. This is seen in the NRSV's "If *then*," connecting what Paul previously stated with what he said here. What Paul said in 2:1-2 is almost a repeat of 1:27-28. It should be recognized there is a natural unity when parties are united in Christ. The word "encouragement" is the word "*paraklesis*" which is the word that speaks of the relationship the Spirit has with disciples (John 14:25-26). Union with Christ is the basis for all Paul's appeal for a life worthy of the gospel. Union with Christ automatically includes union with Christ's disciples.

In this exhortation and encouragement, Paul again drew from his relationship with the Philippians ("make my joy complete"). The focus here was not making Paul happy, but the focus remains that of living a life worthy of the gospel. Paul's joy would be a bi-product of such a life.

In verses 3-4, Paul drew a contrast between two mindsets. One is that of selfish ambition or conceit. The word selfish ambition was used in 1:17 of those who were preaching rival's of Paul (1:16). "Conceit" is literally "empty glory." This is in contrast to the true glory that belongs to and comes from God (2:11).

The opposite mindset is humility that considers others more important than self. The Greco/Roman world considered humility shameful and something to be avoided. This was the reason the cross was "foolishness" to them (1 Cor. 1:18). It was not a virtue. Greek Christians would have needed a mindset adjustment to embrace humility in their lives. Humility is not self-abasement. Paul's understanding of humility no doubt came from the OT. Those who are humble hope for God to save them (Job 5:11; Psalm 142:6). Humility is the proper attitude toward God (Psalm 138:6; Proverbs 3:34; 11:2). "The truly humble show themselves so by resting their case with God rather than trusting their own strength and machinations" (Fee, pg. 188). It is worth noting that the word "regard" in 2:3 will be found again in Paul's description of the attitude of Christ in 2:6. Christian humility has God's mind when it comes to one's perception of self and others. It is the mind of Christ Jesus.

The Mind Of Christ: 2:5-11

The nature and origin of this text is debated. Traditionally, it has been seen as an ancient Christian hymn that may have predated Paul. Some think Paul wrote it. Most think it at least became, regardless of the origin, an informal well-known creedal statement of the Christian faith. The most important thing is what these words say. This is the first writing of Paul that speaks of the pre-existent nature of Jesus.

Christ's Humility: 2:5-8

The mindset that Paul put forth in the previous verses is not something that solely describes the life of the disciple. It is the mindset that is the nature of God as demonstrated in Christ's earthly existence. Jesus' mindset of emptying himself for the sake of others was the same mindset that had always existed in his pre-existent heavenly divine state. In both his heavenly existence and his earthly life Jesus' nature

was one of emptying self for the sake of others. It should be assumed that the one who puts on Christ naturally takes on the nature of Christ. Hooker (pg. 506) states, "we should understand Paul's command to mean 'show among yourselves the attitude that arises from the fact that you are in Christ.'"

Paul often pulled from the OT to make a point. In Romans 5, 1 Corinthians 15, and 1 Timothy 2, Paul referred to Adam and used that story to contrast what God has done in Christ. Some scholars believe first century disciples would have noticed the contrast between Adam and Christ in this text. Adam was in the form (Phil. 2:6) or image of God (Gen. 1:27). Adam grasped for equality with God (Gen. 3:5) but Jesus emptied himself rather than exploiting his equality. Adam's relationship with God was stripped from him. Jesus was exalted after his emptying of self. Adam's disobedience is contrasted to Jesus' obedience. Adam lost his privileged status after his grasping for divinity. This text states that Christ came to reverse the whole Adamic story.

This is one of the most profound statements about the nature of Jesus in all of scripture. The only other one that is similar is Colossians 1:15ff. Not every aspect of the text is easy to interpret. Some of that is due to the fact that some of the words do not have a good equivalent in English.

The one whose mind is to be emulated is the one who "was in the form or shape of God." A more precise translation than "was" is the translation "being in the form." The translation "was" might indicate to us something that was only a past reality. "Being" is a present active participle, which means Jesus was already and always will be the form being discussed. Apparently, there is no precise word in English to translate the Greek word that is here translated "form." It speaks of a quality that is essential in being something, as Fee states, " … that which truly characterizes a given reality" (pg. 204). Jesus' essential eternal nature is that of the divine.

Paul then proclaimed the incredible nature of this divine being with a striking "not/but" contrast. Jesus did not consider this equality with God or divine nature as something to be grasped, exploited, or taken advantage of. A statement and translation by Fee is helpful. Of this mindset of Jesus, Fee writes, "who, in the circumstance of being in the *morphe* (form) of God, as he always was 'did not act selfishly'" (pg. 202). Fee translates this verse (pg. 207):

> "Being in the 'form' of God as he was
> Christ did **not** consider a matter of seizing upon to his own advantage,
> this being equal with God we have just noted,
> **But** he emptied himself."

To put it in the context of the citizens of Philippi who had been given the privileged status of Roman citizenship as described in the introduction, Fee (pg. 206) again states, "Thus, Christ did not consider 'equality with God' to consist of 'grasping' or being 'selfish'; rather he rejected this popular view of kingly power by 'pouring himself out' for the sake of others." In other words, this proclamation about the nature of Jesus was in stark contrast to the way Roman citizens viewed kings. There are two ways to think and act, either selfishly or unselfishly. The nature of the divine is to think unselfishly.

What the one who was by nature divine did is unimaginable and even scandalous to the world. Jesus emptied himself. This was unimaginable for a god or a

king to do. No Roman or Greek god emptied himself. They sat aloof playing with the world like their puppets. Kings plotted and schemed to gain power and protected their power by killing their enemies, which often included their own family.

Understanding this emptying has been debated. Some ask what Jesus emptied himself of. It is assumed Jesus gave up something, maybe some of his divinity. But this is *not* the meaning of this statement. Jesus did not empty himself of something. No aspect of his divine nature ceased. He emptied *himself.* He poured himself out. He unselfishly gave all of himself to the glory of God for the redemption of the world. It is a metaphor. Instead of exploiting his deity, Jesus emptied himself or made himself nothing for the sake of others.

The word "form" in verse 7 is the same as in "form of God" in verse 6. Jesus took on that which is the "essential quality of what it meant to be a slave." "It is in his self-emptying and his humiliation that he (Jesus) reveals what God is like, and it is through his taking the form of a slave that we see 'the form of God'" (Hooker, pg. 508). This is the incredible heart of God that disciples are called to emulate. Jesus did not come as the kind of king the world seeks. Fee (pg. 212) states, "He entered our history not as *kurios* (Lord), which name he acquires at his vindication (vv. 9-11), but as *doulos* (slave), a person without advantages, with no rights or privileges, but in servanthood to all."

Incredibly, the one who was and is divine chose to be identified with fallen humanity. He fully took on the form of humanity. The statement that Jesus was born in human *likeness* is most likely Paul's way of talking about Jesus' humanity without giving any indication Jesus' divine nature was diminished in any way. Jesus is completely like us in one way (his full humanity), but he is completely dissimilar in another (his full deity). The two phrases "human likeness" and "human form" do the same thing in regard to Jesus' humanity that the phrases "form of God" and "equality with God" did in regard to his deity. These two similar statements give emphasis to the reality of Jesus' humanity and deity.

Jesus demonstrated what humanity was intended to be from creation. Real humanity, not fallen humanity, is characterized by humility. When Jesus appeared in human form he demonstrated that not only is real humanity characterized by humility, the divine is characterized by humility. As Jesus taught in the banquet parable in Luke 14, Jesus took the lowest place at the table so that the Father could exalt him. The primary locus for Jesus' humility was his relationship with the Father. Jesus' humility toward the Father resulted in a choice of obedience. Jesus' humility was so genuine that he chose the path of death. He did this because the divine considers others more important than self.

> Here is the very heart of Pauline theology, both of his understanding of God as such and of his understanding of what God has done and is doing in our fallen world. Here is where the one who as 'equal with God' has most fully revealed the truth about God: that God is love and that his love expresses itself in self-sacrifice – cruel, humiliating death on a cross – for the sake of those he loves. The divine weakness (death at the hands of his creatures, his enemies) is the divine scandal (the cross was reserved for slaves and insurrectionists). No one in Philippi, we must remind ourselves, used the cross as a symbol for their faith; there were no gold

> crosses embossed on Bibles or worn as pendants around the neck or lighted on the steeple of the local church. The cross was God's – and thus their – scandal, God's contradiction to human wisdom and power; that the one they worshipped as Lord of all, including Caesar, had been crucified as a state criminal at the hands of one of Caesar's proconsuls; that the Almighty would appear in human dress, and that he should do so in *this* way, as a 'Messiah' who died by crucifixion (Fee, pg. 217).

Exalted By God: 2:6-11

The story is not finished. Previously, Jesus was the subject ("did not regard," did not exploit, emptied himself, "taking form of a slave," "became obedient"). Now God is the subject and Jesus the object of God's actions. God *exalted* Jesus and *gave* him the name that resulted in Jesus being worshiped by all. The words resurrection and ascension are not used but assumed in the text.

This should be not understood as receiving a reward for his humility and obedience. We get too caught up in looking for a reward from God, which may indicate a lack of humility toward God. The focus here is vindication. Jesus had been charged by the Jews as a blasphemer and by the Romans as an insurrectionist. These actions on God's part vindicated that what Jesus did was God's will and that Jesus' actions played the primary role in God's redemption of the cosmos. It was a sign to those who took part in Jesus' death that they were wrong and a sign to believers that He is God's Messiah.

God exalted Jesus to the highest possible status. The exaltation resulted in a name being given to Jesus. To the ancient Jew, one's name described the nature of the being. There is debate as to what "gave him the name" refers. Some believe God's exaltation of Jesus gave a greater significance to the name Jesus. Others believe it has reference to the title Lord. Verse 10 is a quote from Isaiah 45:23. In that text, Yahweh proclaims that to him every knee would bow and every tongue would confess. If Paul intended this statement to be connected to the context of Isaiah 45, it is the name Yahweh that is given. This was God's special covenant name given to Moses at the burning bush and again to Israel at Mt Sinai after the Exodus. Biblically, "Lord" is the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew Yahweh. It is *the* covenant name of God that is bestowed upon Jesus. That does not mean that it was not Jesus' name before. That should be understood from the early statement that from eternity Jesus was in the form of God. This declaration of vindication that the Jesus who walked this dusty earth and died on a cross is none other than Yahweh. The name is:

"The LORD, the LORD,
(Yahweh, Yahweh)
a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger,
and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness,
keeping steadfast love for the thousandth generation,
forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, (Exodus 34:6-7)

This name (Lord in Greek) would also speak volumes to Roman citizens. Just as it was true in regard to Pharaoh, it was not Caesar who was Lord. It is the crucified servant who is LORD. Jesus' sovereignty extends far beyond the borders of Rome. It extends throughout the whole cosmos. Everyone and everything will bow the knee, or acknowledge the sovereignty inherent in Jesus' name. The whole cosmos will some day acknowledge that Yahweh is none other than the crucified Jesus.

> God is not a grasping, self-centered being, but is most truly known through the one who, himself in the form of God and thus equal with God, poured himself out in sacrificial love by taking the lowest place, the role of a slave, whose love for his human creatures found its consummate expression in his death on the cross. That this is God's own nature and doing has been attested for all time by Christ Jesus' divine vindication: he has been exalted by God to the highest place by having been given the name of God himself: The Lord is none other than Jesus Christ (_____, pg. _____).

All of this is "to the glory of God the Father." Ultimately, everything is pointed toward the Father. Jesus chose the Father's will in the Garden of Gethsemane. This was the bottom line mission of Jesus to glorify the Father. Jesus glorified the Father by being the Father's submissive instrument in redeeming the cosmos.

Conclusion

Paul exhorted the Philippians to stand firm against their enemies as one community of faith. Such a position would most likely result in suffering at the hand of enemies. This was not something that should surprise or shock disciples of Christ. Having been united with Jesus included suffering for the sake of the gospel. Paul even considered such suffering a privilege because it gave him a Christ-like experience.

The ability to boldly stand together against their opponents and the vindication that would come as a result of that stance was the work of God. The Philippians were called as a community of faith to strive together side-by-side so that God would be glorified because of what he accomplished through Jesus. Only those who understand their citizenship is in heaven, not Rome, and who were confident of their future could see what God had and was doing. Those who saw their lives controlled by Fate, which was the way the Greco/Roman saw the world, could not understand how a small community of seemingly insignificant and powerless people could have boldness and confidence.

Although we may not experience the kind of worldly attacks the Philippians faced, we have enemies in modern times and even in a free country. Christians are made fun of in the media. Christian values are shown as vindictive and ignorant. Christians today are made fun of in work settings for not joining in the behaviors of those they work with. Modern disciples are also called not to give into the pressures of our world. In order to remain faithful in the midst of opposition, the Christian community must stand together as one and give strength and encouragement to each other.

Paul's discussion of Jesus is the foundation of all of what Paul says in Philippians. Jesus taking on the image of humanity and the form of a slave defines two things: (1) The nature of God and (2) Being recreated in the image of God. The one

who is fully divine took on human likeness so that the nature of God would be seen through the life of a slave. There is no greater slave to the needs of others than is God.

The life of a disciple is not status quo in terms of this world's values. It is a life of humility that seeks to serve others rather than pampering self. The core reason for such a life is the glory of the God who loved us and reconciled us. Serving others, particularly those whose lives are troubled, is difficult. Between the pressure the world brings to us and the difficulty that serving brings, it is not difficult to give up hope. This text reminds us that one day, regardless of what our lives in this world looks like, God will vindicate our faithful sacrificial lives by raising us and bringing us to his side just as he did Jesus.

Points To Be Made

1. Those who have been united with Jesus will experience some form of suffering from the world.
2. Because this life is often difficult, disciples of Jesus need to stand side-by-side.
3. Disciples are called to a mind-set of humility that takes the position of a slave.
4. Jesus demonstrated that humility and the desire to take the position of a slave for the good of others is the heart of God.
5. God vindicated Jesus after his choice of emptying himself. He will vindicate all who make the same choice.