

NAZARENE BIBLE COLLEGE

Chapel Message

April 15, 2009

RUN BY STANDING FIRM

(Philippians 4:1-9)

Opening Illust: **{Vic: as I begin this illustration, bring up Slide #2 with old barn.}**

There once was an old church member who always prayed, “Lord, prop us up on our leanin’ side.” Someone asked him why he prayed that way so fervently. He answered, “well, you see, it’s like this - I’ve got this old barn out back. It’s been there a long time; its withstood a lot of weather; its gone through a lot of storms, and its stood for many years. In fact, its still standing. But one day I noticed it was leaning to one side a bit. So, I went and got some poles and propped it up on the side that was leaning; so it wouldn’t fall. Then I got to thinking about that and how much I was like that old barn. I’ve been around a loooooong time. I’ve withstood a lot of life’s storms, a lot of hard times in life; and I’m still standing, too. But I find myself leaning to one side from time to time. Sometimes we, too, get to leanin’ toward a lot of things that we shouldn’t. So we need to pray, ‘Lord, prop us up on our leaning side, so we will stand straight and tall again, bringing glory to your name.’”

Our chapel theme this year has been about running. How **DO** we run this race of life in Christ? I would suggest that we run by standing firm. A little boy went to a county fair with his Daddy. He saw one of those inflatable clowns that you try to knock down. Of course, the harder you hit it, the quicker it flies back up. The father watched as the little boy repeatedly punched the clown, only for it to bounce back up again. Finally, the Dad interrupted him and asked, “how is it possible for the clown to keep standing back up, no matter how hard you hit it?” The little boy scratched his head and said, “*Daddy, I think this clown is standing up on the inside.*”

As we run the race of life in Christ, we face all sorts of challenges. Sometimes life beats us up. It’s not a question of IF, but WHEN and HOW HARD. Aren’t you glad that God’s Word doesn’t deny the harsh realities of life; the Apostle Paul didn’t either. In fact, Paul often wrote about his life experiences or those of the first century churches (the shipwrecks, beatings, doctrinal disputes, the countless issues). We were reminded last

week (Holy Week) that we don't live on what Richard Foster called the "fluff side of faith." There is a scene in the movie, *The Passion*, where Jesus is carrying the cross. He fell due to the pain of his wounds and the weight of the Cross; but he kept getting up. St. Paul declared "We are more than conquerors." But that comes on the other side of hardship and distress and persecution and famine and nakedness and peril and sword."

So, great insight and inspiration comes when "real life" intersects with the "real truth of God's Word." This has been a "real life" kind of year, hasn't it: for our nation, for our college, for many of you who (like that clown at the fair) have been punched over and over again. As I've thought about these things, there is a passage that I just haven't been able to get away from; it's been teaching me, feeding me, sustaining me. In running the race, I am learning about "standing firm on the inside." The Apostle Paul gives us wise counsel in Philippians 4. We will highlight three words, all in the imperative form.

I. **READ Philippians 4:1-5.** First of all, the word Paul uses for "stand firm" is the word used for a soldier standing fast in the shock of battle, with the enemy surging down upon him. Stand firm! The first command word is **REJOICE**. **{Vic: after I say rejoice here, bring up Slide #3 with Rejoice.}** **REJOICE!** And for good measure, Paul repeats it – *I will say it again, rejoice*. Just do it!! The book of Philippians, besides being the most intimate of Paul's letters, has often been called the "epistle of joy." Sixteen times in this little letter Paul uses some form of the word. "I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel," he wrote at the start. But what really struck me was that Paul wrote to a situation where saying "rejoice" seemed unreasonable; these were **NOT** the best of times for Paul or the congregation in Philippi: Paul was in prison ("*I am in chains for Christ*"), the aging apostle was contemplating what it would be like to go and be with Jesus ("*for to me is live is Christ and to die is gain*"); there were other threats ("*watch out for those dogs*," Paul wrote in Ch. 3); there was some conflict in the church itself ("*tell Euodia and Syntyche to get their act together*"); and this group of believers faced persecution ("*don't be frightened in any way by those who oppose you*").

Now, in some life situations it would be the height of insensitivity to say to someone, "rejoice." {Don't worry, be happy.} We don't deny the hardships of life. Ministry connects with reality; it doesn't avoid it. Paul certainly didn't take all these

things lightly. But he had earned the right to say these words. Whatever it is - prison, internal conflict, external persecution and threats - *whatever you are facing*: **REJOICE**. Whatever you are going through, there is always some reason for the believer to rejoice. Come on, brother Paul. Don't you know what we're going through here? Oops, wrong question; Paul did know; he was living it, enduring it!

The human tendency in the hard times is to become downcast and feel sorry for ourselves; to become self-absorbed. A rather gloomy fellow once wrote, "life is difficult and then we die." Well, the gospel simply won't allow us to be so pessimistic. Christian writer Tim Hansel goes to the heart of the matter: "hardship is inevitable, but misery is optional. We can't avoid hardship, but we can avoid joy. God has given us such immense freedom that He will allow us to be as miserable as we want to be. At any moment in life, we have at least two options; one of them is to choose an attitude of gratitude, a posture of grace, a commitment to joy." **REJOICE!**

Now, we can't do this in our own strength can we? There are times we don't feel like rejoicing; our true feelings and what would bubble up from the inside might produce something far different. So, Paul gives us a couple of qualifiers here.

Notice what he says about the Lord. **REJOICE . . . *in the Lord always***. **REJOICE . . . *the Lord is near***. Our connection with Jesus produces joy. There is simply no other source for the kind of joy we are talking about here. It has nothing to do with material things or outward circumstances. William Barclay wrote: "1.) a person upon whom life has apparently inflicted no blows at all can be gloomy and discontented; 2.) a person upon whom life has inflicted every blow possible can be serenely joyful." It is a living, growing faith in Christ that enables us to stand firm and deal with anything life throws at us. One sure reason we can rejoice??? - the Lord is near – He is present with us; He is available for us whenever and however we need it. We rejoice when we realize that God can transform hardship into an instrument to grow us and touch the lives of others. We rejoice when we realize that others come alongside of us and show care and encouragement. We rejoice when the little blessings of life remind us of the depths of God's love

Paul says, rejoice **AND** while you're at it, "Let your gentleness be evident to all." Gentleness – what a great word in the Greek. It's a justice term. Sometimes, when we

face painful situations, we are tempted to take matters into our own hands, seek justice, balance the scales. Real life comes our way. *What to do; what to do???* There are times when believers should stand up against injustice. But in this one word, Paul says don't insist on your own way, don't retaliate, don't try to get even, don't keep score. He is saying "remember how the Lord treated you when you deserved justice, judgment; instead, the Lord extended mercy! Paul wrote in Colossians 3: "as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience." Let this fruit of the Spirit show through your life. Gentleness - this is the way of the Lord.

Stand firm - " Rejoice and be gentle; the Lord, who is ever present with you, will enable you to do it.

II. Let's go on with what Paul says here. **READ 4:4-7.** My dear friends, as you are running the race and face tough times, **PRAY!** **{Vic: after I say "pray" here, bring up Slide #4 with "Pray" on it.}** **PRAY!** This was a common note in Paul's writings: Romans 12:12 – "rejoice in your hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer." Ephesians 6:18 – "pray in the Spirit at all times in every prayer and supplication." Colossians 4:2 – "continue steadfastly in prayer, being watchful in it with thanksgiving." I Thess. 5:17 – "be joyful always, pray continually, give thanks in all circumstances."

Paul cared deeply about his brothers and sisters. "*You are my joy,*" he wrote. He spoke out of his own situation to help his friends cope with the tough times. We live in a fallen, broken world. When we face hardship, the human tendency is to become restless and edgy. Paul understood. He doesn't suggest some magic formula or spout off some nice sounding clichés. **BUT** he does remind them and us that there are reasons we need not be distressed. He throws out another command – "don't be anxious about anything." Eugene Peterson in *The Message*, writes, "don't fret or worry. Instead of worrying, pray. Let petitions and praises shape your worries into prayers, letting God know your concerns."

We can spend a lot of time and energy being anxious. Instead, Paul says, practice the spiritual discipline of prayer. The great Protestant theologian Karl Barth wrote: "to clasp the hands in prayer is the beginning of an uprising against the disorder of the

world.” Prayer and more prayer. Paul says, “the way to be anxious about nothing is to be prayerful about everything.” In everything, absolutely everything, **PRAY** – just do it.

And, by the way, Paul writes, when you pray, do so in a spirit of thanksgiving – “meta eucharistias” (Greek); with the same spirit of thanksgiving with which we give thanks for our Lord’s great sacrifice on the Cross. In the midst of everything you face, give thanks, the result will be the “peace of God:” a peace so vast no human mind can grasp it; a peace we experience but just can’t explain; a peace that produces much better results than our human planning ever could; a peace that guards our hearts like a detachment of soldiers protects a fortress from enemy attack.

Two other things about prayer tonight – persistence and presence. Do you know why the mighty God of the universe chooses to answer prayer? The answer is really very simple: because His children ask and keep on asking. The tough times especially teach us to be serious about prayer – intentional, determined, disciplined. Our relentless God, who pursues us by His grace, invites His children to be persistent. We “present our requests to God,” and we keep on presenting them. A lesson I have learned over the years; the most important thing about prayer is **NOT** the answer.

Our persistence in prayer leads us into the divine presence. We are made for God. Early church father Augustine wrote, “God gives where He finds empty hands.” In prayer, we are connected to a power much greater than ourselves – to change us, to guide us, to strengthen us. Sometimes life doesn’t make sense. Sometimes God seems silent. Sometimes it takes awhile for the answers to come. But we keep on presenting our requests to God. We rest in His presence; we leave the answering to God in His way, in His time. Persistence leads us to The Presence; that’s where we need to be at all times, especially in the hard times. It’s been written: *“the righteous person strives in prayer with God and conquers – in that God conquers.”*

The story is told of the great missionary to China, Hudson Taylor. After years of service, he came to a point of physical and emotional exhaustion. Then, some time later, 58 of his fellow missionaries and 21 children were massacred in the Boxer Revolution of 1900. The news was almost more than his aging heart and exhausted mind could endure. “I cannot read; I cannot think; I find it hard to even pray,” he admitted to his wife, “**BUT I CAN TRUST.**” Paul wrote later in Chapter Four, “I have learned the secret of being

content in any and every situation (I'm in prison here people); whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through Him who gives me strength . . . my God will meet all your needs according to His glorious riches in Christ Jesus.” Some of you will remember Bob Benson (speaker, author, spiritual mentor to many). He wrote, “so, fill me with Thy life, O Lord, that I will feel Your slightest touch, hear Your softest whisper, see Your faintest footprint; yielding in such glad response that others might see the grace and beauty of communion with You.”

III. Stand firm as you run this race. REJOICE . . . PRAY! There is a third command word in this passage. Let's read on. **READ Philippians 4:4-9**. The third imperative or command word is **THINK**. {**Vic: after I say “think” here, bring up Slide #5 on think.**} **THINK!** Instead of rejoicing we become self-absorbed and forget how near the Lord is. Instead of praying we become anxious and edgy. Another human tendency in the tough times is “stinkin’ thinking.” Paul knew this. Its right there in the text – get rid of the “stinkin’ thinking!” As with rejoicing and praying, how believers think was important to Paul. Paul used this strong word for “think” over 30 times in his writings. Reflect in a critical and calculated way. Your thoughts must continually dwell on these things. Absorb these things into your very being. Paul says deliberately fill your minds with good thoughts.

Paul is clear: this thinking is within our control and we must be proactive about it. I like what William Barclay says here, “the human mind will always set itself on something; Paul wanted to be sure that the Philippians set their minds on the right things.” A number of years ago, I read Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. He writes of his experience as a Jew in a Nazi concentration camp. The Nazis stripped the Jews of everything (clothes, books, papers, every personal memento that gave meaning to life.) “But,” Frankl wrote, “there was one thing the Nazis could never take away – our freedom to choose our attitude.” Whatever the situation swirling around us, we can choose our frame of mind. This is precisely what Paul is talking about. We have control about how we think; we must be proactive about shaping good thoughts. You know the motto: “what would Jesus do?” Perhaps, even more important: “*how would Jesus think.*”

John Stumbo pastors a large Christian and Missionary Alliance Church in

Oregon. A few months back he became mysteriously ill and everything went downhill from there. On his blog, he recently wrote about what he called his “Traveling Companions” – all the medical paraphernalia that he has to drag around with him – walker, a wound vacuum, medication patches, feeding tube. His Traveling Companions are with him 24/7. But then he shifted to talk about some other Traveling Companions “that give evidence of the infirmities of our lives.” They tend to attach themselves to us when we face hardships. Pastor John wrote, “as I lay in bed, I started asking myself, am I packing around bitterness? That’s an attachment I don’t want to haul around with me. And grudges? Those are entirely unhealthy Traveling Companions. As we run the race, it’s natural and normal for hardships to bring these “traveling companions” – potentially destructive thoughts – bitterness, grudges, judgmental spirit, envy, self-pity. “These travel companions interrupt our journey with their seductive speeches.” But, Paul says we are responsible, we don’t lose control of our ability to shape how we think about any and every situation.

Throughout his writings, Paul taught us how this is possible. “Let the mind of the Master be the master of your mind!” In I Corinthians 2, Paul quoted Isaiah 40, “for who has known the mind of the Lord that he may instruct Him? But we have the mind of Christ,” he wrote. In chapter 2 of this letter, Paul wrote, “your attitude (your mindset) ought to be the same as that of Christ Jesus.” In chapter 3 he mentioned those enemies of the cross of Christ: “their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, their glory is their shame; *their mind is on earthly things.*” Romans 12: “do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind.”

Get rid of the “stinkin’ thinking; it will drag you down and harm your witness.” Develop habits of thinking that reflect the Lord whom you serve. Let the mind of the Master be the master of your mind. “Take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (II Cor. 10:5). The Message puts it this way: “summing it all up, friends, I’d say you’ll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, authentic, compelling, gracious—the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse. Put into practice what you learned from me, what you heard and saw and realized. Do that, and God will make things work together according to His perfect plan.” In Chapter One, Paul wrote: “this is my prayer, that your love may abound more

and more in knowledge and depth of insight, so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless until the day of Christ.”

CONCLUSION: {Vic: as I begin the Conclusion, bring up Slide #6.}

Stand firm as you run the race of life in Christ. Rejoice, pray, and think about good things. You know, these three commands really go together to form a powerful spiritual equation. It begins with prayer and going deeper in the presence of God. That calming, reassuring presence shapes right thoughts, good ways of thinking. We then rejoice because we know that God will enable us to carry on.

Finally, there was one other place in this letter where Paul talked about standing firm; Chapter One. He talked about his partnership with these believers and his prayers for them. He said his “chains” had actually encouraged others to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly.” He was torn between going to be with Jesus and remaining to serve His Lord. Then, he wrote: “whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ (that’s always our goal isn’t it?). Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you **STAND FIRM** in one spirit, contending as one person for the faith of the gospel” (1:27).

Rejoice . . . Pray . . . Think Good thoughts. “We can do all things through Him who gives us strength.

Benediction:

STAND FIRM!

live a life worthy of the Lord;

please Him in every way;

bear fruit in every good work;

grow in the knowledge of God;

be strengthened with all power according to His glorious might.

STAND FIRM!