

Confidence and the Gift of Struggle

Thomas Robinson, *Lives Shaped by Jesus 3*, October 14, 2012

Philippians 1:21-30

²¹ For to me to live is Christ/Messiah, and to die is gain. ²² If I am to live in the flesh, that means for me a harvest requiring labor. Yet which I'll prefer I am not telling.

²³ I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ/Messiah, for that is far better. ²⁴ But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account.

²⁵ Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith ²⁶ so that your confidence in Messiah Jesus may overflow because of me through my presence with you again.

²⁷ Only let your life as citizens of a community be worthy of the gospel of the Messiah (good news of the Anointed King), so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one Spirit, with one soul/life striving/competing side by side for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸ and not intimidated in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and all of this from God.

²⁹ For by grace it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ/Messiah you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, ³⁰ engaged in the same struggle/contest that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

Philippians 2:5, 8

⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ... ⁸ And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Philippians 3:8, 10-11

⁸ ...For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, ... ¹⁰ that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Philippians 3:20-21

²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

2 Corinthians 4:7-10

⁷ But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing power belongs to God and not to us. ⁸ We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; ⁹ persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; ¹⁰ always carrying in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies.

2 Corinthians 6:4-10

⁴ As servants of God we commend ourselves in every way: by great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, ⁵ beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; ⁶ by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love; ⁷ by truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; ⁸ through honor and dishonor, through slander and praise. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; ⁹ as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold, we live; as punished, and yet not killed; ¹⁰ as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, yet possessing everything.

Imprisoned with Work to Do

Paul writes to Christians in Philippi from a jail cell in Ephesus. We've been reflecting on how Jesus came to Israel telling about the Kingdom of God, how he showed in teaching and life what that meant – discipleship to one who claimed all authority after crucifixion and resurrection. Paul is leading people in a Roman colony to implement that in life. At the same time he experiences the conflicts and dangers stirred up by the message. Whether in Philippi in the 1st century or New York in the 21st, the “faith of the gospel” (v 27) – the core vision at the heart of the message about Jesus as God's Anointed King of the world – causes problems because it radically places our whole world within the frame of God's rule, values and future, and thus it challenges the values of money and power, of sex, patriotism, and violence that ran the Roman empire or any modern nation state. Paul was in chains, contemplating life and death, writing to people in a highly patriotic Roman colony. But he knows that this Gospel has become a cause of serious suffering for many of the believers in Philippi. We don't know details: persecution, lost jobs, broken relationships, career paths thwarted. They continued to support Paul in his mission. Paul lets them see how he thinks of his own life and death. Fear of death – gone. But there's work to do – the Messiah – people learning to confidently base life on Him, not only progress in understanding but the experience of Joy that flows from their faith.

A New Citizenship in a Patriotic World

Paul challenges these citizens of a Roman colony to live as citizens of a new community defined by the values of Messiah Jesus /worthy of the Gospel. (*politeuein / politeuma* [3:20], cf. political). The gospel wasn't a different way of running the Roman empire, but changed people to know that the Roman empire (or any human government) came nowhere near to the ways of the God who created this world and who holds its future. The Gospel creates a new kind of person, living within this world, but knowing that its power structures, fears, and values are distorted and deluded, and thus always in a paradoxical relationship to it. Like the cross of Jesus: the world's violence, God's love.

A Shared Contest

Another kind of language that Paul uses comes from the competition of Greek and Roman games: “*Striving side by side ... your opponents ... the same struggle.*” Different understandings of life and meaning struggling for the hearts of people – then as now. Here Paul emphasizes the unity of a shared center in God: “*one Spirit*” and “*one soul,*” supporting, strengthening each other in a world that can be very intimidating because of its control of power, money, and propaganda – and it can't fathom this faith. The very fact that the powers of Philippi and Ephesus (and later Rome) felt threatened enough by the faith to fight back with persecution was a sign of its deep power (it had no surface power) that would ultimately challenge the structure of the pagan world.

The Grace of Believing and Suffering

In all of this, Paul is confident God is working: He began the work and will complete it (1:6). The sign of his Grace is that he has granted the Philippians to suffer for the sake of the Messiah, just as Jesus has suffered for our sake. Is this Grace and Good News? Yes! The way of God's Love through the Cross is the only path of Joy that truly lasts. The Philippians had to experience that, and Christians today are called to the same Grace.