

stand. It is a promise of the God who never fails to fulfil His promises.

We are 'en route' to the final fulfilment of our eternal redemption. As we press on towards our heavenly destination, we require instruction on how to live the life of faith and obedience. Numbers gives a great deal of detailed instruction concerning behaviour. We need not concern ourselves with the details for we are not called to reproduce Old Testament Israel in the church of today. We must, however, that the keynote of holiness among God's people is of vital relevance for the church in the last decade of the twentieth century. It is the New Testament—no less than the Old Testament—which encourages us to 'Strive . . . for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord' (Hebrews 12:14). Whatever differences there may be between the Old and New Testaments, there is complete agreement here: God's people are to be a holy people.

Time well spent?

Why have we spent so much time studying an obscure Old Testament book? The answer to this question may be summed up in one sentence from 1 Corinthians 10:11—'these things . . . were written down for our instruction'. What is the central message of Numbers for the Church of today? Again, listen to what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:6—'these things are warnings for us, not to desire evil as they did'. 'In the wilderness'—this is the Hebrew title of Numbers. 'In the wilderness'—this is a summary of the situation in which we are called to live as disciples of Jesus Christ. We are 'en route' to our promised eternal destiny but we are not there yet. We have not arrived. We are still 'in the wilderness'. For us, no less than the ancient Israelites, the wilderness is a place of promise and place of danger. For them and

for us, there is 'good news'—'the promise of entering His rest' (Hebrews 4:1). For them and for us there is the danger of failing 'to enter that rest'. For the old generation, always looking back wistfully to Egypt, the promise was not fulfilled because they did not believe: 'the message which they heard did not benefit them, because it did not meet with faith in the hearers' (Hebrews 4:2). This is the danger that faces us—the danger of missing out on God's blessing. The older generation of Israelites did not believe (Heb. 4:2). They were disobedient (Heb. 4:6). These things happened such a long time ago yet they are filled with contemporary relevance. There is never a 'Today' when we do not need to hear these words: 'Today, when you here His voice, do not harden your hearts' (Heb. 4:7). There will never be a 'Today' when we can say, 'I no longer need to hear the words', 'Today, when you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts' (Heb. 4:7). Every day is 'the day of salvation'. Every day is the day in which God in grace, mercy and love is patiently looking for our response of faith—faith in Jesus Christ our Saviour and Lord.

Having heard about those who failed to reach the promised land, we must give careful attention to the Word of God when it says to us: 'Let us therefore strive to enter that rest, that no one fall by the same disobedience' (Heb. 4:11). We are aware of the many dangers which face us. Let us pray that we will be even more aware of the presence of God who will bring us safely home to our heavenly and eternal destiny.

'O Jesus, I have promised to serve Thee to the end . . . O give me grace to follow my Master and my Friend'.

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STANDING FIRM!

Derek Thomas

Philippians 4:1

'Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!'

The final chapter of Philippians does not begin in a vacuum. The word 'therefore' sets it firmly in the context of a series of assertions at the end of the preceding chapter. Three, in particular, are worth mentioning: first, Christians are citizens of a heavenly

kingdom: 'But our citizenship is in heaven' (Phil. 3:20a). This is as good a description of the Christian life as any in the New Testament. It is a summary of all that the Christian life is all about. In contrast to the 'enemies' of the gospel (3:18), whose 'destiny is

destruction' (3:19), the children of God are assured of a home and permanent residence in heaven.

Christianity is thoroughly 'other-wordly' and it is silly to deny it for the sake of making the gospel relevant to the modern world. Folk are adrift, tired of this world with its cursed relationships and empty promises and a gospel which speaks of life above and beyond the realm of the material and tangible is what they need to hear. Even now, Christians have this dual experience: living very much in this world, but participating in the world to come. Already, the world to come has broken into the Christian's life; the Holy Spirit's presence in the believer's heart is a foretaste and assurance of greater things to come (Rom. 8:17ff). Even now, our passports are stamped with an entry visa to heaven.

Second, the future, other-worldly (eschatological) dimension is enlarged upon: Christians anticipate the return of Christ when he will celebrate the final triumph of his kingly reign: 'And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ' (3:29b). The word Paul uses here is not the ordinary word for 'to look, or see', but a quite different word. It is a word that he uses in Romans 8:23 where he says 'we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as *we wait eagerly* for our adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies' (emphasis added; the same word is used to describe how creation is waiting' in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed' [8:19]). As Paul anticipates the final redemption of his body, he cannot be silent about it. Just as children 'can't wait' when told of some forthcoming event, God's children 'can't wait' for the glory that accompanies Christ's return. Paul was imprisoned, facing a possible death-sentence but not in the least depressed. The doctrine of the Second Coming had immediate implications for present encouragement and endurance through trials and tribulations.

Third, following the Return of Christ, Christians are going to be changed, their bodies are going to be transformed: 'who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body' (3:21). There is a pattern: our bodies are meant to be perfect and all that sin has twisted and destroyed will be unravelled and made new on that day. We shall reflect the pattern of Christ's glorious body.

These, then, are the truths which form the basis of a series of exhortations in the fourth and final chapter of Philippians, the first of which is an exhortation to stand firm in the Lord (4:1). Why should the apostle make this particular application at all? There appear to be two immediate answers: his love for the Philippian believers and the dangers that he could see facing the members of the church.

The fellowship of Kindred Minds

Paul's love for the Philippian church is self evident: he regards them with 'affection' (1:8). Paul's experience in Philippi had been an unpleasant one; they included conflict and imprisonment. Having been forced to flee, he headed west towards Thessalonica where, during a three week period of ministry which resulted in one of the fastest church planting situations

in the New Testament, it appears that Paul received help of a material and spiritual kind from his friends in Philippi. Forced to leave here also, he went on to Berea, then to Athens, and finally Corinth, where he stayed for a year and half before returning to Antioch. Whilst at Corinth, Paul once more is the recipient of assistance from the Philippian church (Acts 16-35; 18:22, 2 Cor. 11:7-9). It is something he alludes to in this chapter: 'I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles. Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only; for even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need. Not that I am looking for a gift, but I am looking for what may be credited to your account' (4:10, 14-17).

A year later, Paul set out on his third missionary journeys, the main purpose of which was to gather funds from the Gentile churches in Asia Minor for their Jewish brothers in the church at Jerusalem (cf. Acts 18:23; Rom. 15:25-26; 1 Cor. 16:1-4; 2 Cor. 9:1-2, 12-23). As Paul passed through he discovered that the Philippians were in financial straits of their own. Since they had already contributed more than once, the apostle seems to have been of a mind not to ask them this time, but they were insistent on joining with others in relieving the needs of their brothers in Judea (2 Cor. 8:1-5).

We can begin to understand why Paul uses an extravagant list of five terms of endearment as he considers this church, referring to them as 'my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown'. It is particularly impressive that the apostle should refer to fellow believers as his 'joy' since this has been the theme of the entire letter. He began by telling them of the joy he felt when praying for them (1:4); he rejoiced in their generosity to him (4:10, 17); he asks them to practise unity, so as to make his joy 'complete' (2:2); he asks them to practise unity, so as to make his joy 'complete' (2:2); he rejoices when Christ is being preached—even though some of the preachers are guilty of envy and malice towards the apostle personally (1:18); he finds joy in thinking about his possible release and the mutual joy they will share together in renewed fellowship if he is permitted to see them again (1:25-26); and if his release is not forthcoming, Paul finds joy in contemplating his own possible death as a martyr, telling his friends in Philippi that should it occur they must rejoice with him too (2:17-18). Twice he exhorts them to 'rejoice in the Lord' (3:1; 4:4). In addition to all this, he finds the same joy in his converts at Philippi (4:1).

It may be appropriate at this point to pause and ask whether we have discovered this joy in mutual fellowship with other believers.

Hostile forces

If one reason for the apostle's exhortation to stand firm was his love for them, another was to do with the fact that they were surrounded by hostile forces

of two quite distinct kinds: doctrinal aberration and the intrusion of worldliness.

If, when Paul had set out on his third missionary journey, one reason had been to collect funds for the ailing church in Jerusalem, another reason had been his concern for the defence of the gospel. Judaizers, unable to accept justification by faith alone in Christ alone, were insisting upon circumcision and obedience to the ceremonial law as essential components of being right with God. Paul's habit of accepting Gentiles on the basis of their faith alone was unacceptable and the Judaizers made their point known by fiercely insisting that Paul's way was wrong. To the Judaizers, it was at once a denial of their Jewish heritage.

The fact that even moderates were wavering (in the Jerusalem and the Galatian churches especially [Acts 15:1-5; Gal. 2:1-16]) evidently posed a threat to Paul's friends in Philippi too (3:1ff). Paul has to warn them to be on guard against these dangerous opponents: 'Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh' (3:2).

Paul makes three remarks about them. First, referring to the Judaizers as 'dogs', Paul achieves an astonishing turn-around in their understanding of the real situation. The Jews had frequently referred to the Gentiles as 'dogs' to mark their non-inclusion within the covenant. When Jesus drew a comparison between the Syro-Phoenician woman and dogs (Mark 7:27), the woman evidently recognised the remark—not as an insult but as a religious statement. The real Gentiles in this situation are the Judaizers! Second, the Judaizers are 'men who do evil'. Paul's point is to refute their boastful claim that they, and they only, were doing the works of the law. The good works of the unconverted amount to nothing. Third, their insistence upon circumcision amounts to nothing short of 'mutilation'! What had once been a sign and seal of God's covenant had been twisted and abused by the Judaizers so as to become a meaningless ritual. They had become sacramentalists and thus mere mutilators of the flesh. His antithesis to ceremonialism is akin to the prophets of the Old Testament (cf. Isa. 1:10-17; Jer. 7:21-26; Hos. 6:6; Amos 5:21-24; Mic. 6:6-8).

The doctrine of justification by faith is like Atlas: it bears the whole weight of the evangelical understanding of the gospel upon its shoulders. When the Reformers lashed out at unreformed Rome for crassly insisting that a man's works were the key to heaven, they insisted that what Rome was doing was denying the gospel itself. The Reformers saw their battle as a continuation of opposition established by Paul in Romans and Galatians against the intrusion of works, and in Colossians against tradition. The fight that raged in sixteenth century Europe against the religion of the natural man: a religion that at once appeals to human pride and Satanic mischief; that fight was first fought in Philippi against gospel-perverters.

The danger faced by the Philippian church was a theological one. Doctrinal aberration, when it concerns the very definition of the gospel: of how a man can be right with God, is not a trivial matter confined to the seminars of the nation's universities. It is of primary significance. Whether it is bishops denying the

resurrection, leaders doubting the right of Christians to evangelise Jews, neo-evangelicals soft-peddling the complete inspiration of every word of Scripture, the reaction must be the same. Writing over a century ago, Bishop Ryle warned: 'The plain truth is that *false doctrine* has been the chosen engine which Satan has employed in every age to stop the progress of the Gospel of Christ . . . The Church which is "rich, and increased with goods", may think it has "need of nothing", . . . It may cry "Peace, peace", and flatter itself it shall see no evil. But if it is not careful about the maintenance of sound doctrine among its ministers and members, it must never be surprised if its candlestick is taken away'.¹ It was the fear of false doctrine that led the apostle to say to the Corinthians: 'But I am afraid that . . . your *minds* may somehow be led astray from your sincere and pure devotion to Christ' (2 Cor. 11:3, emphasis added).

The spectacle of public squabbling

If the opposition came from doctrinal aberration, it was also the result of the intrusion of worldliness into the lives of some of the church's members. Two women, Euodia and Synteche were evidently in public disagreement over some matter and the apostle warns them, in a staggering public fashion too, that they patch up their differences for the sake of the gospel and its testimony (4:2). It is, of course, further evidence of the mutual love and respect the apostle and the Philippian church had for one another that Paul feels able to make such a public rebuke of two of its members. It is not surprising, considering the fact that the first converts at Philippi were women, that two of them had risen to positions of some eminence in the church. Chrysostom's remark that 'these women seem to me to be the chief of the Church which was there' removes Euodia and Synteche from mere cantankerous old women. Evidently women played a substantive role in the fledgling Philippian church (4:3); and evidently too, they were not getting on!

What this tells us is sobering: it is possible for mature Christians to be at fault and in need of a public rebuke! That two Christians should find themselves in public disagreement is, sadly, not unique in the history of the church. Division caused, not by fundamental doctrinal difference (division is in this case unavoidable), but by personality clashes and party spirit is something which Christians must seek to limit and if possible avoid. When such division does emerge every effort must be made by both sides to be reconciled.

In what is a caring, supportive and intensely loyal church—a model church indeed!—two strong-willed Christians of some standing and reputation in the church are threatening its entire witness. There is no doubt that they were Christians: Paul makes a clear statement as regards their names being 'in the Book of Life'. It is as though the apostle is saying to them: 'You're going to spend eternity together; you had better learn to get along with each other right away!'

The effect of their public disagreement had consequences for the entire progress of the gospel. Since

these women had been contending 'at (Paul's) side in the cause of the gospel' (4:3), their present attention with themselves and their local difficulties meant that they were no longer concerned for the spread of the gospel and the advancement of God's kingdom. Petty squabbles can have devastating affects upon evangelism.

Paul had greatly appreciated the Philippians zeal for evangelism as can be seen from a remark made in the first chapter where he refers to their 'partnership in the gospel' (1:5). That is why he is eager to promote the relationship between holiness and evangelism by saying: 'Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. 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 man for the faith of the gospel' (1:27). Evidently, the effectiveness of their testimony was now under threat by the public squabbling of two of their members.

The primary task of the church is a missionary one: to 'go and make disciples of all nations' (Matt. 28:19), and since we are the only Bibles many ever 'read', the judgement passed on the gospel itself is directly related to the witness of our lives.

It is against this background, then, of an intense concern for the well-being of the Philippians, together with a recognition of the opposition that they were now facing, that the apostle exhorts them to stand firm. But what does it mean to stand firm? Three aspects seem to be underlined in this letter.

Contending for the Faith

Earlier in the letter, the apostle exhorts his readers to 'stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel' (1:27). They are to stand firm by *contending together*—Paul uses the word *athleo* from which we get our English word 'athlete'. To be an athlete requires discipline, determination; *discipline*, for that is what Paul means when he says to young Timothy: 'if anyone competes as an athlete, he does not receive the victor's crown unless he competes according to the rules' (2 Tim. 2:5); *determination*, for that's what the writer to the Hebrews meant when he commended them standing their ground 'in a great contest (*athlesis*) in the face of suffering' (Heb. 10:32).

In Philippians 1:27, Paul adds the prefix *sun* to the word *athleo*. It suggests that standing firm is a team effort. This is supported by something he says in chapter 4, immediately after his exhortation to 'stand firm'. He urges the Philippians to look after those women who had 'contended' at his side in the cause of the gospel (4:3). Standing firm is not an individual effort, but a team effort. It is that strength which is drawn from one another as members of God's church. This is why it is vital for Christians to identify themselves with a local body of God's people. If they are to withstand the pressures Satan will bring upon them, if they are going to contribute to the defence of the gospel, they need the corporate strength that comes from their fellowship together. One link of metal has little strength but when joined together to

form a chain the strength can be considerable. It is the same in the fellowship of the church.

Standing firm, then, means maintaining the purity of the gospel by recognising that we belong to the *body* of Christ. The church is stand *together* for the truth as delivered to the prophets and apostles. Faithful preachers are to be encouraged in their defence of the truth, for the consequences of error are ruinous. 'If you once give entrance to [false doctrines]', wrote Calvin, 'they spread till they have completed the destruction of the Church'.²

The Agony of Opposition

Following his exhortation to contend for the faith of the gospel, Paul adds that their present sufferings are the same as the ones the apostle had: 'since you are going through the same *struggle* you saw I had' (Phil. 1:30). Standing firm means to engage in a struggle (*agonizomai*). This is a recognition that the church is faced by constant opposition. It is a contest which may cause some *agony*. What the apostle had suffered in a Philippian jail is now being inflicted upon the church. So often does the New Testament draw the picture of the Christian life as one of fellow-suffering with a suffering Christ and a persecuted Church that it becomes a mark of the church. 'Do not be surprised', Peter writes, 'at the painful trial you are suffering, as though something strange were happening to you' (1 Pet. 4:12). Nothing is more important than that we should recognise the inevitability of trials and troubles and conflicts in this world because of the devil and because of sin. Whenever discouragement comes and we feel that the Lord does not seem to be fulfilling his promises to us, that very moment we must heed this exhortation to 'Stand firm!' We must not be tempted to run away!

An Eye on Heaven

One other meaning suggests itself. To 'stand firm' in 1:27 is not only linked with 'contending for the faith' and 'suffering for the gospel'; it is also linked with the idea heaven! We are to remind ourselves that as Christians it is our home! 'Whatever happens, *conduct yourselves* in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. 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 man for the faith of the gospel' (Phil. 1:27). The word Paul uses, translated 'conduct yourselves' (*politeuma*) is one that Paul repeats in chapter 3:20, just before he exhorts the Philippians to 'Stand firm'. 'But our *citizenship* is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ' (Phil. 3:20). The way to stand firm is to recall our 'homeland'. Through the grace of the gospel we are heirs of heaven. We are inseparable tied to Christ, no matter what. Even though all of hell may be opposed to us, we are assured that nothing shall separate us from the love of God which is in Christ (Rom. 32ff); the mansions which Jesus has prepared for us will one day be ours John (14:1ff).

There is no better way to walk through life than with one eye on heaven. It will keep us sweet and

supple. It will help us in times of stress and difficulty. 'Grant, Almighty God,' prayed John Calvin at the close of one of his lectures on the Minor Prophets, 'that . . . we may stand fixed in our watch-tower . . . until at length we ascend, above all watch-towers, into that blessed rest, where we shall no more watch . . . but see, face to face, in thine image, whatever can be wished, and whatever is needful for our perfect happiness, through Christ our Lord. Amen.'³

Footnotes

1. J. C. Ryle, *Warnings to the Churches* (Banner of Truth, 1967), pp. 125, 127.

2. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles*, p. 224.

3. John Calvin, *Commentaries on the Twelve Minor Prophets*, Vol. IV, p. 69.

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THE PSALMS: INTRODUCTION AND THEOLOGY

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The following is intended as a short introduction to the Book of Psalms. A first section considers the place of the Psalms—and psalmody—in the life of ancient Israel. The second treats the great themes of the Psalter, with close reference to a number of individual Psalms.

Historical Setting

The first thing to notice is that the Book of Psalms does not represent the sum total of ancient Israel's hymnody. We know this because songs which are in all important respects like Psalms appear elsewhere in the Old Testament. The so-called 'Song of the Sea', Exod. 15, is a case in point. Here the Israelite people, having newly experienced deliverance from Egypt, give thanks to God. It is significant that they thus respond to what was to be recognised as the greatest event in their history in song. 2 Samuel 22 is another similar instance, though this time it is David alone who sings, the occasion being his victory over the Philistines. Interestingly, this song also turns up in the Book of Psalms (Ps. 18). Something similar happens in 1 Chr. 16:8–36, where David, having just brought the ark of the covenant into Jerusalem following its establishment as his capital, orders 'Asaph and his brethren' to sing in celebration. The song they sing bears a strong resemblance to various Psalms in the Psalter (especially 105 and 96) and may be a composition based upon them.

It is clear, then, that the Psalms as we know them had an existence of their own in the life and worship of Israel. On the one hand, their use was not confined

to their mere presence in a book. Rather the book is evidence of the rich spiritual heritage of a living, worshipping people. On the other hand, the Psalter does not preserve all that there was of Israelite hymnody. We must suppose that there were other songs, perhaps a great many, which are now lost to us. The fact that the writings of the sect that lived at Qumran in the second and first centuries BC, and which produced the famous Dead Sea Scrolls, included a number of Psalms not found in the Psalter suggests that the writing and using of Psalms was an ongoing activity which Israelite people saw as an essential part of their life before God.

Our next question is when were the Psalms written? What we have already said makes it clear that there is no straightforward answer to this. Some Psalm-writing was certainly very early. The 'Song of the Sea' suggests that it had begun long before David ever took up his lyre. David himself will have made his own contribution (though how great this was is not as obvious as appears at first), and indeed the picture given in Chronicles shows that he not only composed Psalms himself but set up the organisation which would produce the music of the Israelite