

Spiritual Stability: Introduction

Scripture: Philippians 4:1

Code: 50-37

INTRODUCTION

A.The Presence of Instability

1. In today's church

I received a letter from a church leader who said, "My heart is broken because some friends have defaulted from the ministry." His letter is but one illustration of the widespread instability in today's church.

It's no surprise the church is under attack because Christ said it would be that way: "In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33, NIV). That trouble sometimes includes imprisonment and physical persecution for following Christ (Matt. 10:16-22).

Because the world, the flesh, and the devil are behind such hostility, Christ instructed us to "keep watching and praying, that [we] may not enter into temptation" (Matt. 26:41). Peter warned, "Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8). To be prepared Paul said, "Let us be sober, having put on the breastplate of faith and love, and as a helmet, the hope of salvation" (1 Thess. 5:8).

Now it can be difficult to maintain your Christian testimony when persecution is subtle rather than open. I remember asking a Russian pastor, "What is it like to pastor a church in your country? Is it difficult?" The pastor responded, "No, it's easy because I know where everyone stands. But how can someone pastor a church in America, where compromise is so common and subtle?" Many so-called Christians want the world's acceptance and are therefore unwilling to take a stand for Christ.

The world is clever in its allurements, the flesh is vulnerable to temptation, and the devil is aggressive in his attack. So it's a battle to remain spiritually stable.

2. In the Philippian church

Paul and the Philippian believers shared a special love for each other (Phil. 1:8, 26; 4:15). Nevertheless, even that church experienced some instability.

Some of the believers were acting selfishly. Instead of thinking only of themselves, they needed to be like Christ (2:1-8). The church also experienced a lack of unity, illustrated by an intense disagreement between two women (4:2). It must have been serious since Paul identified them by name and asked for other believers to help correct the problem. Besides that, some in the church apparently struggled with depression, harshness of spirit, anxiety, failure to take prayer seriously, thanklessness, and wrong thought patterns (4:4-8).

B. The Concern About Instability

1. In the New Testament

a) Shown by Christ

Being a disciple of Christ would cost Peter his life (John 21:18). Nevertheless Christ said to him, "Follow Me!" (v. 19), encouraging him to be strong and steadfast in the face of persecution. To prevent any of His disciples from being shaken by the unexpected, Christ told them all to anticipate trials (Matt. 10:16-22).

b) Shown by Peter

Peter warned believers about false teachers, who were "enticing unstable souls" (2 Pet. 2:14). He repeatedly called them to heed sound doctrine so they would "never stumble" (1:10). He also instructed them to be on guard because "the untaught and unstable distort" the Scriptures (3:16-17).

c) Shown by Paul

Knowing false teachers would enter the churches, Paul strengthened the Ephesian believers by teaching them the Scriptures for three years (Acts 20:29-31).

d) Shown by James

James described the spiritually unstable as "double-minded" (1:8) because they vacillate between doubt and faith. Unsure of what they believe or what is right, they find it difficult to make decisions. To help remove that kind of unsteadiness, James wanted the believers to have a true understanding of God's character (1:13-17).

2. In the Old Testament

The life of Reuben illustrates why we should be concerned about instability. As the oldest son in the patriarch Jacob's family, Reuben was to receive highly valued privileges such as a larger inheritance

and a special paternal blessing. But Reuben's immorality (Gen. 35:22) showed him to be as "uncontrolled as water" (49:4), and therefore he forfeited his special privileges and ruined a promising future.

No Christian wants to be unstable and defeated by trials or temptation. So how can we stand firm?

C. The Biblical Command Regarding Stability

Paul begins Philippians 4 by saying, "Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, so stand firm in the Lord, my beloved." That command to stand firm is the dominant theme of verses 1-9.

1. The necessity for the command

a) Because of persecution

Paul told the believers, "To you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake" (Phil. 1:29).

b) Because of dissension

To help counter any potential problem with dissension Paul made these appeals:

1) Philippians 2:2--"Make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose."

2) Philippians 1:27--"Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ; so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel."

3) Philippians 2:14--"Do all things without grumbling or disputing."

c) Because of false teachers

1) Philippians 3:2--"Beware of the dogs, beware of the evil workers, beware of the false circumcision." Judaizers added works to faith as a requirement for salvation--an unbiblical teaching.

2) Philippians 3:18-19--"They are enemies of the cross of Christ, whose end is destruction, whose god is their appetite, and whose glory is in their shame, who set their minds on earthly things." Others taught that good works weren't the necessary evidence of genuine faith--another wrong teaching (cf. James 2:17).

2. The seriousness of the command

The Greek term translated "stand firm" in Philippians 4:1 is a military word that pictures a soldier standing his ground in the midst of battle. Paul uses the same metaphor in Ephesians 6:11: "Put on the full armor of God, that you may be able to stand firm against the schemes of the devil." Standing firm spiritually means not compromising your Christian testimony by allowing yourself to be overwhelmed by trials or temptation.

It saddens me that many believers don't take God and His commands seriously enough. Instead of wanting to know God, many prefer to be entertained. That kind of apathy regards His commands as mere suggestions. But our sovereign Lord is commands us to stand firm. Inherent in that command is the capacity to obey.

3. The basis of the command

a) The believer's pursuit of Christlikeness

Philippians 4:1 says, "Therefore ... stand firm." That refers back to chapter 3, which says to diligently pursue Christlikeness--the goal and prize of the Christian life. Since our goal is to be like Christ, we need to ask ourselves, Did Christ stand firm? Did He ever waver and sin? Scripture declares He is "without sin" (Heb. 4:15) and therefore the perfect example for us to follow.

b) Paul's care for the church

Paul surrounded the military command to stand firm with terms that reveal his gracious and tender spirit. His words aren't manipulative or dishonest, but a genuine expression from his heart.

1) They were his love

Paul addressed the church as his "beloved brethren" (Phil. 4:1). He had a deep, holy affection for them (1:8).

It was manifested in his desire to remain with them for their "progress and joy in the faith" (1:25). Indeed Paul was willing to be "offered upon the sacrifice and service of [their] faith" (2:17, KJV). And only the Philippian believers had "shared with [him] in the matter of giving and receiving" (4:15), which also reveals his special bond with them.

Paul's love is also evident in the Greek term translated "whom I long to see" (epipoth[ma]etos), which occurs only here in the New Testament and refers to the deep pain of separation from loved ones. Paul was a logician and theologian without equal--his intellectual capacity was staggering--but he was

also endowed with a tremendous capacity to love people.

2) They were his joy

Certainly Paul didn't derive his joy from his circumstances--he was a Roman prisoner (1:7, 17) and the target of critics who desired "to add affliction to [his] bonds" (v. 16, KJV).

Instead his joy came from fellow believers. The Philippian believers were his "joy and crown" (Phil. 4:1). To the Thessalonian believers he likewise proclaimed, "Who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation? Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming? For you are our glory and joy.... What thanks can we render to God for you in return for all the joy with which we rejoice before our God on your account" (1 Thess. 2:19-20; 3:9). Paul rejoiced in the church's salvation, spiritual growth, and eventual perfection in Christ's presence.

3) They were his reward

The Greek term translated "crown" refers to a laurel wreath, something an athlete received in biblical times for winning a contest (1 Cor. 9:25). But an athlete wasn't the only recipient of such a wreath. If someone was honored by his peers, he too would receive one as the guest of honor at a great feast or banquet. The wreath then was symbolic of success or a fruitful life.

It's as if Paul was saying, "The Philippian believers are my reward or trophy--proof that my efforts have been successful" (cf. 1 Cor. 9:2). That is a rich commendation.

4. The application of the command

Spiritual stability must be our objective in ministry, just as it was in the early church.

a) In Barnabas's ministry

Barnabas encouraged the church at Antioch "with resolute heart to remain true to the Lord" (Acts 11:23).

b) In Peter's ministry

Peter said, "Be on your guard lest, being carried away by the error of unprincipled men, you fall from your own steadfastness" (2 Pet. 3:17).

c) In Paul's ministry

1) Acts 14:22--Paul was "strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith."

2) Galatians 5:1--To help prevent the believers from falling back to Judaistic legalism Paul said, "It was for freedom that Christ set us free; therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery."

3) 1 Thessalonians 3:8--"For now we really live, if you stand firm in the Lord." Paul received great joy from seeing stability in other believers, and so should we.

4) 2 Thessalonians 2:15--"Stand firm and hold to the traditions which you were taught, whether by word of mouth or by letter from us." The believers weren't to waiver from the biblical truths they learned from Paul.

5) 1 Corinthians 15:58--Paul encouraged fellow believers by saying, "Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord."

d) In Epaphras's ministry

Epaphras was "always laboring earnestly for [the Colossian believers] in his prayers, that [they] may stand perfect and fully assured in all the will of God" (Col. 4:12).

5. The explanation of the command

In Philippians 4:11 Paul says, "So stand firm in the Lord." The Greek term translated "so" means "thus or in this way," pointing to an explanation to follow. So verses 2-9, which we soon will study tell us how to stand firm in the Lord.

Focusing on the Facts

1. Why do many so-called Christians refuse take a public stand for Christ?

2. Why is it a battle for believers to remain stable?

3. In what ways was the Philippian church unstable?

4. What did Christ do to keep His disciples from being unstable?

5. Peter warned believers about , who were "enticing unstable souls" (2 Pet. 2:14).
6. How did James describe spiritual instability (James 1:8)?
7. What does the life of Reuben illustrate?
8. Why was the command to stand firm necessary? Support your answer with Scripture.
9. Many believers don't take God and His commands seriously enough, wrongly regarding His commands as mere _____ .
10. What does "therefore" in Philippians 4:1 refer to?
11. How did Paul reveal his love for fellow believers?
12. What were Paul's circumstances when he wrote his letter?
13. What was Paul's supreme joy?
14. In what way were the Philippian believers Paul's "crown" (Phil. 4:1)?
15. Who made spiritual stability the object of ministry in the early church? Support your answer with Scripture.
16. What does "so" in Philippians 4:1 point to?

Pondering the Principles

1. The devil aggressively attacks Christians to undermine their stability. The Puritan Thomas Brooks described Satan's most devious ways of doing that: "Satan knows that if he should present sin in its own nature and dress, the soul would rather fly from it than yield to it; and therefore he presents it unto us, not in its own proper colours, but painted and gilded over with the name and show of virtue, that we may the more easily be overcome by it, and take the more pleasure in committing of it. Pride, he presents to the soul under the name and notion of neatness and cleanliness, and covetousness (which the apostle condemns for idolatry) to be but [thrift]; and drunkenness to be good fellowship, and riotousness under the name and notion of [freedom]" (Precious Remedies Against Satan's Devices [Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1987], p. 34). "Be on the alert" because "your adversary, the devil, prowls about like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Pet. 5:8).

2. Our pursuit of Christlikeness is the basis for standing firm in the Lord. That pursuit is eloquently depicted in the following prayer (cited from The Valley of Vision: A Collection of Puritan Prayers and Devotions, edited by Arthur Bennett [Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989], p. 18):

May I read the meltings of thy heart to me
in the manger of thy birth,
in the garden of thy agony,
in the cross of thy suffering,
in the tomb of thy resurrection,

Bold in this thought I defy my adversary,
tread down his temptations,
resist his schemings,
renounce the world,
am valiant for truth.

Deepen in me a sense of my holy relationship to thee,
as spiritual bridegroom,
as Jehovah's fellow,
as sinners' friend.

I think of thy glory and my vileness,
thy majesty and my meanness,
thy beauty and my deformity,
thy purity and my filth,
thy righteousness and my iniquity,

Thou hast loved me everlastingly, unchangeably, may I love thee as I am loved;

Thou hast given thyself for me,
may I give myself to thee;
Thou hast died for me,
may I live to thee,
in every moment of my time,
in every movement of my mind,
in every pulse of my heart.

May I never dally with the world and its allurements,
but walk by thy side,

listen to thy voice,
be clothed with thy graces,
and adorned with thy righteousness.

Ask the Lord to help you be like Christ.

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