

Stand Firm in One Spirit

✦ **Courageous in life and death** (vv.18b-24)

✦ **Moving forward in joyful faith** (vv.25-27)

In the name of Jesus, the Captain of our souls, dearly redeemed family of God:

Perception is vital for every mechanic or computer tech, diplomat or soldier. Especially in special forces like the Army Rangers or Navy Seals, perspective is gained by strict training very few can endure. One former member of Seal Team Six described stage two hypothermia from training in the cold surf. Everyone was shivering violently. Some guys had already rung the bell and quit, sitting in warm ambulances. An instructor took Howard Wasdin back where he could feel the warmth of the ambulance and handed him a cup of hot chocolate. He reminded Wasdin that he had a wife back home. “You don’t need this. Go over there and ring the bell.” When Wasdin perceived what was happening, his shivering hands gave the hot cup back to the officer. He was told, “Get back to your class.” The guys that survive special training tell us what’s far worse than the physical is the mental. So too for soldiers of the cross. It takes God Almighty – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – to train us to **Stand Firm in One Spirit**...

✦ **Courageous in life and death** (vv.18b-24)

Two thousand years ago a man named Saul of Tarsus got a huge dose of training perspective from God. He was on his way to Damascus to arrest more Christians, when a bright light flashed from heaven. Imagine falling to the ground and hearing the voice of someone you were sure was dead, someone you hated enough to imprison men and women for saying He was alive. What a shock to hear, “*Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?*” “*Who are you, Lord?*” “*I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting. Now get up and go into the city, and you will be told what you must do.*” Three days of blindness would change your perspective, but the scales did not fall off Saul’s eyes until a trembling disciple named Ananias came and baptized him. “*Brother Saul, the Lord – Jesus, who appeared to you on the road as you were coming here – has sent me so that you may see again and be filled with the Holy Spirit.*” (Acts 9:1-19) Saul was never the same. God changed his name to Paul and sent him out as missionary to us Gentiles.

Gratitude for God’s forgiveness made Paul **Courageous in life and death**. After two years awaiting trial in Judea, Paul was compelled to appeal to Caesar. Think about it. If the Emperor had a bad day, thumbs down could end your life in a heartbeat. But God had promised Paul would go to Rome, so the Empire paid his passage. A two-week storm battered them across the Mediterranean. Finally, Paul told the sailors and soldiers on board: “*I urge you to keep up your courage, because not one of you will be lost; only the ship will be destroyed. Last night an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me and said, ‘Do not be afraid, Paul. You must stand trial before Caesar; and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you.’ So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.*” (Acts 27:22–25 NIV84)

Rome is where we find Paul writing this letter to his dear Philippians, under house arrest, but in chains awaiting trial before the Emperor. His hope of release would take another two years. For now, there was a problem with perception – not his, but the perception of his spiritual children back in Philippi. That colony of retired Roman soldiers in Macedonia is where Paul found Lydia, a textile merchant. In Philippi the jailer cried out after the earthquake, “*What must I do to be saved?*” Remember Paul and Silas’ answer? “*Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved – you and your household.*” (Acts 16:30f) The Macedonians made Paul so proud in the Lord because “*out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.*” (2 Corinthians 8:2) Philippian perception God has given us at New Life, welling “*up in rich generosity,*” nearly erasing our deficit.

Pastor Paul wanted them to stay **Courageous in life and death**. Joyful in the Lord, Paul was confident their prayers would be answered as the Holy Spirit supplied every need. His only real concern, in fact, his confident expectation is that he will boldly proclaim Christ – come what may.

“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.” What a miracle of confidence for this former prosecutor of Christ and His people. My old Jewish friend Karl could never understand how I could echo Paul. “You have so much to live for,” he would say. “Don’t talk about dying.” But he would not let me share my hope in our Jewish Messiah. But isn’t Christ the key? When you are convinced that Jesus fulfilled all God’s Old Testament promises to the Jewish people, that God mercifully included us Gentiles in this great salvation, it’s like oil in the engine of your faith. Your heart won’t seize up with anxiety after the Holy Spirit’s lube job. “Living here in this body,” Paul says, **“will mean fruitful labor for me.”** Christ was not Paul’s copilot. They traded places when Paul came to faith. I remember praying for this in fourth or fifth grade that God would use me to share the Gospel. It was really fun yesterday telling neighbors why our car wash was free: God has freely forgiven us in Jesus. As you tell the Good News of sins forgiven, you are more confident of your own eternal joy with Jesus. Loving wife and family still, you say: **“I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far.”**

Somehow God had shown His servant Paul that his ministry would continue to bless the Philippians – and us for that matter! **Courageous in life and death**, Paul kept....

✠ **Moving forward in joyful faith (vv.25-27)**

“Convinced of this, I know that I will remain, and I will continue with all of you for your progress and joy in the faith, so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.” Did you catch that? **“...progress and joy in the faith...”**

My dear friends in Christ, how would you evaluate your faith in the light of these words? Are you making **“progress”**? Originally, the Greek seems to have been a nautical term for “making headway.” Are you “making headway,” sailing on the winds of the Spirit in stronger conviction that you are sinner, deserving of God’s eternal wrath and punishment? Are you all the more convinced that for Jesus’ sake God has turned away His wrath from you? Is your confidence in forgiveness growing? Do you see the kind hearted, smiling face of God guiding your life? **“He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?”** (Romans 8:32 NIV84) Are you more eager to serve in thankful joy wherever and whenever the Lord gives opportunity?

If you feel you’re slipping a bit in this, there may be a very simple reason. Look closely at God’s words through Paul. He is not talking about joy because people appreciate you, or satisfaction doing good. To focus on your hands and heart leaves you shivering in the cold. Paul says so simply you might have missed it, **“...so that through my being with you again your joy in Christ Jesus will overflow on account of me.”** It wasn’t because of his eloquence or skill. Paul kept pointing them to Jesus and His Gospel day by day. Word and sacrament overflowed their hearts with holy **“joy in Christ Jesus.”** Focus on Christ, and you keep **Moving forward in joyful faith**.

When all of us focus on Christ together, God gives unity of heart and soul. People from different backgrounds, different back stories, different strokes for fun and work, all come together with one mind and heart. You **“conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.”** That means you are more focused on being a citizen of heaven than of any country here on earth.

“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.” **Moving forward in joyful faith** means not letting personal opinions and preferences get in the way of the Gospel. Then our hearts beat as one like Norma and Gordon Yeager after 72 years of marriage. Side-by-side in the ICU, Gordon’s heart monitor kept beeping after he passed. Nurses realized Norma was still holding his hand; her heart was beating through him. Living or dying, let Christ’s heart always be beating in us. Then now and forever in Christ alone we **Stand Firm in One Spirit**. Amen.