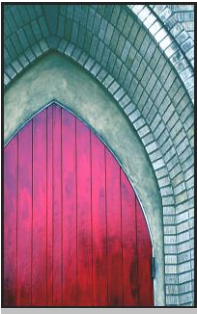


Worthy ... to Suffer

TEXT: ACTS 16.16-24; PHILIPPIANS 1.27-30



Rev. Jon Dunning
September 12, 2010

Oak Hills
Presbyterian Church,
Overland Park,
Kansas

IN THE WORLD?

From before the birth of Jesus, God's people have wrestled with a question: "How do I live in a world that's different from and often hostile to who I am and how I live my life?" And over the same time period, there have been a variety of ways of answering that question. In our current setting, as religions of all stripes are given more attention in the public eye, this question may take on 'new' forms, but it's still the same question. One way that we're asking the question in our day and age is

related to 'social justice' issues. "How should I engage with the suffering of my world as a believer?" While we tend to think in word vs. deed patterns, the better question is simpler: Are we proclaiming the Gospel? We consider these questions as we approach God's word in Acts 16 and Philippians 1.

ACTS 16.16-24; PHIL. 1.27-30

Acts 16.16-24

¹⁶As we were going to the place of prayer, we were met by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination and brought her owners much gain by fortune-telling. ¹⁷She followed Paul and us, crying out, "These men are servants of the Most High God, who proclaim to you the way of salvation." ¹⁸And this she kept doing for many days. Paul, having become greatly annoyed, turned and said to the spirit, "I command you in the name of Jesus Christ to come out of her." And it came out that very hour.

¹⁹But when her owners saw that their hope of gain was gone, they seized Paul and Silas and dragged them into the marketplace before the rulers. ²⁰And when they had brought them to the magistrates, they said, "These men are Jews, and they are disturbing our city. ²¹They advocate customs that are not lawful for us as Romans to accept or practice." ²²The crowd joined in attacking them, and the magistrates tore the garments off them and gave orders to beat them with rods. ²³And when they had inflicted many blows upon them, they threw them into prison, ordering the jailer to keep them safely. ²⁴Having received this order, he put them into the inner prison and fastened their feet in the stocks.

Philippians 1.27-30

²⁷Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, 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 mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. ²⁹For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, ³⁰engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

PAUL IN PHILIPPI

The portion of Acts 16 I read is really the 'middle' of the story of Paul's time in Philippi. Paul and his companions, seemingly living on 'hold' as they waited for divine direction, were called to this area when Paul received a vision of a man asking for help.^{Ac 16.6-10} When they arrived, they found the God-fearers in the city praying down by the river; at least one of the women there—Lydia—heard the Gospel and believed.

But it's in this second section that three factors stand out that appropriately set the background to the words at the end of Philippians 1. First of all, we're given a summary of the message of help—the Gospel—that Paul and his companions brought. The message is the proclamation that Jesus Christ is Lord. It's what Paul says to the spirit that's possessing the slave girl.^{Ac 16.18} In the third scene that follows, this was the message to the jailer: "believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved."^{Ac 16.31; cf. 16.18} The pattern we see over and over again in Acts is that the message of the Gospel is the announcement that Jesus is Lord. Jesus is the message.

Second of all, make note of the response that this message received. In short, it brought fury. The Gospel cost the owners of the slave-girl money—she was their livelihood. Everything was 'fine' and 'nice' when the Gospel was a private matter down by the river; but when it started to mess with money, then it brought the heat. The truth of the Gospel, all by itself, has this way of turning our world upside-down.

The result for Paul and Silas was physically brutal. They were publicly attacked, the target of mob-mentality. They were stripped and beaten repeatedly—in public. They were thrown into prison and their feet were fastened into place. It was their preaching of the message of the Gospel that landed them in jail and the subsequent response to the Gospel. The message of the Gospel can cost comfort, reputation, and safety.

GOSPEL-WORTHY LIVING

With this knowledge of Paul's time in Philippi—the message he brought, the response to that message, and the results of his preaching—we can now approach Philippians 1.27-30. Paul's concern is that the Christians in Philippi would be about one thing, that, no matter what, they would live in a "manner of life" "worthy of the Gospel of Christ."^{1.27} These words echo an important theme for Paul: our lives must be worthy of what God has done for us and in us.^{Eph 4.1; Col 1.10; 1 Th 2.12} But be careful: to live worthy of the Gospel cannot be any attempt to earn what has been freely given; that would be a violent contradiction to grace. This is instead to live a life heavy with Gospel weight. Not the weight of insecurity, of self-defensiveness and self-preservation, of fear, but the weight of forgiveness, of rest, and of hope. When Paul says later that "this is a clear sign"^{1.28} he's speaking of this entire endeavor as a proclamation of the Gospel. Living according to the message that Jesus is Lord in all that we do is in and of itself a proclamation of that message. He outlines this in what follows:

Are we standing together? Paul's outline of a Gospel-worthy manner of life begins with Christians standing together, "in one spirit ... side-by-side."^{1,27} At the heart of the message is not a human authority structure or chain of privilege, but rather trust in a person, trust in Jesus. It is the confession that left to ourselves our desires lead us to battle with each other and will bite, devour, and claw over one another to get ahead.^{Gal 5.15; Js 4.1-3} It is the joyful knowledge that in Christ we are set free from slavery and given the hope of a tearless eternity. Is this what our lives declare? Can we risk honesty, humility, confession, repentance, and love?

Are we striving? Living Gospel-worthy lives isn't about fighting to survive; it is about forward motion, and therefore it is about moving forward. It's what Paul describes as "striving ... for the faith of the gospel."^{1,27} The message of Jesus has its effect and it cannot be contained. Inherent in the message is the transformation of the lives of its recipients. It is always moving forward and going out. Are we part of this movement?

Are we living with confidence? As Paul's time in Philippi demonstrates, there will be a response to the Gospel, and the Gospel has its opponents. The fear of which Paul writes is that of a horse surprised and reacting out of surprise. It's the sharp, fighting response of an animal that doesn't even know what it's up against. This is not the reaction of those who live by the humble knowledge that the One who has redeemed them knows all things, sees all things, and graciously guides all things.

Are we suffering? There will be suffering when we proclaim the message of Jesus with our lives. This is not the result of being obnoxious, uncaring, arrogant, or belligerent. It is the gracious gift of God-honoring suffering that comes from living by the hope of the Gospel for its progress in the lives of others, no matter what the cost. It is the suffering imparted from selfish anger that proudly refuses to admit that you are a different person because of Jesus.

Are we in conflict? Paul connects the conflict he knew in Philippi with that which the believers are still engaged.^{1,30} This is the "good fight" of the Christian life, of doing battle with sin within,^{1 Tim 6.12} and of carrying on the message around us.^{1 Th 2.12} The opposite of conflict here is appeasement, it is apathy, it is silence. That is not Gospel advancement. More often than we are comfortable, we are called to engage in conflict—by the Gospel, for the Gospel, and with the Gospel.

A "MANNER OF LIFE"

When Paul talks about a "manner of life,"^{1,27} he's using a word that would have been significant in Philippi. He is in effect calling them to "live by their rights and freedoms as citizens." In that context, their thought would have gone to Rome and all Roman citizenship entailed. For God's people, it's a reminder of their King, of His rule in their lives, and of those with whom they stand.

How do we live in a world that is different from and even hostile to the work of Jesus in our lives because of? The short answer is to live a manner of life worthy of the Gospel. It is to bear the weight of the Gospel—a weight born by Another and only on our shoulders by faith. It is stand together, striving for the singular purpose of the growth of the Gospel, without fear in opposition, with suffering, and taking us into conflict. The call of Jesus to the Christian is live the proclamation of Jesus: the message of the grace of God that turns everything upside down, costs you everything, and promises eternal joy.

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