

Rafting on the Whitewater of Grace

Moving Forward, Part 8

Philippians 1:28-30

A pastor who grew up as a missionary kid in Africa wrote recently about a trip he took with his brothers to the western edge of Zimbabwe.

Among other things, they planned to go white water rafting on the Zambezi River – a River most famous, because at one point in its journey to the Indian Ocean, it includes the famous Victoria Falls. This pastor and his brothers planned to begin rafting at the base of Victoria Falls.

He writes, “Massive amounts of water spilled over the top of the giant falls and dropped almost 1,000 feet; the roar was deafening.

He explains – Victoria Falls are the largest in the world, more than a mile wide and three hundred feet high, on average. Mist from the spray fills the air like fog and can be seen 50 miles away; the local villagers call it, “Smoke That Thunders”.

The water from the falls rushes down the gorge in torrents, creating the world’s largest rapids. Now in the United States, the highest class rapid you can raft on is a Class 5. The Zambezi’s whitewater rapids can top 7 and even 8.

This trip was not for the faint of heart . . . he explains, “as I sat on the edge of the eight-person raft, all suited up in a tight, overstuffed jacket and a thick crash helmet – I wondered – the Zambezi can’t be that dangerous, can it?”

But then I heard our guide say, “When the raft flips over” . . . wait – he didn’t say, “if the raft flips or, on the off chance we get flipped over”, but “when the raft flips stay in the rough water. You will be tempted to swim toward the stagnate water at the edge of the banks of the river – don’t do it! It’s in the calm stagnate waters at the river’s edge where crocodiles will wait for you. So when the raft flips, stay in the rough water.”ⁱ

This pastor went on to make the application that stagnate waters are deadly – and while the church and every Christian might not want to stay in the rough waters of tribulation and suffering when their raft is overturned and they are spilled into the rough current.

Whitewater is not only God’s design but a sign of God’s protection and a place for the believer’s development.

The rough water is where character and perseverance is strengthened; which is why the believer is to resist the temptation to swim to where it seems safe and calm . . . stagnate waters are where the truly deadly enemies are watching and waiting.

Many are under the impression or even being taught that the Christian life should mark the beginning of smooth sailing with uninterrupted promotions, successes, health, wealth and all things positive.

The opposite is actually the truth. The Apostle Paul warned as clearly as he possibly could – ***All those who desire to live godly in Jesus Christ will suffer persecution (2 Timothy 3:12).***

James wrote, ***Count it all joy when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith – the whitewater of life – will produce endurance – which produces maturity. (James 1:2-3)***

It isn’t a matter of if . . . but when.

Christianity is in many ways like boarding a raft and heading down a class 8 rapids.

And the reality is, God never promised the believer smooth sailing – but He did promise us a safe landing.ⁱⁱ

It is that kind of that kind of warning *and* encouragement that the Apostle Paul is drilling into the church in Philippi.

He has reminded them that they are citizens of heaven – and to be good citizens of heaven they are to be good citizens in the outposts of heaven – the local church – where the believer is to be committed to three critical actions.

First, Paul commands us to be committed to repairing any dis-unifying spirit – Paul writes in ***Philippians 1:27 – to stand firm in one spirit.***

In our last study, we learned that we are to be committed to rejecting any disengaging attitude – Paul writes further – ***with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel.*** Christianity isn’t a solo performance . . . it’s a team effort.

We are to have the same desire for God’s glory, to move in the same direction as a team and deliver to our world the same declaration of the gospel.

Now today, we arrive at a somewhat surprising third action point.

The first two told us *what* to do – this one tells us what *not* to do.

Paul begins verse 28. ***In no way alarmed by your opponents.***

Let me finish our outline in principle form.

Not only are we to be committed to repairing any dis-unifying spirit; to be rejecting any disengaging attitude; now Paul effectively tells us that **our conduct should be committed to refusing any disheartening perspective.**

Refusing any disheartening perspective – ***In no way alarmed by your opponents***

The word here for *alarmed* or “frightened” (πυροϋ) does not occur anywhere else in the New Testament. It’s a word that refers to horses that are startled and frightened on the battlefield. In fact, Plutarch, the historian living during the same time of the Apostle Paul had published the news of a Roman soldier’s death in battle because his frightened horse panicked and bolted, fatally throwing the soldier to the ground.ⁱⁱⁱ

Paul may very well be playing on the memory of the Philippians who would well remember the great battle 100 years earlier in that region where Cassius assumed that he and Brutus had lost the battle against Caesar Augustus and Antony; Cassius was not aware that his comrade Brutus had already defeated Antony, and Cassius assumed the worst, lost all heart and then took his own life in fear, commanding his armor bearer to run him through with a sword. That was known as the Battle of Philippi.^{iv}

Paul is writing, don’t lose heart on the field of battle – it might look like you’re losing – but you’re not . . . you are on the victory side.

So Paul tells the church to resist – to refuse – any kind of perspective that would dishearten them – distract them – discourage them.

He’s effectively telling the church to be fearless.

And by the way, did you notice Paul did not write, “don’t be alarmed *if* you happen to have opponents” . . . no, it was a given.

Your raft is going to flip over . . . you’re going to taste the whitewater of opposition and difficulty.

In this world you will have tribulation, Jesus said in John 16:33.

Not “you might”, but “you will”.

And to this day, the gospel is still considered foolish and insulting and troubling and out of touch.

Ultimately it will be considered a threat to the good of society.

And what is the church at large doing? The opposite of what Paul encouraged.

The church at large today is evidently alarmed by any kind of opposition. It is scurrying around in an attempt to hide any kind of offensive doctrine . . . to remove anything politically incorrect from the gospel . . . to call sin, actually sinful; to even refuse to describe someone in danger of going to Hell, even if that person denies the gospel of Jesus Christ – “I mean, we can’t say that person is going to face the wrath of God – we’ll just leave that up to God.”

No God has actually left it up to us to tell our world how to avoid Hell and how to go to Heaven.

One author wrote, a growing number of churches today are intentionally playing down the biblical elements of sin and repentance . . . and in so doing, the gospel is trivialized or reduced to an impotent level and then repackaged into various forms of entertaining amusement.^v

I personally believe that at the core of this digression is fear. Fear of losing the approval of your culture; fear of being viewed as out of touch; fear of being considered among the worst offenders of human rights –

As one member of the Colorado Civil Rights Commission recently suggested that any religious system that doesn’t endorse same-sex marriage is effectively in the same category as slave traders and Nazis.^{vi}

Never mind that many Christians worked tirelessly to end slavery; never mind that many Christians hid Jews in their closets from Nazis – Christians have been loyal friends to the Jewish people.

The church is scrambling to avoid any kind of opposition, while the Apostle Paul clearly tells us here we will face opposition.

Let’s bring this down to a much more popular level. How many church leaders and pastors and authors today are effectively communicating that God doesn’t want any Christian in the whitewater of suffering or sickness or tribulation – He wants you to have the best in life, to learn how to activate His power; to discover the secrets to health and wealth and comfort; that God Himself would never want you to struggle in the turbulence of whitewater –

Certainly, God would invite you to swim over to where the water is calm and stagnate . . . and destructive.

More than ever before, the Christian and the church need to be warned not to lose heart in the face of opposition . . . to be fearless in communicating the gospel of repentance and faith in Jesus Christ alone.

Now mind you, Paul doesn't just say, "Come on church . . . pick your chin up and get out there . . ."

No, what Paul will do is build his case for fearlessness, basing it on two eternal realities.

Notice verse 28. *In no way alarmed by your opponents – which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that too, from God.*

Paul says, "Let me redefine opposition for you – let me give you another perspective".

Paul says, opposition is a *sign*; and the word Paul uses for *a sign* is a word that refers to giving evidence that something is true.^{vii}

In other words, Paul wants the church to consider opposition to be *evidence* that two things are true and they are truly going to happen.

Let me break it down and put it this way:

First, opposition is evidence for a coming judgment

Paul writes here, *it is a sign of destruction for them (that is, the opponents of the church).*

That's a terrifying thought. The opponents of the church are actually opposing a God who is coming one day in judgment.

And God has taken note of their opposition – and their acts of opposition will be turned into evidence one day that they were, in reality, His enemies and worthy of His judgment.

Paul describes just a sliver of the terror of that coming judgment in 2 Thessalonians 1 and verse 7 . . . ***when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with His mighty angels in flaming fire, dealing out retribution to those who do not know God and to those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.***

How clear can that be?

Jesus further clarified that this destruction is actually a place of everlasting fire and torment – we know it as Hell. (Matthew 25:31-46)

Shouldn't the world be warned of that? Isn't that a part of our mission? To tell our opponents that there is a Hell to avoid and a Heaven to gain?

So keep that in mind church – when you are facing opposition just remember that the opponent is doing nothing more than giving self-condemning evidence that they are enemies of God and horrifying judgment is in their future.

And this causes us to respond to our world correctly; not with hatred or anger or retaliation, but compassion and above all pity – we know what they will endure unless they repent and believe the gospel.

But that's not all; secondly, opposition is not only evidence for a coming judgment; **opposition is evidence of a genuine disciple.**

Notice, *verse 28 again – in no way alarmed by your opponents – which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you, and that too, from God.*

In other words, the very fact that you are being opposed on behalf of Christ provides the evidence that you belong to Christ.

Think about it . . . the Apostles were cowards at the crucifixion – they were huddled in fear in the upper room as Jesus, their leader lay in that borrowed tomb.

They were terrified, panicked. Listen, the evidence was unmistakable – they were cowards after the crucifixion, but they were courageous after the resurrection.

That made the difference. The gospel of Christ was physically and completely and undeniably confirmed.

So they are now preaching the truth of Jesus Christ as Lord and Messiah.

And it isn't long before they're arrested and told not to preach again. They refused and simply said, ***"We will obey God rather than man" (Acts 5:29)***

The Supreme Court of Israel (the Sanhedrin) didn't know what to do with that. We're told that the Sanhedrin simply called the apostles back in – ***they flogged them and ordered them to speak no more in the name of Jesus and then released them. And they went on their way from the presence of the Sanhedrin – the High Court – rejoicing that they had been considered worthy to suffer shame for His name . . . and they kept right on teaching and preaching Jesus as the Messiah (Acts 5:41-42)***

- Opposition points to a coming punishment for the enemies of God
- Opposition also points to convincing proof for the children of God.

In other words, opposition against you for the sake of your faith in Jesus Christ becomes the very evidence of your faith in Jesus Christ. Paul writes, it is a sign pointing to the reality of your true loyalty.

I couldn't help but notice a very tangible illustration of that, taking place right now in Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul. The Islamic State of Iraq

and Syria (ISIS) ordered all the Christians in that city to either convert to Islam, pay a protection fee, leave or be killed. And in the meantime, every house occupied by a Christian family was physically marked with the Arabic letter “N” – the letter N identified the homes of Christians.^{viii}

When I read that I was intrigued. I wondered what that could mean.

So I called my friend Hanna, a converted Palestinian. He leads a ministry to that part of the world as a faithful missionary and church planter – also a member of our church – many of you know Hanna and his sweet wife Evelyn.

Their ministry now is throughout the Middle East.

If anybody would know what this meant, I was sure he would know. So I called him up and said, Hanna, what does the Arabic letter N stand for? I mean, why are the Muslims identifying Christian homes by marking them with the Arabic letter N?

He immediately knew. He said the letter N tracks back centuries ago when Christians were referred to as followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

So they marked these homes with the letter N to identify people who belong to – which are following – the Nazarene.

Wow – this is *Philippians 1:27* played out in a tangible, physical way; these families have been marked by their opponents. And not only that – the letter N – scrawled on their homes, is also a sign – tangible evidence that they, as followers of the Nazarene, are members of the family of God.

Now what Paul will do in the next verse is to effectively expand his case for fearlessness – for the church to stay in the white water – by giving:

Three encouraging reminders

a. First, Paul will remind them that salvation is a gift

Notice verse 29. For to you it has been granted for Christ’s sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake.

Before we run to the second part of that rather dramatic phrase, don’t miss the first one.

Salvation is a gift to those who belong to God.

For to you it has been granted . . .

The word Paul uses for “granted” is from charizo (χαριζω) which means to give graciously.^{ix}

It’s the same root word from which we get our word charis – grace.

Paul would write to the Ephesians, For by grace are you saved, through faith; and not of yourselves, it is the gift of God. (Ephesians 2:8-9)

Salvation is the gracious gift of God.

But this is where it gets surprising.

God not only gave believers the marvelous gift of faith to believe in Him, but also the privilege to suffer for His sake.^x

So Paul is not only encouraging them to remember that salvation is a gift of grace; he’s reminding them that, secondly;

b. Suffering is a privilege to embrace

For to you it has been granted – sounds like an award. Sounds like an honor. Paul says it is: God in His grace – not His disfavor – but in His grace – has granted you the privilege to suffer for His sake.

This means, suffering isn’t a sign that God has abandoned you – it is a sign that God is honoring you.

It isn’t a sign that God is displeased with you . . . it may very well be a sign that He is pleased with you.

The rough waters of a raging crisis might indicate to these early Christians – and to you today – that trouble has somehow slipped past the hand of God and seized you by the neck.

No – what Paul says here is that trouble has actually *come* from the hand of God; and not as a mark of dishonor, but honor.

Now don’t misunderstand. Paul here isn’t encouraging the Christian to seek suffering and go spoiling for trouble. He’s telling us that when it comes, God has actually granted it – as a gift of His grace.

But what good does this kind of gift do for us?

- It takes our eyes off earthly things
- It weeds out superficial believers and shallow traditions
- It strengthens the testimony of those who endure
- It adds to the future reward for those who faithfully suffer
- It weans us from self-sufficiency and self-promotion
- It crushes our pride
- It causes us to worship with purified motives and emotion^{xi}

Salvation is a gift of grace.

Suffering is a privilege to embrace.

God has graciously granted us this gift to keep us safe – right in the middle of the rapids of life which have a unique way of keeping us focused and dependent and aware and worshipping.

Beloved, the plan of God is not to pamper you but to perfect you – to grow us up in Christ – not to deliver us from whitewater but to develop us in the midst of it.

This is the rewriting of our perspectives as believers – so we can resist losing heart.

Salvation is a gift of grace.

Suffering is a privilege to embrace.

c. Thirdly, Trials are to be expected as common-place

Don't be surprised when they come.

Paul writes here in *verse 29, for to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake* – now notice – *30. Experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me.*

In other words – you are experiencing what I'm experiencing . . . implied – what every believer experiences.

All of our situations might be different – the trials multi-colored – but suffering the same. Trials should be viewed then, not as occasional guests, but as regular companions.

Knowing that truth doesn't make it easy; in fact, Paul uses the word conflict here in *verse 30* for suffering. *I am experiencing the same conflict.*

The word *conflict* is from the word *agon* (αγων or αγωνια) – which gives us the word *agony*.

In fact, it's the same word used for Christ's struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane – *and being in agony, he was praying fervently.*” (Luke 22:44)

First and foremost, Jesus Christ has tasted the agony of suffering. He can understand yours.

This term here for agony or conflict originally referred to the arena where some athletic or gladiatorial contest took place; later on, in Paul's day, it had come to refer to any kind of agonizing struggle or conflict.^{xii}

Paul effectively says, “You've seen the agony in my own life and now you are seeing it in your own life.”

Which is another way of reminding them, “You're not the only ones who suffer . . . trials are common-place . . . they are the mark of a genuine disciple . . . they are the gracious gift of God to mature His children.

You're not the only one suffering.

But that also means, you are never alone in your suffering.

You're not alone.

You are surrounded in here by people who have received the gracious gift of suffering.

It'll all look a little different, but suffering is the native tongue of the true believer.

Every Christian's in the race . . . every Christian's been marked . . . every Christian's in the arena.

I appreciate the lyrics to that gospel song:

We're pilgrims on the journey

Of the narrow road

And those who've gone before us line the way

Cheering on the faithful, encouraging the weary

Their lives a stirring testament to God's sustaining grace

Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses

Let us run the race not only for the prize

But as those who've gone before us

Let us leave to those behind us

The heritage of faithfulness passed on through godly lives

Oh may all who come behind us find us faithful

May the fire of our devotion light their way

May the footprints that we leave

Lead them to believe

And the lives we live inspire them to obey

Oh may all who come behind us find us faithful.

Christians who stayed in the arena . . . faced the agony of conflict . . . stayed in the race . . . stayed on the raft in the middle of the rapids . . . and then trusted the grace of God, when the raft has flipped over and the water is over your head.

Even then . . . to conduct ourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

Which according to Paul and through him the Spirit of God means:

- to be committed to repairing any dis-unifying spirit.
- to be committed to rejecting any disengaging attitude
- to be committed to refusing any disheartening perspective.

In no way alarmed by your opponents – which is a sign of destruction for them, but of salvation for you . . . for to you it has been granted for Christ's sake, not only to believe in Him, but also

to suffer for His sake - experiencing the same agony which you saw in me.

Christianity is a whitewater experience – it’s anything but predictable . . . it demands recurring trust and commitment to whatever God’s hand of grace has chosen to grant to you, ultimately for the sake of the gospel and the glory of Christ.

I close with this testimony of abandon and trust in Christ, but one of His young disciples.

As a college student, Pastor Jim Denison served as a summer missionary in East Malaysia. While there, he attended a small, Bible believing church, working with them during his internship. At one of the church’s worship services, a baptism had been planned afterward and a young teenage girl had

come to publicly announce her faith in Christ and her desire to be baptized as a public profession of faith as a follower of Christ. During the service, Jim noticed some worn-out luggage leaning against the wall of the little church sanctuary. He asked the pastor why it was sitting there. The pastor pointed to the young girl who had just been baptized and said, “Her father said that if she was baptized as a Christian, she could never come home again. So she brought her luggage.”^{xiii}

There’s a genuine believer . . . ready to get on her raft . . . and head out into the whitewater, marked by and guided by and strengthened by the grace of God.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 1/25/2015 by Stephen Davey.

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i Palmer Chinchin, True Religion (David C. Cook, 2010), p. 55; citation www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2011/july/7072511.html

ii Sam Gordon, *Philippians: An Odyssey of Joy* (Ambassador, 2004), p. 66

iii Adapted from G. Walter Hansen, *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letter to the Philippians* (Eerdmans, 2009), p. 98

iv Adapted from Fritz Rienecker & Cleon Rogers, *Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament* (Regency, 1976), p. 548

v Adapted from John MacArthur, *Philippians* (Moody Publishers, 2001), p. 92

vi World Magazine Online, *Comparing Christians to slave owners and Nazis*, La Shawn Barber, posted Jan. 14, 2015

vii MacArthur, p. 93

viii Christianity Today, *Historic Christian Communities swallowed up by Terrorists* September, 2014, p. 20,

ix Rienecker, p. 548

x MacArthur, p. 95

xi Expanded and Adapted from *Life Application Bible: Philippians, Colossians & Philemon*, editor, Grant Osborne (Tyndale, 1995), p. 46

xii Hansen, p. 102

xiii Raymond McHenry, *Stories for the Soul* (Hendrickson, 2001), p. 48