



*St Paul in Prison from whence he wrote to the Philippian Church
Painting by Rembrandt Harmensz van Rijn*

“Stand Firm...” A Bible Study on Philippians 4:1

Dear Friend,

I pray that this will be a spiritual encouragement to you at this time. You all know the curse that has manifested itself in some parts of our country. There is no point in my describing it to you. Instead I hope that these thoughts from God’s word will strengthen you at this time and address your fears. I invite you to this short journey into some Scripture verses. If you are on your own, I encourage you to share this with a friend or neighbour, especially the prayers which you may pray together. There is spiritual strength in two or three gathered in the name of Jesus. The Grace of our Lord Jesus be with us all. You are not alone today if you call on His name.

We all join together in this prayer.

Lord God our heavenly Father, you know the hearts of your people. Grant that we may know your heart at this time as you see a spirit of destructive insanity take possession of the lives and actions of people who are captured away from knowing that they are your precious children. If any have preyed upon them because of ignorance, need, poverty and fear, we know that they will stand under your judgement. We pray for the deliverance of those who are possessed by a spirit of violence. Grant that that deliverance will be the casting out of any demonic force. And now, let your word speak to us that we may stand firm in our faith and commitment to your healing grace that has been given to us in Jesus. In that precious name we pray. Amen

Rev Paul Bester

St. Paul's Phrase "Stand Firm"

Please read through some texts where St. Paul uses this phrase in his letters. If any text speaks to you, then spend time on it and listen to its message for you in this moment.

(1Corinthians 16:13) Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong.

(2Corinthians 1:21) Now it is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. He anointed us...

(Galatians 5:1) It is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery.

(Ephesians 6:14) Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place,

(Philippians 1:27) 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

(2Thessalonians 2:15) So then, brothers, stand firm and hold to the teachings we passed on to you, whether by word of mouth or by letter.

(James 5:8) You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near.

Our text is 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!"

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Scholars widely accept that St. Paul writes this letter to the Philippians from his prison cell in Rome. Rembrandt's painting shows St. Paul in his prison cell. Notice how Rembrandt included a sword in the background on the left. St. Paul would not have been allowed to have a sword in his prison cell. The painter includes it because the sword became the early Christian symbol of his ministry. As a Roman citizen he was executed with the sword. It also depicts a great theme in his letters to the Churches which is the Sword of the Spirit. In the painting he is waiting for his execution. With him the Church will face persecution for the next 200 years. Aware of this reality, Paul calls the Church to stand firm.

In the year 258, Cyprian, the Christian bishop of Carthage, suffered martyrdom. He wrote a letter in which he describes the situation and this extract is preserved in the documents of the Church:-

"There are many various and unauthenticated rumours going about, but the truth is as follows; Valerian sent a Rescript to the Senate ordering that bishops, priests and deacons should forthwith be punished(i.e. executed); that senators, men of rank and Roman knights should be degraded and lose their property, and if, having been deprived of their possessions, they should still remain Christians, then they should also lose their heads; that matrons should be deprived of their property and banished; and that any members of Caesar's household who had confessed before, or should now confess, should lose their property and be sent in chains to forced labour on Caesar's farms."

So the background to our text is also one of a destructive madness that possessed the ruling powers. There is no doubt that history teaches us that the lust for power can so possess the human spirit that human life becomes cheap.

AND NOW SOME COMMENTS ON THE PASSAGE

It seems like a bit of a cheek to tell the early Christians to stand firm. In our situation there may be many Christians who may consider taking up the sword of Rome rather than the sword of the Spirit. After all we face equally soul-destroying dangers in our so-called tolerant South Africa.

Prayer was one of the greatest forces that saved this land from unnecessary bloodshed and gave birth to a new beginning for a society of hope and tolerance. But does prayer stand a chance today? Has the last generation of secularism overtaken and even destroyed a lot of the Christian grace that so many people had in the mid nineteen nineties? The spirit of God spoke to the hearts of many at that time but will the Spirit of God be heard in this hour? There have been long radio talks that have been easy platforms for the views and philosophies of listeners and even a radio host to use the broadcast as a pulpit to preach the uselessness and foolishness and failures of Christians and their beliefs. Christians who phoned in to speak about their faith were openly dismissed as narrow minded and foolish.

Well, my dear Friends, let's be foolish. Let's be more foolish than ever before. Let us speak the Word openly. Let us pray openly. Let us call the land to prayer. Let us challenge our leaders to prayer. Let us pray the blood of Christ for the deliverance of those possessed. Let us pray for their healing. Let us pray for repentance in the land. Let us pray that like Ninevah even the rulers will call us to prayer and fasting. So let us be foolish enough to pray. During the Second World War, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was executed by the Nazis. He also wrote letters from his prison. I quote from one of them. *"Who stands fast? Only the man whose final standard is not his reason, his principles, his conscience, his freedom, or his virtue, but who is ready to sacrifice all this when he is called to obedient and responsible action in faith and in exclusive allegiance to God..."* (*Letters and Papers from Prison*)

Finally, we are unapologetic in challenging society to turn to God and pray for National deliverance and healing. We believe that in spite of all the human brokenness and evil that has been perpetrated in the name of the Church and Christ, the greatest ethic that has influenced this world has come from Jesus. We don't judge Jesus by the failure of his followers. When we are disobedient, we must turn from that disobedience and try again....and again.

Raise the sword of the Spirit and stand firm. Because the early Christians stood firm in their loyalty to Christ, we have a Gospel today. Because you stand firm today, the Church of tomorrow will continue the rescue mission.

OUR PRAYER

The call to prayer is very simple. I ask you that at midday every day, you will make contact with someone and pray this prayer together.

Lord, grant us the strength of your most Holy Spirit to stand firm and renounce all evil. We pray this through the saving blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

