

Serve bravely in the face of conflict

In his letter to the Philippians Paul wrote,

Philippians 1:27 Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel; 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. 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, 30 experiencing the same conflict which you saw in me, and now hear to be in me.

The "Good News" is that Jesus Christ has not only been born in a stable in Bethlehem, but that he acquitted Himself perfectly under the burden of the Law, keeping it without sin, and then being without blemish, He offered Himself as a lamb in sacrifice. The "Good News" is that He died and rose from the dead, and that in His Name salvation has been proclaimed for all who would believe in Him.

Moreover, His example of suffering has become our example of service. Those of us who are among the called want to do well, but sometimes the circumstances overcome us.

Some of us are like the company of British soldiers during the First World War who had been on furlough and were returning to the front. Their commanding officer led them through a country that was war-scarred and desolate. Cold rain fell. Other soldiers on the march had trampled the road and left it muddy. These soldiers knew what awaited them at the front—

more mud and blood, and cold and death. Their shoulders sagged. None spoke. The only sound was their boots slapping and sloshing in the mud.

The commander felt the same gloom, and wishing to brace his troops he happened to glance through the door of a ruined church building that stood off the side of the line of march. Inside, on the altar, he saw a cross, and a figure of the Christ there. The thought of a sympathetic co-sufferer came to him suddenly like a breath of courage, like the voice of assurance. So, spontaneously, as these things happen, he turned to his company and gave the command,

"Eyes—right! March!"

Those depressed and discouraged soldiers turned in unison to see what he had seen. Then, in the suffering and triumphant Christ, they found renewed strength. As they passed on they lifted their heads, and squared their shoulders, marching like conquerors.¹

A co-worker, with whom I shared an office for a time, had a poster on the wall of his portion of the office. The poster showed a boy, a football player, sitting on the bench with his face buried in his hands. Beside him is the caption, "I quit."

Often we feel the same way.

On the same poster, in the background, is a picture of the Lord on the cross, with the caption beside Him, "I didn't."

So that...I will hear that you are standing firm:

Nehemiah came to Jerusalem, after he had received permission from Artaxerxes to rebuild the wall, and remained there three days. And it says in Nehemiah the second chapter,

Nehemiah 2:11 11 So I came to Jerusalem and was there three days. 12 And I arose in the night, I and

¹ Adapted from C.E. Macartney, Macartney's Illustrations.

a few men with me. I did not tell anyone what my God was putting into my mind to do for Jerusalem and there was no animal with me except the animal on which I was riding. 13 So I went out at night by the Valley Gate in the direction of the Dragon's Well and on to the Refuse Gate, inspecting the walls of Jerusalem which were broken down and its gates which were consumed by fire.

How distressing it is to see one's city, one's country exposed to danger, its ramparts breached, its walls broken down, its gates burned. It reminds me of the church as it is today, the spiritual Jerusalem with its walls broken down, exposed to every danger.

Then in verse 17, Nehemiah told the Jews, the priests, the nobles, the officials, and the ones who would do the work,

Nehemiah 2:17 Then I said to them, "You see the bad situation we are in, that Jerusalem is desolate and its gates burned by fire. Come, let us rebuild the wall of Jerusalem so that we will no longer be a reproach."

Here is the desire we feel the strongest—for the spiritual Jerusalem...

Nehemiah says,

Neh. 2:19 But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard it, they mocked us and despised us and said, "What is this thing you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?" 20 So I answered them and said to them, "The God of heaven will give us success; therefore we His servants will arise and build, but you have no portion, right or memorial in Jerusalem."

The enemy is always there to mock and to ridicule--but the servant of the Lord is expected to stand firm. Our success comes from the God of Heaven as Nehemiah said.

There is a story of an ancient Athenian soldier who was lame in one foot. A day came when he joined his fellows at the front of the battle. As he approached them they saw his sword in his hand and they cheered. But when he came closer they saw his foot, and they laughed.

He stilled their laughter when he said, "I came to fight, not to run."

Christians do not run from the conflict, but we also know what Paul wrote to the Corinthians,

2 Corinthians 10:3 For though we walk in the flesh,
we do not war according to the flesh, 4 for the
weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but
divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses.

We stand firm in one spirit

The Third Chapter of Nehemiah is a roll call of the laborers and craftsmen who bent their backs under Nehemiah's call—and built the wall of Jerusalem. They worked shoulder to shoulder, brother with brother, with zeal and dedication. Their spirit is captured in verse 1 where it says,

Then Eliashib the high priest arose with his brothers
the priests and built the Sheep Gate; they
consecrated it and hung its doors. They
consecrated the wall to the Tower of the Hundred
and the Tower of Hananel. And next to him the
men of Jericho BUILT, and next to them Zaccur
the son of Imri BUILT.

They built.

With one mind

Nehemiah 4:1 Now it came about that when Sanballat heard that we were rebuilding the wall, he became furious and very angry and mocked the Jews. 2 He spoke in the presence of his brothers and the wealthy men of Samaria and said, “What are these feeble Jews doing? Are they going to restore it for themselves? Can they offer sacrifices? Can they finish in a day? Can they revive the stones from the dusty rubble even the burned ones?” 3 Now Tobiah the Ammonite was near him and he said, “Even what they are building—if a fox should jump on it, he would break their stone wall down!” 4 Hear, O our God, how we are despised! Return their reproach on their own heads and give them up for plunder in a land of captivity. 5 Do not forgive their iniquity and let not their sin be blotted out before You, for they have demoralized the builders. 6 So we built the wall and the whole wall was joined together to half its height, for the people had a mind to work.

- The people had a mind to work.

Striving together

Nehemiah 4:7 Now it came about when Sanballat, Tobiah, the Arabs, the Ammonites, and the Ashdodites heard that the repair of the wall of Jerusalem went on, and that the breaches began to be closed, they were very angry. And all of them conspired together to come and fight against Jerusalem and to cause a disturbance in it.

But we prayed to our God, and because of them we set up a guard against them day and night.

(vs 14) ...When I saw their fear, I rose and spoke to the nobles, the officials, and the rest of the people: 'Do not be afraid of them; remember the Lord who is great and awesome, and fight for your brothers, your sons, your daughters, your wives, and your houses.'

Divide and Conquer is an ancient strategy that is still used today—because it works.

In no way alarmed

There is a bridge on Bougainville Island named in honor of Chief Carpenter's Mate Elmer I. Carruthers. Chief Carruthers was a Seabee. Seabees are construction battalions of the U.S. Navy and they have served since their formation in World War II. They have a "can do" attitude and they keep that attitude in the face of opposition from a determined enemy. The Seabees are a group of skilled construction workers who are trained to drop their tools if necessary and take up their weapons at a moment's notice to defend themselves. At Bougainville navy yard they had a sign that read: "The difficult we do now. The impossible will take a little longer."

In 1943 the Seabees landed with U. S. Marines on the island of Bougainville to establish a forward base from which they could oppose the Japanese who were based at Rabaul. Witness accounts say that a detachment of Seabees under Chief Carruthers was cutting a road in advance of the front lines when the Japanese attacked the detachment and its Marine security guard. Chief Carruthers and six other men were killed and twenty were wounded. The entire detachment might have been wiped out had it not been for the gallantry of another Seabee, Chief Carpenter's Mate Joe Bumgarner. Bumgarner and a group with him were building a bridge when they heard the enemy firing at Carruthers' men. Bumgarner led his men to the rescue,

helped drive off the Japanese, and evacuated the Marine and Seabee casualties.

They had a job to do and they did it despite opposition from the enemy. They did it on Bougainville while the enemy soldiers fired rifles and mortars at them.²

Such also were the men serving under Nehemiah. He wrote in the Fourth Chapter of his book,

Nehemiah 4:15 When our enemies heard that it was known to us, and that God had frustrated their plan, then all of us returned to the wall, each one to his work. 16 From that day on, half of my servants carried on the work while half of them held the spears, the shields, the bows and the breastplates; and the captains were behind the whole house of Judah. 17 Those who were rebuilding the wall and those who carried burdens took their load with one hand doing the work and the other holding a weapon. 18 As for the builders, each wore his sword girded at his side as he built, while the trumpeter stood near me. 19 I said to the nobles, the officials and the rest of the people, "The work is great and extensive, and we are separated on the wall far from one another. 20 "At whatever place you hear the sound of the trumpet, rally to us there. Our God will fight for us." 21 So we carried on the work with half of them holding spears from dawn until the stars appeared.

² <http://www.usmilitariaforum.com/forums/index.php?app=core&module=search&do=search&fromMainBar=1>

<http://www.6thcorpscombatengineers.com/engforum/index.php?/topic/2256-bougainville-seabees/>
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Seabee>

But as Christians, even though the work is great and we are separated on the wall far from one another...Our God will fight for us.

For to you it has been granted:

Moses and Israel in Egypt

After God appointed Moses to deliver the children of Israel from Egyptian bondage, Moses took his brother Aaron as his spokesman, and his staff as his symbol and went to their people.

Exodus 4:29 Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled all the elders of the sons of Israel; and Aaron spoke all the words which the Lord had spoken to Moses. He then performed the signs in the sight of the people. So the people believed; and when they heard that the Lord was concerned about the sons of Israel and that He had seen their affliction, then they bowed low and worshipped.

- The Lord had heard the cry of the Children of Israel; their bondage would soon be over.
- There was hope for these desperate believers, these chosen ones.
- The Lord had work in mind also.

To Believe in Him

God has granted us the privilege to believe in Him, to see through the veil and blindness of ignorance, and...

2 Cor. 4:3 even if our gospel is veiled, it is veiled to those who are perishing, in whose case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God. For we do not preach ourselves but Christ

Jesus as Lord, and ourselves as your bond-servants for Jesus sake. For God, who said, 'Light shall shine out of darkness,' is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ."

To suffer for His sake

Moses' promises to Israel were followed by suffering.

Exodus 5:6 Pharaoh commanded the taskmasters over the people and their foremen, saying, 'You are no longer to give the people straw to make brick as previously; let them go and gather straw for themselves. But the quota of bricks which they were making previously, you shall impose on them; you are not to reduce any of it...

As Paul also suffered at the hands of his opponents,

Acts 14:19 Jews came from Antioch and Iconium, and having won over the multitudes, they stoned Paul and dragged him out of the city, supposing him to be dead...

The death of Polycarp followed the pattern.

After the ascension of Antoninus Pius as emperor of Rome, Christians were severely persecuted. They were scourged, burned or thrown to wild beasts in the arena. During this time the Empire suffered great calamities also. They blamed these misfortunes on the Christians. The persecution spread to Asia Minor and centered around Smyrna, the home of the aging Polycarp who was also a disciple of John.

"...Through the urgency of friends he was induced to leave the city, to seek a retreat in the country...A band of soldiers, thoroughly armed, hastened to seize him. It was late on Friday night and Polycarp was sleeping in his chamber. Aroused by the noise of their entrance he descended to meet them. He greeted

them kindly, and ordered refreshments to be set before them. He asked of them the favor to grant him one hour for prayer. The soldiers impressed by his venerable appearance and kindly spirit, could not refuse his request. At the close of this season of devotion they conducted him to the city.

Many of the pagans who had long known Polycarp and who appreciated the nobleness of his character, entreated him to simply say, 'Lord Caesar,' to offer sacrifice to the idols and thus be saved. He merely replied, 'I cannot follow your advice.'

They brought him before the tribunal of the proconsul, Philip, who seemed to wish to save the venerable old man. He said to Polycarp, 'If you will only swear by Caesar and reproach Christ, I will immediately release you.'

Polycarp replied, 'Eighty and six years have I served Christ and he has never wronged me. How can I blaspheme my king, who has saved me. I am a Christian. If you desire to learn the Christian doctrine assign me a day and I will declare it to you.'"

Because of his refusal, they threatened Polycarp with the wild beasts, and with burning at the stake. When he steadfastly refused to renounce Christ they thrust him through with a sword and consigned his body to the fire.³

Paul wrote,

2 Corinthians 4:7 But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, so that the surpassing greatness of the power will be of God and not from ourselves; 8 we are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not despairing; 9 persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; 10 always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body. 11 For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus'

³ *History of the Church*, Brumback

Serve Bravely in the Face of Conflict

sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

... 16 Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. 17 For momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, 18 while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

Serve bravely.