

Unstoppable Determination

Daniel 3:8–25, 1 Thessalonians 2:1–4

One has to admire the apostle Paul's tenacity! In spite of setbacks and obstacles and suffering and conflict at every juncture, he pressed on in his calling to preach the gospel where it had not been heard, confident he was doing God's will and would ultimately receive our Lord's "Well done!" He remained optimistic, as we see in our passage this morning: "For you yourselves know, brethren, that our coming to you was not in vain. But even after we had suffered before and were spitefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in much conflict."

There is no grumbling or complaining. He isn't saying, "Why me? Why am I being treated this way? Why do I run into all this opposition?" Paul's positive attitude is an encouragement to us as we, too, face difficulties. As we read the inspired record we are amazed by this man's *unstoppable determination*. Here was a man who would not back down, or give up, or stop preaching Christ, no matter what. As we look at our text this morning we see, first that Paul was determined

1. To follow Christ

As we learn in the book of Acts, Paul's life was forever changed by his encounter with the risen Christ on the Damascus road. The full story appears no fewer than three times in the inspired history: first, as the event happened in Acts 8; second, as he gives his testimony before the murderous crowd of hostile Jews on the steps leading up to the Roman barracks in Jerusalem (chap. 22); then third, before King Agrippa, Governor Festus, Bernice and a crowd of Roman citizens in an auditorium at Caesarea, after he had appealed to Caesar (chap. 26). The fact that the story of Paul's conversion is repeated three times indicates its importance: Paul was not self-appointed; he did not undertake the task of preaching the Christ on his own initiative; he did not make up the gospel himself, out of his own mind; rather, as he went forth on his preaching mission throughout the Mediterranean world he was conscious at every step that he was following Christ, and that he represented Christ.

A follower of Christ is a person who obeys Christ. He wants to please his Master, who died for him. A follower of Christ is gracious. He is humble, not proud. He doesn't seek to lift up himself but to lift up Jesus. Notice particularly how Paul addresses the Thessalonian Christians as "brethren" in our text this morning. He writes: "you yourselves know, *brethren*, that our coming to you was not in vain."

Paul is not condescending to the recipients of his letter. Remember, it was Paul who won the Thessalonians to Christ; it was Paul who planted the church at Thessalonica. Moreover, Paul was an apostle called immediately by the risen Christ; he outranked the ordinary saints. Yet he addresses the members of the

church at Thessalonica as “brethren”—that is, as brothers and sisters in Christ. The church is the family of God: God is our heavenly Father, and we who are born of the Spirit and adopted into the family of Christ are brothers. We are sons and daughters of God in two ways: through the new birth, and by adoption. As Paul would write later to the churches of Galatia, “when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the *adoption* as sons.” The word translated “adoption” occurs five times in the New Testament: three times in Romans, then also in Galatians and Ephesians—all from the pen of the apostle Paul. This highlights the significance of Paul’s addressing the people of the church in Thessalonica as “brethren.” Paul wasn’t resorting to flattery; rather, he was practicing his strong, heartfelt belief.

This attitude was evident as well in the little letter he would later write to Philemon: “Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to *command* you what is fitting, yet for love’s sake I rather *appeal* to you—being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.” Paul didn’t try to browbeat or pressure his brother in the faith; rather, he appealed to him in love. This was his consistent practice; Paul didn’t try to lord it over other Christians; rather, he demonstrated the “brotherly love” that was a part of his message.¹ As Peter would later write, “finally, all of you be of one mind, having compassion for one another; *love as brothers*, be tenderhearted, be courteous” (1 Pet. 3:8).

Compassion, love and courtesy are Christian graces which ought to characterize all followers of Christ. There should be no envy or status-seeking within the Christian church. There should be no putting down of other Christians, disparaging, insulting or humiliating, or making them feel that they are second class because they haven’t attained to the same level as yourself. We should all endeavor to put into practice what our Lord taught when he said, “This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.”²

Loving one another is a fifth-commandment duty: “the preserving the honor, and performing the duties, belonging to every one in their several places and relations, as superiors, inferiors, or equals.” This is supremely demonstrated in the life of Christ, who was kind and compassionate to all kinds of people: women, children, infants, Samaritans; a Roman centurion; demoniacs; desperate people who came to him, begging him to heal their seriously-ill loved ones; and many others. The only people to whom he spoke harshly were the proud, self-satisfied, hypocritical religious leaders who wanted to trap and destroy him.

¹ Rom. 12:10, 1 Thess. 4:9, Heb. 13:1

² John 15:12

You may think you are a nobody, you may struggle with self-esteem and feel totally unworthy, but if you come to Christ in faith, realizing your need for him, he will have mercy on you; he will never turn you away!

But if you are his follower, you will act in a Christlike manner. You will have a respectful attitude toward other Christians, appreciating their gifts and contributions to the body. You will not have a high and mighty attitude. You will not seek to lord it over other believers. You will speak to them with tenderness and affection. Let me ask you pointedly: is this something that you truly want to do? Or do you feel that if you don't exalt yourself, you will personally lose out? The Bible teaches that if we humble ourselves before him, he will lift us up. He promises, "them that honor me I will honor."³ Our reputations are safe and secure in Christ. Amen!

Paul was determined to follow Christ; second, he was determined

2. To endure conflict

Paul writes: "But even after we had *suffered* before and were *spitefully treated* at Philippi, as you know, we were bold in our God to speak to you the gospel of God in *much conflict*." Notice the words "suffered," "spitefully treated," "conflict." These are not pleasant experiences. There is the mention of Philippi, the city where Paul and Silas labored before coming to Thessalonica.

Paul and Silas had suffered in Philippi, where they had been seized and dragged before the authorities. A bloodthirsty multitude had risen up against them. The magistrates had stripped them of their clothes and commanded them to be beaten with cruel rods. With their flesh raw from the beating, they were thrown into prison, locked in solitary confinement with their feet clamped unyieldingly in heavy wooden stocks. Though they had been treated most savagely and inhumanely, they prayed and sang hymns to the Lord in the middle of the night and eventually won the Philippian jailer to Christ.

No normal person embraces a life of suffering, mistreatment and conflict. But be warned: living for Christ may involve suffering—and even persecution. Suffering is one of the results of the Fall. It is part of our experience on a sin-cursed earth. The Scriptures are realistic. God has never promised that we will escape suffering, but he *has* promised to be with us *in the midst of* suffering. His promise remains: "Yea, though I walk *through* the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me." Paul was determined not only to *endure* suffering, but to *triumph* through it. As he would later put it, "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Rom. 8:17).

³ 2 Sam. 2:30

In this earthly life we are sure to experience sufferings of one kind or another. It might be bad news from a doctor. It might be the loss of a friend or family member. You might be the victim of a crime. It might be the realization that your earthly body is wearing out. But if you belong to Christ, you can be assured that your heavenly Father will never leave you or forsake you. He will surely take you to glory. We never know when trouble may come, but the Christian knows that “*all things work together for good to them that love God, to them who are the called according to his purpose*”—no exceptions! As he experiences the suffering of this life the Christian can say, “I trust God so much that I do not doubt he will provide whatever I need for body and soul, and will turn to my good whatever adversity he sends upon me in this vale of tears. He is able to do this because he is almighty God; he desires to do this because he is a faithful Father.”⁴ Our faithful Father knows what’s best for us. Nothing can happen to us that is outside his control. He intends it for our good, that we might be the better for it, that we might learn to trust him the more. For the Christian, the sufferings of this earthly life are temporary, but the joys of eternal life are unending.

Paul’s greatest desire was to introduce people to Jesus Christ, the lover of their soul. He didn’t force anyone to become a Christian. People were free to accept or reject his message. If you receive it, you will go to heaven. If you reject it, you will go to hell. But his enemies wanted to silence him. They saw his message as a threat. It is the same today. Those who reject Christ resent the gospel; it stands as a witness against them. And in many places around the world there is active persecution against the church. Christians are murdered, their homes are set on fire, people won’t hire them, they can’t earn a living, they are chased out of their community, they are ostracized. The writer to the Hebrews speaks of those who “had trial of mockings and scourgings . . . of chains and imprisonment. They were stoned, they were sawn in two, were tempted, were slain with the sword. They wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, tormented—of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, in dens and caves of the earth.”⁵

But through it all, we, like Paul, ought to be determined to endure conflict. Christ’s promise is still true: “he who endures to the end shall be saved” (Matt. 24:13). Let us all aspire to be faithful unto death, that we might receive the crown of life.

Thirdly, Paul was determined

3. To communicate the gospel

Paul writes: “But as we have been approved by God to be *entrusted with the gospel*, even so we *speak*.”

⁴ Heidelberg Catechism, Lord’s Day 9, <https://all-of-grace.org/resources/heidelberg-catechism>

⁵ Heb. 11:36–38

The gospel is one of the great themes of the apostle Paul. Jesus himself had charged his apostles: “Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature. He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned.”⁶ The gospel is the good news that *Christ saves sinners*. Paul defines the gospel in his great resurrection chapter, 1 Corinthians 15: “Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the *gospel* which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand . . . that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.”

In Scripture the gospel is the good news about Christ. All of us, fallen sons and daughters of Adam, are sinners. We fall short of God’s standard of absolute perfection. He is a holy God, and cannot allow sin into his presence. We cannot save ourselves. All our righteousnesses are like filthy rags, of no value in the sight of a holy God. But what we cannot do, Christ has done. He is the living God, come in the flesh. He is the sinless one. If we trust in Christ, the Bible teaches that our sins are laid on him. He died in our place. By trusting in Christ, his perfect righteousness is credited to our account. We are clothed in the garments of salvation, robed with the robe of Christ’s perfect righteousness. Our sins are washed away. When the Father looks at us, what he sees is the perfect righteousness of Christ which alone qualifies a sinner to enter heaven. Salvation cannot be earned; it is all of grace. Amen!

The gospel is good news for lost sinners, but those who reject it don’t want to hear it, and many of them don’t want other people to hear it either. Satan, the god of this world, doesn’t want people to hear it. He works behind the scenes to hinder and stymie the work of Christian missions. Think of Haiti. Lawlessness abounds to such an extent that in many places it’s not safe to travel. Armed bandits steal and loot, and the government cannot prevent it. Christians are afraid to go to church. Missionaries have been forced to leave the country. Yet Christ promises to build his church, and he will be victorious in the end.

Enemies of the gospel tried to silence the apostle Paul, but he wouldn’t change his message to make it more palatable. He would preach the truth as Christ had taught him. The gospel is man’s only hope: “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved.” Evangelism is the faithful communication of the message of Christ. Paul was determined to communicate the gospel, and we should be as well. Fourthly, Paul was determined

4. To pass the test

⁶ Mark 16:15–16

Paul writes: “even so we speak, not as pleasing men, but God who *tests* our hearts.” As Paul traveled, wherever he found opportunity, he preached. Though he was a very learned man with a Spirit-given understanding of the Scriptures, many of which he had committed to memory, he had basically one message: Christ. Wherever he went, he preached Christ—Christ as the answer to mankind’s deepest need. He did not seek the acclaim of the crowds. His goal was not to have people fawn over him. He did not preach a message that would have people up on their feet singing, “For he’s a jolly good fellow.” Rather, his goal was to preach the truth of Christ as it is revealed in Scripture, to handle the Word faithfully and accurately, and to win the Savior’s “well done” in the end. Paul was not a motivational speaker trying to whip up the enthusiasm of the crowd, trying to get people to see their innate, inner potential to solve life’s knotty problems. He did not want people to trust in their own efforts and imagined goodness. Wherever he preached, he was conscious that the Lord is the searcher of human hearts, and what he wanted most of all was to pass the test. “We speak, not as pleasing men, but God who tests our hearts.” Paul well knew the Scriptures: “I, the LORD, search the heart, I test the mind, even to give every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his doings” (Jer. 17:10). In the very last book of the Bible the Lord Jesus Christ would tell his church: “I am He who searches the minds and hearts. And I will give to each one of you according to your works” (Rev. 2:23). As Paul would later pen in the epistle to the Romans, there is coming “the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God; who will render to every man according to his deeds” (Rom. 2:5–6). Paul wanted at the final day to hear the Savior’s “well done, good and faithful servant.”

Paul was a minister of Christ. In every age the minister’s calling is to be a faithful minister of Christ. Wherever he goes, whatever situation he is in, he is to be a minister of Christ. He is to faithfully represent Christ. He is to teach the doctrine of Christ. He is not to teach anything contrary to the doctrine of Christ. He is not to preach his own opinion. If he ventures a purely human opinion, he should identify it as such.

At the end of a sermon God’s people should say, “We have heard the word of God today.” Faithful preachers do not preach as men-pleasers. We do not preach to win the approval of men, but of God, who tries the human heart. “We ought to obey God rather than men.” Obedience is always the wisest course.

In the words of Psalm 17, penned by David, but fulfilled ultimately in the his greater Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, he has the Messiah saying (in the poetic versification which we will sing following the sermon): “By night you came and sought me, you searched my heart and mind. Though tested and examined, yet nothing did you find. I *steadfastly determined* my mouth would not transgress; I keep from men of violence, from works of wickedness.”

The Lord Jesus Christ is the only one who perfectly passes the test. He is the only one in history who ever heard from the Father, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am *well pleased*.”

Here, then, is *unstoppable determination* (1) to follow Christ, (2) to endure conflict, (3) to communicate the gospel, (4) to pass the test. The same Holy Spirit that built these qualities into the apostle Paul can build them into your life and mine, if we yield ourselves to him. Are we committed to follow Christ, wherever he might lead us; to endure conflict for the sake of Christ; to communicate the gospel by our life and testimony; and to pass the test? Brothers and sisters, let us serve him faithfully, and receive the Savior’s “well done.” Let us, like Paul, have unstoppable determination. Amen.