

Stand Firm in the Lord

^{CEB} **Exodus 32:1** The people saw that Moses was taking a long time to come down from the mountain. They gathered around Aaron and said to him, "Come on! Make us gods who can lead us. As for this man Moses who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we don't have a clue what has happened to him." ² Aaron said to them, "All right, take out the gold rings from the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me." ³ So all the people took out the gold rings from their ears and brought them to Aaron. ⁴ He collected them and tied them up in a cloth. Then he made a metal image of a bull calf, and the people declared, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!" ⁵ When Aaron saw this, he built an altar in front of the calf. Then Aaron announced, "Tomorrow will be a festival to the LORD!" ⁶ They got up early the next day and offered up entirely burned offerings and brought well-being sacrifices. The people sat down to eat and drink and then got up to celebrate.

⁷ The LORD spoke to Moses: "Hurry up and go down! Your people, whom you brought up out of the land of Egypt, are ruining everything! ⁸ They've already abandoned the path that I commanded. They have made a metal bull calf for themselves. They've bowed down to it and offered sacrifices to it and declared, "These are your gods, Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!"

^{CEB} **Philippians 4:1** Therefore, my brothers and sisters whom I love and miss, who are my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord.

⁴ Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! ⁵ Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. ⁶ Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. ⁷ Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. ⁸ From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. ⁹ Practice these things: whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us. The God of peace will be with you. (Phi 4:1-9 CEB)

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When I was a boy, there was a four year period where my family moved around a lot. We might be in one place for several months, and another for only a few weeks. Once when we were about to move, the minister told my Dad, "Walt, you can't go and move away. You're my best bad example!"

What a tremendous contrast there is between today's two passages from scripture! Sometimes we talk about the Holy Bible as if it were a holy object, as if it were filled with righteous rules and inspirational stories about devout servants of God. Those things are in the Bible, but the scriptures also contain some extraordinarily great bad examples! That is one of the reasons that it isn't a good idea to seek God's direction for your life by letting the Bible fall open wherever it will. It might fall open to today's text in Exodus chapter 32, which is one of those good bad examples!

For those who are too young to have seen Charlton Heston as Moses in the movie, *The Ten Commandments*, and for those of us who may have forgotten some of the details over the years, let me recount a bit of the back story for today's Old Testament text. The descendants of Abraham had moved to Egypt during a severe drought. They settled there and over a long period of time and had become enslaved by the Egyptian pharaohs. God had sent a very reluctant Moses to get the reigning pharaoh to release the Hebrew slaves. After a series of ten plagues, the Hebrews were released.

But Pharaoh changed his mind and chased after the Hebrew tribes. God opened a path through the Red Sea for the Hebrews and they crossed over to the Sinai Peninsula. When Pharaoh's army tried to follow them through the Red Sea, the waters closed over and drowned them. Then God began to lead the Hebrew people across the Sinai Peninsula, using a pillar of cloud during the day and a brilliant column of lightning at night. Along the trail, the people grew thirsty and complained. God provided water for them to drink. They grew hungry and God provided manna every morning and quail at twilight. After three months they reached Mount Sinai and set up camp. Moses went up Mount Sinai to meet with God. And he was gone a long time.

After being released from slavery because of God's intervention, after being rescued from a pursuing army at the Red Sea, after being guided on the trail by God's columns of cloud and fire, after receiving water and food by God's hand when they were thirsty and hungry – after all of this care from God through thick and thin – you would think that their trust in God would be unshakeable! But Moses was delayed on the mountain.

Several things go wrong. They forgot all that God has done for them. They just ignored all of the rescuing and feeding and leading. They acted like it was Moses who delivered them and then deserted them. Then they pooled all of their gold jewelry. Aaron, the brother of Moses, melted it down and made a statue of a bull calf, and the people declared that to be their god. It's a great bad example!

And the truth is, it is so easy and so common for us to act in ways that are parallel to what those ancient Hebrews did. We take God's blessings for granted. We're blind to the gifts of creation. We use the day for work, but under appreciate the night for rest. We care not for the lands that grow our crops, but only for productivity, availability, and economy. We've turned egg farming into egg factories, ignoring inhumane conditions, but scrutinizing production rates and consumer cost. And if we aren't in the middle of some overwhelming experience of the presence of God, we often forget God's presence or even doubt God's existence.

So we assemble our shekels and our dollars and make idols out of things. It's so easy to do. We've essentially lost any distinction between need and want. One definition of a god is anything that you look to to influence your behavior and actions. That could be the astrology advice on a website. It could be the latest fad in living styles, vacations, clothes, or food. It could be the belief that the latest phone or tablet will give you control over your life. Like those ancient Hebrews, we can make our own gods. And like them, we can be pretty frantic about it.

In stark contrast, we read some of Paul's closing thoughts in his letter to the church in Philippi. "Stand firm in the Lord," he urges. Then he gives specific examples. Be gentle in your treatment of everyone. They are God's children just like you are. Mother Theresa was good at this. She tried to see the face of Christ in everyone she met. So be gentle with every person. It's how you would be like to be treated.

Remember that the Lord is near. God's Holy Spirit is with us to strengthen us, guide us, and comfort us. We can choose to ignore God's presence, or choose to welcome and rely on it. Turn your attention to things that are admirable, such as truth, facts not assumptions, and to eternal truths that guide us to live lives that remind people of Christ.

Paul tells us to focus on all that is holy and pure and worthy of praise. Elsewhere he lifts up trust, hope, and love and declares that love is the supreme good. Now, loving ourselves to the point of recognizing that God values and loves each of us, personally and individually, is important. Loving our parents, spouses, and children is widely expected.

But our love isn't bound just to self and family. Love of neighbor is holy and pure and worthy of praise. Paul also says to focus on all that is just. We tend to be pretty quick to recognize injustice and want a just outcome when it involves us or our family. But Paul says "all that is just" and so we are called to seek justice for others. If we read the gospels carefully, we'll notice that Jesus seemed to pay a lot of attention to making life more just for those who were least powerful and, therefore, least able, to secure justice for themselves.

Paul's closing thoughts to the church at Philippi are couched in terms of joy and peace. "Be glad in the Lord always!" he says. "You are my joy and crown," he exclaims. And he says that all of these admonitions and advice will have them standing firm in the Lord.

There is one more thing: "Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. ⁷ Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus." The business of not being anxious is difficult – at least I find it difficult, and I suspect that you do, too. But Paul offers an alternative. He says that when we pray, we should give thanks. We would do well to offer thanks for our blessings before we begin to ask God to do things. And I don't mean a mumbled generalization about "thanks for all our blessings." Think about it. Name some specifics. Take note of the beauty of the day, the bounty of food, the warmth of family and friends, the talents that you have, and the more you think about, the longer the list grows. And Paul tells us to bring up all of our requests in our prayers. Sometimes we make petty requests that almost sound like busywork for the Master of the Universe. "Lord, please make a parking place open up near the store." Other times, we just want God to fix it without any effort on our part. "O Lord, we pray for world peace." Often it seems wiser to pray for wisdom to know God's will in a situation, and then for strength and determination to act accordingly. No matter what you pray about, Paul tells us that staying in touch with God is the antidote to anxiety.

There is so much contrast between these two texts. The Hebrews have forgotten or ignored all that God has done for them, are highly anxious about their safety and their future, and they make their own gods. But the church in Philippi is urged to stand firm in the Lord, to focus on all that is good and true and admirable. Seek that which is holy and just and pure. Rather than be anxious, take your care along with your gratitude to God in prayer. The result will be a peace that defies all understanding and you will rejoice and be glad.

We all have the choice and this congregation as a whole has the choice: will we lose our trust in God and frantically try to deal with life by trusting in our own man-made gods? Or, shall we seek the joy and peace that comes from relying on God and focusing on all that is good and admirable? The choice is ours. Amen.

Always be conscious of God's love and presence.
Let that empower you to look outward.
Concentrate on all that is good,
And dream confidently of what God calls you to do.