

A Study of the Letter to the Philippians

Introduction

Many pastors have nicely decorated “studies” — offices that are filled with many books, cozy chairs, and a large desk to read and write. It just so happens that I am currently sitting in a comfortable chair, sipping coffee in my own office. BUT—Do not let that influence how you think of Paul and where he may have been writing his letters to the church.

Surely he had chances to write at a fine desk, but he does a great deal of his work either under house arrest or in prison. I doubt soldiers brought him a morning coffee or made sure he had enough natural light. Yet in the midst of his discomfort and pain, he wrote to the church to encourage them.

Let that sink in. In a letter like Philippians, Paul is writing to the church so that they will be encouraged, even though he is the one in prison! He is likely awaiting his execution in Rome and he is the one going on about rejoicing!

Rachel and I thought that now, in the midst of this pandemic, it may be a good time to go through Philippians to see what God has to say to us in that short letter. We'll still have our Sunday sermon/messages (send us videos of you playing music for music Sunday!). But this will be additional. Short devotionals to guide us during the week.

We want to stay as connected as we can, so keep an eye on the church website, where you can subscribe to the new email list. Go to the facebook page to keep up to date on what we post over there. And check out YouTube where I'll put up the sermons, especially if you aren't a facebook person.

<https://www.newmonmouthpres.org>

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<https://youtu.be/8qReQsE-w3I>

I'd invite you to read through Philippians as we begin to study it together. Here is a short selection to bless your morning:

Philippians 1:9-11

For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

Even though apart, still together in Christ,

Casey

Philippians 1:1-11

- Have you ever received a letter, call, or some other communication from someone who was in a really difficult situation? What sort of message was it?
- The Philippians cared deeply for Paul and now they receive a letter from him when he is in prison. What do you think they'd expect to read from him?

1:1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:

2 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

3 I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, 4 always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, 5 because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. 7 It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. 8 For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus. 9 And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, 10 so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ, 11 filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ, to the glory and praise of God.

- In the midst of an imprisonment and a possible execution in his mind, what is Paul's tone here?
- When trials come, is it hard to still be thankful?
- This morning, what are three things for which you can give thanks to God?

As the letter goes on, Paul will help us better understand how he can endure the intense highs and lows that he experiences with an ability to rejoice through it all.

As we continue through this letter, take these questions and scripture to a favorite chair, share them around your dinner table, or even do it together with a friend over the phone. God's Word is alive for us today. May he bless you in the time you spend in it.

Prayer

Holy God,

Illuminate our minds to know you better. Help our understanding not so that we are puffed up, but rather so that in our knowing you, we know better how to follow you and bring glory to the name of Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Philippians 1:12-18a

12 I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, 13 so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. 14 And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear.

- What has happened to Paul? (Remember from where he is writing.)
- How is Paul's situation being used to "advance the gospel"?

Being thrown in jail is seen as reason for "confidence in the Lord" and Paul sees God in the midst of it. People are being reached with the good news of Jesus who may not have heard it otherwise. Paul has the perspective to look beyond his own future so he can rejoice in the new future brought to all who believe. And even though the Philippians are grieved Paul is in prison he wants them to see this good news.

- Can you think of a time when you saw God working through especially hard circumstances? Were you able to have that perspective in the midst of it, or did you only gain that insight later?
- How might God be at work today in the troubles facing our world?

15 Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. 16 The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. 17 The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. 18 What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

- There seems to be conflict with some others who are trying to serve in the church, perhaps with some seeing their work in a competitive way. What is Paul's response?

- What is the greatest concern that Paul has, and how can we better align our priorities to share his own?

It isn't entirely clear who makes up the group of people preaching from envy or rivalry. If they were a group preaching a false gospel he wouldn't rejoice in their success. But the point is he isn't concerned with who gets to go and spread the word. Whether it is he who is confined in prison or another, his concern is that the message of Jesus is carried on. As long as the gospel is proclaimed he will rejoice, even from prison.

Again, Paul's key to finding a new perspective is to see the world from beyond his own point of view. He is not the center of the universe and his experience does not count for everything. He looks beyond himself. He looks to Jesus.

Prayer

Holy God,

May we seek your will in all we do. May our service not be for prideful gain or from rivalry, but to glorify you alone. In whatever we do, imperfect as it is, use it to bless others and be a witness to Jesus.

Whatever personal hardships we face today, give us a grand view of the work that you are doing, and may that be cause for us to rejoice.

Amen.

Philippians 1:18b-26

18b Yes, and I will rejoice, 19 for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, 20 as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.

- What does it feel like to know someone is praying for you? Have you had times when a church community has supported you like that? Are there people now you can be praying for?
- What will be Paul's deliverance?

21 For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. 23 I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. 24 But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. 25 Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all, for your progress and joy in the faith, 26 so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus, because of my coming to you again.

- How is Paul comparing living and dying? What does he see as the positives of both? What appears to be his preference and why?
- We don't often hear of people yearning for Christ so much that they would prefer if their current situation resulted in their death, but such is Paul's desire. Yet he is convinced God has work for him in this world. What does that work look like for him? Do you have a sense that there is work God has prepared for you, as well?

Christians are called to live in a tension between life and death. To seek God and seek to serve to such a degree that we are willing to die, but we are to fight for our lives so we can continue this work. No matter how we value ourselves, know that God has called you to this very moment of history with purpose. He values you. He has a task for your life, allowing you to live through whatever comes your way with purpose.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Renew our sense of purpose in this life. May we continue to hold tightly to the hope we have for eternal fellowship with you, and let that vision inspire us today, as well. Our blessed future ought to spill into our present. May we journey on giving our whole selves to you, until our final breath.

Amen.

Philippians 1:27-30

27 Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel, 28 and not frightened in anything by your opponents. This is a clear sign to them of their destruction, but of your salvation, and that from God. 29 For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake, 30 engaged in the same conflict that you saw I had and now hear that I still have.

- What do you think Paul means when he says “let your lives be worthy of the gospel”?
- What specific qualities is he hoping to see or hear about?

Paul had just finished writing about how some people are preaching the gospel out of selfish reasons, but he is just happy Jesus is proclaimed. That’s his unifying goal. He now wants the church to live like they are believing that good news. He wants them to live like they are Jesus people, following their Lord. And that means standing firm and unafraid of opposition, united and working together for the gospel.

- What may be the response from the world when the church is united for the gospel?
- Paul mentions that for the sake of Christ the church “has been granted” what two things in verse 29?

We don’t often want to think of the promise Christ makes to us that we, too, will suffer. In multiple places Jesus says this will happen to those who follow him, such as in Matthew 5:12, “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so they persecuted the prophets who were before you.”

- Why do you think Jesus promised that Christians will suffer?
- How can such suffering actually be an encouragement?

When we face disappointments or hardships we are better when we are together. We may say to another, “There is no one else I’d rather go through this with” or “at least we were together.” A rough patch at work or a terrible vacation isn’t as important as the people you were with through thick and thin.

Paul knows this and clings closely to Jesus through both highs and lows. He believes this good news of Jesus, trusts him in all his life, and wants so much to identify with Christ in every single way possible, that even sharing in sufferings with Jesus is to be desired. Paul wants this for the church and for himself, to follow every step of Jesus, for it brings us closer to him.

Prayer

Most High God,

May Jesus be our desire today. As we all are facing difficulties and even suffering, may we be drawn closer to Jesus Christ, who suffered for us.

Amen.

Philippians 2:1-11

1 So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, 2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

- What will give Paul great joy to see in the church?
- What ways does he define unity in this passage? What would it look like? What specifics does he encourage you to do?
- What do you think are some of the biggest obstacles to unity in the church, both within congregations and between denominations?

5 Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, 6 who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, 7 but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. 8 And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. 9 Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, 10 so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, 11 and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

- In seeking to live in unity and with humility, we are to have the mind of Christ. How is Christ a model for us?
- Though “he was in the form of God”, Jesus didn’t demand special treatment from those around him, but instead he was humble. To what extreme lengths was he humble?

- Can you think of anyone who willingly went from such a high position to such a low position? Is there any way to compare how Christ left heaven to go to a cross?
- Having humbled himself, putting others needs before him, and because of his great love for us, Jesus went to the cross for us. What position does he have now and how are we to view him?

Part of this text is believed to be a hymn of the early church. Seeing this love of God on display in Jesus certainly inspires songs of praise. Jesus humbled himself to such a depth, so that we could be caught up and raised with him. Our Lord is not distant or detached from our world. He is not ignorant of our pain and suffering. Earthly kings and rulers are like that, often left untouched by the hardships of the world. But our God entered into it and he knows our sorrow first hand.

Prayer

Lord God,

May your great love captivate our hearts. We could never replicate your sacrifice and ongoing pursuit of your people, but by your Spirit, may your care for us lead us to seek out ways to care for others. Help us to have the mind of Christ, not looking to put our own needs first, but to count others as more significant. Lead your church in these trying times to display great unity in purpose to bring glory to the name that is above all names, Jesus Christ.

Amen.

Philippians 2:12-18

12 Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence—continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.

- As parents will surely know, children sometimes better listen to directions when you are still in the room. But Paul wants the church, even more in his absence, to continue to do what?
- If you only read verse twelve, does it seem as though we are fully responsible for our salvation?
- If we begin to think everything rests on us, Paul reminds us of what good news in verse thirteen? Does God begin a good work in us and then leave us to fend for ourselves?

14 Do everything without grumbling or arguing, 15 so that you may become blameless and pure, “children of God without fault in a warped and crooked generation.” Then you will shine among them like stars in the sky 16 as you hold firmly to the word of life. And then I will be able to boast on the day of Christ that I did not run or labor in vain. 17 But even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you. 18 So you too should be glad and rejoice with me.

- Apologies for how corny this is, but it will help you remember—Paul wants us to stop grumbling and arguing. Thinking back to earlier in Philippians 2, what rhyming word is the alternative that will finish this phrase? **Be - - - - - , don’t grumble.**
- There are two words, warped and crooked, that describe the generations in the world. How does God want his church to stand apart from this? How can we shine for him? Be specific and practical.

Paul's humility shines forth as he seeks to follow Jesus and serve the church. Even if he is "being poured out like a drink offering", meaning even if he is going to die in his work, he will rejoice seeing the work of God's salvation arise in the Philippians.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

Guide us in the work we do. May we never forget that you support and strengthen us to do all that you have prepared. When times are tough and we want to complain, help us turn to you. Help us keep in perspective your sacrifice for us. Make us humble and turn our grumbling into a lament that draws closer. Then soften our hearts to serve you, your church, and our neighbors.

Amen.

Philippians 2:19-30

19 I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you soon, so that I too may be cheered by news of you. 20 For I have no one like him, who will be genuinely concerned for your welfare. 21 For they all seek their own interests, not those of Jesus Christ. 22 But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. 23 I hope therefore to send him just as soon as I see how it will go with me, 24 and I trust in the Lord that shortly I myself will come also.

- What does Paul think of Timothy? In what ways does he describe Timothy to the Philippians?
- Given how highly Paul regards him, what does it say that Paul wants to send Timothy?

Paul's continued theme of humility and looking out for others continues here. He says he has no one around that is like Timothy, yet he is eager to send Timothy away! How often are we willing to part with something or someone we hold so dear?

25 I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, 26 for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. 27 Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. 28 I am the more eager to send him, therefore, that you may rejoice at seeing him again, and that I may be less anxious. 29 So receive him in the Lord with all joy, and honor such men, 30 for he nearly died for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was lacking in your service to me.

- What do we know about Epaphroditus from this passage? What sort of danger did he get himself into? Why did he suffer? How would seeing him bring joy to the church?
- Because of this pandemic, we live in a time of isolation when we do not see people like we used to. Does that give you a different sense of how Paul feels in these letters? He often writes about longing to see people. Can we empathize with that more now?

- What would have caused Paul sorrow upon sorrow?

In chapter one, Paul wrote about his own fate. He knew that death was a very real possibility for him and he said that to die would be gain. He knows to die is to be held in the presence of God. Of course this doesn't apply only to Paul, but to all believers. But that does not mean that the death of a friend, Epaphroditus, wouldn't cause him great sorrow. The church is not instructed to erase emotions of sadness or grief just because we have faith and hope. The love we receive and are to show to one another is reason for us to grieve whenever someone dies. So while Paul writes about what death means for the believer, he knows well that in this world our lives matter greatly to each other.

In this time of absence and quarantine, let us store up the desire to be present with our brothers and sisters in the faith. And meanwhile let us keep each other in prayer.

Prayer

Dear Lord,

We ask that you continue to work upon our hearts directly by your Holy Spirit, our Comforter and Teacher. Make your presence known and guide our thoughts and attitudes. Remind us that you also work through our brothers and sisters and the support they are by being present with us. Encourage us to see ways that we can reach out and carry your love to the neighbors you have placed in our lives. May we minister to the needs of others, as you have ministered to us.

Amen.

Philippians 3:1-11

1 Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. To write the same things to you is no trouble to me and is safe for you. 2 Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers, look out for those who mutilate the flesh. 3 For we are the circumcision, who worship by the Spirit of God and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh—

Paul shifts gears here. He wrote at the end of chapter two about trustworthy people coming to their community. Now he is warning them about others.

- Who do you think Paul was warning about? Would they have been inside the church communities or outside it? What sort of words does Paul use to help us piece together what the issue may have been about?

One of the biggest sources of concern for Paul was false teaching that arose from *within* the churches. He writes about those who “mutilate the flesh”, comparing that to those in the church who put “no confidence in the flesh.” He is likely writing against the teachings that require that faith in Jesus be held alongside adherence to the law, including circumcision.

- Why does Paul think circumcision was no longer required?
- Circumcision had been a show of trust and a marker for who was a part of the covenant. What are new signs of trust and inclusion in the church?

Paul doesn't think what we do in the flesh could ever be enough to make us righteous, but if someone were to try to make a case, it'd be him. But even Paul knows he'd come up short. Read the following and see where this thought takes him.

4 though I myself have reason for confidence in the flesh also. If anyone else thinks he has reason for confidence in the flesh, I have more: 5 circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; 6 as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless. 7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I

have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

- If righteousness is required, and we could never be righteous on our own, where does Paul have us look for it?
- Does righteousness come from a mixture of some law and some faith?
- If we are faithful to Christ, do we then stop caring entirely about how we live? What does Paul seek to do now, having cast off the works of the flesh and trusting in the righteousness of Jesus?

Paul does not write that what we do in this life is meaningless. Christians are not supposed to do whatever we feel like. But we are supposed to see that what we do can never save us. Only the work of Christ, the truly Righteous One, is enough. Seeing his love and sacrifice does not lead us to further rebellion against God. We ought to follow God, even suffer (verse 10), as we share in the gift of his life. Yet always remembering that at no point do our works take over for the perfect, all-sufficient work of Jesus. He alone makes us righteous and good before our God.

Prayer

Gracious God,

Your grace is so unexpected that it can be hard for us to believe it. It is so undeserved it can be hard to accept it. So every day of our lives, continue to speak this good news to our hearts that the love you have given us in Christ is unconditional. It is not the work of our hands that makes us into your beloved, but it is by your beloved Son that you make us your own. May he become our greatest desire.

Amen.

Philippians 3:12-21

12 Not that I have already obtained this or am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. 13 Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, 14 I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

15 Let those of us who are mature think this way, and if in anything you think otherwise, God will reveal that also to you. 16 Only let us hold true to what we have attained. 17 Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us. 18 For many, of whom I have often told you and now tell you even with tears, walk as enemies of the cross of Christ. 19 Their end is destruction, their god is their belly, and they glory in their shame, with minds set on earthly things.

20 But our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, 21 who will transform our lowly body to be like his glorious body, by the power that enables him even to subject all things to himself.

- “He has made me his own”—you could stop right there for today and just reflect on that. How many other beliefs or religions about God have such a personal care from the maker to that which is made? Where the creator would take such pride and show such love for the creation? How does it feel to know that Christ labored to make you his very own?
- Sometimes we are supposed to remember, but why does he say here to forget what lies behind? When do we need to be able to let go of the past, and how does that help us press on? When has holding on too tightly to what is behind hindered you from attaining a goal?
- In verse 17, Paul encourages the believers to follow those who have set their eyes on Christ. In your life, who has God used to encourage your walk? Could you encourage those people this week by sending them a note of thanks?

- What in verse 18 has brought Paul to tears?
- Paul talks of those who are enemies of the cross. What to you think that means? Why do they cause Paul such sorrow?
- What do you think it means for your god to be your belly? How can our desires control us?
- Rather than let our bellies control us, Paul urges us to desire God, and see that our “citizenship is in heaven.” What makes someone a citizen of a country—what duties or characteristics? How then should we be citizens of heaven? What should that look like?

Prayer

Holy God,

We thank you for those people you have placed in our lives that have come alongside us in just the right moments to turn our eyes to you. We thank you for their faithful service and dedication that has helped us to see and understand what following Jesus really means. Strengthen us to walk in those same footsteps and be a light to others.

Amen.

Philippians 4:1-3

1 Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

- This is the final chapter of Philippians. Having read so far, do you sense warmth from Paul toward the church, given how many greetings he uses?
- Does Paul seem like a stuffy academic who cares only about his research and writing, or does he also care for the people? Yet, his care for the people leads him to urge the church to do what?

Sometimes caring about ideas and caring about people are pitted against each other. For instance, in the church some leaders will say that theology isn't really important, and we just need to love each other. But Paul wouldn't understand how you could break those apart. How loves his church—he loves the people—and *because he loves them* he wants them to see with open eyes the truth of Jesus. He wants them to *stand firm* in it and not be swayed by false teaching.

- Have you tended to think that “theology” and what the church believes are practical or not?
- In what ways can you see that what we believe should shape the way we live?

2 I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. 3 Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

- In this letter to a whole group of people Paul has written about life and death, hope and resurrection, suffering and joy, humility and unity, and other big issues. He then calls out two people, Euodia and Syntyche, by name to encourage them to stop their quar-

rel. Why do you think he'd do that? What does it say about conflict that Paul would think it necessary to include this?

- When there is conflict and disunity in the church, what sort of witness is that to the rest of the world?
- Go back to Philippians 2. What did Paul say there about how to attain unity?
- Here in chapter 4 he also ask a “true companion” to help. How can allowing a third party to participate in settling a dispute help?
- What do you think Paul means by “book of life”?

The book of life is a term with roots in the Old Testament is a record of all those who belong to God. It can be a helpful reminder of how to view others in the church, even those with whom we have disagreements. That can be our lens: see them as people whose names are in the book of life. Within Christ's church we may have issues, deep divides even, but to remember that we are claimed by God, and written into his book of life, helps us gain perspective. We are not our own, we are his, and we are to live in the light of all Jesus has done for us. To have the same mind that Christ had, with humility and sacrificial love.

Prayer

Heavenly Father,

We thank you for this word that is deeply personal. The Bible you have blessed us with is full of truth and wisdom, but it is not simply doctrine. It is histories of people passed on through generations, poetry expressing every human emotion, and passionate letters seeking to help and support fellow believers. May we never let the Scriptures grow stale, seeing how it is living and breathing, and beneficial for our faith and life.

Amen.

Philippians 4:4-7

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. 5 Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; 6 do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

- What are your first reactions to a passage like this?
- Does this fit the bill of “easier said than done”?
- Did Paul have an easy and carefree life? What sort of hardships did he face? Does it help hear his words in verse 4 knowing that his life was filled with suffering?

Something can be true regardless of who says it, but when the person has experience to back up their claim, it can be a help for the hearer. Paul knew suffering. Turning to follow Jesus did not mean an easier life. That was true for all the disciples. Yet, there is still the call to rejoice in the Lord always.

- What can give reason for you to rejoice no matter what is going on?
- Paul goes on to speak of anxiety. What gives you the most anxiety? Why does it cause you trouble?
- How does Paul say we should approach those areas that can make us anxious?
- If we aren't supposed to be anxious, does that mean we don't care anymore?

Anxiety is written about in Matthew 6, where Jesus says, “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.” In the NIV version it is translated, “Therefore do not worry about tomorrow...”

The ideas of worry and anxiety are related. We aren't being told to stop *caring* about our circumstances, our tomorrow, or whatever is heavy on our hearts. The difference is a sense of dread or fear. If we look at tomorrow and the trouble it may bring and we are overcome by anxiety, Paul says to take that to God through prayer. Take those concerns to God through continued prayer and God, who knows our tomorrow already, can grant us peace.

So much assaults our hearts and minds. So much can contribute to worry and anxiety. Take comfort and rejoice knowing that we are not alone and that our Lord stands guard over us.

Prayer

Mighty God,

We find that our prayers about anxiety lead us to ask you to take all causes of anxiety away. Remove all conflict and pain and create a calmness in life. But that may not be the path for our prayers. We might still have to endure the sufferings that our Lord warned us of in the gospels. So in those times, help us find the words to pray not just for external peace, but an internal peace that comes by your Spirit. May we turn from our circumstances and turn to you. May the face of Christ give us courage no matter what the day brings.

Amen.

Philippians 4:8-13

8 Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9 What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.

- Consider what you think about in life. What fills your mind? What subjects and ideas tend to dominate your thinking? Do you think what you think about affects you? If so, how?
- Paul seems to think it matters what we think about; that there is a link between mind and body. What sorts of things would meet his criteria for what we should think on? And how would thinking about whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, or worthy of praise do to us?
- Earlier in the letter Paul wrote about having the “mind of Christ” and now he urges them to set their mind of worthy things. How can you practice this and love God with your mind?
- In verse 9 Paul moves from the mind to actions. What is the church to do and what will result from their action?

10 I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at length you have revived your concern for me. You were indeed concerned for me, but you had no opportunity. 11 Not that I am speaking of being in need, for I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. 12 I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. 13 I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

- Paul shares that he has *learned* how to be content. Is contentment something that comes easily for you? What has helped in finding contentment? What lessons have you learned?

- What is Paul’s “secret” for finding contentment in all circumstances?
- We may think contentment is harder in times that we are “brought low” or when we face hunger. But Paul makes the point that he has learned also “how to abound”—he has learned about contentment when there is plenty. What can be particularly difficult for the Christian in times of abundance? How can that actually be a hindrance to our faith?

In this letter Paul has built on themes of perspective and humility. He wants the church to see the world as Christ sees it, he wants the church to think with the mind of Christ, to meditate on the wondrous works of Jesus. When we can change our outlook and focus, looking less to ourselves and our circumstances, we can begin to see beyond the daily and into the eternal. When we keep in mind our Savior, never letting go of the truth that he provides for us in all times, we are then able to rejoice no matter what is happening to us. We can rejoice and direct our whole selves, body and mind, to the one who strengthens us to carry on.

Prayer

Dear Lord,

Grow in us a desire for more than the minimum. Help us cultivate a life that finds its beginning, middle, and end rooted in you. May we meditate on your goodness in times that we reclaim from our overly hurried days. Give us the mind of Christ, so we may look at this world and see it as he does, love it as he does, and go then to serve it in the ways he showed us.

Amen.

Philippians 4:14-23

14 Yet it was kind of you to share my trouble. 15 And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. 16 Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again. 17 Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit. 18 I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. 19 And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. 20 To our God and Father be glory forever and ever. Amen.

- There is a popular saying, “Misery loves company.” Here Paul writes it was kind of the church to “share in my trouble.” Have you experienced any comfort from someone coming alongside you during a troubling time? How can that help?
- Paul was glad for the Philippian church to be with him so that he didn’t feel alone. What did this church do to help that was unlike others early in his ministry?
- Can you imagine what Paul’s ministry would have been like if not for churches supporting him?

We may not always be doing the same sort of frontline ministry as Paul, but it doesn’t mean God doesn’t have a place for us. Countless gifts were funneled through the church to help early missionaries like Paul reach out with the good news. How exciting it must have been for this church to hear his encouragement. Have you felt such excitement from supporting others in ministry?

21 Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The brothers who are with me greet you. 22 All the saints greet you, especially those of Caesar's household.

23 The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

- Greetings that we share in passing can become routine and lack meaning, but Paul urges the church to greet one another in Christ Jesus. What do you think he is trying to communicate to them? Why do you think he include such greetings in his letters?
- He passes on greetings from Caesar's household. Do you think it'd be encouraging to hear that Paul has brought the message of Jesus even into the inner circles around the Caesar?

The church can look like the most random assortment of people. Young and old, rich and poor, male and female. It should be a body with various backgrounds, ethnicities, and interests. Yet there is one thing that holds us together. And even if it is *just* one thing, it should be enough to generate a warmth and care within our church. Jesus Christ binds us together, and so we greet each other now as family. No matter how else we may be different, we are one in him.

This was a strange thing in the ancient world and it still can be strange today. But joining as one in Christ, bound up by his Spirit, and continuing in this faith that God has given us, is what will help carry us through times of both plenty and hunger. God has made us one family based on the work of Jesus and no matter the circumstance, being a part of this new-found community based in Jesus is reason enough to rejoice in the Lord always.

So let us press on, reaching out to the *whole world*. May we be of one mind, sharing the good news that for us, Jesus humbled himself, even to the point of death on a cross. By his work, grace upon grace has been shared with us, and only by his grace can we carry on.

So then let us we finish, echoing Paul's final words:

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Amen.