

“Transformed by Joy”

A study of the Biblical Book of Philippians

Part 5 – Joy through Contentment

Chapter 4: verses 2 – 23

We conclude our journey through the book of Philippians by taking a look at Paul’s final comments. We have seen in past sessions how much joy Paul took in the church at Philippi and how thankful he was at their participation with him in the work of the Kingdom.

He describes them as ‘saints’. He encourages them to keep running a good race. He lays before them the example of the servant lifestyle of Jesus as their ultimate aim. He encourages them to rejoice, even when things weren’t going so well, to carry within themselves a positive attitude that transformed even the darkest situations.

But as we will immediately see, just because they were a congregation of faithful believers founded by an apostle and who seemingly were growing and thriving, not all was well amongst the saints of God. Indeed a few of them seemed to have had ‘issues’. Can you believe that? A perfect church where people didn’t always get along? (O.K. I’m being sarcastic!) Let us read verses 2 and 3.

² I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.³ Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

It appears that Euodia and Syntyche are a couple of church ladies who have butted heads. We don’t know what the problem is, other than that it is serious enough to warrant Paul mentioning it in a letter that is otherwise upbeat, and encouraging.

Paul has a good deal of affection for these lady leaders and acknowledges them as being those who helped him in his work, and who have their names written in ‘the book of life’. Saints they still were. The community is given the task of helping them work through their problem. He doesn’t ask anybody to take sides, or decide who is right... only that they are given the help they need to resolve their differences.

William Barclay makes the observation that it is rather sad that the only thing we know about these ladies is that they quarreled. That was surely not their desired epitaph. They may have both been wonderful workers in their church. But all we

now recall is that they argued. He challenges us with the sobering task of considering what folk may remember about ourselves once we are gone.

Thankfully that is not where Paul leaves us. As he has done throughout the letter he instead urges us to embrace thanksgiving and joyful obedience towards God. Verses 4 through 7.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. ⁵ Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not worry 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.

Paul continues to remind his readers to 'rejoice' in the Lord. Remarkable words when we remember where he was and how uncertain the future he may be facing could be! He then speaks about some positive attitudes to adopt, habits that rightly practiced can enrich our daily lives. In these suggestions he appears to reflect Jesus teaching in the gospels about such themes as 'Do unto others', the Kingdom being 'near' and to not worry about our lives but rather trust God in prayerful and practical ways.

He writes, "*Let your gentleness be known to everyone*". The word here translated 'gentleness' is the Greek Word 'epieikeia', one of the most untranslatable of all Greek words (as a browse through differing translations reveals.) Amongst the options suggested are 'moderation', 'patience', 'softness', 'modesty', 'magnanimity' and 'forbearance.' For myself the Message Bible captures it best: "Make it as clear as you can to all you meet that you're on their side, working with them and not against them."

If people feel like we're on their side they are more ready to listen to what we have to say. And that takes gentleness, patience, forbearance, moderation; all those things the different translations suggest 'epieikeia' may mean. In the gospels Jesus invites us to deal with others in the same sort of way we would like them to deal with us. ("*In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; (Mat 7:12 NRS)*). This is a similar injunction.

Paul invites us to remember that the "*Lord is Near*". Our incentive for treating others well is that God never fails to treat us well! God is always with us. Always close by, if we can but apprehend God's presence. In Matthews gospel, the first time the disciples are sent out into the world, they are told to "*Proclaim the good news; 'The kingdom of heaven has come near.'*" (Mat 10:7 NRS). So we are encouraged to believe that God is not watching us from a distance, but close by, walking with us and guiding our steps.

Knowing God is with us leads to Paul's next observation. *'Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.'* The first part of this verse reflects Jesus teaching *"Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own."* (Mat 6:34 NRS). The second part His teaching about prayer *"Ask, and it will be given you; search, and you will find; knock, and the door will be opened for you. For everyone who asks receives, and everyone who searches finds, and for everyone who knocks, the door will be opened."* (Mat 7:7-8 NRS).

Paul stresses that we can take everything to God in prayer. An anonymous commentator writes: "There is nothing too great for God's power; and nothing too small for His fatherly care". Just as a child takes all things to their parents, from the cuts and bruises of rough and tumble, to the most perplexing problems of dealing with life, so we are encouraged to bring all of life into the presence of God.

And to do so thankfully! One can have the impression that prayer is an exercise in trying to wrestle something out of God that God is reluctant to give. That we need to have the right words and formula and spend the right amount of time praying in order to find God's way. Paul counteracts such a view by suggesting the true requisite for a fruitful prayer life is that it simply flows from a heart full of thanksgiving.

Such is a way of prayer that he suggests will bring us peace... and not just any old peace... but peace that passes understanding. The kind of peace that keeps us centered even when everything looks like it is falling apart! The sort of joy that comes from inner conviction rather than depending on external circumstances.

Paul now uses the word 'finally' again. This time he really is drawing to a close! Verses 8 through 9.

⁸ Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. ⁹ Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

There is sometimes with religious folk a tendency to divide between the sacred and the secular. Nowhere has this been more evident in recent days than with contemporary music. Indeed there is now a whole genre known as 'Christian Contemporary Music' which often sounds just like any other kind of music, except the lyrical content is specifically Christian.

Certainly much of it is of a high quality but it would be a mistake to think that the only spiritual insights one could obtain through contemporary music were limited to a genre specifically labeled as 'Christian'. In all realms of the arts, not just music, whenever artists share their hearts they are reflecting something of the image in which God has made them. At times it may be their brokenness and distance from God that they communicate... but sometimes that is what speaks to us most.

Paul's canvas is much greater than just music or art. He encourages us to look for the good in all that is around us... to find joy in whatever is worthy of praise. Interestingly, the virtues he mentions in verse 8; *'whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise'...* are among those that were particularly honored in the pagan world. If God is the origin of all that is good and true and honorable, then such are resources we are right to enjoy!

In computer terminology there is the phrase 'Garbage in equates to garbage out'. Turning that around, if we fill our lives with good things then a good harvest is produced. So Paul finishes this section by urging his readers to 'keep on keeping on' doing the good that he has witnessed in them and that they have witnessed in him. As our letter draws near its close Paul reminds the Philippians how grateful he was for their partnership in the gospel.

¹⁰ I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹ Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹² I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³ I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

A final parting shot about being joyful is found here. Paul tells us that he has learned to be content with whatever he has. He has in his life known times when he was overflowing with good things, and times when he was just hanging in there. He shares the secret of his contentedness in verse 13 *'I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.'*

Note that this is not a statement about what he can do, but about what God can do. Paul is content because he has a life surrendered to God and believes that whatever comes his way God will help him through it. William Barclay writes in his commentary 'Paul could face anything, because in every situation he had Christ; the person who walks with Christ can cope with anything'. Morna Hooker in the New International Bible Commentary writes that Verse 13 'reveals the secret of Paul's ability to do "everything"; it is through the one who gives him the strength he needs.'

Matthew Henry makes reference to Ephesians 3:16 -17 *'I pray that, according to the riches of His glory, God may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through His Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love.'* He paraphrases Paul as saying **"Through Christ, who is strengthening me, and does continually strengthen me; it is by His constant and renewed strength I am enabled to act in every thing; I wholly depend upon Him for all my spiritual power."**

Lest he give the impression that his reliance on God diminished the importance he placed on the love he had received from the Philippian Church, Paul concludes his letter by returning to his original thoughts; they had been a wonderful blessing from God during his time of need. Verses 14 through 20.

¹⁴ In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress. ¹⁵ You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. ¹⁶ For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. ¹⁷ Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. ¹⁸ I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. ¹⁹ And my God will fully satisfy 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.

He praises their kindness that had helped him on numerous occasions. He is thankful for the gift of Epaphroditus who had been a great friend and comfort to him through his Christ-like service. He assures them that their kindness would never go unnoticed by God who was intent on blessing them and meeting their every need. He says 'Amen' and then adds a few personal greetings.

²¹ Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The friends who are with me greet you. ²² All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor's household. ²³ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

We titled our series on Philippians 'Transformed by Joy'. Let us conclude by reviewing the sources of transforming joy that Paul has offered to us.

Firstly there was **joy through participation**. Through his partnership with the church in Philippi Paul felt greatly blessed. They were dear to him and they had kept faith with him, in particular through sending one of their own, Epaphroditus, to be with him. The relationships we form with each other through active participation in a worshipping community can be a source of joy like no other.

Secondly, we spoke about **joy through endeavor**. Being part of a community is a blessing but building community is hard work. Its not a walk in the park, its more like a walk through Psalm 23. There are the clear cool waters, but also the

frightening dark shadowy valleys, the wolves we need protection from and the need to rely on the shepherds rod and staff of guidance to get us through. It takes inner conviction to go forward in the midst of uncertainty. Paul phrases his inner conviction with the dramatic phrase '*For me to live is Christ, to die is gain*'. But this is not grim determination, rather joyful acceptance that wherever and whatever his life may be, it was being lived out within the great framework of the eternal love of God.

Thirdly we spoke about **joy through obedience**. Paul lifts up for us, through a passage we called the Philippian hymn, the servant lifestyle of Jesus Christ, as the ultimate example of what a joy surrendered, to God abandoned, life should look like. Jesus love towards us becomes our incentive to care for each other. Discipleship is not a task to be pursued with grudging reticence, but joyful gratitude towards God. Paul uses the imagery of 'running a race to the finish' to illuminate how our endeavor is a life long journey! Our lives can be transformed through joyful obedience to Christ's call.

Fourthly we spoke about **joy through faithfulness**. Paul singled out a couple of close friends, Timothy and Epaphroditus as examples of how we find joy through nurturing our closest relationships. He spoke about the joy we can experience through knowing the forgiveness of God; knowing that we are saved by grace through our faith in Jesus Christ. He spoke about the false barriers we erect between each other... barriers of class, religion, status, education, and influence... achievements he describes as garbage in comparison to the joy that comes from simply knowing ourselves God's children, accepted and loved through Jesus Christ. He talks about the joy of knowing that whatever the future may hold... God's got it covered.

Finally... in this session we have spoken about **joy through contentment**. After urging agreement between a couple of church ladies who are out of sorts, he reminds us some of the principles Jesus has taught us. Treating others in a way we would like to be treated. Remembering God is always near. Nurturing a relationship with God that overwhelms our worries. Developing an attitude of gratitude that enables us to see the good in even the bleakest of outward situations. He talks of finding joy in the good world around us, joy in all the positive things, the excellent and commendable... the things worthy of praise. They are all gifts from God through His children, for His children to feast upon.

He holds off till the end to give us the most profound of his insights about how to have a life transformed by joy. Chapter 4, verse 13 '*I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.*' Life is transformed when we center life upon what God can do! Its not about self-sufficiency but about trusting God to do those things in our selves that we can not achieve apart from His love.

So... maybe... here is Paul's challenge to us. Dare we allow the Spirit of Christ to invade our lives with the joy perspective? Dare we claim that even when outwardly things may seem chaotic, that because we are placing ourselves in God's care, chaos can be infused with creativity? Dare we trust God beyond our worries and concerns? Dare we throw ourselves into deeper service of our church and community, simply because we believe that we are loved and that the servant King, our Lord Jesus Christ can actually bring the Kingdom near through our little tasks and everyday random acts of faithfulness?

Take him up on that challenge and then maybe we will see our personal lives and our church, in ways little and large, **transformed by joy!** And to conclude I offer Paul's closing words: "**The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit!**"