

KEEPING YOUR JOY - The Heartfelt Theology of an Isolated Prisoner Part twenty-one
 Sunday, November 22nd, 2020, 10:00 a.m.
 Teaching #2057 Pastor Don Horban - Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

WHAT THE POWER OF GOD IS *FOR* AND WHAT IT SHOULD *LOOK LIKE* TO THOSE AROUND US

Philippians 4:10-13 - "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."

The only person Paul talks about in these four verses is himself. The words "*I*" and "*me*" are peppered throughout each sentence. The *reason* for this is found when we look back to **verse 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."

Paul has been urging these Christians at Philippi, in whatever difficulties they may be facing, to "**rejoice in the Lord**"(4:4). We know they have been experiencing deep trial of some kind from these words: "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"(1:29-30).

Yet Paul has been urging that in the middle of their persecution and trial they must "**Rejoice in the Lord always**"(4:4). They are not to be "**anxious about anything** (4:6), but are to have their hearts **guarded by the peace of God** (4:7). This is the peace of having their security and joy so anchored in God they are protected from **discouragement** in the face of earthly trial and loss and protected from the **idolatry** of abundance and pleasure.

This is the foundation under Paul's command to "**rejoice in the Lord always**"(4:4). That's a very tall request, so Paul wants them to see how this has worked *in his own life* - "**I rejoiced in the Lord greatly** (4:10)....**I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content** (4:11)....**I know how to be brought low and I know how to abound** (4:12)....**I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger** (4:12)....**I can do all things through him who strengthens me**" (4:13)

This is the only way truth is passed on from one generation to another. When I see it on paper I **agree**

with it. When I see it fleshed out right in front of my eyes in some beautiful Christian's life I don't just agree that it's **true**. I know it **works**. This is what Paul wants to emphasize. Remember, this letter was **read aloud** to the church at Philippi. When you know that what you are writing is going to be read out loud, you put what you want remembered at the **end** of the letter. You **save** for last what you want **pondered**.

So before we pull out some of the **details** of this text we need to catch the **big picture**. Words like **"I can do all things through him who strengthens me"**(13) aren't easy for **any** of us to believe. They feel too big for us many times. We **all** find those glowing words, printed on the pages of our Bibles, a bit stretching when they confront our weak faith.

But they're **easier** to embrace in faith when we see them pouring out of the soul of a man like Paul while he is in prison facing death. They're easier to believe when that man is more anxious to tell these Philippian Christians how his imprisonment has led to the conversion of the Roman guard than the kind of treatment he is receiving personally (1:12-13) - how, for him, to live is Christ and to die is **gain** (1:22) - whose only real concern is that Christ be honored in his body, whether by life or by death (1:20).

Paul sets his autobiography before the Philippians in vivid terms. This is why Paul put his pants on in the morning. This was the only purpose driving his life. Paul wanted Christians, atheists, agnostics, backsliders and pagans to look at his life and say, **"There it is! You can't argue with that. Christ must be present. No one can experience such contentment in the face of those trials. No one can be so loosely attached to material goods. No one can live like that all the time unless Christ lives in him and strengthens him!"**

Now, how does this work? And for that we pry some details from this famous text:

1) **PAUL REJOICED UPON RECEIVING THE GIFTS OF SUPPORT SENT FROM THE PHILIPPIAN CHURCH FOR HIS MINISTRY IN ROME THROUGH EPAPHRODITUS**

Philippians 4:10 - "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."

Paul explains this in more detail in **4:18** - "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.**"

Remember, this is what birthed Paul's response in this very letter we know as Philippians, which would be taken back to the congregation at Philippi by Epaphroditus as well - **Philippians 2:25** - "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...."

There is only one point I want to draw out of **verse 10**. It isn't something you would even think about on the surface of things, but it **does** lead into the important spiritual principle of **contentment (4:11-12)** and being able to **do all things through the strengthening power of God (4:13)**. Paul never actually **thanks** the congregation at Philippi. The words **"thank you"** never occur anywhere in the passage. **Why** is this? Is Paul being rude or forgetful? Or is there something deeper going on in this text?

The idea, I think, is Paul doesn't hold on to anything he received as **"his own."** He explains the way his mind works in relation to their gift in **4:18** - "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."

The people at Philippi, had probably taken money - cash - out of their wallets some Sunday at offering time. They had obviously given so substantially that it **cost** them to do so because Paul calls their gifts a **"sacrifice"**(18). **Why** had they done this? Was it just because they loved Paul?

They did love him, to be sure. But they gave their gifts because they wanted, more than anything else, not to please **Paul**, but to please **God (18)**. They saw their calling to be pleasing to God as covering their **wealth** as much as it covered their **sexual morality** or their **honesty**.

In short, they saw themselves as **partners** in the gospel **with** Paul - **Philippians 1:3-5** - "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."

So much for the motive behind the **giving**. The text also tells us how Paul viewed their gift on the **receiving** end - **4:17** - “**Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the fruit that increases to your credit**.” Here we have a clue as to why Paul never actually thanks the Philippian church for their gift. He never saw the funds as **his**. It wasn’t the **money** that pleased Paul, but the **fruit**.

Paul measured everything by its potential to produce **kingdom fruit**. And this is not the first time Paul labored this point: **Philippians 1:9-14** - “**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. [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.”**

This is the way Paul related **circumstances** to **life**. This is why, very specifically, he said their gift caused him to “**rejoice greatly in the Lord”(4:10)**. It’s almost as though he had forgotten **how** to rejoice merely in material wealth received, or comfort, or entertainment. Not that those are necessarily wicked in themselves.

But Paul had found **those** sources of joy to be anemic, fickle, and flimsy. Instead, he connected all the earthly dots of his life back to Christ and His coming and His kingdom call that rested on his life just as it does on yours and mine.

So that’s the first point. Paul “**rejoiced in the Lord”** at the receiving of the gift from the church at Philippi. Then he does something very surprising:

2) **PAUL TAKES THE TIME TO JUSTIFY THE JOY HE FEELS IN HIS HEART - FOR A REASON**

Philippians 4:11-12 - “**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.”

He seems insistent that they don't *misunderstand* his joy. In a way we wouldn't expect he launches into an argument. You can see him *repeating himself*, this is so important to him - *“Not that I am speaking of being in need....”* (11) - and, *“Not that I seek the gift....”* (17).

He can't easily let go of this point. He doesn't want them to think he is *dependant* on them for his confidence and joy. He *loves* them dearly. But he takes *ten verses - ten verses!* - to make clear he hasn't been sitting in prison wondering why no one had been caring about him and his needs.

But - and this is very important - it's not *pride* that makes Paul talk like this. It's not that he thinks he's invincible - so strong in himself he needs no one else. This is not pride or self-sufficiency talking. That's not it at all. He doesn't want to give these dear saints back in Philippi the impression that the Lord was *not* sufficient for him. That's it. That's his whole point. And he takes *ten* verses to unfold this idea further.

3) WHAT PAUL HAD LEARNED AND HOW IT GAVE HIM STRENGTH AND JOY IN THE LORD

Philippians 4:11-13 - *“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.”*

This is not a *denial* of circumstances. When Paul says he had learned contentment in *“whatever situation”* he means there are all *kinds* of situations that come along. When he says he knows *“how to be brought low”* he means there are times when he *experiences* lowness.

When he says he has learned the secret of facing *hunger and need* he means there are times when he *experiences* hunger and need - just as he has actually *experienced*, at other times, *plenty and abundance*. All I'm saying here is Paul *knows* life brings good times and bad. His strategy isn't *denial*. He doesn't *pretend*. He isn't just *mediating* himself above circumstances.

What, then, is Paul's approach to the varied circumstances of life? Fundamentally he says he

chose to **learn** something as he walked through life hand in hand with Jesus. It's those "**how**" words in **verse 12** that seem so important. Who links a "**how**" with wealth and abundance? Who links a "**how**" with needing a food basket?

This is what he wanted the Philippian church to **see in him and put into practice - 4:9** - "**What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.**" And what Paul **did** and wanted them to **see** was he **learned contentment in God** - "**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**"(12).

The fact that Paul calls the Philippians to **mark** his example and **ponder** it and take the trouble to **copy** it proves it is not **automatic** that Christians gain this wisdom. There are more people - **far** more people - who know how to **make** lots of money than who know how to **have** lots of money. And knowing how to **have** money is far more important than knowing how to **make** it. Paul says there is a "**secret**" to knowing how to "**abound**" (4:12).

There are lots of people who have been "**brought low**" by trying circumstance (4:12). Perhaps you've had a hard year. People have abused you in many ways. You've experienced trial and loss and perhaps persecution. But there is a difference between merely **experiencing** these sad things and learning the "**secret**" of **how to be brought "low"**(4:12).

It doesn't happen overnight. But Paul says there is great joy in learning a sense of **contentment** in all kinds of circumstances. He doesn't mean we aren't human beings, with emotions attached to good and bad experiences. But he **does** mean we can learn not to place **too much** joy in material gain and pleasure. And we can learn not to allow gloom and despair **too much** power to take away our eternal hope and confidence in the sure future we have in Christ Jesus.

This is exactly what Paul was commending to them in **4:4-5** - "**Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. [5] Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand....**"

Let the nearness and presence of the Lord **moderate** the rest of your life. Like green sunglasses

make you see everything green, view all of life through the lens of the nearness of the coming of Christ.

True, life comes in all flavors. But anchor your life enough in the Lord that you aren't **overgrieved** or **overjoyed** anywhere else. Let all of life be **flavored** with what is **most** joyous and **most** unfading. And let people **see** this about you. **Not** that you're invincible. **Not** that you're superhuman. But that **Christ** is real and certain above and in all things. That leads to the last point:

3) **WHAT THE POWER OF GOD IS FOR**

When you talk of the power of God, this verse has to come to mind - **Philippians 4:13** - **"I can do all things through him who strengthens me."**

The most obvious application of the power of God through my life is His ability to **deliver** me from trial and pain and crisis. And there is no shortage of Biblical precedent to prove this is frequently the case. The children of Israel at battle. David and Goliath. Daniel in the lion's den. Peter in prison. The list is long and impressive. God is a saving, healing, delivering God. He manifests His awesome power on our behalf.

If you want to preach on the delivering power of God, I will stand and say "amen." Just don't use **this** text because, in **this** text, that is not at all Paul's point. He **is** magnifying the power of God. But he's talking about a **different application** of it to our circumstances.

What is the power of God **for**? That's a very important question. Because if **all** God's power does is **deliver** and **heal** then **all** people will learn about Him from my life is He is **powerful**. They will never learn that He is supremely **desirable**. When they see me in my hour of desperate need they will never learn He is worthy of love and devotion and service and worship when **nothing** else works. They will never see any evidence of a hope that transcends my temporal situation. And, perhaps even more relevant for our North American culture, when they see me prospering beyond my wildest dreams they will never learn that He is **more** desirable than life's greatest treasure and blessing and pleasure. They will never see that the greatest source of joy in **my** life is different from **theirs**.

Here is my closing conviction. It is unfair to ask people just to take my **word** for the greatness of hope and joy in Christ. Paul says they need **proof**. You and I **can** give better testimony to our Maker and Redeemer. It isn't easy. There is enough in life - very good and very bad - to distract us from the fact that **"the Lord is at hand" (4:5)**. The call is to never live one second of life - in trial or in thrill - as though God wasn't **most** on my mind and most in my heart.

"I don't think I can do that, Pastor Don." Yes you can. That's the point of Paul's glorious promise about the power of God. You can through the One who gives you strength. In fact, according to Paul, that's what His strength is **for**. He gives strength to weak, needy, frail creatures like me to **bring glory to Himself**. And remember, it was in Philippi that Paul and Silas were first found singing praise to God while languishing in prison. I think he probably wanted this church - and ours - to remember that.