

Finding joy and peace in the Lord

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Date: 31 December 1969

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[0 : 0 0] I don't know whether you feel the same way, but there are many times when I wish life was just easy. That things would be just as they should be, living up to my ideals of what life should be.

So take housework, for instance. I always ask myself, why can't our house be always tidy? Where there's never a pile of laundry waiting to be cleaned, or else a pile of clean clothes waiting to be folded and ironed and put away.

Where the fridge would only have food we want to eat, still want to eat, instead of food that has been growing mold for months. Where the study and the desk always looks like this, no, the one before, and not the one like this.

I'm sure there's lots of other examples, but life has a stubborn way of not being what we'd like it to be. And I guess this applies to church as well. Now over the last five weeks we've been walking through Philippians, and we've heard Paul describing what the Christian life ought to be like, and how the gospel transforms the way we live.

Last week we heard how the gospel transforms our destiny, where we're headed, where our prize is waiting for us in heaven. And Paul knowing that, again reiterates in our passage today, verse 1, chapter 4, that we should stand firm in the Lord.

[1 : 2 7] It's sort of in one sense summarizing last week's passage. He says, stand firm in the Lord, stay united in the gospel, live lives worthy of it, because God is completing His work in us.

The Philippians, by the way, have also encouraged Paul in their way of living, so much so that he gushes over them and calls them his joy and crown in verse 1. And yet, despite this progress, it's not all smooth sailing.

It hasn't been. There has been conflict, as people have not seen eye to eye. Others may be tempted to turn away from the gospel by those called mutilators of the flesh.

And along the way, there has been persecution. And so perhaps they were at risk of losing the joy and peace that comes from believing in Jesus. And I suppose when we think about it, it's not that different from our own experience at HTD.

We're by and large a great church. And yet, it's not without challenges. People don't always get along. There are others that may find it hard to fit in.

[2 : 3 6] And then as individuals, it's not always easy to maintain a consistent walk with God. One moment, we may be at the top of the world, something God's done, something in our lives.

And then the next, we're sort of dragged down by the smallest of disappointments. Well, I think Paul knows that this is what the Christian life is like and experience in reality, which is why he's majored so heavily on joy in this letter.

I don't know whether you've picked it up as we've been going along, but last week, we were urged to rejoice in the Lord and he does that again in chapter 4 and verse 4. But then throughout the letter, there has been this constant reference to joy.

He speaks of his own joy in seeing their faith grow, in seeing the gospel progress, but he's also urged them to rejoice with him in the Lord. Now, we don't have time to look at all of them, but if you look at the outline there, I've just put a list of all the references to joy.

I think there are 11 in total, which is quite a few, isn't it, for a short letter like Philippians, where there's only four chapters. And so I think Paul, throughout the letter, has been urging them to just keep rejoicing, even through the challenges of living out the gospel.

[3 : 51] Then at the same time, in our passage today, Paul also talks about peace. Firstly, peace with one another, and then being at peace with our circumstances in the world.

And so Paul is in this sort of latter part of the letter, coming down to some really practical advice and encouragement as to how we can continue to live and stand firm in the Lord.

He wants us to develop godly habits to help us do that, to help us maintain joy and peace. Even as we pursue the goal of standing firm in the Lord, we are helped in doing that by having these godly habits.

Now, the thing with goals is that we often have to break it down, don't we, into smaller or more concrete steps, specific actions to help us attain those goals. So, some years ago, I decided I needed to get fit.

And so, some of you know, I've decided to swim. But I needed to be more specific than that, right? Not just, I'm going to swim. No, I had to set the target that I was going to swim at least two weeks.

[4 : 59] Now, whether I achieved it or not, beside the point, but at least I've set a target. And then when I got into the water, I needed to establish even more specific targets, like how many laps I'm going to swim, and then progressively, what times I was going to beat.

And hopefully, the times were coming down. Now, the key, of course, is that I wanted to make it a habit, a way of living, something that I do on a regular basis.

And in the same way, Paul has similar habits here that he encourages us to put into practice in order to live for the Lord. So, I've got three there. Habit number one, is that of relating rightly to each other.

Number two, of consistent prayerfulness. And then number three, of developing and having a biblical thought life. So, let's begin. Habit number one, verse two.

Here, Paul pleads with two ladies, Yodia and Syntyche, to agree with each other in the Lord. Now, Paul doesn't give us details of the conflict, so I don't know, you know, whether they're openly hostile to each other, or just giving each other the cold shoulder.

[6 : 07] We're not quite sure. But what's probably safe to conclude is that they've stopped partnering in the Gospel. Hence, Paul pleads for them to agree in the Lord, agree for the sake of the Lord Jesus, and agree for the sake of His Gospel.

In fact, Paul reminds them in the next verse that they both actually did that. They actually contended at His side in the course of the Gospel. But he's more than just making an appeal to their common history.

He wants them to know, actually, that the work of the Gospel is at stake in their relationship. This is not just a quarrel between friends anymore. What they're doing has implications for the Gospel.

For if the Gospel is the act of God reconciling Himself to those who are His enemies, that's us, then the messengers of that Gospel, these two ladies and us, need to live it out as well, don't they?

See, peace, you see, is not just an inner feeling of well-being or peace with God. It needs to extend to our relationships as well. And so when conflicts arise, we need to remember that the reputation of the Gospel, the Gospel of peace, is at stake.

[7 : 19] Now, Paul also reminds them that their names are in the Book of Life. And here, he's sort of picking up what we read last week. They're both citizens of Heaven, and so he's asking, you know, what's going to happen when you both get there?

Are you going to continue to avoid each other? We'd hope not. So if that's going to be happening in Heaven, then why aren't you reconciling now on Earth? Now, notice as well that on top of pleading with the two ladies, Paul also pleads with a third person.

He calls him my true companion. It's in singular, so there's only one person. And he's asking this person, whoever he may be, to help bring these two women together. Now, people speculate who this person might be, a church leader, someone close to the woman.

Some even think it's Luke, the Gospel writer. But at the end of the day, who it is isn't so important. What's more important is to see that there is a role for others in the church to play in peacemaking.

Now, this isn't to say that every time there's a conflict, we all, you know, jump in and have our say, like it's a free fall. No. But often it's tempting to just look the other way as well, isn't it?

[8 : 31] Just leave the people to sort it out. Or, if they can't, you know, whatever. Now, relating rightly is actually a habit.

Something that we all have to do, and we all have to work at as a church. Otherwise, what happens is that we just leave people to dysfunctional relationships results. I know many people hate conflict.

They think it's always bad, particularly with Asians. But actually, if you think about it, not all conflict, particularly the ones where it's just in the nature of disagreement, is bad.

Disagreements are common, aren't they? I mean, just take, for instance, even in the closest of marriages. Husband and wives, they don't always see an eye to eye on things, do they? And conflict may ensue.

Often ensues. If that's the case, then how much more in a church where there's so many different people, different temperaments, different personalities, skills, and levels of maturity.

[9 : 37] We hate conflict, but really, if we're honest, it is sort of part and parcel of life. As people try and understand each other, sometimes they unintentionally rub against each other the wrong way and have friction.

But when we don't initially see eye to eye, that's not necessarily a bad thing, initially. It's what matters after that that's important, how we deal with it.

We can't avoid conflict all the time, but if we want to develop good habits, then we need to know how to deal with it in the right way. So for instance, if we make an effort to resolve our differences whenever conflicts arise, then actually, it may actually be a good thing for a healthy church because what happens is that we learn to practice what is in chapter 2.

We learn to put each other before ourselves. Or as Paul says here, we learn to agree in the Lord, agree for the sake of the gospel. We learn to think not just, oh, how am I impacted, but how is the gospel impacted?

And even if we don't get our way, we learn to put the gospel first. But this is something we have to be intentional, don't we? Because it doesn't come to us naturally.

[10 : 58] We have to actually choose to show grace and forbearance and be humble enough to admit we're wrong, if we are wrong. The lazy way is to give up. The lazy way is to just everyone go their separate ways and work with only those people that they can work with.

But if we do that, then we don't display the gospel, do we, as a community? But if we do, Paul says in verse 5, what will happen is that our gentleness will be evident to all.

Now I take it that all here means people outside the church as well, and the gentleness here is not about speaking softly or whatever. The gentleness here is actually the patience and the grace that we show to each other.

And if we do that consistently, then what happens is that we become a witness to the world of the gospel that we believe. And when people see that even when there's disagreement, we can be gracious to each other, then it actually speaks the gospel in action.

Now I'm glad to say that actually I've seen that happen here. Not a lot. I mean, you don't have lots of conflict, but I've seen it happen when there is conflict that people have the courage and humility to actually resolve their differences.

[12 : 19] And so, that's a real joy to be able to see that happen. But I want to encourage all of us to have that habit to put that into practice. So that's the first habit, Relating Rightly.

Let's move on to the second one, that of consistent prayerfulness. And that begins in the second part of verse 5, 5b. Now here again, Paul envisions challenges in life as we seek to stand firm in the Lord.

And again, our natural tendency when troubles come is to become anxious, to fear the worst. But being anxious actually changes nothing. In fact, it robs us of having joy in what's good, in enjoying the good.

So Paul encourages a different response in verse 6. Don't be anxious about anything, he says, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your request to God.

Now again, this requires discipline and training because our natural tendency whenever things go wrong is not to turn to prayer as our first response. Now depending on your personality, you either go into problem-solving mode, which is me, or else you melt and go into panic.

[13 : 31] Well done. Turning to prayer first is not a natural first response. But Paul says we ought to pray first.

Why? Because it's an instinctive acknowledgement that we're dependent on God for all things. Now Paul uses three words here, prayer, petition, request. And while we might try and sort of distinguish each of them, and there are slight differences, I think the more important point here is this, that Paul is simply encouraging prayers of all kinds.

As long as we do pray, what form it takes is probably not as important. The other thing that's important is our attitude. For we are to pray with joy, verse 4, pray rejoicing in the Lord always.

And then in verse 5, we are to pray with thanksgiving as well. Now again, this can be hard. You know, if you failed an exam or lost your job, it's hard to feel joy and thanksgiving in those circumstances.

And yet Paul encourages us to rejoice and be thankful even in those situations. And he's asking us instead of focusing on our problems, actually, to focus on God. Focus on the times He has helped us.

[14 : 44] Focus on the times where He did help us in sending His Son to save us. And then give thanks for it. Give thanks and pray expectantly knowing that God, because He's helped us in the past, will help us again.

In fact, Paul gives us another encouragement in verse 5 by saying that the Lord is near. That is, we can pray and we will know that God will help because the Lord, His Spirit, is always with us.

Now, if we practice this kind of prayerfulness, this consistent and constant prayerfulness, then really, a large part of our day will be taken up praying.

We won't just be praying during our quiet times or praying when we're in church. No, we'll be praying even on the move, short but frequent conversations with God whenever we need it.

And when we do that, we sort of expand our prayer life so that we cultivate a mindfulness of God's presence. The more we pray, the more we realize that God is near.

[15 : 51] And then slowly but surely, God uses that mindfulness to shape our thoughts and responses so that we can say in verse 7 that the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Now, I think when people sometimes read verse 7, what they think of is that when we talk of peace that transcends all understanding, they think of a mystical sort of Zen-like peace. One that sort of defies logic that disengages the mind.

A bit like transcendental meditation. And I think I've got a picture of this lady sitting at the edge of a pool doing that. Where you sort of empty your mind, you disengage, and you free yourself from all the cares of the world.

Are you feeling that peace right now? But this isn't the process of transformation here, I don't think. Rather, what the peace of God gives us is the ability to see with the eyes of faith.

That is, to trust God over and above what the human mind can comprehend. I think that's what transcends all understanding means. So that even when all hope seems lost to the naked eye, we can still rejoice and know God's peace because we trust that the Lord is near to help.

[17 : 10] He will help even when all things seem lost. But this sort of peace is cultivated with consistent prayer because that sort of prayer trains us to keep trusting in the Lord.

It trains us not to slip into thoughts of despair and negativity whenever things go wrong. Which brings us to the third habit, that of a biblical thought life.

Now I'm sure you've heard the saying we are what we eat. I don't know whether you agree with that or not. But I think what's even more true is this saying we are what we think.

For what we occupy our thoughts with reveal what we value and worship. But it not only reflects our desires, it also shapes them. And so with that in mind Paul says finally whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, if anything is excellent or praiseworthy, think about such things.

Now here I think Paul is playing on what's common in those days. You know those Greek philosophers or Roman philosophers would sit around all day and they engage in intellectual discourse, eating grapes.

[18 : 21] Have you seen pictures of those? Reclining. For them, this is the ultimate in life, right? For the Greeks, the upper class who can afford not to work, the ultimate in life is to just spend their day pursuing knowledge and wisdom and talking about it.

I think Paul is sort of appealing to this high-minded ideal because he's using all these adjectives but he's also making fun of them and sort of including a twist because unlike these philosophers, Paul has no sense that this thinking needs to be self-generated.

It doesn't come from humans. Neither is he advocating the power of positive thinking. Alright? A lot of people read this verse and think, oh yep, all you need to do is think positively. Those are all positive attributes and therefore you'll be alright.

Rather, Paul actually in verse 9 tells them where the source of their thoughts are to come from. He says, whatever you've learned or received or heard from me or seen in me, put it into practice.

So there's two things here. Paul wants them to fill their minds with his teachings which he's got from the Lord including what has been taught in this letter. They are also to consider Paul's own way of life that is a life of suffering.

[19 : 37] And then what happens is that they're not just to sit around talk about it and gaze into their navels. Rather, they are to put it into practice. So yes, reflect on what Paul has said.

Reflect and think through all its implications and significance. But then after that, we are to put it into practice. Now some of us are really good at sharing Christian articles on Facebook.

I do that myself. Paul encourages us don't just post or share it. Put it into practice as well. Now again, critical thinking and putting it into practice is another habit that we need to train.

Because often it's easy to just let our minds wander, isn't it? Or just carelessly soak up all that rubbish that passes for wisdom in this world. Whether it's the values that come across on TV or the things our friends or colleagues or schoolmates say.

But the thing is that we can only really sort out what's truly good and bad if we have some objective measure against which to measure it. In other words, we need a Christian worldview.

[20 : 42] We need a set of clearly established truths against which to measure what we read and hear. You see, when Paul says to think about what is true, what's true, he's not just referring to thinking about abstract truth in isolation from our life.

No, he's saying that when we're confronted with a situation, a real-life decision, we're to think through how our knowledge of truth, what we already know, can influence our decision or how it influences the way we act.

The same goes with things about purity and what is lovely and what is admirable. We're not just to think pure of thoughts, but then we need to practice purity as well when we are tempted to do otherwise.

But cultivating a Christian worldview actually takes time and discipline. It's truth that needs to actually lodge deep into our minds through constant reflection and practice.

Now, many of you are gardeners, maybe, but there's one expert gardener in our midst, that's my wife, and she tells me that gardens, she probably don't like me saying that, but anyway, but gardens, great gardens, really thrive when they benefit from deep watering, right?

[21 : 59] You don't just stand there in the middle of the day and do half an hour of this and hope that the garden will be good, no. In fact, if you're really dedicated, you wake up at 5 a.m. or stay up until the sun's down, and you would stand there in the middle of the night with the mozzies flying around you and give the garden, the soil, a good soaking because what you want to do is you want the water to really sink deep into the soil.

And then what happens is that the roots of the plants will go deep to draw that water. And so even in the hot weather, they'll be able to soak up what's really deep inside.

And so that's the same here. If we want to have a good Christian worldview, we need to give proper time to deeply soaking our minds in God's truth, in learning, and then in practicing.

And for us, truth is not just found in Paul's words, but it's found in the entire Bible. Our Old Testament reading today in Psalm 19 sort of makes a similar point to Paul. If you bother to read it again, you'll see that Paul actually used a lot of similar ideas and words as with the Psalm.

So like verse 8 in the Psalm, it says, the statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making the wise simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The fear of the Lord is pure, that word there, enduring forever.

[23 : 18] By them, verse 11, your servant is warned, in keeping them there is great reward. You see, God's word is not something that you use as a manual that you dip into from time to time just to pick up a little tidbit of truth here and there whenever you're in trouble.

No, Paul says we have to think deeply about these things. We have to use it to shape our entire worldview and then put it into practice. Then it will really help us to stand firm because we're deeply rooted in God's truth.

truth. And I have to say that from personal experience, the past time in life to do this is when you're a young adult, when you have the time and the energy before kids come and, you know, your time goes out the window.

So that's a lot of you. You may think you're busy, but actually you do have the time and now is the right time to sink deep into God's truth. So if you come along to Bible study, that's great.

But when you come, really work at studying God's word, really grapple and wrestle with his truth. Because what you're doing is you're soaking deep to prepare yourself for times when you may not have the time to do that kind of deep thinking.

[24 : 30] You want to at those times be ready to just draw upon what you do know in order to make wise decisions and live and practice what God wants you to do. So let me encourage you, if you're not part of a study group, to be one, be in one, and if you are part of one, then treasure those times when you come together.

Well, there we have it, three habits, relationships, prayer, and word. And if we give ourselves to these, then we are training ourselves in righteousness and we're helping ourselves not just to stand firm in the Lord, but to maintain joy and peace even when challenges come.

But just a final word from me, and I want to just encourage you not to think of these things as things that we have to do to remain Christians, that we have to do even to achieve joy and peace.

No, joy and peace are grace or gifts from God. And these other habits that we have are what I call means of grace. They're like channels which God uses to bring us his grace, his joy, his peace.

So it's like the city water system that we have, Melbourne water, whatever. Peace and joy are like the water. But the habits we practice are the things we do to keep the pipes in good working order, whether it's clearing blockages or repairing leaks.

[25 : 47] We want to do that so that we can keep the water flowing. And it's the same with joy and peace. Maintaining right relationships, consistent prayer, cultivating a biblical thought life.

Those are the things we practice to keep the channels flowing so that God's joy and peace and grace keeps coming to us even when things are tough. So let me pray and ask God to help us do that.

Father, we thank you that ultimately we know that you are near, that if we believe in the Lord Jesus, we have the gift of your spirit to help us in time of need, to keep blessing us with not just a knowledge but an experience of joy and peace in this life.

Joy and peace even when things are tough. But help us, Lord, to put these habits into practice because these are the means to use to give us joy, not just individually but as a church.

Give us peace, not just individually but as a church. So help us to build these good habits that will stand us in good stead throughout the rest of our lives. We pray this in Jesus' name.

[27 : 02] Amen.