

# The Mindfulness of Joy in Philippians 4 with Allen Hilton

## Open – It Started with a Squabble

In its twenty-three verses, the fourth chapter of Philippians contains four Hall of Fame-caliber passages. That makes it prime real estate for the Navigators scripture memory system.

*“Rejoice in the Lord always! And again I will say it: rejoice!” (4.4)*

*“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (4.6-7)*

*“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. 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. (4.8-9)*

*“I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” (4.13)*

These passages are beautiful! But their fame and attractiveness can ironically undermine their purpose in Paul’s letter, as we quote them for our daily use. Properly, the last movement of Paul’s letter begins with a crisis: Euodia and Syntyche, two female leaders in the Philippian Christian group, can’t get along. Paul here calls on the community to help these women, who “struggled alongside Paul in the work of the Gospel.” While we don’t know the nature of the conflict, Paul makes his famous command to rejoice in the Lord always with his next pen stroke after he describes it. That context matters for our work on joy. He commands joy amid the uncertainty and concern that division presents. But how can they sustain joy amid such a threat?

## Part One: The Circumstances for Philippian Joy

Joy does not depend on ease or comfort. Sociologists and social psychologists tell us that the happiest people in the world are not those experiencing the easiest or rosiest circumstances. In fact, in this age of positive psychology, quality of life – as measured by the Happiness/Joy Quotient – has become a primary question in universities and in the assessment of nations. Here’s what the Philippians are going through, when Paul tells them to “rejoice in the Lord always!”

### *Pressure or Persecution from Outside*

In this letter, we have seen that Paul is not the only one in duress. He is in prison, but his group of Christians in Philippi are facing their own version of hardship, which Paul describes as...

- “Intimidation” by “Opponents” (1.28)
- “Suffering” (1.29)
- “Struggle” (1.30)

### ***Increasing Conflict within the Community***

Paul strongly called the Philippians to unity in chapters 1 and 2:

*“Only, live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that...I will know that you are...”*

- *standing firm in one spirit,*
- *striving side by side with one mind for the faith of the gospel.”*

Now we hear about a specific live conflict in Philippi:

*I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. <sup>3</sup>Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, <sup>4</sup>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. (Philippians 4.2)*

This conflict becomes our inroad into Paul’s formula for joy.

### **Part Two: Paul’s Method for Infusing Joy**

Into the midst of the Philippians’ circumstances, Paul inserts joy. He exhibits it himself and calls them to a sort of wellbeing that can’t be thwarted by hardship. In Paul’s time, people who encouraged others to change habits or develop new ones had specific methods that help us to understand Paul’s relationship with his Philippians.

### ***Paraenesis: How Philosophers Changed Students’ Habits in the Ancient World***

When ancient philosophers set out to help their students to improve morally, they followed a prescribed pattern. This way of speaking they called *paraenesis*. One scholar has described its purpose like this: “Ancient *paraenesis* was not just exhortation, but something more specific, a speech act that was logically directed towards conduct, behavior, acts to be done, or avoided.” (Troels Engberg-Pederson, “The Concept of *Paraenesis*”)

The general pattern for *paraenesis* had four components:

1. Reminders of the Teacher's Love and Care
2. The Presentation of Examples the Students Could Follow (e.g., Socrates)
3. Encouragement and Affirmation of the Student's Progress
4. The Command Itself

Using these techniques, moral philosophers artfully moved their students from Point A to Point B in their growth

### ***Paul's Paraenetic Call to Tough Joy***

Paul reminds the Philippians of his love and care.

- Paul's Constant Prayer for the Philippians

*I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now...For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. (1.3-8)*

- Paul's Decision to Stay on and Labor for Their Good

*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. (4.10)*

Paul presents examples of the desired behavior.

In this short letter (104 verses) Paul uses the words "joy" and "rejoice" sixteen times (16) – a little more than once every seven verses – mostly to describe his own approach to life. He does this in spite of his current harsh experience of painful and discouraging circumstances.

- Paul's Attitude in Prison

*others proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but intending to increase my suffering in my imprisonment. <sup>18</sup>What does it matter? Just this, that Christ is proclaimed in every way, whether out of false motives or true; and in that I rejoice (1.18)*

*But even if I am being poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you (2.17).*

- Paul's Attitude When in Need

*Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. 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. (4.11-12)*

Paul encourages and affirms the Philippians for their progress up 'til now.

Throughout the letter, Paul lavishes affirmation and praise on the Philippians' for their progress in Faith. These are especially pronounced at the beginning and end.

- Paul begins the letter by thanking God exuberantly for them and commending them at the same time (1.3-11)
- Paul ends the letter by thanking them again and praising their participation in his ministry from early days to the present (Paul 4.10-20)

Have you had teachers and coaches who used encouragement to help you change a habit or learn a new one?

### The Command/Exhortation Itself

Paul's unlikely and thrice-repeated command

- *I am glad and rejoice with all of you— and in the same way you also must be glad and rejoice with me.* (2.17-18)
- *Finally, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord.* (3.1)
- *Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice!* (4.4)

### **Part Three – Paul's Formula: Three Practices That Produce Joy**

Paul must have known the degree of difficulty involved in cultivating a habit of joy in all circumstances. To help himself jump that high bar, he had learned three "tricks of the trade": prayer, a focused direction of the mind, and practiced contentment. Finding the way that these three practices serve joy keeps this fourth chapter from being an unconnected all star team of commands – as if Paul were haphazardly throwing in the kitchen sink before closing. (That's the impression one gets Instead, we should see this string of exhortations as a connected strategy to assist the central goal: joy.

#### ***The Threat to Joy: Worry***

#### ***The Remedy: A Habit of Prayer***

Anyone who seeks joy must do something about worry. Imagining that something bad happening wreaks havoc with the well-being joy would bring. Jesus addressed this in his Sermon on the Mount:

*"Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear...Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, but their heavenly father feeds them."* (Matthew 6.25-26)

Paul sends his Philippians to confident prayer and its outcome, joy's cousin, peace.

*Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.* (Philippians 4.6-7)

### ***The Threat to Joy: Fixating on Problems***

### ***The Remedy: A Habit of Mindfulness***

Bad news is the overwhelming majority of our media coverage. And in 2017 Americans read and watch news A LOT! Yet in our time, research continues to demonstrate that focusing on positive things produces healthier lives. A cottage industry has grown up around the discipline of focusing the mind – often called “mindfulness.” Some forms of this practice takes emphasize emptying or decluttering the mind. Paul here chooses another path, directing the Philippians’ (and our) minds toward good and noble objects.

*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. 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.*  
(Philippians 4.8-9)

### ***The Threat to Joy: Financial Fear***

### ***The Remedy: Contentment***

Financial concerns continue to rank among the top three stressors on survey after survey of the American people. Paul has learned to be content in all financial circumstances. That side-by-side would naturally commend Paul to us as we face our own financial pressures. His secret is being content.

Andrew Weil has written, “I think instead [of happiness] we should be working for contentment... an inner sense of fulfillment that's relatively independent of external circumstances.” In that sense, contentment and joy are close cousins.

Jesus’ words above confronted material worries: what to eat, what to drink, what to wear. He was talking to Galilean peasants, but material worries span the socio-economic continuum. After he has seemed to turn to a new topic, Paul gives us his third joy-producing practice: contentment. In the context of thanking the Philippians for their material gift, Paul writes:

*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. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. 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. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.* (Philippians 4.10-14)

### ***The Threat to Fear – Lonely Self-Reliance***

### ***The Remedy – Self-Reliance in Community***

*I have learned to be content with whatever I have. 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.* (Philippians

4.11-12) With these words, Paul sounds veritably Stoic. Notice the capital “S” here. By using the word “stoic”, I don’t mean to describe your staid uncle with the tiny range of emotional expression. I speak here, rather, of the kind of Stoicism for which moral philosophers of Paul’s time trained: a state of self-mastery and discipline that wouldn’t allow circumstances to dictate their well-being. They called this sort of invulnerable contentment “*autarkeia*” – self-sufficiency – and that’s the very term Paul uses here and the NRSV translates “content”.

A Stoic called Epictetus, whose philosophical work started not too long after Paul’s death, taught his students,

“With regard to whatever objects give you delight, are useful, or are deeply loved, remember to tell yourself of what general nature they are, beginning from the most insignificant things. If, for example, you are fond of a specific ceramic cup, remind yourself that it is only ceramic cups in general of which you are fond. Then, if it breaks, you will not be disturbed. If you kiss your child, or your wife, say that you only kiss things which are human, and thus you will not be disturbed if either of them dies.” (*Enchiridion* 3)

The Stoics trained to steel themselves against the upset that changed circumstances can inflict. In Paul’s words, they wanted “to be content (*autarkes*) with whatever [they] have.” (4.11) Money or no, favorite ceramic cup or no, friends and family or no, Paul and the Stoic both hope to become free to experience this invulnerable, unassailable sense of well-being. The claim fits within the flow of Paul’s whole letter. If money is the subject in our passage – his gratitude for the Philippians’ financial gift to him brought it to mind – other obstacles to contentment have dotted the letter, for both Paul and his pupils, as we have seen.

### ***Mutual Reliance***

All of this sounds splendid, and it is. Paul’s experience of an implicit call to self-sufficiency and contentment, his *autarkeia*, can stand up against all kinds of ills. Because of this, we may emerge from our passage ready to take it straight home and shout it from the rooftops to our youth groups. But in the 21<sup>st</sup> century west, any conversation about self-sufficiency takes us into a risky region. For, if a feeble, circumstance-dependent quest for happiness is the Scylla of our culture (the dangerous rock Odysseus avoided on the one side) that Paul’s *autarkeia* helps us avoid, as we navigate the perilous waters of our world, another rock (Charybdis) juts out on the other side, just as dangerous.

Affluent Americans often seek a self-reliance that we hope will set us free, but it’s a different sort of self-sufficiency than Paul’s *autarkeia* – one that would liberate us from reliance on anyone else. Those with the means hire out tasks that neighbors could do with us and so insulate ourselves from the vulnerability of needing other people. Others of us, apart from means, wall ourselves off with self-encasing devices that leave us needing no one, each riveted to a screen alone. We even seek damaging substitutes for friendship in

the angry TV and Twitter tribes of our political partisans. Self-sufficiency, a misguided quest to need no one, is on the rise in our land, and it's driving us to all sorts of problems. Sociologists chart a profound rise in loneliness that pervades our culture and leads to suicides at its worst, but also drug abuse and a whole lot of other failed and self-damaging substitutes for community.

If Paul's words in 4.10-13 usher us toward a sturdy self-sufficiency in Christ (*autarkeia*), significant other parts of the letter call the Philippians and us toward community and mutual reliance. He exhorts them (and us) to strive together (1.16-20) to come together (2.1-3), and, by "having... the mind of Christ Jesus", esteeming others as even more important than themselves. They (and we) are to work out their communal salvation with fear and trembling (2.12). Having had Paul veritably drench us with his seminar on community, we could never imagine this Christian *autarkeia* as a solo act. Paul paints throughout the letter a picture of community that is mutually self-sacrificing and interdependent – an antidote to the overdeveloped self-sufficiency and individualism of the modern west. In fact, Bradley Arnold has suggested that since the Enlightenment, interpreters have tended to see Stoic and Pauline use of *autarkeia* through the lens of modernism and western individualism, to our own detriment. He reminds us that both the Stoics and Paul would have shared communitarian assumptions that kept the self-sufficient soul from lapsing into isolation. (*Autarkes in "Stoicism and Phil 4.11: Challenging Individualist Readings of Stoicism," Novum Testamentum 59 (1): 1-19, 2017*) This letter as a whole calls us to keep self- and Christ-reliance in a constructive tandem with communal mutuality.

This communal connectedness of which we speak even shows up in our *autarkeia* passage, in themes from the ethics of friendship. Paul's initial thank you to the Philippians is underwhelming. He's glad for their kindness because it demonstrates their concern, but in verse eleven, he essentially says, "Thanks for the gift, but I didn't really need it." He claims this while sitting in a Roman prison, which has no cafeteria. This gift may have saved Paul's life, and it surely made his circumstances much better, but here he barely ekes out a grateful word.

To discover why Paul's gratitude is so reserved, we do well to visit another Stoic, Seneca, in his ninth letter to his protégé, Lucilius, on choosing friends. Seneca pictures there "the so-called 'fair-weather' friendships." In these, "one who is chosen for the sake of utility will be satisfactory only so long as he is useful." Seneca cautions Lucilius not to fall for that sort, because, "one who begins to be your friend because it pays will also cease because it pays." For Seneca, true friends haven't gotten into the relationship for the benefits it will afford them.

Paul seems to have the same truth about friendship in mind when he offers his own "thankless thanks." Many commentators identify Philippians as a "friendship letter", or at least see in it elements of that genre. (See Abraham Malherbe, *Ancient Epistolary*

*Theorists*, 1988 and those who build on it.) Indeed, from the letter's first words, Paul has treated the Philippians as his friends. By this reading, he is assuring the Philippians that his friendship with them is not contingent on their benefactions – that he would be their friend, even if they had never given him a thing. (See Gordon Fee, *The NIV Commentary on Philippians*. For an alternative interpretation, see David Briones, "Paul's Intentional 'Thankless Thanks' in Philippians 4.10-20," *JSNT* 34 (1) 2011, 47-69)

### **Close – All Begins and Ends in Jesus**

Philippians 4.13 brings us to our closing thought. Moral philosophers of Paul's time believed that progress was up to the will power of the faithful person. Paul saw it otherwise. He believed that God had been working in the Philippians' lives from the beginning and would continue through to the end.

- *I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ (1.6).*
- *...for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (2.13)*
- *I can do all things through him who strengthens me. (4.13)*

How about us? Being commanded to rejoice, being told to pray, focus, and be content – these may seem like things you've tried and failed at before. But Paul tells us there is a holy wind at our back. We ride that holy wind when we connect to the God who "began a good work" in us, who is "at work in us, enabling...", who "strengthens us" to do things we never thought we could do – things like joy unsinkable.

Paul ends his letter right where he began it: with a greeting with grace: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit."

As we end our class, I wish you the same. In the spirit of this last session and of your deep quest to join the ancient Philippians on Paul's journey of joy, I close with a blessing: Grace, peace and joy to you as you take Philippians into your life and out into your world!