

# Philippians: The Pursuit of Joy

## Stand Firm! \* Philippians 4:1-9

### Introduction

All right, Harmony, take your Bibles and turn with me to two passages. Our main text today is from Philippians 4, but I first want to start in Ephesians 6. So, get to Philippians 4, mark your place and then turn back a couple of pages to Ephesians 6.

Let's read verses 10-13 to set the stage for our message this morning:

*Finally, be strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might. [11] Put on the whole armor of God, that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. [12] For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. [13] Therefore take up the whole armor of God, that you may be able to withstand in the evil day, and having done all, to stand firm. (Ephesians 6:10-13 ESV)*

Harmony, as we come to our text this morning, we need to recognize that we are in a war. One of the greatest concerns that I have every week is that you won't simply be educated and encouraged, but that you will be transformed. That you won't simply walk out of here thinking, wow, that was a good service but rather wow, Jesus is a great Savior and I am ready to live for Him. And if that is going to be the case today one of the things we have to realize up front is that life is war. While externally it might look like we are at peace, the truth is that we are in the midst of a life and death struggle. A struggle for the gospel. A struggle for the souls of men and women. A struggle for our joy. A struggle against the devil and his ruthless cohorts. And in both Ephesians 6 and Philippians 4, Paul tells us that in this battle we must stand firm. The picture in both places is of soldiers in a battle line who are holding fast against the enemies' charge. So, please make no mistake about it. If you are a believer here today, you are in a war. You are a soldier in God's army, and you have been called to fight. And today from Philippians 4, we are going to learn how to do so. Are you ready to learn how to fight today? If so, let's read our passage for today.

*Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. [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. [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. [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. (Philippians 4:1-9 ESV)*

Verse 1 is transitional in that it ties in pretty much everything that Paul has said in the first three chapters with his opening remarks in chapter 4. In this verse he once again displays his heart for the Philippians – he tells them he loves and longs for them, he says they are his joy and crown, and he calls them his beloved. Paul has deep feelings for these people, which makes his final words to them drip with extra urgency.

Now, you probably noticed that verse 1 starts with the word *therefore*, clearly pointing us back to what we have studied in the first three chapters. But the word *thus* later on in the verse unmistakably points towards what Paul has to say in verses 2-9. So, here is how we should understand verse 1: because we have enemies, because we have been justified, because we have been sanctified, and because we are partnering in the gospel, stand firm! That's verse 1. Let's now look at verses 2-9 to see how Paul tells us to do so. We will see that he gives us six components for standing firm.

### **1. Paul says that we must pursue harmony with other believers. (v. 2-3)**

Look at verses 2-3 again:

*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.*

As most of you know, Eva and I are in the process of adopting two children, a boy and a girl from China. And since the names that they currently have are simply designations related to when and where they were born, we have the privilege of giving them new names. However, as usual we are having a hard time agreeing on what we should call them, so I was thinking this week that maybe we should just make it easy and use one of these names. How about it Eva, do you prefer Euodia or Syntyche? Neither one? Yeah, I don't think so either.

Anyways, that has nothing at all to do with the message, so let me tell you a few things about these two ladies. First, note that they were key players in the church at Philippi.

In verse 3 Paul says they have labored side by side with him in the gospel. The language here literally pictures gladiators fighting together against a common enemy. So, these women aren't casual attenders or uninvolved members. They are high-profile members in the church – perhaps founding members with Lydia when Paul first brought the gospel to Philippi a decade before. This is further stressed by the fact that Paul says their names are in the book of life. So, these ladies are true believers who have co-labored with Paul and have been instrumental to the spread of the gospel in Philippi and beyond.

Second, their issue wasn't about the gospel, or else Paul would have taken sides with one or the other. Their issue concerned the way in which they were interacting with one another. We don't know exactly what the issue was, but most likely it was over how to do ministry. Perhaps it was about how to minister to women or how to reach the lost in Philippi. But it seems likely that what happened is that they couldn't agree on some ministry issue, and as a result feelings got hurt. But regardless of the issue, Paul tells them that they need *to agree in the Lord*.

Now, it's very important to note here that when Paul says *agree* he means to have the same mindset, which would naturally point the Philippians back to the key passage in this letter, verses 5-8 of chapter 2. Let's look at that again together. As you are turning, let's remember that when the church at Philippi received this letter, they wouldn't have done what we have over the last few months. They wouldn't have studied the letter section by section, at least at first. The first thing they would have done would have been to read the entire letter through together. So, picture the entire church listening carefully as one of the elders reads through the letter. And no doubt when they got to chapter 4 and Euodia and Syntyche heard their names mentioned, they and everyone else would have immediately thought back to chapter 2:5-8. Look at it with me:

*Have this mind among yourselves, [the word for mind here is the same word for agree in 4:2] 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. (Philippians 2:5-8 ESV)*

Do you know what these two ladies would have recognized? We need to have the same mindset as Christ. We need to practice humility and forget about what we want. We need to put our differences aside and continue to stand together in fighting for the gospel.

It's interesting to note as well that Paul calls in for some backup with the problem; apparently this wasn't a minor issue but was something that was threatening to do great harm to the church. So in verse 3 he enlists the help of his true companion to assist these ladies in reconciliation. Now, there is a lot of conjecture about who this exactly is – some say Luke, others Epaphroditus – I have no idea. And it doesn't really matter. What matters is this: harmony in the church is a community project. Harmony is something that we all have to work on and all have to assist one another with. We could say this for our church: we must pursue harmony at Harmony together.

Let me just put this bluntly for you. As I consider the dangers for our church in the days ahead, I am not overly concerned about doctrinal issues. We have been talking a lot about the gospel and it seems like most, if not all, of us are on the same page. And while we can't and won't assume that this will always be the case, I think we can say that right now gospel fidelity is a strength of Harmony Bible Church. That being the case, my primary concern is that we would become divided over non-gospel issues, particularly relational issues. Over hurt feelings that come as a result of different opinions on how to do ministry. And that is why Paul's words here are so critical for us to heed. We must be willing to put aside our personal preferences and desires and in humility pursue harmony with one another. Note what D.A. Carson has to say on this point:

*Make sure you agree over the gospel. Work hard to develop perfect agreement on matters of greatest importance: the gospel, the Word of God, the glory of Christ, the good of God's people, the beauty of holiness, the ugliness of sin—especially your own sin. Personal differences should never become an occasion for advancing your party, for stroking bruised egos, for resorting to cheap triumphalism, for trimming the gospel by appealing to pragmatics. Focus on what unites you: the gospel, the gospel, the gospel. Be like-minded; think the same things; agree with one another. Work hard and humbly on these central issues, and in most instances the peripheral matters will take care of themselves. Resolve to pursue like-mindedness with other believers. This will enable and strengthen all sides, so that you will never abandon the Christian walk.<sup>1</sup>*

Brothers and sisters, we are in a war. And one of the chief strategies of the opponent is to tempt us to fight amongst ourselves. He wants us to get caught up in arguments over non-essential issues. But let's not fall into this trap. Let's keep the gospel first and humbly pursue harmony with one another.

## **2. Rejoice in the Lord. (v. 4)**

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<sup>1</sup> Carson, D. A. (1996). *Basics for believers: An exposition of Philippians* (103). Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books.

Ok, component #2 is found in verse 4, and is a very familiar one to us at this point:

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice.*

Now, if you haven't picked up from our study of Philippians that Paul is serious about joy, then you simply haven't been paying attention. And since we have talked about this a great deal, let me simply point out four final things about joy from this verse. First,

- **We are to rejoice always.**

Verse 4 is very familiar to most of us and as a result has largely become a simple Christian platitude. But you can tell that Paul is serious because he uses the words again and always. Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, rejoice. He really wants the Philippians to get this. So, let me ask: what circumstances or situations are involved in the word always? Pretty much all of them, right? We are to rejoice no matter what the circumstances, no matter what we have going on in our lives.

Second, note that:

- **Rejoicing is a command, not a suggestion.**

Rejoice is a verb, it is something you choose to do. And it isn't optional for a believer. Here in verse 4 rejoice is in the present imperative, meaning that believers are called to the continual habitual practice of rejoicing.<sup>2</sup> Rejoicing should be a habit for us. It should be something that we just naturally do.

Now, in order to get this we have to recognize the difference between joy and happiness. Happiness is a feeling, it's an emotion. It's dependent upon circumstances. Perhaps you remember the Charlie Brown cartoon *Happiness is a Warm Puppy*. What's the problem with that? Well, the problem is, when the warm puppy goes away, so does the happiness.

Joy on the other hand, isn't dependent on circumstances. Joy comes from one thing, and one thing only, and that is the Lord. You see, the third thing we learn about joy here in verse 4 is that the key to rejoicing is to do it in the Lord.

- **The key to rejoicing always is to do it *in the Lord*.**

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<sup>2</sup> MacArthur, John, pg. 273 (2001). *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, Chicago, IL: Moody Press

Now, what exactly does that mean, *in the Lord*? I think it means continually focusing on the gospel. Note what 1 Peter 1:8-9 says:

*Though you have not seen him, you love him. Though you do not now see him, you believe in him and rejoice with joy that is inexpressible and filled with glory, [9] obtaining the outcome of your faith, the salvation of your souls. (1 Peter 1:8-9 ESV)*

In other words, as we focus upon the fact that through the gospel we have been saved, it will naturally produce within us an inexpressible joy. Here's another way to look at it. Psalm 40:

*I waited patiently for the LORD; he inclined to me and heard my cry. [2] He drew me up from the pit of destruction, out of the miry bog, and set my feet upon a rock, making my steps secure. [3] He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD. (Psalm 40:1-3 ESV)*

Listen friends, I recognize that this is perhaps one of the most difficult things that the Bible calls us to do - to rejoice despite our circumstances. And yet it is so vital that we seek to obey. Because I really believe that one of the primary ways the devil gets us off track in the Christian life is by overwhelming us with circumstances.

The way to fight back is to remember all that God has done for us in Jesus Christ, because when we do it will fill our hearts with praise and joy for Him. Look at verse 2 again...*God drew me up from the pit of destruction*. When I was dead in my sins, completely lost and headed for an eternity in hell, God rescued me! And therefore regardless of the circumstances I find myself in, I can rejoice in the Lord – in what he has done and will do for me forever!

Now, there is one more thing I want to point out here about joy. A point that is implicit in Philippians 4:4, but is very explicit in Psalm 40:3, and that is:

- **Rejoicing is essential to Christian witness.**

One of the greatest ways that we can be a testimony to a lost and dying world is to rejoice despite our circumstances. Listen, we all know that Christians are not immune from suffering and difficulty. Despite what the heretical health and wealth preachers proclaim, we face as many if not more difficulties than unbelievers. The difference is that we have the ability to see beyond our circumstances and rejoice because of what God has done for us. And when we do, we give an incredibly powerful testimony to the power of the gospel.

Look at Psalm 40:3 again:

*He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God. Many will see and fear, and put their trust in the LORD.*

And I have to tell you that one of the big things that I want to see as a result of this series is a group of people who rejoice regardless of what they face in life and that God uses this to cause many others to have joy in Him as well. Amen?

All right, on to component 3 of standing firm, which we find in verse 5:

*Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand;*

### **3. Be gentle. (v. 5).**

The Greek word behind reasonableness here in verse 5 is one that no single English word can fully translate. The idea behind the word includes generosity, goodwill, friendliness, mercy, indulgence, and graciousness. It has to do with having the humility that produces the patience to endure injustice, disgrace, and mistreatment without retaliation, bitterness, or vengeance.<sup>3</sup> It is the gentleness that was modeled for us by Jesus during his arrest, trial and crucifixion. 1 Peter 2 describes it for us:

*When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly. (1 Peter 2:23 ESV)*

Now, we have to be careful that we don't associate gentleness with weakness. Jesus was gentle, but he wasn't weak. The truth is that gentleness, what the Bible sometimes calls meekness, is strength under control.

And I have to tell you that of all the components we are going to talk about today, I probably need this one the most. I don't think gentle is a word that most people use to describe me. I am not someone who likes to fight in a gentle way. I tend to take more of the bull in the china shop approach. And yet gentle was the way of Jesus. It was the path that he took. And it is the path we are called to take as well.

And to help us with this, you will note that Paul adds a short phrase at the end of verse 5: *the Lord is near*. The word for near can mean near in time or near in space. I think that

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<sup>3</sup> MacArthur, John, pg. 276. (2001). *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, Chicago, IL: Moody Press

Paul has both in mind; Jesus is near in the present – he is with us every single moment of every single day – and his coming is near in time. And so one of the keys for being like Jesus – specifically in being gentle - is to constantly remember that he is near. He is with us and he is coming for us soon.

Ok, component #4 to standing firm is don't worry, be prayerful. Verse 6:

*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. (Philippians 4:6)*

#### **4. Don't worry, be prayerful.**

Before we go too far on this point we need to remind ourselves where Paul is when he writes this. He isn't sipping a cold drink in a hammock at some Mediterranean Resort. He is in a Roman prison, chained to a soldier at all times. At any moment he could be sentenced to death. And he has a lot of enemies who are out to get him, including other professing Christians. So things aren't going too well for them. And yet he tells the Philippians not to be anxious about what? Don't be anxious about anything. Once again, what is included in anything? Pretty much everything, right? And I think this is a very practical point for every single person here today, because the truth is that we all worry, don't we? I know that some of us worry more than others, but we all worry. We all have things we are anxious about. Whether it is the economy, the weather, school, our job, our health, or the upcoming election, just think about all of the things you worried about this week. And yet, Paul commands us not to worry about any of it.

But you know what is great about what Paul tells us here – he tells us how not to worry. He teaches us something called the replacement principle. He instructs us to replace worry with prayer. So, think about it this way. The next time you find yourself worrying, replace your worry with prayer. There are many of us here today who have things on our mind that we are worried about. And what Paul is telling us is that we need to stop worrying and we need to start praying.

And there are two types of prayers that we should pray. One, we simply need to ask God for things. Paul uses three terms for prayer in verse 6 – prayers, supplications and requests – and all three simply refer to asking God for things. So instead of spending our time worrying, we need to ask God to intervene and take care of what we are worrying about.

Second, he says that we need to pray prayers of thanksgiving. He says to ask with thanksgiving. Now, how does this help us not to worry? Well, it reminds us of how God has provided for us in the past, and therefore builds within us confidence and trust

that he will provide for us in the future. I really don't think it gets more practical than this. If you are worrying, what do you do? Go on the offensive and pray. Start by thanking God for how he has taken care of you in the past, and move to asking him to take care of you in the present. Listen, this is all about going on the offensive. The way to stand firm isn't to retreat but to advance. And the way to advance is to pray.

Now, notice what the results are of this approach. Look at verse 7:

*And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

Here is a wonderful truth; when we pray instead of getting anxious, God grants us peace. A peace that goes beyond our understanding or comprehension. And notice what this peace does – it guards our hearts and minds. The word guard here is literally *garrison*. The Philippians were used to seeing a garrison of Roman soldiers every day – a reminder that the most powerful fighting force the world had ever seen had been sent by the Emperor to protect them. And so this is a wonderful picture of the protection that prayer offers us. Prayer actually guards us from worry by granting us peace. Peace is the shield that protects us from worry.

And please recognize that this peace comes regardless of circumstances. It comes regardless of whether or not our prayers are answered. It is a peace that comes from knowing that God is in control and working out our circumstances for our good and for His glory.

I'd like to point out something about peace for a second. The peace that we can have through prayer is a wonderful blessing from God. But before we can have peace from God we must first experience peace with God. Romans 5:1 says this:

*Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. (Romans 5:1 ESV)*

If you are here today and have never experienced peace from God, it very well may be that you haven't made peace with God. You only get peace from God after you have made peace with God. And the way to make this peace is to repent of your sins and place your faith in Jesus Christ as your Savior. And when you do, God will justify you in his sight and give you peace. Peace with Him and peace from Him.

Ok, we are coming down the homestretch now. Component #5 of standing firm is found in verse 8:

*Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, anything worthy of praise, think about these things.*

## **5. Meditate on truth (v. 8)**

The word for think here means more than just simply having thoughts about something; it means to evaluate, to consider, or to calculate. Paul is commanding us to consider the virtues listed in this verse and meditate on their implications.<sup>4</sup>

Let's talk for a moment about how important our thoughts are. In a real sense, we are what we think. Proverbs 23:7 makes this clear:

*For as he thinks in his heart, so is he. Proverbs 23:7 (NKJV)*

Our modern day proverb is garbage in, garbage out. And here is the problem many of us face; we are consuming way too much garbage and not nearly enough truth. I am firmly convinced that one of the primary reasons many Christians struggle to stand firm is that they are consuming too much garbage and not nearly enough of God's Word.

Listen, this is pretty simple. I know in my own life that when I don't spend time in God's Word, I find myself all out of whack spiritually. And I have to tell you, the absolute worst times of this for me are on vacation. I am a pretty routine guy – and when I get off my routine I normally get away from spending time in the Word- and the results are never good.

And so if you are here today and you find that you frequently struggle in your walk with the Lord and you struggle to really get this Christianity thing, it very well may be that you aren't spending enough time meditating on the wonder, beauty and truth of Scripture. If you are going to stand firm, you have stand in and on God's Word. No way around it.

I refer to John 17:17 quite often, but I think it is worth doing here again. Jesus prayed this for all of his disciples, including you and me:

*Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. (John 17:17 ESV)*

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<sup>4</sup> MacArthur, John, p. 285. (2001). *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary*, Chicago, IL: Moody Press

Friends, the way that we grow in our faith, the way we become mature, the way that we learn to stand firm is to meditate on God's Word.

Ok, here is the last one. Component #6 is to practice what you have learned.

## **6. Practice what you have learned.**

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.*

The word practice here refers to repetitive, continuous action. This makes me think of the athletes who just competed in the Olympics. Think about Michael Phelps. How many times do you think he has practiced the freestyle stroke? Undoubtedly tens of thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of times. Repeatedly, over and over, day after day, practicing the same stroke. What does this mean for us? It means that we need to take what we have seen in Scripture, and what we have heard taught in our church, and what has been modeled by our examples, and we need to practice it repeatedly. Over and over again

D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, perhaps the greatest preacher of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, wrote this in his book *Spiritual Depression: It's Causes and Cure*:

*I defy you to read the life of any saint that has ever adorned the life of the Church without seeing at once that the greatest characteristic in the life of that saint was discipline and order. Invariably it is the universal characteristic of all the outstanding men and women of God. Read about Henry Martyn, David Brainerd, Jonathon Edwards, the brothers Wesley and Whitfield – read their journals. It does not matter what branch of the church they belonged to, they have all disciplined their lives and have insisted upon the need for this: and obviously it is something that is thoroughly scriptural and absolutely essential.<sup>5</sup>*

Now, I was told that I got the Burger King slogan slightly wrong last week, but I guarantee that I will get this one right... what is Nike's slogan? Just do it.

And so I want to say to Harmony Bible Church today, let's just do it. Let's pursue harmony with one another. Let's rejoice always, regardless of our circumstances. Let's be gentle in the face of difficulty. Let's pray instead of being anxious. And let's

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<sup>5</sup> *Spiritual Depression: It's Causes and Cure* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965]

meditate on the truth and watch it transform us into people who God uses to rock south East Iowa and the whole world for Him.

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