

“Rejoice! Again, I Say Rejoice!”
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[Philippians 4:4-13](#)

“I’ve got the joy, joy, joy, joy down in my heart!” Do you know this children’s song? It’s probably one of my favorite church songs from childhood. It was always fun to shout “Where?” and then shout even more loudly “Down in my heart!” And then the verse ends with “down in my heart to stay.” As kids, we really tapered off when we got to that part. It was much more fun to shout “where?” and “Down in my heart” than it was to get to that last bit, “down in my heart to stay.” By then, with all of the shouting of “where,” the first part of the verse is all but forgotten. Just what is it that we have down in our hearts? Oh, yes, “joy!” As kids, we were exemplifying that joy as we sang, even as we shouted “where?!” Children seem to have a better grasp on joy than adults do. Just think for a moment about the children you know and the adults you know. I imagine most of us know a lot more joyful children than joyful adults.

Sometimes, children don’t even know that they are supposed to be sad. I have several times attended or officiated at funerals and observed young children who were just being themselves – just being happy – in the midst of sadness. And what I have seen is adults who were smiling at these children, in the midst of *their* grief. Sure, children have their down times, as well, but I definitely think children, in general, are better at this “joy” thing than adults.

Erma Bombeck once wrote about an experience at church. She said there was a little boy who kept turning around and smiling at the people behind him. And you know how it is, smiles are infectious, so the people behind him were smiling back. Bombeck says the little boy wasn’t “kicking, tearing the hymnals, or rummaging through his mother’s handbag. He was just smiling.”

But the mother jerked him around and said “Stop that grinning! You’re in church!” As the tears started to roll down his cheek, she said “That’s better.”¹

Yes, we surely don’t want anybody smiling around here!

What is it about joy that we understand as children but seem to lose as adults? I think that part of the answer is in what we refer to longingly as “the innocence of childhood.” We can barely say that phrase without saying it like this: “*(exhale)* ah, the innocence of childhood.” We say that children can be joyful because they have not had the experiences of life that we have had. They haven’t gone through the wars and depressions (both economic and mental). They haven’t experienced the losses of jobs and of loved ones like we have. They haven’t been beaten down by life like we have.

Into our less-than-joyful lives come the words that Paul wrote to the Philippians. In this short letter of just four chapters, Paul uses the Greek words “joy” or “rejoice” fourteen times. He tells the Philippians that he constantly prays for them with joy. He says that he rejoices that others are out spreading the gospel. He tells them to rejoice in the Lord. He mentions “joy” or “to rejoice” seven other times before getting to the passage we read today. In chapter four, Paul says “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” In fact, the majority of the letter of Paul to the Philippians has a tone of joy. Is Paul some childlike person who hasn’t faced the real world? Is that how he can have this sense of true joy? No, I think we all know the answer to that.

Paul had been through quite a lot in his life. He had experienced a lot of pain, and even inflicted a lot of pain before his conversion to Christianity. He had experienced three shipwrecks, five beatings of thirty-nine lashes each, three beatings with a Roman rod, a public stoning that nearly killed him, and multiple imprisonments. In fact, the letter to the Philippians was written

¹ Quoted in *What’s So Amazing About Grace?* By Philip Yancey

while Paul was incarcerated. Scholars are unsure during which imprisonment Paul wrote this letter, but it is likely that it was while Paul was awaiting trial on a capital charge in Rome, where it is believed he was martyred.

While locked up and awaiting a trial that would likely result in his death, Paul wrote this letter to the Philippians, a letter that is filled with joy. So, no, we cannot say that Paul did not know what it was like to face the kinds of hardships that we face. We cannot say that he was a naïve idealist. Paul lived a much tougher life than most of us can imagine, and he lived it for the sake of the gospel, for the sake of Jesus Christ. And yet, through all of this, he was able to write to his friends at Philippi, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” He tells them not to worry, but instead to make request of God in thankful prayer, and the peace of God will be with them.

And then in verse 8, he rattles off a long list of “whatevers.” No, this is not “whatever” like a teenager might say to us. This is a list of things to think about, all starting with whatever. Paul says “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.” Paul has a really good point here. If we are to be joyful people – if we are to rejoice in the Lord – then we need to be filling our minds with things that are true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, and worthy of praise. Instead, we all too often are filling our minds with so-called “reality” television, with violent movies, with crass and immoral entertainment. This is nothing new. In Paul’s day, the Roman empire was known for its barbaric entertainment. Here’s one description of a typical day of entertainment: “wild animal matches took place on the morning of the games, the public executions were held at midday, and then the

gladiatorial matches.”² Paul was telling the people of his day – and ours – that we should be focusing on things that are positive and beneficial, things that are of God. There is now a whole branch of psychology dedicated to similar concepts. It’s called “positive psychology” and it was developed to expand psychology beyond the typical psychological focus on disorders in order to help people live healthier and more fulfilling lives. Psychologists are studying the same kind of things that Paul told the church at Philippi nearly 2000 years ago! We *should* spend more time thinking about the good things around us, rather than just the bad things.

It is interesting how Paul switches around a phrase. In verses 6-7, he tells us not to worry, but instead to pray, and the “peace of God” will be with us. In verses 8-9, he tells us to focus on good things, and in so doing, the “God of peace” will be with us. We can have the “peace of God” and the “God of peace” if we will listen to what Paul tells us.

We can have the “peace that surpasses all understanding” – which was another great verse in that children’s song – “I’ve got the peace that passes understanding down in my heart.” That verse is a real tongue-twister, but it is one that we should focus on. We should spend our mental energy on peace.

Paul understood the ups and downs of life. He understood the trials and tribulations. He understood what it was like to be living “the good life” and he understood what it was like to be in prison, on trial for his life. And, through it all, he said “Rejoice!” In these times of economic hardship, we might focus in on what he says in verses 11-12. He says “I have learned to be content with whatever I have.” This is where Paul’s letter gets pretty interesting. In this verse, he uses a word that would have been well-known to all to be part of the Stoic philosophy. The Stoics believed that human happiness could be obtained by being totally self-sufficient. And, here, Paul is

² <http://library.thinkquest.org/26602/entertainment.htm>

using their language to describe himself. He says he has learned contentment; he has learned self-sufficiency. It runs counter to what we expect. Paul seems to be endorsing the popular philosophy of the day.

Then, he makes it worse in verse 12. He writes, “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.” This doesn’t sound like a problem, until we focus in on Paul saying “I have learned the secret.” That phrase had a specific meaning in Paul’s day, and it had to do with secret initiations into mystery religious organizations. The best known were the Gnostics, but all such groups claimed to have “secret” information that was only told to people initiated into the religion. Most of these groups were pagan. So, when Paul says he has “learned the secret,” this had a very specific meaning. Paul was intentionally drawing on the language of pagan religions, just after using the language of the Stoics. To those hearing Paul’s letter for the first time, I imagine they had to be getting pretty suspicious of Paul. Had this incarceration finally sent him off the deep end?

And then, we move on to verse 13, where Paul writes, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” This apparent self-sufficiency is really Christ-sufficiency. The secret that Paul has learned is now spelled out for all. Just how has Paul learned to be content in all situations? It is only through Jesus Christ, who gives him the strength to do so. Paul has taken the language of the day, and turned it on its head. He has taken something familiar to the people of Philippi and made it something different, something holy.

Paul says that he has learned how to be content whether wealthy or poor, and it is through Christ. He has learned how to be content whether hungry or well-fed, and it is through Christ. He knows how to be content with whatever he has, and it is through Christ. It is through Christ that Paul has learned how to rejoice. That is the secret. The secret is to focus our minds and energies

on Christ and not on our circumstances. We are to focus on positive things and not on violence and immorality. In this great letter, Paul tells us that if we do so, we will have the peace of God and the God of peace. We will have joy. We will be able to, like the children in our lives, rejoice! Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Amen