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JOYFUL

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BE

JOYFUL

EVEN WHEN THINGS GO WRONG,
YOU CAN HAVE JOY

NT COMMENTARY

PHILIPPIANS

Warren W. Wiersbe

DAVID  COOK

transforming lives together

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*Dedicated to
Wayne Christianson,
whose friendship I appreciate, and
whose journalistic skill I admire*

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THE BIG IDEA

An Introduction to *Be Joyful*
by Ken Baugh

Joy leaks. Have you ever noticed that? One minute you can be on top of the world, and the next minute in the pit of despair. To hold on to a joyful state of mind seems as pointless as trying to carry water in a holey bucket—it might work for a moment, but that is hardly enough. And yet the Bible exhorts us to “be joyful *always*” (1 Thess. 5:16 NIV). Most of us think that’s impossible, though—just another one of those “suggestions” from the Bible that doesn’t make sense in real life. But being joyful wasn’t impossible for the apostle Paul. He seemed to be able to live his life in a perpetual state of joy, and he wanted to help others live in that joy too.

The book of Philippians is Paul’s personal manifesto on how to live a life full of joy. We see this over and over again throughout the letter: “I always pray with joy . . .” (1:4 NIV); “I rejoice . . .” (1:18 NIV); “I will continue to rejoice . . .” (1:18 NIV); “be glad and rejoice with me” (2:18 NIV); “rejoice in the Lord!” (3:1 NIV); “Rejoice in the Lord always” (4:4 NIV). And on and on it goes, chapter after chapter the word *joy* drips off every page in various forms. It makes a thinking person wonder, *How did Paul do it? How did Paul live in a constant state of joy?* Was he some kind of super-saint with a faith made of different stuff than the rest of us? Did he live in a constant state of denial? Or did he live such a problem-free life that to be sad, depressed, or in despair never occurred to him?

Well, if there is one thing that is true about the apostle Paul, it is that his life was not easy. Paul lived almost every day of his life in mortal danger and physical pain. In 2 Corinthians 11:23–27 (MSG), Paul sums up the harsh realities of his life as an apostle:

I've worked much harder, been jailed more often, beaten up more times than I can count, and at death's door time after time. I've been flogged five times with the Jews' thirty-nine lashes, beaten by Roman rods three times, pummeled with rocks once. I've been shipwrecked three times, and immersed in the open sea for a night and a day. In hard traveling year in and year out, I've had to ford rivers, fend off robbers, struggle with friends, struggle with foes. I've been at risk in the city, at risk in the country, endangered by desert sun and sea storm, and betrayed by those I thought were my brothers. I've known drudgery and hard labor, many a long and lonely night without sleep, many a missed meal, blasted by the cold, naked to the weather.

As if these things were not enough, Paul also suffered from some type of physical ailment that he called a “thorn in the flesh,” which tormented him every day of his life (2 Cor. 12:7 NIV). Finally, according to church history, Emperor Nero killed Paul by cutting off his head sometime around AD 67. Needless to say, despite what some might say about the apostle Paul, he clearly did not live a charmed life. So then here is my question: What was the secret to Paul's joy?

In spite of his incredible hardships and daily physical suffering, how was he able to maintain a continual state of joy? How was he able to say to the Philippians, “Be glad and rejoice with me” (2:18 NIV)?

Well, I won't disclose to you all of Paul's secrets right now—for those you

need to have your Bible in one hand and Wiersbe's commentary in the other. But I will give you a hint: I believe that Paul's ability to be joyful was due to the *source* of his joy. Three different times in his letter to the Philippians Paul revealed that his joy was "*in the Lord*" (3:1, 4:4, 4:10 NIV) rather than in the difficult, painful, constantly changing circumstances of life. But what does that mean? Simply this: To find joy we must place our confidence and hope in the character and nature of God. For Paul, this happened in two ways.

First, Paul was able to have joy because of his confidence in the sovereignty of God. You see, Paul believed that no matter what happened to him, God was in control of his life; and God never falls asleep at the wheel. For instance, in Philippians 1:12–18 (NIV) we discover that Paul is in prison as he writes this letter, but he is not discouraged by this. Instead he sees his chains as part of God's sovereign plan to encourage others in their proclamation of the gospel. Look at what he says: "Because of my chains, most of the brothers in the Lord have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly." Because Paul was able to see his chains from the perspective of God's sovereignty, he was able to rejoice. He didn't view his imprisonment as an interruption in his work to proclaim the gospel, rather he saw it all playing out according to God's sovereign plan. You see, when we trust that God is in control of all things—the good, the bad, and the ugly—we can be joyful because we know that God is working behind the scenes for our good and His glory.

Second, Paul was able to have joy because of his hope in heaven. God had given Paul a clear vision of heaven (2 Cor. 12:1–10), and this vision gave him incredible hope for the future that enabled him not only to press on throughout all the difficult circumstances of his life, but to do so with joy! "I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14 NIV). Paul's hope was in God's promise of heaven and God always keeps His promises. In fact, Paul was so

encouraged by the reality of heaven that he considered all the troubles in this life to be small potatoes: “These hard times are *small potatoes* compared to the coming good times, the lavish celebration prepared for us” (2 Cor. 4:17 MSG). Never forget that life in this world is not all there is—we live seventy to ninety years at best on this planet, and many of those days are long and difficult, filled with pain and sorrow. But there is a new order of things coming where there will be no more death, no more sorrow, no more pain or suffering of any kind (Rev. 21:4). There is a lavish celebration awaiting us, where one day we will all sit and share a feast at God’s table! Paul’s confidence and hope “in the Lord” enabled him to live every day of his life filled with joy, and by the grace of God, it will enable you to do the same.

I am excited for you as you continue to uncover the secrets of Paul’s ability to live a life filled with joy.

Dr. Wiersbe’s commentaries have been a source of guidance and strength to me over the many years that I have been a pastor. His unique style is not overly academic, but theologically sound. He explains the deep truths of Scripture in a way that everyone can understand and apply. Whether you’re a Bible scholar or a brand-new believer in Christ, you will benefit, as I have, from Warren’s insights. With your Bible in one hand and Dr. Wiersbe’s commentary in the other, you will be able to accurately unpack the deep truths of God’s Word and learn how to apply them to your life.

Drink deeply, my friend, of the truths of God’s Word, for in them you will find Jesus Christ, and there is freedom, peace, assurance, and joy.

—Ken Baugh
 Pastor of Coast Hills Community Church
 Aliso Viejo, California

A WORD FROM THE AUTHOR

Philippians is a joyful letter!

If you master the truths in Philippians, you should be filled with joy as you live the Christian life!

This little epistle from a Roman prisoner has grown on me over the years. I have preached it and taught it in churches and conferences across the country, and each time I come to it, the message is more real and exciting. My prayer is that it will become real and exciting to you.

As far as I know, this approach to Philippians is my own, although just about everybody who writes on the book deals with the subject of “joy” in one way or another. I first presented this material at Winona Lake, Indiana, in July 1961, and the outline was copyrighted in 1965. So many people have told me that the series has helped them that I’m encouraged to put it into print.

In spite of a busy schedule with many demands, it was a real joy to write this book. My prayer is that you might experience Christ’s joy in your everyday life as you grasp the spiritual principles in Philippians.

—Warren W. Wiersbe

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A SUGGESTED OUTLINE OF THE BOOK OF PHILIPPIANS

Theme: The joy of the Lord

Theme verse: Philippians 3:1

- I. The Single Mind (Philippians 1)
 - A. The fellowship of the gospel (Philippians 1:1–11)
 - B. The furtherance of the gospel (Philippians 1:12–26)
 - C. The faith of the gospel (Philippians 1:27–30)
- II. The Submissive Mind (Philippians 2)
 - A. The example of Christ (Philippians 2:1–11)
 - B. The example of Paul (Philippians 2:12–18)
 - C. The example of Timothy (Philippians 2:19–24)
 - D. The example of Epaphroditus (Philippians 2:25–30)
- III. The Spiritual Mind (Philippians 3)
 - A. Paul's past—the accountant: "I count" (Philippians 3:1–11)
 - B. Paul's present—the athlete: "I press" (Philippians 3:12–16)
 - C. Paul's future—the alien: "I look" (Philippians 3:17–21)
- IV. The Secure Mind (Philippians 4)
 - A. God's peace (Philippians 4:1–9)
 - B. God's power (Philippians 4:10–13)
 - C. God's provision (Philippians 4:14–23)

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THE JOY-STEALERS

Mark Twain was a professional humorist whose lectures and writings made people around the world laugh and, for a short time, forget their troubles. Yet Mark Twain himself was, in private, a man whose life was broken by sorrow. When his beloved daughter Jean died suddenly of an epileptic seizure, Twain, too ill to go to the funeral, said to a friend, “I have never greatly envied anyone but the dead. I always envy the dead.”

Jesus Christ was “a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief.” Yet He possessed a deep joy that was beyond anything the world could offer. As He faced the cruel death of Calvary, Jesus said to His followers, “These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full” (John 15:11).

Those who have trusted Christ have the privilege of experiencing “fulness of joy” (Ps. 16:11). Yet few Christians take advantage of this privilege. They live under a cloud of disappointment when they could be walking in the sunshine of joy. What has robbed them of their joy?

The answer to that important question is found in a letter written centuries ago. It was written by the apostle Paul when he was a prisoner

in Rome about AD 62, and it was sent to his fellow Christians at the church in Philippi, a church Paul had founded on his second missionary journey (Acts 16). One of their members, Epaphroditus, had been sent to Rome to bring a special offering to the apostle and to help him in his time of difficulty (Phil. 2:25–30; 4:10–20). Paul’s letter to the Philippian church is something of a missionary thank-you letter, but it is much more than that. It is the sharing of Paul’s secret of Christian joy! At least nineteen times in these four chapters, Paul mentions joy, rejoicing, or gladness.

The unusual thing about the letter is this: Paul’s situation was such that there appeared to be no reason for him to be rejoicing. He was a Roman prisoner, and his case was coming up shortly. He might be acquitted, or he might be beheaded! Acts 28:30–31 indicates that he was a prisoner in his own hired house, but he was chained to a Roman soldier and not permitted to preach in public. Paul had wanted to go to Rome as a preacher (Rom. 1:13–16); instead, he arrived as a prisoner. And, unfortunately, the believers at Rome were divided: Some were for Paul and some were against him (Phil. 1:15–17). In fact, some of the Christians even wanted to make things more difficult for the apostle!

Yet, in spite of his danger and discomfort, Paul overflowed with joy. What was the secret of this joy? The secret is found in another word that is often repeated in Philippians: It is the word *mind*. Paul uses *mind* ten times, and also uses the word *think* five times. Add the time he uses *remember* and you have a total of sixteen references to the mind. In other words, the secret of Christian joy is found in the way the believer thinks—his attitudes. After all, outlook determines outcome. As we think, so we are (Prov. 23:7). Philippians, then, is a Christian psychology book, based solidly on Bible doctrine. It is not a shallow self-help book that tells the reader how to convince himself that “everything is going to turn out all right.” It is a book that explains

the mind the believer must have if he is going to experience Christian joy in a world filled with trouble.

The best way to get the total picture of the book is to discover first the “thieves” that rob us of our joy, then determine the kinds of attitudes we must have in order to capture and conquer these thieves.

THE THIEVES THAT ROB YOU OF YOUR JOY

Circumstances. Most of us must confess that when things are going our way, we feel a lot happier and we are much easier to live with. “Dad must have had an easy day at the office,” little Peggy said to her visiting girlfriend. “He didn’t squeal the tires when he pulled into the driveway, and he didn’t slam the door when he came into the house. And he even gave Mother a kiss!”

But have you ever stopped to consider how few of the circumstances of life are really under our control? We have no control over the weather or over the traffic on the expressway or over the things other people say and do. The person whose happiness depends on ideal circumstances is going to be miserable much of the time. The poet Byron wrote, “Men are the sport of circumstances.” And yet here is the apostle Paul in the worst of circumstances, writing a letter saturated with joy!

People. My daughter jumped off the school bus as it stopped in front of our house and slammed her way through the front door. She marched defiantly up the stairs into her room and again slammed the door. All the time she was muttering under her breath, “People-people-*people*-PEOPLE!”

I went to her door and knocked softly. “May I come in?”

She replied, “No!”

I tried again, but she said it even more belligerently: “NO!”

I asked, “Why can’t I come in?”

Her answer: “Because you’re a *people*!”

All of us have lost our joy because of people: what they are, what they say, and what they do. (And no doubt we ourselves have contributed to making somebody else unhappy. It works both ways.) But we have to live and work with people; we cannot isolate ourselves and still live to glorify Christ. We are the light of the world and the salt of the earth. But sometimes the light grows dim and the salt becomes bitter because of other people. Is there any way to have joy in spite of people?

Things. A wealthy man was moving into his mansion, and his Quaker neighbor, who believed in simplicity of life, was watching the activities carefully. The neighbor counted the number of chairs and tables and the vast amount of bric-a-brac that was being carried into the house. Finally, he said to the lord of the mansion: “Neighbor, if thou dost need anything, come to see me and I will tell thee *how to get along without it!*”

Abraham Lincoln was walking down the street with his two sons, who were crying and fighting. “What’s the matter with the boys?” a friend asked.

“The same thing that’s wrong with the whole world,” Lincoln replied. “I have three walnuts and each of the boys wants two.”

Things! What thieves they can be. Yet Jesus said, “A man’s life consisteth not in the abundance of the things which he possesseth” (Luke 12:15). In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus warned against laying up treasures on earth: They are not safe, they do not last, and they never satisfy. Yet most people today think that joy comes from the things that they own. In reality, things can rob us of the only kind of joy that really lasts.

Worry. This is the worst thief of all. How many people have been robbed of peace and fulfillment because of worry? In fact, worry even has *physical* consequences, and while medicine can remove the symptoms, it cannot remove the cause. Worry is an “inside job.” You can purchase sleep at the drug store, but you cannot purchase rest.

If Paul had wanted to worry, he had plenty of occasion. He was a polit-

ical prisoner facing possible execution. His friends in Rome were divided in their attitudes toward his case. He had no mission board supporting him and no Legal Aid Society defending him. But in spite of all these difficulties, *Paul does not worry!* Instead, he writes a letter filled with joy and tells us how to stop worrying.

These, then, are the four thieves that rob us of joy: circumstances, people, things, and worry. How do we capture these thieves and keep them from taking away the joy that is rightfully ours in Christ? The answer is: *We must cultivate the right kind of mind.* If outlook determines outcome, then the attitude of mind that we cultivate will determine our joy or lack of it. In the four chapters of Philippians, Paul describes four attitudes of mind that will produce joy in spite of circumstances, people, and things, and that will keep us from worrying.

THE FOUR ATTITUDES THAT MAINTAIN YOUR JOY

(1) The Single Mind (Phil. 1). “A double minded man is unstable in all his ways” (James 1:8). Or, to use the old Latin proverb:

“When the pilot does not know what port he is heading for, no wind is the right wind.” The reason many Christians are upset by circumstances is because they do not cultivate the single mind. Paul expresses this attitude of single-hearted devotion to Christ thus: “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (1:21).

In chapter 1, Paul discusses his difficult circumstances and faces them honestly. But his circumstances cannot rob him of his joy because he is not living to enjoy circumstances; he is living to serve Jesus Christ. He is a man with purpose: “This one thing I do” (3:13). He does not look at circumstances in themselves, but rather in relationship to Jesus Christ. He is not the prisoner of Rome; he is “the prisoner of Jesus Christ” (Eph. 3:1). The chains he wears are “my bonds in Christ” (Phil. 1:13). He is not facing a

civil trial; he is “set for the defence of the Gospel” (1:17). He did not look at Christ through his circumstances; rather, he looked at his circumstances through Christ—and this changed everything.

When a Christian is single-minded, he is concerned about the *fellowship of the gospel* (1:1–11), the *furtherance of the gospel* (1:12–26), and the *faith of the gospel* (1:27–30). Paul rejoiced in his difficult circumstances because they helped to strengthen his fellowship with other Christians, gave him opportunity to lead others to Christ, and enabled him to defend the gospel before the courts of Rome. When you have the single mind, your circumstances work *for* you and not *against* you.

(2) The Submissive Mind (Phil. 2). This chapter focuses on *people*, and the key verse says, “Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better [more important] than themselves” (v. 3). In chapter 1, Paul puts Christ first. In this chapter, he puts others second. Which means he puts himself last! The reason people aggravate us so much is usually because we do not have our own way. If we go through life putting *ourselves* first, and others go through life putting *themselves* first, then at many points there are going to be terrific battles.

A mother and her little son got on an elevator to go to the doctor’s office. At the second floor a group of people got on, among them a rather large woman. As the elevator sped upward, the quiet was broken by a scream from the lips of the plump passenger. She turned to the mother and said, “Your son just bit me!”

The mother was horrified, but the little boy had an explanation: “She sitted in my face and I bited her!”

What took place on that elevator is taking place all over the world: People and nations bite each other because they get sat on or crowded.

But the Christian with the submissive mind does not expect others to serve him; he serves others. He considers the good of others to be more

important than his own plans and desires. In chapter 2 we find four wonderful examples of the submissive mind: Jesus Christ (2:1–11), Paul (2:12–18), Timothy (2:19–24), and Epaphroditus (2:25–30). Each of these examples proves the principle, “For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (Luke 14:11).

(3) The Spiritual Mind (Phil. 3). Eleven times in this chapter you find Paul using the word *things*. He points out that most people “mind earthly things” (v. 19), but that the spiritually minded Christian is concerned about heavenly things. “For our conversation [citizenship] is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ” (v. 20). The person with the spiritual mind looks at the things of this world from heaven’s point of view—and what a difference that makes!

When five missionaries were martyred by the Aucas in Ecuador, some newspapers and magazines considered the tragedy to be a great waste of life. While it did bring sorrow and grief to friends and loved ones, subsequent events proved that their deaths were not “waste” either for them or for the world. The words of Jim Elliot were true: “He is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.”

The quest for things is robbing people of joy, and this includes Christian people. We want to possess things, and then we discover that things possess us. The only way to victory and joy is to have the spiritual mind and to look at things from God’s point of view. Like Paul, we must be *accountants* with the right *values* (3:1–11), *athletes* with the right vigor (3:12–16), and *aliens* with the right *vision* (3:17–21). “I count ... I press ... I look” are the verbs that describe the person with the spiritual mind.

(4) The Secure Mind (Phil. 4). Worry is actually wrong thinking (the mind) and wrong feeling (the heart) about circumstances, people, and things. So if we have the single mind, the submissive mind, and the spiritual mind, we should not have too much trouble with worry. All we

need is something to *guard* the heart and mind so that worry will not enter. Paul describes *the secure mind*: “And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (v. 7). That word *keep* is a military term; it means “stand guard, garrison.” (Paul was chained to a soldier, you will remember.)

Chapter 4 describes the spiritual resources the believer has in Christ: God’s peace (4:1–9), God’s power (4:10–13), and God’s provision (4:14–23). With resources like these, why should we worry? We have the peace of God to guard us (v. 7) and the God of peace to guide us (v. 9). The peace of God comes to us when we practice right praying (vv. 6–7), right thinking (v. 8), and right living (v. 9). This is God’s secret for victory over all worry.

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

This rapid survey of Philippians ought to convince us that it is possible to live a life of Christian joy in spite of circumstances, people, and things, and that we need not worry when the going is difficult. But how can we put all of this into practice in our lives? Here are four principles to help you remember these truths.

(1) Be sure you are a Christian. Paul wrote this letter to “all the saints in Christ Jesus” (1:1). That word *saint* simply means “a set-apart one.” When you give yourself to Christ, you no longer belong to this world; you belong to Him and have been set apart for His glory. Each chapter in Philippians begins with either “in Christ” or “in the Lord” (1:1; 2:1; 3:1; 4:1). You cannot have the *single mind* (“For to me to live is Christ”—1:21), or the *submissive mind* (“Let each esteem other better than themselves”—2:3), or the *spiritual mind* (“For our conversation is in heaven”—3:20), or the *secure mind* (“And the peace of God ... shall keep your hearts and minds”—4:7) unless you belong to Jesus Christ. How does one become a child of God?

Paul answered that question when he was in the Philippian jail: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved” (read Acts 16:6–40 for the whole story).

(2) Admit your failures. If we have been double-minded, proud, worldly minded, and filled with worry—*then we are sinning!* And the sooner we confess it to God, the sooner His joy will fill our lives. (Some people are actually proud of the fact that they worry, in spite of what Jesus says in Matthew 6:24–34.)

(3) Surrender your mind to Christ daily. Ask Him to give you a single mind, a submissive mind, a spiritual mind, and a secure mind. (In the chapters that follow, we will explain the way each of these minds functions in the Christian life.) When you find yourself losing your joy during the day, take inventory: “Do I have a double mind? Have I been proud? Am I grasping for things? Am I worrying?” If guilty, confess your sin then and there, and ask God to restore your mind as it ought to be.

(4) Look for opportunities to put your mind to work. If you really want a single mind, you can be sure the Lord will arrange circumstances so that you can begin to practice. “I told the Lord that I wanted Philipians 1:21 to work in my life,” a new Christian told her pastor, “and guess what happened? I ended up in the hospital!”

The pastor asked, “Did you then look for opportunities to further the gospel, the way Paul did in Rome?”

Her face clouded. “No, I guess I didn’t. I spent most of my time complaining.”

You will discover during this study that God will give you regular “exams” in your daily life, to help you develop your spiritual attitudes. Learning and living go together, and He will give you the grace you need for every demand. As you practice exercising the right kind of attitude, you will find a deep joy welling up in your heart—joy in spite of circumstances,

people, and things—and joy that defeats worry and fills you with the peace of God.

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace” (Gal. 5:22). Start letting this fruit grow in your life.

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QUESTIONS FOR PERSONAL REFLECTION OR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Only true believers in Christ can experience the fullness of joy. What does “fullness of joy” mean to you?
2. Why did Paul seem to be an unlikely person to write about joy?
3. What circumstances in your everyday life rob you of your Christian joy?
4. Are there certain people who irritate you without even trying? What can you do about that?
5. Do you think Christians today are more or less concerned about things than Christians fifty years ago were?
6. Do you worry often? What do you worry about?

7. What do you think it means to be single-minded? How can you better pursue this in your own life?

8. Do you find it hard to be submissive to other people? Why or why not?

9. Do you consider yourself a spiritually minded person? Why or why not?

10. In what ways do you feel secure? In your job? In your family? In your relationship with Christ? Thank the Lord for these things before you continue.