

When Fear Gives Way to Joy: 5. The Secret to Contentment

Philippians 4:13-19

May 24, 2020

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How long, O Lord, how long? Because we are weary – and we are restless – and there is growing dissention even among those who call on you by name. How Long, O Lord, how much longer. A few days ago, I was talking with one of our oldest members and if she lives another seven months, she will break through the century mark, something she never aspired to do. She's not ill, but her body is wearing out. She's weary; she's restless. She is not afraid of what will be, but she doesn't know how much longer. So I asked what she would like me to say at her memorial service. She said, "Tell them I'm glad it's over."

Have you ever had that feeling about your life? I'm glad it's over. Two months into a pandemic, longing to get back to normal and still a lot of people are getting sick and some of them are dying. How long, O Lord, how long?

Last week, I read an interview in the Harvard Business Review with David Kessler. He's considered the world's foremost authority on grief. He co-wrote the textbook on the five stages of grief. And in his interview, he said, as a nation, we are experiencing collective grief. This pandemic has altered life for every one of us, and it's important to acknowledge what we are feeling. There is loss of normalcy, fear of the economic toll, and loss of connections. We're grieving. Every one of us is experiencing one of the stages of grief. These stages are not linear. We don't necessarily experience all of them and we often move back and forth between the stages. So, let me remind you about these stages to see if any of them resonate with you today.

There is **denial**. "It won't happen to me; I won't get sick." "I'm not sure there is a virus." A few days ago, Amanda waiting for the cashier at a garden store, keeping her social distance, wearing her face mask when an older man without a face mask stepping in front of her. If you've been to stores recently, the six foot distancing is marked on the floor. Excuse me, she said, would you respect the six-foot distance? And he replied, I survived agent orange. And she said, Congratulations. Thank you for your service. Now please respect my space. And as he stepped aside, he made an angry remark that I won't repeat this morning.

And that's the next stage: **anger**. If you have older children in your home, maybe you've heard this. "You're making me stay home and taking away my activities. They took away prom. They took away graduation. And now I can't even see my friends." Or maybe you feel this anger inside because of the real impact this pandemic is having on your life.

There's also **bargaining**. I social distanced and nothing happened to me, I followed all the instructions for the past two weeks/months, so can't I resume life as normal.

There's **sadness**. How long, O Lord, how long. I don't know when this will end. What if I never see my grandma again. Or what if I don't get my job back. Or that trip of a lifetime that we'd planned, what if we never get to take it.

And the fifth stage is **acceptance**. This is happening. This is the way things are, but I'm not powerless. I have a choice. Kessler says it is letting go of what you cannot control and what other people are doing. They may be hoarding toilet paper. They may not be keeping a safe distance. But have a choice: I will keep a six feet distance. I will wash my hands. Everyone has different levels of fear and grief, and it will manifest in different ways. People are stressed. We

get impatient, snippy, even rude. But we will get through this. If history shows us anything, it's that every generation has faced great challenges and yet here we are.

To these five stages of grief, Kessler's work has identified a sixth stage: **meaning**. Even in the darkness there is light if we will look for it. It's okay to be angry. It's okay to shout at God. It's okay to be brokenhearted, confused, outraged, and sad. Just know there is something bigger. Life gets hard. But there is something bigger. And that's what the apostle Paul wants us to know.

As we've seen in the past few weeks, Paul was writing during troubled times with a message of hope and encouragement. His letter was included in the Bible because there is something timeless in the message. We don't need to be in prison like Paul to understand the message. The message has power and not only for people living under persecution like the church in Philippi. As I consider what was going on in Paul's life and the lives of the Philippian Christians I wonder: Why believe? Why be Christian? After all, Paul was in prison precisely because he was passionate about his faith in the resurrected Jesus. He challenged conventional beliefs and as a result he was thrown in prison on trumped up charges and spent years being shuttled from prison to prison while authorities figure out what to do with him. If he had not gotten caught up in the Christian faith, he might be living out his days in the comfort of suburban Jerusalem! And the Philippians – they would not be living under constant persecution if they would be quiet and quit practicing this newfound Christian faith. So why believe? Why be Christian?

And Paul provides an answer. It is contentment. **I have learned how to be content in any circumstance. I know the experience of being in need and of having more than enough; I have learned the secret to being content in any and every circumstance, whether full or hungry or whether having plenty or being poor.** What truly filled Paul was not food or wealth or having enough or living the good life. **I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.** God is not a genie in a bottle. Wouldn't that be wonderful? God, I want a job. Poof – a job appears. God, I want a nice house. Poof – a new house. God, I want less stress and more time. Poof – it's done. God, I want this pandemic to go away. Poof – it's done. I'm glad it's over. But God is not a genie. And the reason faith will not work that way is that we start in the wrong place. The path to contentment starts with the spiritual realm and not the material realm. Focus on the spiritual and you will have what you need in the material realm. **I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me!**

If this season has rocked your world, your outlook on life or your faith, pay attention. God is ready to do a new thing in you. Paul says, I can do all things – and sometimes we stop there, thinking if I just try harder or think harder or fight harder. But, I can't do enough, I can't be smart enough – not on my own. I can do – through Christ who strengthens me. It begins with knowing Christ. Letting Christ in.

The Philippians never forgot Paul. Once he left their city, they spontaneously and generously gave to meet his needs as he traveled in his missionary journeys. No other church demonstrated such a personal commitment to him. When Paul suffered, they suffered. When he was needy, they sent gifts to meet his need. When he was unable to stay in touch, they remained faithful and prayed for him. When he was arrested and imprisoned, they sent a friend, Epaphroditus, to minister to him. They knew the secret to contentment which was really no secret at all. It only seems that way if your heart and soul is planted in the material realm. Contentment comes in knowing Christ and practicing compassion and generosity.

Some time ago, a man underwent open heart surgery. He was scared to death. He wondered whether he would make it, and he felt helpless and powerless to do anything about his situation. He was totally at the mercy of his doctors and nurses. He knew that one little slip-up on their part could cost him his life. He said: "On the morning of surgery, a nurse came into my room. She took hold of my hand and told me to feel it and hold it. 'Now,' she said, 'during the surgery you will be disconnected from your heart and you will be kept alive only by virtue of certain machines. And when your heart is finally restored and the operation is over and you are recovering, you will eventually awaken in the recovery room. But you will be immobile for as long as six hours. You may be unable to move or speak or even to open your eyes, but you will be perfectly conscious and you will hear and you will know everything that is going on around you. During those six hours, I will be at your side and I will hold your hand, exactly as I am doing now. And I will stay with you until you are fully recovered. When you feel my hand, you will know that I will not leave you.'"

And the man said, "It went exactly as the nurse told me. I awoke and I could do nothing. But I could feel the nurse's hand in my hand – and that made all the difference."

This pandemic may be keeping us apart, but that does not mean we cannot come alongside each other. God does God's greatest work through people like you and me. Who will be the people to hold out a compassionate hand? Who will practice generosity? The path to contentment is not a spectator sport. You cannot stand on the sidelines and watch others and find true contentment. You've got to jump on the field and be a player.

Contentment comes in knowing Christ and practicing compassion and generosity.

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of May 24, 2020

Weekly Prayer: Lord Jesus, sometimes, maybe without even thinking about it, we limit the Bible's promise of contentment to a time when our problems and challenges disappear. But you work through your Spirit's presence, and through each one of us, to bring comfort, hope and joy, even now. Steady our hands and give us compassion and courage, as we learn more about how we can choose joy no matter what we are facing. Amen.

Monday, May 25

Scripture: Psalm 4:6-8; Isaiah 12:2-6

Many people say, "We can't find goodness anywhere. The light of your face has left us, LORD!" But you have filled my heart with more joy than when their wheat and wine are everywhere! I will lie down and fall asleep in peace because you alone, LORD, let me live in safety.

God is indeed my salvation; I will trust and won't be afraid. Yah, the LORD, is my strength and my shield; he has become my salvation." You will draw water with joy from the springs of salvation. And you will say on that day: "Thank the LORD; call on God's name; proclaim God's deeds among the peoples; declare that God's name is exalted. Sing to the LORD, who has done glorious things; proclaim this throughout all the earth." Shout and sing for joy, city of Zion, because the holy one of Israel is great among you.

Observation: Today's readings might seem like fairly "standard" songs of praise. They weren't. We don't know all the details, but Psalm 4 clearly came from a time when both the psalmist and his nation faced trials and danger. And the prophet Isaiah wrote on the heels of stern warnings of coming judgment. His phrase "on that day" meant his song of praise was a song of hope for a

future Isaiah might not (and did not) live to see. Their joy was rooted not in any earthly, material prosperity, but in the presence of God with God's people.

Application: In his commentary on the book of Isaiah, John Goldingay said, "Providing the people with a song that they will be able to sing one day is another way of inviting them to live in hope....they're virtually praising God for fulfilling his promises before the fulfillment happens. Wherever they are, they're invited to see that they have come this far by faith and can continue in hope, not because their faith or hope is big but because the God they trust and hope in is big." How do you maintain your trust and hope in God at times of disappointment, sadness and loss?

Prayer: Lord God, I find joy relatively easy on sunny days when everything goes my way. Teach me to focus more on you, and less on everything going my way, so that my inner joy is more deeply rooted and durable. Amen.

Tuesday, May 26

Scripture: Ephesians 5:18-21; Isaiah 12:1-5

Don't get drunk on wine, which produces depravity. Instead, be filled with the Spirit in the following ways: speak to each other with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs; sing and make music to the Lord in your hearts; always give thanks to God the Father for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; and submit to each other out of respect for Christ.

You will say on that day: "I thank you, LORD. Though you were angry with me, your anger turned away and you comforted me. God is indeed my salvation; I will trust and won't be afraid. Yah, the LORD, is my strength and my shield; he has become my salvation." You will draw water with joy from the springs of salvation. And you will say on that day: "Thank the LORD; call on God's name; proclaim God's deeds among the peoples; declare that God's name is exalted. Sing to the LORD, who has done glorious things; proclaim this throughout all the earth."

Observation: In the ancient world, as today, some people tried to numb themselves against life's pains with alcohol (as well as, of course, other escape mechanisms). To Christians in the city of Ephesus, Paul wrote that psalms, hymns, spiritual songs and always giving thanks to God were a better way. He must have had praise songs like the one in Isaiah 12 in mind.

Application: Isaiah, in the midst of a set of messages warning Israel of judgment, offered hope for the future. To people who lived in the often-arid Middle East, he wrote, "You will draw water with joy from the springs of salvation" (Isaiah 12:3). What people, places or practices help you to draw water from the springs of salvation, even in the dry times of your life?

Prayer: Living Lord, life in this world sometimes leaves me parched and thirsty inside. Help me remember that, in the end, only you are a reliable, never-ending source of living water. Amen.

Wednesday, May 27

Scripture: Colossians 3:15-17

The peace of Christ must control your hearts—a peace into which you were called in one body. And be thankful people. The word of Christ must live in you richly. Teach and warn each other with all wisdom by singing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Sing to God with gratitude in your hearts. Whatever you do, whether in speech or action, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus and give thanks to God the Father through him.

Observation: It's easy to read a passage like today's and think, "What lovely, uplifting devotional words." But remember: the apostle Paul was not writing abstract devotional thoughts. He and the early Christians lived in a world as cruel and unsettling as ours, and one that often turned its hatred and scorn particularly on them. His counsel about peace, praise and gratitude was a survival manual for a spiritual combat zone, not just a set of nice, uplifting pleasantries.

Application: Verse 17 takes in a lot of ground: "Whatever you do, whether in speech or action, do it ALL in the name of the Lord Jesus and give thanks to God the Father through him." What does it mean to you to do whatever you do "in the name of the Lord Jesus"? How can you "give thanks to God the Father through him" as you work, shop, drive the freeway, react to today's headlines or face the uncertainty of the economic and health challenges ahead?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, thank you for the gift of this day. Thank you that whatever happens today, you will be with me. Thank you for clearing my vision so that I can see reasons to say "thank you." Amen.

Thursday, May 28

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 4:6-9, 16-18; John 16:31-33

God said that light should shine out of the darkness. He is the same one who shone in our hearts to give us the light of the knowledge of God's glory in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in clay pots so that the awesome power belongs to God and doesn't come from us. We are experiencing all kinds of trouble, but we aren't crushed. We are confused, but we aren't depressed. We are harassed, but we aren't abandoned. We are knocked down, but we aren't knocked out.

So we aren't depressed. But even if our bodies are breaking down on the outside, the person that we are on the inside is being renewed every day. Our temporary minor problems are producing an eternal stockpile of glory for us that is beyond all comparison. We don't focus on the things that can be seen but on the things that can't be seen. The things that can be seen don't last, but the things that can't be seen are eternal.

Jesus replied, "Now you believe? Look! A time is coming—and is here!—when each of you will be scattered to your own homes and you will leave me alone. I'm not really alone, for the Father is with me. I've said these things to you so that you will have peace in me. In the world you have distress. But be encouraged! I have conquered the world."

Observation: Jesus saw beyond this world. He taught about "the Kingdom of heaven," not as a vivid way of imaging some spiritual values, but as the defining reality he lived in. When facing death on a cross the next day, he said, "I have conquered the world." It is little wonder that his follower Paul wrote, "We don't focus on the things that can be seen... the things that can't be seen are eternal."

Application: When did you last feel confused, harassed or knocked down? What resources did you draw on to try to keep from being crushed, depressed or knocked out? Have you ever found it true, in yourself or someone you know, that "even if our bodies are breaking down on the outside, the person that we are on the inside is being renewed every day"? Are there disciplines (such as Bible memorization, meditation, prayer) that help you access God's strength to renew the person you are on the inside?

Prayer: Lord God, I don't want to forget the truth expressed in the old hymn: "I need Thee every hour." Draw me ever closer to you, so that your presence becomes more and more the air my spirit breathes. Amen.

Friday, May 29

Scripture: Philippians 4:4-12

Be glad in the Lord always! Again I say, be glad! Let your gentleness show in your treatment of all people. The Lord is near. Don't be anxious about anything; rather, bring up all of your requests to God in your prayers and petitions, along with giving thanks. Then the peace of God that exceeds all understanding will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus. From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise. Practice these things: whatever you learned, received, heard, or saw in us. The God of peace will be with you.

I was very glad in the Lord because now at last you have shown concern for me again. (Of course you were always concerned but had no way to show it.) I'm not saying this because I need anything, for I have learned how to be content in any circumstance. I know the experience of being in need and of having more than enough; I have learned the secret to being content in any and every circumstance, whether full or hungry or whether having plenty or being poor.

Observation: The apostle Paul's statement that God's peace "exceeds all understanding" may make more sense when we remember that he sent this letter from a dank, dreary Roman prison cell. Even in those conditions, he had that peace. He shared three of the keys he'd found for God's peace: to give worries to God in prayer, to focus on the good in life and to practice contentment.

Application: Paul, contented and at peace even in prison, did not say "I was lucky to be born with a contented heart." He said, "I have learned to be content." Under what conditions, good or bad, do you find it a struggle to stay contented in God's peace? What experiences or examples have helped you learn to make choices or take actions that lead you toward accepting God's gift of contentment?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I want to turn my worries into prayers. So right now I lay before you all the things that worry me today, and I open my heart to your gifts of peace and contentment. Amen.

Saturday, May 30

Scripture: Acts 2:41-47

Those who accepted Peter's message were baptized. God brought about three thousand people into the community on that day.

The believers devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching, to the community, to their shared meals, and to their prayers. A sense of awe came over everyone. God performed many wonders and signs through the apostles. All the believers were united and shared everything. They would sell pieces of property and possessions and distribute the proceeds to everyone who needed them. Every day, they met together in the temple and ate in their homes. They shared food with gladness and simplicity. They praised God and demonstrated God's goodness to everyone. The Lord added daily to the community those who were being saved.

Observation: The very first "Christians" (they didn't even call themselves that yet) were a fairly small, largely unknown group, living in a city that had crucified their Lord. But they lived out their

faith in ways that have changed the world for over 2000 years now. The apostles' teaching, prayer, fellowship and a radical spirit of joyous generosity bound them together. They found such joy and meaning in their lives that they told others, who invited others, who invited others and so on until eventually someone invited you. And now it's your turn to keep the story going.

Application: The teachings of the apostles and the power of the Holy Spirit moved the first Christians to share their possessions, setting aside their own gain to bless others. That spirit made their lives joyous, not miserable—"they shared food with gladness." How does your readiness to find joy in sharing with others reflect God's impact on your life? How do you respond inwardly to being part of a congregation that specifically and intentionally exists to reach beyond our walls, to reach, serve and uplift our neighbors and our community?

Prayer: Generous, joy-giving God, I offer you my gratitude. Help me to be willing to adjust my life in whatever ways I need to so that my gratitude isn't just words, but joyful service to you and to your children. Amen.