

Resilient Perseverance in Pursuit of Knowing Jesus

Winston Churchill famously said, *"If you're going through hell, keep going!"* He was talking about the resilience to persevere during the worst of times. But when we read the scriptures, we discover that resilience isn't just for the very bad times. If we're going to press on to know Christ, as Paul told us to in **Philippians 3**, we need resilience. Resilience is the ability to withstand pressure and recover quickly from difficult conditions. A tree that is resilient bends with the wind and recovers instead of being brittle and snapping. We all need resilience.

For weeks we've been looking at short sections of **Philippians 4** and talking about rejoicing and praying, and thinking. The famous preacher Martin Lloyd Jones, speaking about **Philippians 4**, said it can seem as if what we have here is a series of injunctions given one after another without any definite order, but on closer examination, we find that *"each one of these specific and particular injunctions is related to the others and they ought to go together to form a composite and complete whole."* A good word to describe what all the seemingly different things in **Philippians 4** come together to impart to us is resilience.

One of the great insights that we derive from this passage, coming as it does towards the end of the book of Philippians, is this:

I. EVEN WHEN WE'RE WELL TAUGHT ABOUT THE CHRISTIAN LIFE, WE HAVE TO WORK AT RESILIENT PERSEVERANCE.

As the book of Philippians draws to a close in **Philippians 4**, it's clear that many fundamental critical truths have been clearly expressed.

Philippians 1 Begins with an expression of confidence that God, who began a good work in them, will carry it on to the day of Christ. This assurance is expressed in the midst of a prayer of thanksgiving that also becomes a prayer for them to continue to grow in a love filled with wisdom and insight. The apostle Paul reveals the secret of his

courageous joy in Christ when he says for him *to live is Christ and to die is gain*. In that context, he says even the hard, seemingly bad things that have happened to him, like his imprisonment, have turned out for good - to advance the cause of Christ. And he ends by encouraging us all to walk worthy of our calling in Christ as well.

Philippians 2 beautifully continues by calling us to reflect on and consider the love we've been shown by God in Christ and then to have the mind of Christ within us, especially in our relationships with each other. We're reminded of the example of Jesus himself. He humbled himself and became obedient even to the death of the cross for our sakes and then was highly exalted by God. He calls all of us to work out our salvation - we don't work for it, but we work it out in practice. We do this knowing God's at work *in us* both to will and to do his good pleasure. He shows us the power of the gospel and Christ to change lives, telling us about Timothy and Epaphroditus, two very real human men who were following Christ unselfishly, serving others for him.

Philippians 3 begins with a sober word of warning about false teachers who actually undermine the transforming power of the gospel by wrongly emphasizing the importance of religious rituals and good works as a means to earn God's approval. The apostle Paul's own story is presented to show us that even the most exemplary record of achievement is worthless when it comes to standing before God! Right standing with God's - salvation and all of its richness comes from being found in Christ. It is not a reward earned by us but a gift of grace received when we turn to Christ and trust in him. It is at this point in **Philippians 3**, we are called to press on to know Christ. Having been brought into a new relationship with him purely by his grace and mercy, with our sins forgiven, with his Spirit at work in us, we are to forget the things that are behind and press on to pursue knowing Christ personally and in a way that transforms us.

So by the end of **Philippians 3** there's been a wealth of great teaching. It's enough to build your life on. What else is needed? When I was a new believer I imagined that if I could come to understand at least the fundamental issues in the Christian life, I'd be good to go, but I underestimated the fact that once I knew what I needed to know I was

just beginning to live out the life before me. I was naive and untested regarding the challenges that would confront me and the resilience I would need to press on.

When good coaches train athletes, they don't just teach the rules of the game and the techniques that will help them win. They condition them and prepare them so they can bear the pressures they are certain to face. It's like that in the Christian life, we're in a spiritual endurance race, and even when we've been well taught, we need to develop the spiritual resilience that will sustain us in a lifetime of pressing on to know Christ and become more like him.

II. WHAT ARE THE PRACTICES THAT HELP US SUSTAIN SPIRITUAL RESILIENCE IN FOLLOWING JESUS?

We've looked at them separately. Now, Let's put them together. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones said, they are meant to form a composite whole, a sort of four-stranded braid woven together for strength.

The first is to...

A. Keep Finding Your Joy in the Lord.

Verse 4: *"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"* To *rejoice in the Lord* means to choose to make the Lord the central source of your joy in life. What makes this passage so powerful is not only that the word – the command to rejoice is repeated, but it is made emphatic by the word "always ."In the Christian life, joy is not an optional perk for those who are lucky enough to find it. It's an essential quality, a choice even, that encourages and even requires us to put our faith to work at the deepest level and about the most important issues.

I had a memorable experience with the command to rejoice once that made a lasting impression and even formed a deep conviction in me. I had memorized the Scripture that says to rejoice in the Lord always, and it came to mind when I was really in the dumps in the midst of a seriously disappointing circumstance. I clearly remember that I looked down at the floor and thought, *"I do not feel like rejoicing. How can I rejoice now?"* But the thought that came with authority in my heart was

something like this: *“You can rejoice because you are rejoicing in the Lord. What you believe and know to be true about him and his promises is deeper than what you are feeling at this moment. And you need to rejoice in the Lord because while it may not change your circumstances or even alleviate all your feelings it will help you to bear with them and protect you from the bitterness that could come on the heels of them. You don’t have to figure everything out. You can entrust your concerns to God and wait for him to bring resolution to every issue. And because you have a Father to whom you can entrust your concerns, you can rejoice in that right now.”* At that moment, I realized I didn’t want to rejoice! I once heard someone say, *“Your emotions are a ticket to the here and now.”* I think what they were saying is that if you pay attention to them, they give you access to the reality of your inner life in real-time. Then you have a choice to make. I felt compelled by the authority of Scripture – God’s word and my commitment to him to make that choice. So – this is what it felt like – I just took that step and discovered, only then, that I actually could. The tightness loosened, my heart lifted, and instead of anger and sadness, there was faith and hope and peace and trust. I remember that moment because I learned in it that we can rejoice in the Lord always if we take that crucial step of faith and obedience. We need to rejoice to be resilient.

But rejoicing in the Lord doesn’t stand alone. The second thing is to...

B. Hold On To Sweet Reasonableness.

Verse 5; *Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand.* The reason I say *sweet reasonableness* is because that's a famous translation that came from a British poet and scholar named Matthew Arnold. The Greek word being translated contains both ideas; being reasonable and thoughtful but also courteous and gentle. It describes a person who is not just reactionary but thoughtful. Strong emotions can make us more reactionary than reasonable. So to say, *let your reasonableness be known to everyone* is to take away a major excuse for bad behavior. Strong emotions are not an excuse for unreasonable actions. It’s one thing to give another grace when you see strong emotions at work. But it is another thing to give yourself a free pass on unreasonable behavior because *you* have strong feelings.

If you deal with emotions in denial, they destroy you slowly from within. If you deal with emotions by venting them, they keep you superficial. You never get to their roots to discover the power of Christ for deeper changes. Sometimes instead of denying *or* venting, you have to be still as you process them, and that in itself drives you deeper down into Christ and your relationship with him. That builds a deeper resilience.

Verse 5 says; *Let your reasonableness be known to everyone*. This is deeply needed not only in our everyday challenges and relationships but also in the atmosphere of incredibly toxic political polarization that we're already in now and can only expect more of in the year to come. This by no means calls for us to compromise our convictions or even to be unclear in the way we express them. It does call for courteous reasonableness that is markedly evident and seen and known. I've seen thoughtful Christians accused of just trying to be accepted by the left or the elites simply because they were striving to be biblical and to be known as reasonable in the way they argued for their causes.

At the end of **verse 5** says, The Lord is "*at hand*." He is close by now, and he is coming again soon. You have not been abandoned. Nothing in your life is far from him or a surprise to him. This earthly life is a brief slice of time before the dawn of eternity.

So whatever you face, keep finding your joy in the Lord and hold on to sweet reasonableness. And then add this third element.

C. Address Every Issue with Thankful Prayer.

This point is made in **verses 6-7**; *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.*

Dr. Ed Welch is a counselor with over thirty years of experience. He commented on these verses in an article and said in his experience, many people know this passage, but few ever actually do what it says. He says some people might brush this off as trite or simplistic, but then he asks,

Have you ever countered anxiety with thoughtful, Scripture-led prayer? If so, you are in the minority. It turns out that this seemingly simplistic and available teaching is one of the hidden and under-used treasures of Scripture. It only sounds trite if you haven't practiced it... Too often, we brush off this passage and wait for something we think has more oomph to it. Meanwhile, this wonderfully compact teaching stands waiting for us.

Dr. Welch included in his article these words:

Next time anxiety comes knocking, consider that the Lord is near. Then make petitions, surround them with thanksgiving, and finish with "not my will but yours."... This may all sound too simple, but it is true. The Lord is near. If you are anxious, pray. If depressed, pray. *Welcome to the deep wisdom of God.*

Here's the fourth thing...

D. Cultivate Godly, Positive Thinking.

Verse 8 *Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.* There is incredible power in working on, developing, and guiding that mysterious, often unruly world of your thought life.

Years ago, I read a book titled *God's Psychiatry*. It was by a famous pastor in Atlanta years and years ago named Charles Allen. He was so effective and gifted in counseling people that physician friends would send people to him who were struggling with depression and stress. But what he offered people was really very simple. For instance, one day, a man was referred to him who was at the top of his game in his career. He had risen to the top of his company, and had lots of money and success. However, he was completely stressed out, physically sick and struggling with anxiety and depression. His doctor had not been able to help him, so he sent him to the pastor. And the pastor said I'm going to give you a prescription, and I want you to take it exactly the

way I prescribe it. The prescription was to read the **23rd Psalm** first thing after waking in the morning, then right after breakfast, after lunch, and after dinner, and then once again just before going to bed. To read the whole psalm five times a day on that schedule and to read it carefully, meditatively, and prayerfully, thinking about each phrase and giving his mind time to soak up the meaning.

Dr. Allen gave that prescription to a lot of people. Because he never knew of a single case in which a person followed and it did not produce very significant results. He insisted people take that prescription exactly prescribed so that the truths of the psalm would permeate the thoughts of their whole day. He wrote once that this sounded simple, but it really wasn't. Here's why, he said, "*... the twenty-third psalm is a pattern of thinking, and when a mind becomes saturated with it, a new way of thinking and a new life are the result.*" He said, "*Its power is not in memorizing the words, but rather in thinking the thoughts.*" 1

These four things together will help anyone and everyone to be resilient as they persevere and press on to know Christ. I once heard a humorous story about a young pastor who had preached a sermon on the Ten Commandments, and after the sermon, one of the men in the congregation came up and thanked him and said I really appreciate the Ten Commandments. I try to keep at least one of them every week. I hope you all immediately know what's wrong with that statement. If not, please speak to Barry or Sean after the service today. Here's the thing these four qualities –

- 1.) Finding your joy in the Lord,
- 2.) Remaining clear, calmly reasonable,
- 3.) Approaching every issue with grateful prayer
- 4.) Cultivating godly positive thinking. They go together.

CONCLUSION

What motivates us to press is not the false idea that you will earn

God's approval by your good works. That's backward.

We press on to know him because he came down to save us. Christ came into our world to die on the cross to pay for our sins and rise again to be our Lord and Savior. **John 3:17-18** says *God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but that all the world might be saved through him. He who believes in him is not condemned. He who does not believe this is condemned already because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.*

To turn to Christ and trust in him is the beginning of a life that's found in Christ in which God is at work within you to change you and transform you, but God chooses to work not apart from you or without you but in you, with you and through you. So give yourself fully to him and live the new life to which he calls you.

Amen.

¹ Charles Allen, *God's Psychiatry*, p. 15

A Prayer Expressing Faith in Christ

Almighty God, out of your great love you sent your son into the world not to condemn us but to save us by dying for our sins and rising again. I know that I need and I confess that I want the saving grace that's freely offered me through Christ. I turned to him and trust in him and rest in him alone for my salvation. Uphold me by your grace as I press on to know Christ. For I ask this in his name. Amen

A Prayer for Spiritual Renewal

Heavenly father renew a true and right spirit within me. Open my heart to truly hear see and receive the lifegiving wisdom of your word. Help me to not only hear your teachings but to do as you have taught me. Enable me by your Holy Spirit to find my joy in you to hold on to that sweet reasonableness that is Christ like, to approach everything that might make me anxious with thankful prayer and supplication. And to guide my wayward thoughts into good and godly paths. I ask in Jesus' name, Amen