

There are some years where it is easy to be thankful. Everything is going great and being thankful just comes naturally. There are other years where it might seem a little more difficult to be thankful. Maybe you are going through tough times, and being thankful seems like a discordant note. This year has certainly been a tough year. The virus has been a persistent problem. This year you might have had to adjust the way you celebrate Thanksgiving and it might not feel quite the same. And so being thankful might not seem to come quite so naturally this year. But today I think that we can learn from the Apostle Paul how to be thankful whatever the circumstances. In God’s Word today we learn that no matter what is going on around us we have reason to say, “I’m still thankful.”

I’m Still Thankful

- I. **Because of who empowers me.**
- II. **Because of what I share in.**

First, I’m still thankful because of who empowers me. In our passage for today the Apostle Paul says, **“I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances” (Philippians 4:11)**. Paul wasn’t just saying this. He really was content whatever the circumstances. You know where he wrote this from? Prison. And yet a word group that keeps coming up again and again in this letter is “joy” and “rejoice.” He says at the beginning of our passage, **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (Philippians 4:4)**.

How can he rejoice whatever the circumstances? Part of it is because he trusted that God was going to work all things out for his purposes. So for example at the beginning of this letter to the Philippians, he mentions that he is in prison. But he says that everybody here knows that I am in chains for Christ. And so Paul being in prison actually resulted in people knowing about Christ (1:13). On top of that Paul says that the believers who have heard that I’m in prison for Christ have been inspired to speak God’s word without fear (1:14). And so part of the reason we can still be thankful is because we trust that God is going to work out everything for our good, for the spread of the Gospel and for his glory. And so because of this we can rejoice in the Lord always (4:4).

But there are still many things that cause us to worry and so what should we do about that? Paul says instead of worrying about them, we should pray about them. He says, **“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6)**. We should certainly think through problems and try to come up with the best and wisest thing to do. The problem is that after thinking through the problem we often worry about it. And worry is kind of like spinning your wheels. When you’re spinning your wheels you’re not actually getting anywhere. Paul says instead of spinning our wheels with worry, we should pray about our problems. Can you imagine what would happen if every time we started to worry, we would instead pray? Wouldn’t the result be that we would have more peace?¹ And in the next verse, Paul talks about the peace of God: **“And the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7)**.² That reminds me of the hymn, “Oh what peace we often forfeit. Oh what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer.” (Joseph Scriven, “What a Friend We Have in Jesus, CW 411). After we pray about our troubles we are often left with a feeling of peace.

And we shouldn’t just pray about our troubles. Paul says, **“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6)**. When we thank God for things that causes us to count our blessings. And when we count our blessings we realize that even in the COVID year we have overflowing blessings from God. Paul says in our passage, **“I have more than enough” (4:18)**. Even in the COVID year we have more than enough. And so we’re still thankful.

¹ That the “result” of prayer will be peace I owe to Peter T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 483, 495.

² I first thought of this connection between prayer and peace when I read this passage in the New American Bible translation which translates, “...make your requests known to God. Then the peace of God that surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”

But even if Paul has very little he would still be thankful. He tells the Philippians that he knows what it's like to have just barely enough. I'm sure there were times in his missionary travels when his food supply was running very low. He said in 2 Corinthians, **"I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food" (2 Corinthians 11:27)**. He also knew times on his missionary travels when he was well supplied with food. In Philippi Paul met the jailor. The jailor is the one who asked Paul, "What must I do to be saved?" And Paul said, "Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved." It says that the jailor set a meal before Paul and Silas (Acts 16:34).

So Paul knew what it was like to be hungry, he knew what it was like to be well fed. But no matter whether Paul was hungry or well fed, Paul said that he was content. He said, **"I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want" (Philippians 4:12)**. And what's the secret to being content in any and every situation? Paul tells us, **"I can do all this through him who gives me strength" (Philippians 4:13)**. God is going to take care of you and give you the strength to get through whatever circumstances you find yourself in. Whatever your circumstances you can say, "I'm still thankful, because of him who gives me strength." And "I'm still thankful because of what I share in."

One of the reasons Paul was writing this letter to the Philippians is because the Philippians had sent him a gift. And Paul wanted to thank them for it. He says, **"I am amply supplied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent" (Philippians 4:18)**. Paul was in prison for preaching about Jesus and the Philippian Christians sent him a care-package. And Paul says that this care-package that they sent him was really a thank offering to God. Paul says, **"They [your gifts] are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God" (Philippians 4:18)**.

The Philippians were thankful to God for Paul's ministry. And why were they thankful to God for Paul's ministry? Because Paul brought them the Gospel, the good news of what Jesus had done for them. Because Paul brought them the Gospel and because they believed it, they now shared in God's grace. At the beginning of the letter Paul said to them, **"All of you share in God's grace with me" (Philippians 1:7)**. Imagine the Gospel like a Thanksgiving dinner that you have been invited to share in. You have been given a seat at the table where you partake for free in the blessings of the Gospel. Pastor Lahmann once preached an Easter sermon where he pictured the blessings of Easter like a feast where you say, "Pass the forgiveness. Pass the eternal life." No matter what your outward circumstances you can say, "I'm still thankful because of what I share in." I'm still thankful because I share in the blessings of eternal life in Christ Jesus my Lord.

The Philippians were thankful that they shared in the blessings of the Gospel, that they also wanted to share in supporting Paul as he preached the Gospel.³ Paul says, **"Yet it was good of you to share in my troubles" (Philippians 4:14)**. One way the Philippians shared in Paul's troubles is by sending him this gift while he was in prison. This financial support was one way that the Philippians partnered with Paul in the work of proclaiming the Gospel. At the beginning of the letter Paul talked about the Philippians partnership in the Gospel (Philippians 1:5). From the early days of their acquaintance with the Gospel, the Philippians wanted to support Paul in his mission work. He says, **"Moreover, as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only" (Philippians 4:15)**. This wasn't the first time that the Philippians had sent Paul a gift to support him in his work of proclaiming the Gospel. Paul says in our passage, **"Even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need" (Philippians 4:17)**. The Philippians are a good example for us. Because we share in God's grace, we also want to share in the proclaiming of God's grace. One way we show our thankfulness to God is by giving offerings which support the work of the Gospel.

And Paul closes by saying, **"And my God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus."** This has been a tough year, but God has still met all our needs. And he will continue to meet all our needs. Even after a tough year, we can say, "I'm still thankful. I'm still thankful because of who empowers me, and because of what I share in, the Gospel. And so we say with Paul, **"To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen." (Philippians 4:20)**

³ I got some of the ideas for this section from the *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* by Bauer-Danker-Arndt-Gingrich, 3rd Edition, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), p. 952.