

Philippians 4:1, 4-8 — How Do I Stand Strong For Christ When Times Are Tough?

March 29, 2020

Good morning CrossWinds. Even though we are not gathered physically, I am grateful for the technology that allows us to gather virtually. One thing we are doing different from last week is we are have sermon discussion meetings via Zoom video chat. There are three of them today. The first two will happen 15 minutes after each service at 9:45 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. The third will be at 7:00 p.m. We will discuss the Life Group questions that are at the end of the sermon outline. Links to the sermon outline are found on the livestream page of our website. On the livestream page of our website, you will also find the links you need to click to be part of these Zoom video meetings. Simply click them and Zoom will download any necessary applications and direct you to the meeting room. I look forward to seeing many of you today in those meetings. I miss catching up.

Before we open the Word of God, let's take time to pray and ask for God's hand of mercy and grace on our nation, for those suffering with COVID-19, and for the leaders of our nation who are making difficult decisions.

Heavenly Father, we come before you and we thank you that you are bigger than this disease. We think about the Old Testament and how you sent plagues on nations because of their sin as judgment. We also think of times you sent plagues on your own people to bring them to repentance. We know plagues are not just something used by you in ancient history but in the book of Revelation you tell us you will use plagues in future history as you try to bring people to their knees for repentance. I ask you would use COVID-19 as a tool in your hand to bring our nation to repentance and trust in you.

We confess the sin of our nation. As a nation, we have strayed far from you. Use this plague to open hearts to hear the gospel. Use the our lips and the mouths of

your people in this nation to clearly speak the gospel to a world that desperately needs to hear it.

We also ask for our leaders, our medical workers, and others risking their lives to love their neighbors. Give them safety and may they do great good for those in need.

Finally, we ask that you would bring COVID-19 to an end. We need your mercy now more than ever

Now help us as we study your word to see Jesus better and love Jesus more. Amen.

For our family, watching the evening news has become a stressful activity. There is not much good news right now. States have closed their borders. Shelter-at-home orders are in place. The National Guard is activated in multiple states around the country.

While the terror of this disease initially felt like it was reserved for the big cities of our nation, it has hit close to home with at least one case of COVID-19 documented in our community.

While we have not experienced the medical trauma of this disease, all of us have experienced the financial trauma. For some, our investments have gone soft. For others, there is complete loss of income. As a church, we are preparing meals and helping with benevolence to assist families in need.

All of this has created great anxiety. Last week, we looked at Jesus' words on anxiety and why Christians do not need to be controlled by anxiety because we have a Father that loves us and is looking out for us. This morning, we are going to continue looking at how believers handle anxiety. We are going to move from the words of Jesus to the apostle Paul. We will be in Philippians 4. In that chapter of Philippians, Paul gave us important words on how to persevere for

Christ when times are tough. He told us how to stay strong for Christ when we are exhausted. This is something all of us need to hear, especially in these times.

By way of background, we must know that Paul understood tough times from firsthand experience. When he wrote the letter to the Philippians, he was writing from a Roman prison. He didn't know if he would be released or executed. Every stroke of his pen was followed by the ringing of metal chains moving on his wrists. Roman prisons were not comfortable. They didn't have cable TV, like modern prisons. They were not sanitary. Paul didn't have fur-lined handcuffs on his wrists. Roman prisons were notoriously hard. So we see Paul understood tough times. He could write about handling them from firsthand experience. His time in prison wasn't the only tough time in his life.

In 2 Corinthians 11, Paul told us of other hardships he endured. He was beaten many times. He was stoned and left for dead. Three times he was beaten with rods. He was shipwrecked. He often lived in fear of those who wanted to take his life. He often went without food. He often faced cold and exposure. All I can say is Paul understood tough times much better than we can understand them. This means Paul's words about how to stay strong for Christ when times are tough is something we need to hear this morning. Let's read the text then study it together.

Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.... Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is

any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you. Philippians 4:1, 4–9 (ESV)

Paul gave us four choices we need to make in tough times to come through them pleasing to God.

I must choose to rejoice in the Lord, not in my circumstances.

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Philippians 4:4 (ESV)

When we are going through a tough time, let's face it, there is not much encouragement found in our circumstances. If we look at life around us, it is easy to be depressed. Paul tells us that when everyone is depressed around us because their eyes are fixed on circumstances, as Christians, we are to be different. We are to be joyful people. We are to be positive people even in dark days.

Where does our positivity come from? Was Paul simply telling us to suck it up? Absolutely not. Paul said we are to rejoice “in the Lord.” The joy we display in tough times does not come from the circumstances we are facing but from the relationship we have with God through Jesus that we are enjoying. No matter what we are going through, God loves us. God will not abandon us. God promises be with us. God showers his affection on us through Jesus. The point Paul was making was that having Jesus, being saved by Jesus, and being loved by God brings more joy into our lives than any circumstantial joy this world can offer. When we face tough times, we still have joy because we still have the greatest joy that can be found in this life, being passionately loved and saved by God through Jesus, his son.

Let us think about this comparatively. What would be better? Would it be better to be a millionaire sitting carefree on a tropical beach but never know Jesus or would it be better to be suffering with COVID-19 but to have an intimate relationship with God through Jesus?

Without question, having Jesus is worth more than having anything. It is better to be suffering with COVID-19 and have Jesus, than to be healthy and carefree in this life without him. At the end of our days, only those who know God through Jesus will be with Jesus in eternity, which the Bible describes as never-ending joy. Anyone who dies without Jesus will face eternal, never-ending punishment. The joy we have in Jesus now and in eternity is better than any other pleasure this world has to offer.

This reminds me of life when Cindy and I were first married. We had absolutely no money. Purchasing a basic tool at the hardware store was more money than we could spend. We barely had enough money to pay the deposit on our first apartment. But you know, it didn't matter. We were happy. We were filled with joy. The joy we had in our relationship was so strong that all the other trials of ordinary life faded into the background. We didn't have a lot of joy in our physical circumstances but you couldn't wipe the smile off my face because we had the joy of being married to one another.

This is similar to our relationship with Jesus. The joy of having Jesus and all that God has done for us through him is so great that all the other trials of life fade into the background when we focus on all the good things that are ours

through God. This is why Paul said that in life's trials, we can still rejoice and we must still rejoice.

We find the same principle in the book of Habakkuk.

Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation. Habakkuk 3:17–18 (ESV)

Israel was experiencing complete economic devastation. There was no income. The livestock were just dying in the field. There was nothing to eat, yet he still had joy. He did not have material things but he had something better. He had a relationship with the God who loved him and who promised to save him. In hard times he had joy, because he had the one thing that mattered more than material things in this world. He had God's salvation.

While we are in this section, something else that is important to point out is that the word "oops" is not in God's vocabulary. He doesn't make mistakes. He always has a plan, and it is a good one, even if we don't understand it. God has given Christians a promise for their tough times, a promise that those without Christ do not have. God promises to take all of the tough times we are facing and use them for our good and his glory.

We don't know what will happen in the next few weeks and months. Nobody knows what tough financial times we may face. Nobody knows what tough medical times are in front of us, but as Christians, we know God will use those trials in our lives to make us more like Jesus and bring more glory to his name in this world.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose. Romans 8:28 (ESV)

This is a promise that all of us who know Christ must hold onto with both hands. God may have a hard plan for us, but I guarantee you it is a good plan for us. Think of Job. God had a hard plan for Job's life, but was it a good plan? Yes, it was. It was not easy to lose everything, including your children. God had a good plan in that tough time. It was a plan to demonstrate to Satan, and to countless generations that would follow in Job's footsteps, that you can love God just for who he is. We do not love God simply for the blessings we gain. We can love God for who he is even when all of his goodness in our lives is taken away. At the end of God's tough plan for Job's life, Job loved God more. God had great glory brought to his name, and there was even a book of the Bible for generations to come.

What does it look like to rejoice in God when facing real life trials? Let me give you an example. In Acts 16, we read the story of Paul and Silas preaching the gospel in Philippi. Paul and Silas were dragged before the magistrates of the city. They were stripped and beaten with rods. Acts says many blows were inflicted on them. They were beaten badly. After that, they were put in prison and their feet fastened in stocks. Remember that Paul and Silas did nothing to deserve this other than telling people the good news of Jesus.

What were Paul and Silas doing while in prison while their bodies were swollen and in pain?

About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them... Acts 16:25 (ESV)

They were rejoicing. They were not celebrating their circumstances. They were celebrating Jesus. They were praying to Jesus. They were singing to Jesus.

It says the rest of the prisoners were listening to them. That literally means they were eavesdropping. What could possibly make these beaten and bloodied men sing and pray with joy? Jesus. They were celebrating that they had him.

You know the rest of the story. There was a great earthquake. All the prison doors flew open. Everyone's chains fell off. The jailor awoke planning to kill himself, but nobody left the prison. It was because Paul and Silas were rejoicing in Christ even when facing that tough time that the Philippian jailer, and no doubt many other prisoners, placed their faith in Christ that night. Keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus and having joy in our tough circumstances because of Jesus is one of the best ways for people to see the difference faith in Jesus makes and for us to introduce others to him..

Trials reveal what really is of value. Is it our 401Ks or Jesus? Is it the size of our bank accounts or Jesus? Tough times show us the truth.

By the way, when it comes to rejoicing in tough times, Paul and Silas found it a great help to sing Christian music in those tough times. I echo their recommendation. God often uses good Christian music in a powerful way to encourage us in tough days.

Church, let us be filled with joy that doesn't come from our circumstances.

I must choose gentleness instead of irritability.

Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand...
Philippians 4:5 (ESV)

Now we move from experiencing joy from Jesus in our trials to sharing that joy with other people while in our trials.

The ESV says we are to let our “reasonableness” be known to everyone. Other translations, and the footnote in the ESV, say this can also mean, “let your gentleness be known to everyone.”

The Greek word for the English word “reasonableness” in this sentence means extending kindness and patience toward people, even when you are stressed or they are irritating.

Notice Paul didn’t say we only need to be gentle and reasonable to the people we love. We are to be gentle and reasonable in stressful times to everyone! This includes those who are hurtful toward us.

The tough part of this is when we are suffering, when we are tired, when we are weak, it is hard to be gentle, kind, and tolerant of people. Let’s face it, when we are stressed and under pressure, we start to get harsh with people. We aren’t gentle and kind with people.

A few years ago, when we were having a garage door installed in our house, I ran home from the office to see how things were going. It was not what I expected. The garage door installers had a big radio. They had it in my garage, and it was being played full blast. They were having their own little personal rock concert in my garage! I like rock music, but the kind of music they were listening to was not what I consider music. It was the kind of music in which the lead singer sounds like Darth Vader. To make matters more interesting, the installer was air-guitaring to the music and singing along with it, like he was in the shower, while he was installing my garage door.

I didn't know what to say, I was thinking, "Dude, I am paying you to install my garage door, not have a rock concert in my garage." To make matters worse, when the garage door was done being installed, latches were not installed right so they had to come back and move a bracket leaving exposed bolt holes in a brand new garage door.

That was a stressful time in my life. Let's just say, I didn't handle it well. I typed an e-mail and sent it to the person in charge of the installation. Let's just say that after I sent the e-mail, I wished I attached fishing line to it so I could reel it back in. I was in a tough time, and I wasn't acting like a Christian. I wasn't being gentle, reasonable, and kind. My anger was blowing my witness for Jesus. I was too focused on temporary things rather than keeping my witness with that company so I could be a light for Christ about eternal things.

Paul gave us a little help when it comes to being gentle with people when we are tired, hurt, or irritable. Paul said, "the Lord is at hand." That little phrase is used repeatedly throughout the New Testament to speak of the nearness of Christ's return or the short time until we see Jesus face-to-face by our death before he returns. In other words, Paul told us to look at difficult human relationships from an eternal perspective. It will not be long until we see Jesus face-to-face. At that time, the wrongs done to us will not matter. We will be with Jesus, which is better by far. Jesus will right every wrong. It will no longer be our worry. For some of us, it will be only 20, 30 or 40 years until we see Jesus face-to-face. When that happens, all that will matter is how well we have witnessed to people around us. All that will matter are the people we took with us by sharing

the gospel. It is not worth ruining our witness in stressful times. It is worth being inconvenienced and not ruining our witness for the short time we have left before Christ takes us home.

I must choose prayer instead of anxiety.

...do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. Philippians 4:6 (ESV)

Let me point out a few things. First of all, we are not to be anxious about anything but to pray about everything. As soon as we start to feel anxious about a situation, it should be our reflex to pray about that situation. The proper way to handle anxiety is always prayer.

Whenever we experience anxiety, our reflex should be prayer.

This reminds me of the man who went to the doctor and had two badly burned ears. The doctor asked him what happened to his ears. He said, "I was ironing my shirt and the phone rang." His reflex was to pick it up. The doctor said, "That explains one of your ears, but what happened to the other?" The man said, "They called back."

The man couldn't help himself. It was just a reflex reaction. In the same way, as soon as we start to feel anxiety about something, our reflex should be to pray about it.

We are to pray about little things, not just big things.

Paul said anything we are anxious about, we should pray about. Sometimes we think things are too small to pray about. We feel we should only pray about big things. We don't want to inconvenience God by praying about little

things. After all, right now God is busy handling prayers about COVID-19. He doesn't need a prayer request about help finding my car keys.

Trust me, God can handle all our prayers. He has much higher bandwidth on his prayer connection than we have on our Internet connection. We should pray about all kinds of things. Here is another reason why. Many times little problems can become big problems.

It is like going to Bomgaars before Easter. What do they always have? Baby chickens. Some of them are even dyed pink. They are so cute. If you have kids, you know what happens when your kids see those cute little birds. They begin begging you to purchase one. At first you think, that little bird can't be much of a problem. It is a little problem. It fits in the palm of your hand. The problem is what happens when you feed it. It doesn't stay a little bird for long. That chick goes from a cute bird to a big bird that is pooping all over your yard in nothing flat. We are to pray about all things because little problems have a way of becoming big problems overnight.

I should pray all kinds of prayers.

Paul gave us three different kinds of prayers we are to pray and one qualification for how we are to pray.

Prayers — This is general word for prayer and includes praying all kinds of prayers for all kinds of things.

Supplications — These are urgent requests for urgent needs. When someone goes to the hospital, we pray this kind of prayer. In tough times, we pray urgent requests.

Requests — These are specific prayers for specific needs. Many times our prayers are very general. They are so general we wouldn't even know if God answered them. Here Paul reminded us to pray specific requests about specific things.

Thanksgiving — When we pray, especially in tough times where we are praying urgently and specifically, it is easy to forget to include thanksgiving in our prayers. I think of it this way. When our family helps people in need or we give someone a gift, it is customary to receive a "Thank you" note from him or her. Sometimes, we don't get a note. I realize that may simply be because the person forgot, but I sometimes wonder if it is because that person isn't grateful. The lack of thanks leaves an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of our stomachs.

This is similar to the way we treat God. We pray urgent prayers and demanding prayers, but when God answers our prayers, we never bother to express our gratitude. That is unhealthy. That is ungrateful.

When I was growing up, they taught us to pray using a little acrostic based on the words ACTS.

"A" is for adoration. Begin your prayers focusing on thanking God for who he is and what he has done for us through his son.

"C" is for confession. Before we can spend time with God, we want to confess our sin to God. Quite honestly there is far too little confession of sin in our lives. We don't confess our sin because often times we don't see ourselves as sinners. When we don't see ourselves as sinners, we become less grateful for our savior.

“T” is for thanksgiving. This is reflecting back on God’s answers to our prayers in the past and thanking him for his faithfulness. Remembering his answers to prayers in the past and being grateful for those answers give us confidence to make requests of God in the future.

“S” stands for supplication. That is a fancy word for making a request. It is after we have worshipped God for who he is, we have confessed our sin to God, and thanked God for his good answers to our requests than we are in the right position to make requests concerning our future.

Now Paul told us there is a promise God gives us when we place our worries at the feet of Jesus in prayer.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Philippians 4:7 (ESV)

God doesn’t experience anxiety. For God, nothing is out of control. He is in perfect peace, calmness, and control. The most peaceful person in existence is God. If you want to get peace from anybody, the best person to get it from is God. Paul told us that no matter how chaotic and stressful our lives, we can be people of calm and peace. It is not that we have that peace in ourselves but that God has that peace in himself and he gives it to us through prayer.

God doesn’t promise to always answer our prayers the way we want them answered, but he does promise to take away our anxiety and replace it with peace when we pray. God promises to give us supernatural peace.

Right now, in the COVID-19 pandemic, we are stressed. This means that as Christians, we must pray, and pray a lot. We must give God all of our worries

and look for his help to carry us through. Have you experienced that supernatural peace after prayer? I have. I pray you have. If not, this week, you can.

Peter said something similar to this in 1 Peter 5:7.

...casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you. 1 Peter 5:7 (ESV)

God loves us. He cares for us. He will bring peace to us when everyone else is in chaos. We can leave all our worries at Jesus' feet and not worry about them anymore. God will handle it. Isaiah said the same thing.

You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. Isaiah 26:3 (ESV)

Remember God does not promise to answer our prayers the way we request, but he does promise to give us supernatural peace in response to all of our requests.

This week, if you haven't been praying about your worries with your spouse, set aside time to do that. If you haven't been praying with your family about the challenges you are facing, take the time to do that. If you pray about your anxieties to God and later find them coming back again, stop and take time to pray and give them to God again. Pray about everything all the time.

We need to choose to replace bad thoughts with good thoughts.

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Philippians 4:8 (ESV)

This is one of my favorite verses in Philippians. Paul said what we think about will affect our lives. Every temptation you face will come at you through your mind. Our minds are the command center. The mind can reach backward in

time to recall memories to relive them. The mind can reach forward with the imagination and create the future.

Paul reminded us to be very careful what we let our minds think about, especially in tough times. What we allow our minds to chew on, will become what we act on. This is the way advertising works. If an advertiser can get you imagining its product in your mind, it knows you will purchase its product. What we are thinking will become the way we act. If we let our thoughts be filled with negative things, depressing things, garbage things, then our minds work against us. Soon we will start acting out sinful things, negative things, and unhelpful things in our lives.

But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ. 2 Corinthians 11:3 (ESV)

The way Satan attacked Eve in the Garden of Eden was with her thought life. He advertised a piece of forbidden fruit. Once he had her imagining it, he knew that soon she would act upon it. It was after Eve entertained sinful thoughts in her mind that she later acted out sinful actions in her life. Eve's sin didn't begin with eating the forbidden fruit. It began with thinking about eating the forbidden fruit. This is the way Satan attacks us in tough times. He wants us to think evil and unhelpful things, so he can get us acting in evil and unhelpful ways. This is why we must guard our minds.

Be careful what you role play in your mind. What you role play in your mind will soon become what you real-play in your life.

Let me mention a little side note. Many people think the Internet is harmless. It is just looking at things. It is just imagining things. It isn't necessarily

doing anything wrong. Listen to me. I care about you. What you allow yourself to be entertained with on the Internet shapes you. Soon it will control you. This is why Paul said that at all times, and especially in tough times, we must feed our minds only good and wholesome things so we make good and wholesome choices.

We destroy arguments and every lofty opinion raised against the knowledge of God, and take every thought captive to obey Christ... 2 Corinthians 10:5 (ESV)

Take every thought captive to Christ. Rebuke thoughts that are lustful or thoughts that are vengeful.

By the way, one practical way we can do this right now is to limit the amount of news we put into our minds in this difficult season. Right now, the more news we take in, the more anxiety we will find in our hearts. We already know the basics. Don't lick door knobs. Listen to your mother and wash your hands. Pray for our leaders and country. Let's stick to those basics. Stop feeding your brain constant panic.

Instead of feeding our brains anxiety, let's feed our brains the Word of God, which is good for us. Psalm 1 talks about what happens to us when we feed our mind God's Word.

...but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers. Psalm 1:2–3 (ESV)

Delighting in God's Word and God's law builds us up. Not only should we read the word of God but this Psalm tells us to meditate on it. That means to put it in our minds and chew on it like a cow chews the cud. This is why we memorize

a verse each week. We want to chew on that verse. We want to hide that verse in our hearts so it will come back to our minds when we need to remember it.

Conclusion

So this morning, Paul answered the question, “How do I stand strong for Christ when times are tough?” He gave us four answers to that question.

1. We need to choose to find our joy in Jesus, rather than our circumstances.

That is the only way we can have smiles on our faces in times of trouble. That is the only way people will know that Jesus makes us different.

2. We need to choose gentleness in place of irritability. We need to pursue gentleness with people, especially in tough times. That is how people know Christ has made us different.
3. We need to choose prayer in place of anxiety. God has a great exchange program. When we pray to him about things that worry us, that is when he gives us peace in place of anxiety.
4. We need to choose to think about good and wholesome things, instead of evil and destructive things. Satan always attacks us through our minds. This is why we need to guard our thoughts.



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