

*Psalms 126:1–2 (NRSV)*

- <sup>1</sup> When the LORD restored the fortunes of Zion,  
we were like those who dream.
- <sup>2</sup> Then our mouth was filled with laughter,  
and our tongue with shouts of joy;  
then it was said among the nations,  
“The LORD has done great things for them.”

*Philippians 4:4–7, 10–14 (NRSV)*

<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. . . .

<sup>10</sup> I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. <sup>11</sup> Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. <sup>12</sup> I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. <sup>13</sup> I can do all things through him who strengthens me. <sup>14</sup> In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.

*Where, or in whom, can we find true joy?*

This week, we begin a new series on words. Yes, words. Words that carry a lot of meaning in our theology and our faith, Old Testament and New. And, to day, we begin with “joy,” the verb form “rejoice,” and the adjective “joyful.”

*Seeking and finding joy*

I don’t know that there is a better word to describe the life I seek than a life filled with *joy* - the joy of a loving relationship with God, with my wife, with my children and family, with my friends, with all of you at St. Andrew. The joy of a job well done; the happiness of purpose and fulfillment. The celebration of all that is good and wonderful about life. This is what I seek . . . but such joy can be so hard to find!

## Paul’s Letter to the Philippians

Paul’s letter to the Philippians is one of the brief poignant letters that Paul wrote during his several imprisonments. The others are Ephesians, Colossians, and Philemon.

Philippi is in Greece, but in the first century it was no typical Greek town. Having about 10,000 inhabitants, Philippi was on the *Via Ignatia*, the major highway connecting Asia Minor and the Adriatic Sea. Named for Alexander the Great’s father, Philippi had the status of a Roman colony – its inhabitants were Roman citizens, with all the attendant privileges. City inscriptions were in Latin, not Greek. City government was modeled on Rome, not Athens. Philippi was very “Latinized.”

Eugene Peterson calls Philippians “Paul’s happiest letter.” Most commentators would agree. Perhaps this is because we read the letter knowing that Paul wrote it from prison, in circumstances that most of us will never face. Yet, in his adversity, Paul finds reason to celebrate everywhere he turns, and he prays that the Philippians will find the joy that God has given him. Indeed, Paul writes that the Philippians themselves bring him great joy – they occupy a special place in his heart.

I urge you to find an easy-to-read version of Philippians (such as the *New Living Translation* or *The Good News*) and read the letter through in one sitting. Do this several times over the coming weeks as you seek to find joy in your own life. Take the time to read slowly, even prayerfully.

An article in the *New York Times* in years past has stayed with me: “The Futile Pursuit of Happiness.”<sup>1</sup> The author traces the work of several researchers on our search for happiness. What they found is no real surprise. We humans are dreadful when it comes to imagining how we’ll feel about something in the future. As the author put it, “we overestimate the intensity and duration of our emotional reactions.” More simply stated, that new car isn’t going to make you as happy as you thought it would and any boost it does give to your happiness won’t last as long as you thought it would. The same is true on the downside; emotional devastation was less intense and shorter-lived than people expected. Mistakes we make in understanding what to expect from a raise or a new car or a new house lead directly to poor choices. We think we know what will make us happy or content or joyful – but we don’t. The truth is that it is easy for us all

to spend most of our lives looking for joy in all the wrong places.

### Rejoice! Celebrate!

When we read Paul’s words in v. 4, “Rejoice . . . again, I say Rejoice!,” many of us tend to see it only as some sort of internal feeling or experience, as if Paul is saying “Be happy!” or “Be filled with joy!” But that doesn’t really capture Paul’s intent. Peterson renders the verse this way: “Celebrate God all day, every day. I mean, *revel* in him!” Tom Wright renders it this way: “Celebrate joyfully in the Lord all the time. I’ll say it again: celebrate!”

In the Bible, the experience of joy and the expression of joy are very close to the same thing. Joy is what happens at festivals and feasts and weddings. Jesus would often tell stories of God’s great banquet to which all would be invited. Such occasions are celebrations of our relationship with God and the goodness of his creation. Indeed, what better to reason could there be to celebrate – Jesus is Lord!

Wright notes that after urging the Philippians to celebrate, Paul reminds them they are to celebrate with gentleness. The NASB has “let your gentle spirit be known to all.” Perhaps Paul knows that human celebration can easily turn into raucous exuberance and wild partying! At all times and in all places and on all occasions – even in our celebration of the Lord – others are to see in us the fruits of God’s Spirit who dwells in us all: “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Galatians 5:22).

In Philippians 4:4-7 (see above), after urging the Philippians to celebrate that Jesus is Lord, Paul reminds them that “the Lord is near.” We can’t be sure exactly what he means, but certainly, Paul’s phrase reminds us that Jesus is with us always *and* that he will return to usher in the fullness of God’s kingdom.

Then, Paul turns immediately to prayer. He knows how easy it is for us to be worriers, leading lives beset by constant anxiety over things big and small. But this is not the path to joy or to peace. Paul urges us to set aside our worries and take everything to God in prayer – yes, everything. The word “trivial” may be in our vocabulary, but it is not in God’s. We can have no need that is too inconsequential for God. There can be no goodness or blessing in our lives that is too small for our thankfulness. God wants to hear it all. God seeks a loving relationship with each of us, encompassing every tiny part of our lives. Such is true love.

Indeed, it is in a confident, trusting, loving, and celebratory relationship with God that we find peace and joy. Just as it is easy for us to overestimate the joy that a new car will bring us (and, yes, I drive one!), so we tend to underestimate the happiness, joy, and peace that will come to us from a solid relationship with God. Yet, Paul gets it exactly right. We can’t even really understand the peace of God that is offered to each of us – this peace that will stand guard around our hearts and minds as we make our way through life. Prayer is the path to this peace. When we fail to pray – when we fail to live in conversation with God – we will not stay on the path to God’s peace.

### *From anxiety to joy*

Anxiety has always been part of the human condition. In Paul’s day, people were no less

<sup>1</sup>by Jon Gertner, published in the *NY Times* on September 7, 2003.

anxious and stressed out than we are now. For the ancients, heaven was populated with countless gods and goddesses, any of whom might take a disliking toward you or your neighbors on a whim. The pantheon of the gods was like one big soap opera, far removed from any human control. The gods would do what they wanted, when they wanted. People coped with the whims of the gods in different ways. Some, like the Epicureans, decided that since they couldn't control their capricious gods, they'd simply grab all the pleasure and happiness they could in life.<sup>2</sup> (Sounds like a lot of people I know!) Others, like the Stoics, sought to make themselves immune to anxiety by learning a detached self-sufficiency, which they called "contentment."<sup>3</sup> In Philippians 4:10-13, Paul uses the language of the Stoics. This is the only place in his letters that Paul refers to himself as "content" (*autarkes* in the Greek). Paul would often use the language and vocabulary of his audience when he spoke to them about Jesus Christ.<sup>4</sup> But Paul always meant something different too; there was always a Christian perspective. For the Stoics, contentment was all about being independent, needing no one else. That way, the "content" person couldn't be harmed by the emotions or slights or needs of others. Obviously, Paul means something quite different.

In v. 10 of today's passage, evidently Paul has received some sort of financial help from the Philippians, and he thanks them for it. Perhaps he needed some help with expenses while in prison or perhaps it is financial support that he can use in his work. In any event, as joyful as he is to get the gift, Paul wants the Philippians to understand that his life is no longer driven by whether he happens to have a little at or a lot. Such peace in all circumstances doesn't come naturally. Paul has had to *learn* to be satisfied in whatever circumstances or surroundings he finds himself. Remember, this is Paul's letter of joy – and he is writing from prison! He has learned well.

How has Paul learned this? What is his "secret"? Paul has learned that he can do all things – such as being content in all circumstances – through God. It is God who gives Paul the strength that he needs to be free from worry and anxiety. Paul's secret is that he has come to understand and truly embrace the psalmist's portrait of God as the good shepherd. Though Paul languishes in prison, he knows that he will dwell in God's house forever, because nothing – "not death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers . . . nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:38-39). Such confidence in God and the strength he provides is the basis for Paul's joyful contentment – and our own.

*The entry on "joy" from the Lexham Bible Dictionary (By Brenda Heyink)*

**JOY** (ἡδονή, *simchah*; χαρά, *chara*). Closely related to gladness and happiness, although joy is more a state of being than an emotion; a result of choice. One of the fruits of the spirit (Gal 5:22–23). Having joy is part of the experience of being a Christian.

### **Biblical Relevance**

In the Old Testament, joy is closely related to victory over one's enemies. For example, in 1 Sam 18:6 when David returned from killing the Philistine, he was met with joy and dancing. It is also associated with religious acts and feasts, including sacrifices in Psa 27:6 and the Feast of Unleavened Bread (2 Chr 30; Ezra 6).

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<sup>2</sup>Epicurus taught that since we have no life other than this one, the good life is the life bringing the most pleasure and happiness now. It is unfortunate that "Epicureanism" has come to be associated with a profligate and luxurious lifestyle. This is not what Epicurus had in mind. He led a simple, honest life, believing that justice, honesty, and simplicity were the truest paths to a happy and pleasurable life.

<sup>3</sup>For Stoics, humans become virtuous through knowledge, enabling us to live in harmony with nature and achieve a profound sense of happiness, freedom from emotion, and detachment from the turmoil of life – to be content and self-sufficient in all things.

<sup>4</sup>For example, Acts 17 tells the story of Paul's appearance before a council of Greek philosophers in Athens. There, Paul talks to them in their language, speaking to their issues. Further, the Greeks had always questioned the nature of "being." Paul told them that it is in the Lord God that we live, move, and "have our being." He talks to them about Jesus, but in their own words and idea. Paul knew that all truth is God's truth; that, in God, the Greeks could find the answers they had long sought.

“Joy” also occurs frequently in songs of praise, most frequently in the book of Psalms (1 Chr 16; Pss 20; 33; 47). The prophets speak of joy, both its being taken away on account of exile (Ezek 24:25; Joel 1:12) and of the joy that will return when the people are restored (Isa 35:10; Jer 31:13).

In the New Testament, “joy” is still used for victory, as shown by the disciples returning with joy since even the evil spirits listened to them (Luke 10:17). However, the victory focuses more on salvation (Luke 15:7)—the presence of Christ, the bridegroom, gives reason for joy (John 3:29). In the New Testament letters, joy is a desired attribute of Christians. Paul expressed frequently the joy he had regarding the salvation of those he was writing to and prayed that they might be full of joy.

### Etymology

A significant number of words in the Bible have been translated as “joy.” The most common are:

- The Hebrew *שמחה* (*simchah*)—meaning “joy,” “mirth,” or “gladness” along with the closely related verbal adjective *שמח* (*sameach*).
- The Greek *χαρά* (*chara*)—meaning “joy” or “gladness” and the closely related verbal form, *χαίρω* (*chairō*), meaning “to rejoice or be glad.”

Other words commonly used for “joy” are:

- Hebrew *חדוה* (*chedwah*), meaning “joy” and “gladness”; its verbal form, *חדה* (*chadah*).
- Hebrew *רננה* (*rinnah*), translated as “ringing cry of supplication or joy or praise”; the closely related Hebrew verb, *רנן* (*ranan*), translated as “giving a ring out or shout out for joy” (except in the hithpolel).
- Hebrew verb, *גיל* (*gil*), meaning “rejoicing” or “exceedingly glad” in the noun form and “to rejoice, be glad” when used as a noun (*גילה*, *gilah*, in the less frequently found feminine variation).
- Hebrew *ששון* (*sason*), meaning “gladness”, “joy” or “exultation”; the closely related verbal form, *שש* (*sus*), “to exult or display joy.”
- Greek *ἀγαλλίασις* (*agalliasis*), meaning “extreme joy” and the closely related verbal form, *ἀγαλλιάω* (*agalliaō*), meaning “to rejoice”.
- Greek *εὐφραίνω* (*euphrainō*), meaning “to gladden or be joyful”; the less common noun form *εὐφροσύνη* (*euphrosynē*), meaning “joy” or “gladness.”

### Development

Emotions in the Old Testament were generally connected to various body parts—the heart could have emotions and thoughts, while the gut or liver were also of importance for emotions. Smith explains, “Israelites associated emotions with the internal organs where the emotions were perceived to be felt physically” (Smith, “Israelite Emotion,” 431). While anger is often associated with a burning of the nostrils, the heart is the center for joy. However, joy does not remain in the heart, but is part of a movement towards appropriate action, explaining the relevance of joy in religious activities (Smith, “Israelite Emotion,” 435–36).

In the New Testament, Paul emphasized the place that joy was to have in the lives of Christians. Although he used the general form of Greek letters at the time, he adapted them to suit his needs—in particular, he used joy as an important element, especially in the beginning and ending of his letters. White argues that whereas ancient Greek letters had an element in the greeting where the writer would elaborate on their relationship with the recipient, Paul adapted the form of the letter to include a “joy expression” (White, “Introductory Formula,” 95–97).

### Cultural Relevance

Joy is one of the fruits of the Spirit; it is expected of Christians because it is the natural result of having received salvation. The joy comes on account of what Christ has done, irrelevant of whatever other circumstances are happening in one’s life.

## **Scott Engle's Bible Classes**

### **Monday Afternoon Class**

Current study: *Gospel of Mark*

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

### **Tuesday Lunchtime Class**

Current study: *1 Samuel*

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

*About the weekday classes:*

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at [scottengle.podbean.com](http://scottengle.podbean.com). They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

### **Scott's Sunday Class**

Beginning June 11 – *Ten Bible Passages I wish Christians Knew . . . Well*

This week – Genesis 1-3

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

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