

Finding God's Peace in Tumultuous Times: A Pandemic Devotional from the New Testament Book of Philippians Philippians 4:8-23

Devotional 9

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What are you thinking? We might ask the question to a friend or loved one who has been silent for a while. This question can also be a question about how we are approaching life, asking, "With what are we filling our minds?" What are you thinking since the pandemic began? It is easy to fill our minds with warnings, rants and doom and gloom from our favorite media outlet. It is easy to get worked up about what our preferred media analyst or opinion writer is worked up about.

We live in an information age. There are literally billions of messages and pieces of information at our fingertips with a computer. But we don't have to seek out information, it comes at us every day like an overwhelming flood. Just in our daily lives, advertisers bombard our senses with appeals, cajoling us to want their product. Politicians appeal for our thinking to track with theirs, and thereby secure our vote. News comes at us from a particular point of view. Friends and family vie for our attention with their own list of wants, needs, or rants. There is so much information which seeks to fill our minds and it is so easy to simply passively follow along in the direction the day's happenstance trail of the information leads us.



What we think about is especially important, for, that is where our focus is. What we think about not only profoundly affects what we do, but also how we do it and how we feel.

The solution is not simply to be a glass-half-full kind of person. Paul writes to the Philippians with wisdom that reaches down through the ages to our day. Their information bombardment was different than ours. It was from the sights, sounds and smells of the various temples and Roman tributes in their city. But they had the same need we have. Things were competing for their attention also, just in a different way. The need, which the Apostle Paul addresses in this passage from Philippians, is to discipline our minds and focus our thinking on God and the good things in this life He would have us dwell upon.

Throughout this epistle, Paul has spoken about having a connection with the Lord Jesus Christ, a relationship with Him that far surpasses anything else. He has talked about it from personal experience. He is in prison, but he rejoices. He may die, but that just means he will reach the fulfillment of what he has been pursuing all his life: an eternal relationship with Jesus Christ. This approach of Paul leaves behind valuing the things of this world in the way he once did. Now he focuses on just one thing: His Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Paul has also talked about following examples, his example, the example of other believers, and ultimately the example of Jesus Christ who was God, but didn't claim His rights as God, but surrendered Himself to the demeaning, tortuous death on the cross, bearing the dark weight of the sin of the world – all that we might be set free and forgiven.



As Paul closes out this epistle, his final exhortation talks about thinking and acting. He urges Christians to think about the things that are worthwhile in this world, and to follow his example in living life in all-out pursuit of the heavenward calling of knowing Jesus Christ, now and through eternity.

As we go through the mundane day to day existence of our lives, especially amidst the drudgery of the daily pandemic grind, we would do well to heed Paul's exhortation here. It is so critical what we think about. And this is something in our control. We may not be able to control every message that comes at us, but we can control what we think about, what we dwell upon, what we consider worthy of our thought time and emotional energy. Paul says, those good things you find in the world around you, think about those things!

And then he says follow his example, as he follows Jesus' example. Live not for self, not focused on your resume, achievements, or worldly possessions, but rather focus on the good around you, serving others as Christ served. Focus upon sharing the good news of how a relationship of surpassing value with the One to whom every knee shall bow is available to all.



Paul's exhortation does not mean we think about only Christian things. It means we take in the world around us and evaluate what is there through the lens of heaven, and discerning which are the good, sacred, worthy, noble and righteous things we find there – allowing those things to dominate our thinking – not the things that pull us down and away from our heavenly calling.

Such thinking combined with the imitation of Paul as he imitates Christ comes with a promise. The promise is nothing less than the God of Peace being with us. Adopting such a lifestyle comforts us with the Loving Presence of our God, so that we are never alone. Ultimately, this results in us finding contentment no matter what our circumstances.

Read, Reflect and Apply** – Begin today by asking God to direct your thinking. Ask the Holy Spirit to lead your mind and your thoughts to dwell upon the good things He would have you focus upon today.

**Questions preceded by two asterisks indicate application relevant to your life.

Read Philippians 4:8-23 and then consider these questions.

Verse 8-9

Focusing Our Thinking Upon the Good

**How is your attention span? What is required to remain focused upon something for an extended period of time?

Paul introduces this last section of the letter and the last exhortation for the Philippians with “finally”. The last command will always linger, in the recipients’ thoughts. There is an importance to it. Notice that Paul uses several words in succinct repetition.

*What limitations does Paul put on the things in this list, what limitations does he not place on the things?

Several of the words Paul has chosen come specifically from Greek culture and society. He is speaking generally and broadly. He says literally before each word “whatever is” or “if anything is”. While he *is* encouraging them to think about more noble things, and good things, he is doing more than that. He is encouraging the Philippians to consider the things in the culture in which they live and evaluate them through a gospel lens. Which of them are good and worthy and noble from God’s perspective? This is important for a city full of people that had such civic pride. Notice the expanded definition of each word, then try to think of a couple of examples for each that you see in the culture around you. (These definitions come from the *Concise Greek-English Lexicon*, by Barclay M. Newman Jr., Gordon Fee’s commentaries (both the IVP and the New International) and *the New Linguistic and Exegetical Key to the Greek New Testament*, by Cleon Rogers Jr. and Cleon Rogers III.)

1. **True** – This one simply means truth. There is a lot of deceptive promises in the world. Where do you find truth in popular culture?
2. **Worthy** – “serious, noble, of good character, honorable, respectable” – This word has a sense of the sacredness about it. Thus, it might also be translated as “dignified, majestic, awe-inspiring or creating a sense of reverence.” What do you find has a kind of awe-inspiring worthiness about it in the world around you?
3. **Right** – “righteous, just” – This word is used frequently in Scripture to speak of how God relates to His people. Jesus talks about a Kingdom righteousness in the Sermon on the Mount. Paul takes about being made right with God. It is the same Greek word. Do these concepts bring to mind anything in the culture around you?
4. **Pure** – This word comes from the worship of the temples. It was used of offering a sacrifice without imperfection or blemish. It means “holy, chaste, innocent, morally pure”. What kinds of things could be characterized this way in our culture?
5. **Lovable** – This word means literally “toward affection”. It is something that drives one toward having affection for it. “Loveable, pleasing” might also be synonyms. What do you find “pleasing” in the world around us?
6. **Admirable** – This word means literally “good sounds”. It is anything that is spoken well of. It means something having a “good reputation” and “worthy of praise”. What things in the world and culture around us are of good reputation that Christians can also agree are good?
7. **Virtue** – This is a technical term in Greek philosophy for virtue. It is the most comprehensive Greek term for moral excellency. Where do you find moral excellency in the world around you?

8. **Praise** – This word would designate something praiseworthy of good general ethical judgment. What can Christians agree is praiseworthy that we find in our culture?

About these, Paul uses a present active imperative command. That means this is a command to on-going and repeated action to “think about, give thought to, reckon, take into account, consider, reflect upon and evaluate”. Paul says to continually be giving your thought to the things that you “reckon” to be worthy. This does require a guidance from the Scriptures and from a Christian perspective.

**How can we give continuous thought to these things?

**What would be the effect upon a person, who continuously focused their mind on the things on this list?

**How does this require one to think about the culture around, but also about Jesus Christ and the God of heaven?

Paul uses four words for a call to imitate him as he imitates Christ. He says whatever you have “learned, received, heard and seen” in me, do these things.

*As you think back over your study of Philippians, what have you perceived that would fit here?

**How can we practically imitate Paul in our own lives? Try to give very practical and specific examples.

Paul is combining a call to thought with a call to action. He challenges us to fill our minds with righteous thoughts and then to strive toward action that follows his example. Then he adds a promise.

*What is the promise to those who think about these things, while imitating the example of Paul’s life?

**What might it mean for your life right now for the God of peace to be with you in a palpable and tangible way?

The Secret of Contentment

V. 10-23

*What is Paul thanking the Philippians for in these verses?

*How does he qualify this “thank you note”?

*Why would he thank them in such a strange way? Why not just say thank you for your support?

*What is the secret that Paul has learned?

**How has this worked in your life? Would you say you are content in want or in abundance? Which condition best describes your present circumstance?

It is easy to focus on what we don’t have if we lack things, but we can still focus on what we don’t have in plenty, simply by focusing on wanting to get even more. Contentment means acceptance of your present circumstance as God-given.

*In this context what do you think Paul means when he says this often-quoted verse: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” Does this mean he can do anything he sets his mind to attempt with Christ’s help? Why or why not?

*How does verse 19 help us to understand Paul’s contentment in any circumstance?

**How might having the faith to appreciate your present circumstance as God-ordained, or at least God-permitted help you to achieve greater peace and contentment?

*He qualifies the thank you he offers in several ways, not wanting to miss any opportunity to set a godly example. But in the end, Paul does praise the Philippians. What does he commend them for? How does he describe their gift?

**How easy or difficult do you find it to do what the Philippians have done?

**How might giving money away help demonstrate or break money's hold upon us?

Paul closes this letter extending personal greetings to every believer ("saint") in the church in Philippi.

*What might this have meant to them? What impact would this have had on you had you been a member of that church?

*How might Paul's final sentence in this letter be a summary of the contents of the letter itself?

**As you look back over your study of Philippians, what stands out to you? What have you "learned", "received", "heard" and "seen" that has been challenging to you? What might God be calling you to do in response? Make a list of things you can do to apply these Scriptures to your daily life.

**As you look back over your study of Philippians, what has been encouraging to you? Can you have the faith to really believe these things are true for your life? Will you choose to receive them in faith – trusting God for them today? Make a list.

Closing Application and Prayer

It is easy to let a good Bible Study just make us feel good as we have enjoyed learning some new things, but can we really put into practice what we have learned and studied? As James says, "Be doers of the word, and not only hearers, deceiving yourselves." (James 1:22)

**How will you live what you have learned? Might you take your lists created above and put them on your bathroom mirror, or refrigerator, or in your bible to remember them? Might you seek to take one practical step forward from the first list each week? Might you choose to take one practical promise of encouragement to choose to focus on trusting God for each week?

**Talk to God now, thanking Him for speaking to you through His word and asking Him to help you live it!

To God be the Glory! *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit!*