

JOY: NOW AND ALWAYS

Have you ever had someone you were counting on break a significant promise they had made to you? Perhaps a spouse has been unfaithful and violated sacred promises made to you on your wedding day. Maybe a father promised to attend a concert or a championship game only to forget or cancel because “something came up”. Maybe a friend promised to help you on a project you would never have tackled alone, and then she backed out after you had committed. Perhaps a grown child has made a series of promises to stop drinking or using drugs and now you have come to realize you have been repeatedly lied to. Some people have had a fiancé cancel an engagement for selfish reasons. Have you been passed over for a job promotion or a raise that was promised to you? These are but some of the many ways people can break their promises to us (and who among us hasn’t broken a promise to someone else?). There are few things that pain us more than living with someone else’s broken promises.

Although it is not my desire to dredge up painful memories, try to recall the most significant broken promise made to you. How did you feel? What did you think? Pain, sorrow, despair, loneliness, anger, depression, humiliation; these are the emotions we often experience when someone breaks a promise to us. Often, these emotions become chains that enslave us.

What about God and His promises? Has He ever broken His promises to you? Some Christians might answer that question instantly, not even needing to think about it. “No”, they would say, “God has never broken a promise, and He never will”. They are not being false or living in denial, they honestly believe with 100% confidence that God’s promises do not and cannot fail.

There will be a second group of Christians who would also say that God’s promises are always kept. But unlike the first group, the Christians in this second group don’t wholeheartedly believe what they are saying. They know “the right answer”, and they give it, but deep down inside they are less than certain that God’s promises are **ALWAYS** fulfilled. Their own experiences and the experiences of others have caused these Christians to have a measure of doubt. Nevertheless, they have decided that they should not just come out and admit their doubt.

Finally, there is a third group of Christians. They are not sure of the reason why they have seen God’s promises fail, but they believe they have experienced such failures. They might be close to giving up on Christianity altogether. Some Christians in this group have learned to cope with their disappointment in God by settling for a lukewarm, shallow and non-committed Christianity. They refuse to get too passionate about the Christian faith in order to avoid another experience of letdown when God’s promises fail. We frequently see this phenomena in human relationships where one person feels he or

she can not fully trust another person. Guardedness and caution thinly veil an outright sense of mistrust, but it's better than being hurt once again.

The Bible is filled with promises made to different people under different circumstances. For the purposes of this study, we are going to focus on the promises contained in the New Testament book of Philippians, a letter which Paul wrote to the church in Philippi in approximately 61 A.D. Few promises in the Bible are more precious, comforting and treasured than the promises found in Philippians. The fourth chapter contains promises known to almost every Christian. At the heart of it is verses 6-7 which reads as follows:

***Do not be anxious about anything,
but in everything, by prayer and petition,
with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.
And the peace of God,
which transcends all understanding,
will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.***

Other well-known verses include 4:11-13 where Paul said,

***“I am not saying this because I am in need,
for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.
I know what it is to be in need,
and I know what it is to have plenty.
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.
I can do everything through him who gives me strength”.***

It sounds wonderful, doesn't it? Over the centuries Christians have found great comfort and power in these words. What cannot be denied, however, is that many people, facing incredibly difficult and trying circumstances, have claimed these promises, yet they have ended up weak, confused, depressed and without peace. The promises of these passages have not been experienced, despite the person's fervent prayers and desperate need.

To make matters worse, these promises are often cited by Christians who are trying to comfort or encourage other Christians. They share them with the best of intentions but the end result is that the person they are trying to help is in even worse shape than before the attempt to encourage was made.

What are we to make of this? Are the promises of the Bible and particularly those in Philippians trustworthy or not? Why are some Christians able to testify to the promises being wonderfully fulfilled, while others, if honest, would admit to failure? And if we cannot get to the bottom of this apparent contradiction is it best not to mention God's promises in order to minimize further disillusionment on the part of those who don't see these promises fulfilled in their lives?

These are serious questions that need to be answered. If these promises are true why do so many Christians who sincerely want to experience them still lack peace, contentment and joy in their lives? Many Christians in dire circumstances have pleaded with God for the peace promised in Philippians 4: 6-7 yet never seem to receive it. In addition, countless thousands of Christians routinely spend vast amounts of money and time on counseling, therapy, medication, books, videos and seminars only to remain mired in depression, bitterness and fear. Continued failure causes many of these defeated Christians to blame themselves and thus be weighed down by guilt. Others lose their confidence in God's Word and its power and sufficiency. In short, this wonderful epistle filled with glorious promises ends up as a tragic missed opportunity for many of God's children.

Now for some good news. The promises of Philippians are true and they are available and trustworthy for all Christians. The crescendo of optimism, joy and strength that is reached in Philippians 4 can be the consistent testimony of every Christian. We can live in victory, free from the tyranny of difficult circumstances. Joy can replace despair, peace can supplant anxiety, and contentment can trump frustration. Perhaps best of all, the formula for attaining these things is not a deep secret discoverable by only a few specially initiated super-spiritual Christians. The Bible does promise that we can live in **TRUE JOY** and that such joy is not a fleeting emotion subject to change and uncertainty. Amazingly, the words joy and rejoice are used 18 times in this short letter. **TRUE JOY** is the theme of Philippians.

The key to mining the treasures of Philippians 4 is found in Philippians 1-3. The fundamental reason many Christians miss out on experiencing the chapter four promises is because they overlook or disregard the foundational truths and commands of the first three chapters. Stand upon a solid foundation and that which is built upon it will succeed. The Christian who understands and puts into practice the truths of Philippians 1-3 will be able to share in the victorious life Paul proclaimed in Philippians 4.

What about the Christian who pleads he or she is the exception because of the special difficulty of his or her circumstances? We have all heard someone say (and maybe we've said it ourselves) that the promises aren't realistic in his case because the trials he faces surpass that of the Christians who quote Philippians 4 so carelessly. A rough paraphrase would sound like this: "If you knew what I am going through and understood what it is like you wouldn't be quoting Philippians 4".

This objection can be laid to rest by considering the nature of Paul's circumstances when he wrote the letter to the Philippians. The joy he wrote about was not the by-product of pleasant conditions and easy times. Paul's circumstances were so dark and difficult that very few Christians could compare their problems to Paul's. Ultimately it should not matter because Philippians is the Word of God, but it is human nature to make comparisons. Such a comparison of our trials with Paul's should encourage us because of

what he faced.

Paul wrote the Philippian epistle from prison. We know he was in chains by reading Philippians 1:12-14.¹ We think this was a reference to his imprisonment in Rome as described in Acts 28:16-30. Don't let the conditions of house arrest (Acts 28:30) fool you. Imprisonment in Paul's day was a very serious matter. There was a great stigma connected with chains and prison in Paul's day. In our own culture, having a criminal record and having served jail time can be difficult to overcome, but in Paul's day the stigma was far more serious. Humanly speaking it would have been understandable if Paul's contemporaries suspected his effectiveness as an Apostle and a Christian leader had been permanently damaged. The fact that Paul was not actually guilty of anything (Acts 21:27-34; 23:25-30) was beside the point.

Because Paul mentioned being in chains, it is possible that when he wrote Philippians the conditions of his two year house arrest had changed and become more severe as the date of his actual trial drew closer. In addition to this difficulty, please note that his hardship in Rome came after a two year imprisonment in Ceasarea (Acts 24:27) which had also been part of the whole ordeal that originally began with his arrest in Jerusalem on false charges. Four years of this! To make matters worse, some people were trying to elevate their own status within the church by taking advantage of Paul's absence (and they probably made insinuations that Paul should be viewed as "damaged goods"). When Paul speaks about joy, peace and contentment he deserves to be heard for he was no stranger to sorrow, pain, loss, injustice, criticism, rejection, hatred and abuse. Few of us will experience how it feels to be so hated by others that they truly long to see us dead. Let us hear what Paul has to say, for by God's grace it can lead us to true joy, now and always. Now is the time to throw away your chains.

¹ There will be dozens of Scripture references given throughout this commentary. Please have your Bible available and look up the passages referenced. It is far more important for you to read the Bible itself than to read what someone else says about it!