

The Philippian Prescription for Mental Health and Emotional Stability

Franklin Church of Christ
Edwin Crozier
March 9, 2008
AM Assembly

Introduction:

The Philippian letter is, to me, one of the most surprising books of the Bible. I can't help but think about Paul's circumstance as he wrote. Here was a man who had turned his back on his upbringing in order to serve God. Because of this, his closest peers and friends turned their backs on him. He was a man imprisoned for his beliefs. He was a man whom people were trying to kill. People really were out to get him. He had been beaten for his beliefs, ridiculed for his faith and put on trial for crimes he didn't commit. He had seen some turn to his teaching and then turn away. He even knew of some going out of their way to cause him distress. He had suffered times of poverty, hunger and lack of sleep. He could remember great sins and amazing guilt. He had gone through great trials including shipwreck. Some he had taught turned on him excepting false accusations from others. If any person had a right to poor mental health and emotional instability, Paul did. Depression, anxiety, panic, paranoia; on and on the list could go. Yet, his letter to the Philippians, written while in prison, mentions joy and rejoicing no less than 18 times in 14 verses. Putting that into perspective, 13.46% of the verses, more than 1 out of every 10, mention joy and rejoicing. How did Paul maintain this joy and peace? Look through the letter with me to learn the Philippian prescription for mental health and emotional stability.⁷

Discussion:

- I. Remember God is with you.
 - A. Paul encouraged the Philippians to rejoice because God was with them and working with them (**Philippians 1:6; 2:13**). It is easy in times of difficulty to believe God has abandoned us. If we allow that thought to take control, we will surely be plunged into the pits of despair and anxiety. However, continually remind yourself that God is with you as **Hebrews 13:5-6** demonstrates.
 - B. No doubt, keep in mind that God is with us because He loves us. **Philippians 4:6** encourages us to make our requests to God. In the parallel passage of **I Peter 5:7**, we learn we can do this because God cares for us. He loves us. Sometimes we get bogged down thinking nobody loves us, but God does. He proved it by sending His Son (**Romans 5:8**).
- II. Focus on others, not self.
 - A. Paul is in prison, but who is he thinking about? According to **Philippians 1:7-11**, Paul was thinking about the Philippian brethren. He didn't have time to be depressed, anxious or panicky about himself because he was so focused on assisting others and thinking about their needs.
 - B. In **Philippians 2:3-4**, he admonished the brethren to have his same attitude. Don't focus on self. Look to the needs of others. Think of others as more important. Then our own problems won't seem so large. When we put others needs, desires and problems above our own, the mental instability that comes from thinking about our own situation has no time to breed in our mind. When we serve others, Satan has no niche to attack us.
- III. Look for the positive in every situation
 - A. Though in prison, Paul was able to see the positive side of his situation. In **Philippians 1:12-14**, instead of thinking about his own restriction, he thought about the progress of the gospel and the encouragement others were gaining from him. In **Philippians 1:18**, instead of dwelling on the evil motives of others, he rejoiced that in any event the gospel was preached.
 - B. Bad things happen. Illnesses, deaths, layoffs, etc. all occur to Christians. Some problems occur because we are Christians (**II Timothy 3:12**). We must train ourselves to look for the good in every situation. If we can't see it, we need to remember **Romans 8:28**. God knows how to make every circumstance work out for good. Trust Him.

⁷ Let me clearly state, I recognize there are cases in which people do have medical problems leading to a number of mental health problems. Medical problems need a medical solution. Nothing in this sermon is to be construed as medical advice for those who face an actual medical problem. Nor should anything be construed as advice to stop taking medication for actual medical problems.

IV. Give thanks for the blessings you have received from God.

- A. In **Philippians 2:25-30**, Paul wrote of Epaphroditus who had almost died. However, he did survive and Paul was grateful, expressing that God was having mercy on him through this.
- B. Instead of dwelling on the imprisonment, he gave thanks for the blessing he had received. We sing a song that has almost become cliché, but its meaning should not be lost on us. Count our many blessings, name them one by one and help and comfort will be with us to our journey's end. The song is not inspired but its message is from God. When we realize all God has done, we will not fall into the abyss of mental illness from dwelling on what hasn't happened.

V. Press on for the goal of serving Christ and going to heaven.

- A. In **Philippians 3:4-16**, Paul maintained positive mental health by focusing on serving Christ. He was not anxious regarding all the peripherals of this life. And everything else was a peripheral to his service to Christ. He had lost his status as a Pharisee among the Jews. So what, he had become a Christian. He had determined all the things he had done, a Hebrew of Hebrews, circumcision, Phariseeism, blamelessness according to Moses' Law, was worthless. So what, he had gained Christ. He knew he would attain the resurrection because he had given up all the things that had been important to him before in order to gain what was most important: Christ!
- B. He didn't stop there; he kept marching on to the goal. He focused on the goal of being with Christ in eternity. He wasn't going to let any setback take his mind off the goal of serving Christ and going to heaven. In a moment of brutal honesty, we recognize that a great deal of mental and emotional distress come from focusing on the things that seem important in this world. **Colossians 3:2** explains we need to take our focus off this world and put it squarely on the next.

VI. Pray, making requests with thanksgiving.

- A. Probably the most common piece of advice regarding emotional stability is in **Philippians 4:6-7**. Paul had mental health and emotional stability because he would not allow anxiety to take over his mind. Instead, he shared his concerns with God, making requests of Him with thanksgiving.
- B. Peter encourages us to cast our anxieties and cares upon God because He cares for us (**1 Peter 5:7**). God cares for us. He wants us to let Him know our troubles, asking for help. Making our requests doesn't mean we no longer work at it. It means we have turned the problem over to Him. Our job now is simply to do what He has said and let Him deal with the consequences. Even if the consequences are negative we can have faith that God will carry us through. Too often, our anxieties are caused because we want to control the outcomes of our actions and control the response of others. We simply can't control that. God can and He can carry us through no matter what those consequences and responses are.

VII. Control your thoughts.

- A. Much of what we have learned from this letter about mental health and emotional stability deals with controlling our minds and the way we view things and what we think about. Many will suggest this is impossible. **Philippians 4:8** proves it's not. If we want mental health, we must begin by controlling our minds. Think about things that fit within the description of this verse.
- B. There are two points we need to understand. Our minds won't think about what has never been put there to begin with. Thus, the more we fill our minds with positive things, the less trouble we will have. Of course, we have all botched this multiple times. Which leads to our second point. We cannot control the stray thought that flashes in our minds. But we can control that on which our mind chooses to dwell. We must have a plan of what to do when a negative stray thought threatens to take over our. We need a verse to quote, a song to sing, a friend to call and pray. Don't let bad things in, but when they come in on their own, have a plan.

VIII. Learn contentment

- A. Perhaps one of the greatest keys to Paul's mental health and emotional stability is found in **Philippians 4:10-12**. Paul had learned to be content in whatever state he found himself. Paul had endured times of suffering and want, but he had learned to be content at even those times. His mind didn't dwell on what he did not have. His thoughts didn't roam to all the things he would like to have. He was content.

- B. The source of Paul's contentment was God. As the writer of Hebrews said in **Hebrews 13:5-6**, we can be content not because we have enough earthly possessions but because we have God. What else do we need?
- C. Granted, this is a growth process. Never forget Paul said he learned contentment. He didn't have it naturally. He had to work on it. In fact, part of his learning process may have been the times of want and lack.

Conclusion:

Do we really believe God when He said His peace, which we cannot even understand will guard our hearts and minds (**Philippians 4:7**)? This prescription is not an instant fix. It is not an easy fix. It takes hard work, day in and day out. However, I guarantee you, if you face each new day simply working that day to make these part of your life, in time you will look back and realize you have grown in peace, joy and contentment. And you did it God's way. I guarantee it, not because I am a mental health expert. Not because I am a psychologist. I guarantee it because God said it.