

Christian Optimism

A Positive Attitude Has Great Benefits

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I would like you to turn to Psalm 118 as we begin here. I do not do this very often. I usually start off with a very long introduction, taking 40 or 50 minutes, and then I hurry through my main bit. But I would like to start here in Psalm 118 because there is a very important point right at the very end of it.

If you know anything about the Psalms, most of you who are here over the last several years have heard me go on and on about the Psalms (Book 1, Book 2, Book 3, Book 4, Book 5) and then I cut it down further into various other little sections on that. Psalm 118 is the sixth and final psalm of what the Jews call ‘the Hallel’ (Psalm 113-118).

If you recall from my sermon on them, they are songs of praise to God. They were recited on special occasions. The Jews still recite them on various special occasions, particularly on the holy days of Unleavened Bread, Pentecost, and Tabernacles which are the three pilgrimage festivals. So the Hallel is thought to be songs that were sung in pilgrimage as the Jews (the Israelites) made their way from their homes up to Jerusalem on these holy days. So they are very significant psalms. They have a lot to teach us about the worship of God and the attitude of the people of God as they come to worship at the feasts.

But Psalm 118, as I mentioned, is the final psalm in this group, this Hallel, and that makes it significant because as you finish these songs of praise as you go up to Jerusalem, what is at the end of Psalm 118 is what lingers in the mind. It is almost as if God said, “Okay, I want these thoughts to be in your mind as you go to worship Me at the feasts.” And what it is, as we finish Psalm 118, is a Messianic prophecy.

Let us start in Psalm 118:22 and we will read down through verse 24. The thing that God wants to stick in our minds, among other things, is:

Psalm 118:22-24 The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone. This was the Lord’s doing; it is marvelous in our eyes. This is the day which the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it.

Now it is a shame that the Jews of Christ’s day and those before them, as many times as they sang these songs as they were going up to Jerusalem, did not take this to heart. Of course, this was one of the proofs of the Messiah—the rejected stone has become the chief cornerstone. They should have understood that Christ, the Messiah, was not going to be someone that they would have expected and so it should have helped them to delve into the Old Testament and figure out some of the other clues there. But, of course, God had a plan and a part of that plan was that He was not going to be recognized by those He came to.

But, more specifically, not just the fact that the Messiah was coming and that He would be someone that they would not recognize (the rejected stone), it is the fact that this prophecy, especially these three verses, directs the mind of those who are singing, those who are reading this psalm, to God’s awesome sovereignty. That is particularly in verse 23: “This was the Lord’s doing.”

God made it happen. God is making everything happen. Of course because of what we can see, because of the insight we have been given (the Spirit that has been given us to help us to understand), we look at it and just marvel that He has been able to do the things that He has done to bring everything into alignment to the point where it all happens and happens exactly as He wanted it to happen.

God is able to work anything out. He is able to take things that have been rejected and make them into the most glorious of all. And if He can do it like that, which we see in our Bibles is what has happened, what could He do with old, rejected me? It is an amazing thing!

What we find here, the prophecy tells us that the Lord can lemonade out of any old lemon: You, me, the guy next door, the refugee, whoever. He can take that person and bring him from the lowest depths to the highest heights, should He need to do that. And it is marvelous to see Him work these things out. He does it all the time. It is His stock-in-trade. God takes the weak and the base and the ignoble and He turns them into strong, the mighty, and the glorious.

So now that we know this (and of course, I am sure you have known this), what is our proper response to His amazing ability to make wonderful good out of seeming rejection and loss? How should we react to this? It is right in the psalm. Read the next verse. He says:

Psalm 118:24 This [today] is the day. . .

Obviously, more particularly, He is speaking of the holy day because that is what they were going up to. But we are talking about any old day. Because we do not have to read this or sing this just on the holy day. You can read or sing this psalm any time you want.

Psalm 118:24 This [today] is the day which the Lord has made; we will rejoice and be glad in it [That is the response].

God has done all of these things. He has brought everything to pass so that we have a Messiah—a God—who has come, lived His life, died for us, allowed us to be forgiven and justified before God, and given us salvation. Eternal life in the Kingdom of God is right out there and we are all a part of that. And He has given us this day of life. What an awesome thing life is!

So because of all these wonderful things that are happening and will happen—of promises that have been given—our response is to be glad, to be happy, and to rejoice in the awesome potential that we have.

I am very happy Ronny gave the sermonette he did because he was talking about the “Refuser of Festivities” and how we should not be like that. When we go to the feasts we should want to rejoice, because that is what God wants us to do: He commands us to rejoice. But we see it is not just the feasts. He wants us to rejoice each day that the Lord has made, for us. God is working in this day and He can make this day—and any day—turn out gloriously, should that be what He wants to do.

That is the proper, positive, joyous approach that God wants us to take to life. No matter what doom and gloom the day portends, no matter what is out there ahead of us that we know we have to tackle, no matter how bad things are going on around us, the Lord has it figured out already. He is in complete control of it. Remember, the end of this psalm—the main theme—is God’s sovereignty. This is what the Lord has done. God is in complete control of what is going to happen in our day. So

we might as well be glad in it that He has thought to give us life at this time, in this place, for this reason that we can rejoice, we can be happy.

Now my question to you: Is that your approach to life? Do you wake up in the morning and say, “This is the day which the Lord has made. Let us be glad and rejoice in it.”? I kind of doubt it. That does not seem like the way most people are.

Most of us do not spring out of bed, a smile on our face and a song in our heart, whistling all the way through our morning ministrations and saying “Hello!” to everyone on the street as we go to work. Do we do that? I do not think so.

I think many of us (I will give grant to a few of you who are positive) roll out of bed with a groan and we stagger, especially before coffee. We stagger or crawl to the bathroom, wishing we could crawl back under the covers for another 30 minutes of rest. And then it is all downhill from there.

Sometimes it seems like we face a new day just short of how we would if we were knowing that we were going to have a \$2500 car repair, or maybe we were going to get laid off of work (“Oh, nothing ever good happens!”). That is just kind of how we tend to be.

Maybe we do not necessarily dread each day but it can be a struggle to welcome it with any kind of enthusiasm because life is tough. We have trials, things are bad in the world, and maybe we do not have the best attitude that we should. But that is not how we are supposed to be. The ideal is that we say: “This is the day which the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it.”

Now this verse indicates that God wants us to have that kind of positive attitude. Because all these days of our lives, even though they go just like that, He has given us each one of those days to live, to experience, to overcome, to grow, to produce fruit, to look to Him for what He will offer us.

Now we moderns use other terms than the biblical ones to describe this kind of positive attitude. As a matter of fact, I just used one of those words: Positive. Another is ‘optimistic.’ Can you describe yourself as optimistic? Are you cheerful? Are you bland in your attitude?

Maybe I will tone it down just a little bit. Are you confident? Are you confident about how things are going to turn out? Are you hopeful? Do you see a pot of silver (or gold) at the end of the rainbow? Just how confident are you? Really?

Another one is ‘expectant’—expecting good to happen.

Researchers, many of them psychologists, are finding that optimism provides significant benefits over pessimism. While it is not a magic wand that is going to wipe away every potential problem that springs up in front of us, they find that a positive outlook on life will enhance a person’s quality of life. And even during those times when you do have problems—if you are struggling through something—if you have a positive attitude, they found that you get through it faster, and you see the possibilities, and you have a goal, and you just go through it. You do not get bogged down by a bad situation.

Now those of you who are a little bit older will remember the name Dr. Norman Vincent Peale. He was the one who began, in the middle of last century, what is called the ‘Positive Thinking Movement.’ He was a reformed minister in New England. He had a 1952 book called *The Power of*

Positive Thinking. It was so popular that it stayed on the New York Times Bestseller List for a whopping 186 weeks and in that time sold 5 million copies. So it was a runaway bestseller, if you have ever seen one. People really glommed on to it. You have got to remember, 1952 was just seven years after the war and people were starting to become more optimistic because we were beginning to put the war behind us and we saw great times ahead for the United States.

In his book, Dr. Norman Vincent Peale taught people this eight-step plan—do these seven things, do this other group of things—that you could turn your negative attitude into a positive attitude and you can be successful and happy and have a full life. He became known for an idea that was kind of popularized this way: If you can think it, if you can imagine yourself doing it, you can do it, you can have it, you can be it (whatever that ‘it’ was) and all you had to do was change your thinking.

This was kind of a Freudian concept because most people are not aware that Dr. Peale’s collaborator was a Freudian student. And the way it turned out, it was very heavy on the psychology and very light on the Christianity. After a time, Dr. Peale went off the rails in terms of Christianity altogether—moved away from it toward conceiving God as some kind of powerful force who exists to fulfil a person’s desires. That is kind of how it ended up. He even said on national television (I believe it was ‘The Phil Donahue Show’) that Christ is only one way to God, that he has found God in a Shinto shrine (What was he doing in a Shinto shrine?).

Anyway, he just went away totally from the ideas of the Bible and felt that you can basically change yourself. You do not need God. All you need to do is just change your thoughts and you can become whatever. Anyway, we kind of left Dr. Norman Vincent Peale in our rear-view mirror in terms of our understanding of optimism. He was right in a way and he was wrong in many other ways.

But modern research has shown that optimism can be very helpful to life. One lady at the forefront of modern research on optimism is Dr. Suzanne Segerstrom, Professor of Psychology at the University of Kentucky. She sums up her recent research like this:

People who are optimistic are more committed to their goals, are more successful in achieving their goals, are more satisfied with their lives, and have better mental and physical health when compared to more pessimistic people.

Those are all very good things. She says, like I mentioned before, that it is nothing mystical, that there is not any kind of magic that is going on here, but that “If you think that the future can be positive, you are more willing to put in time and energy to make that come about” (unlike Dr. Norman Vincent Peale who said: “If you think it, if you can imagine yourself doing it, you can do it, you can have it, you can be it.”). So it is not just the matter of changing your thinking and “Voila, there it is!”

What she is saying is that an optimistic, positive attitude puts you in the right frame of mind to make the effort to achieve what it is that you want. It is not hocus-pocus. It is that your mind changes your attitude to the point that you will actually work—and work hard and work diligently—to achieve whatever your goal is. So, in other words, people who are optimistic will make stronger efforts to bring about positive results. That goes for everything.

If you have a goal in your own personal life, it does it for that. If you want to be healthy, a positive person will make the effort to do healthy things. They will go exercise. They will eat the right things. They will make sure they are taking the right supplements, if that is what they need. They will do

this, that, or the other thing to make sure that they are healthy. They will get to sleep at the right time and wake up at the right time and do all the right things because their positive attitude is telling them that they need to do these things to reach their healthy goal, and so they tend to be healthier.

Let me just give you a long string of benefits of being optimistic. These are all compared to being pessimistic. So you have the two extremes here.

1. Compared to pessimists, optimists are healthier. They do tend to take better care of themselves. Optimists take fewer sick days because they have a better immune response. That is actually something that happens within the body; when you are positive, it actually makes your body work better. And certainly they found that in the immune response. Therefore, compared to pessimists, optimists generally live longer.
2. Optimists have better responses to stress. They have actually found that positive people have less cortisol response than negative people. Negative people, when they have stressful situation, cortisol just courses through their body (cortisol is the 'death hormone' and that is not a necessarily good thing).
3. Positive people or optimists laugh more and they generally have a more sunny personality.
4. Optimists have happier relationships. Optimists have better control over their emotions and maybe that is why they have better relationships.
5. Optimists tend to get more done because they are not down in the dumps and sulking. They are actually saying "Yes, this can be done" and they find ways to do it.
6. Optimists are better problem solvers because they can see through the trials that they are faced with and they can then come up with a solution.
7. Optimists are more effective communicators.
8. Optimists take more satisfaction from their jobs. They receive more job offers and promotions and therefore make more money.
9. Optimists are more resilient during hardship and if they are swamped by whatever hardship that they come up on them, they recover more quickly.
10. Finally, optimists tend to be better athletes overall, not just because they are healthier but because they turn negative results and negative feedback into better performance the next time.

There are lots of good things that can come out of being positive, being a little bit more cheerful, of having a more buoyant attitude toward life, of being an optimist. Clearly there are considerable physical benefits to having a positive outlook on life.

But we need to see (and this is what we are going to be spending the rest of the sermon on) that there are equally valuable spiritual benefits in being optimistic. As we saw there in Psalm 118, not only does God want us to be joyous and glad in the days that He has given us, but we also will see that optimism will help us to grow to be more like Him and so enhance our relationships with each other.

Just so we are clear so we understand what optimism is versus Pollyannaism, what we are talking about here is not any kind of Pollyannaish certainty that all will go well if we just have happy thoughts. That is not the kind of optimism I am talking about.

What we need to employ in our personality is what is called grounded optimism: the belief that with effort, dedication, and the guidance and help of God, we can overcome most, if not all, challenges and live abundant, contented lives. It is not only being positive, but also being dedicated to putting in the effort and asking God for help so that we can overcome and grow and have a great life.

But we cannot be negative, we cannot be pessimistic, and think “Oh, I’ll never amount to anything. God will never help me. Why would He help me? I’m not very good.” Those kinds of attitudes just are going to kill any kind of progress. You do not want that.

What you want is an attitude that is realistic (but positive) about what is going on, about what can be: Positive, that you, with God’s help and a little bit of effort and dedication, can push through anything. It does not avoid the bad things because bad things happen all the time. It seems like, and the Scriptures tell us, that evil men and impostors will get worse and worse as we approach the end. We know that as we get closer to the Great Tribulation, things are going to get very bad.

So we cannot be Pollyannaish and just think “No, that will never occur.” Of course it will, because God has said it will. We have to make sure that we are realistic about bad things. This kind of optimism does not avoid the bad things that happen in life, but tackles them—approaches them face on with a hopeful and confident attitude.

A positive, optimist person (one who has this grounded optimism) tends to see the big picture. He does not get narrowly focused on the bad things and what is right in front of him, but he sees the big picture of what is going on in his life, in the world, and in God’s total plan and purpose. He keeps those things in mind. He does not allow himself to get so totally focused on what is in front of him that he cannot see the larger picture. Thus, he believes wholeheartedly that when adversity strikes, this too shall pass. That is temporary because the big picture is God makes everything great.

As Mr. Armstrong finished *Mystery of the Ages*, he said: “We win.” That is the big picture.

The ultimate goal is success and it is guaranteed. It is there out in front of us. So when some sort of stumbling block is before us, we can hurdle it because we know that somewhere down the line we are going to achieve what God wants for us. “Adversity is temporary” is what the optimist thinks, but God’s purpose is eternal.

That is essentially what Paul says in II Corinthians 4. We might as well look at that just to see what he said there. This is the way the optimist looks at trial, at what is going on around.

II Corinthians 4:16-18 Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.

The optimist has this viewpoint about what is going on in life. Even though cities may be crashing on one hand and terrorists are striking at the other and terrible things are happening maybe personally, an optimist will say “This is terrible but it’s only temporary. God’s Kingdom is coming.”

So this subject, for us as Christians, has a great deal of overlap with a lot more theological subjects (if you want to call them that) like joy, blessing, faith in God, hope, God’s providence, and many others. We will see this as we go through the scriptures that we are going to look at today. But I want to approach this from the idea of optimism—that we should be positive—as we go day-by-day, step-by-step toward the Kingdom of God.

Let us go back to the book of Psalms, this time to chapter 4. The Psalms are full of hope and optimism.

Even in the psalms where David seems to be pretty much dying and he is depressed, and he thinks that his life is terrible and Saul is going to get him and all these other things, he seems to always end every psalm that goes that way with “I will have hope in God” or “My God will deliver me” or “I will trust in Him.”

Even when he plunges down to the depths of what you could call a kind of discouragement (because things are not going right), he always shakes himself up and says at the end “Look, this is not really good. I need to have my trust in God and He will save me.”

So the psalms are really great if you are down because it can turn your perspective around very quickly. But I want you to remember, back to those series of sermons I gave on the Psalms, that the book of Psalms begins by setting the overall theme in the first three verses of Psalm 1.

Psalm 1:1-3 Blessed is the man who . . . [delights] in the law of the Lord. . . and whatever he does shall prosper.

That is kind of a synopsis of those first three verses. He is blessed, he delights, he prospers, and it is all because he has his mind focused on God. He is not following the way of sinners but he is looking at God’s law and he is meditating on it day and night, and God responds to that (He is walking right next to us) and He brings us great blessing so that we end up prospering. The thought is that if we follow God and His way, we will be (this is very positive) happy, blessed, and prosperous.

Now this does not always mean money. Prosperity comes in many forms. But a man (or a woman) who walks with God has a far better chance of having a very good, happy, confident life than one who does not. Just like the comparisons we did with optimists and pessimists.

Psalm 4 picks up on this theme and begins to magnify it. I just want verses 6 through 8 here. This is how David ends this particular psalm. He says:

Psalm 4:6 There are many who say, “Who will show us any good?”

Who is going to help us? Who is going to give us anything that is going to make life better?

Psalm 4:6-8 . . . Lord, lift up the light of Your countenance upon us. You have put gladness in my heart, more than in the season that their grain and wine increased [more

than in the best times of prosperity]. I will both lie down in peace, and sleep; for You alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.

Here we have, in chapter 4, two sides of an issue: He says here in verse 6 that the majority (“there are many,” he says) are pessimists. They see circumstances and events around them and just shake their heads, and grumble and grouse, and they say “Everything is terrible. Nothing’s going right. It’s all going to pieces. There’s no one that can help us.”

David immediately takes the completely opposite view. What does he do? Immediately he beseeches God. He says, “Lord” (direct address there), “lift up the light of Your countenance upon us.” That is an interesting way to put it.

His requests here to God points out not only who can save them and who can do them good, but whose good light (called “His bright and pleasant face”) can lift the doom and gloom. Because that is what it is.

It is an idea here—a picture, an illustration—that he is using as a counter to their doom and gloom. It is like the sun rising in the morning just casting off all the darkness of the night. God is like that sun whose face is shining brightly; and when He shines His face on us, everything gets better, everything improves. Because God is there. God’s Spirit is an uplifting spirit.

Have you ever had somebody come into a room who is just happy and joyful and immediately that person just makes the whole room seem a little bit brighter—lifts your own spirit, lifts your own attitude? David is saying here that God does this for whole nations, whole peoples. When He looks upon them, everything gets better.

Verse 7 makes this very obvious. He says:

Psalm 4:7 You have put gladness in my heart.

God is the One who is the source of all this positive feeling—this positive attitude—that he has and He is the source of true happiness and joy. Because if you think about it—consider it, meditate upon it—you must conclude that God is the most positive, optimistic Being in the entire universe. Everything is going to work out great!

I want to show you something here. Let us go back to the book of Revelation, chapter 21. I want you to see how positive God is here about how things are going to go. Now we have to go through hell to get here. But even so, He has already told us in black and white how it is going to be.

Revelation 21:1-7 Now I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away. Also there was no more sea. Then I, John, saw the holy city, New Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from heaven saying, “Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and He will dwell with them, and they shall be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God. And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes; there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying; and there shall be no more pain, for the former things have passed away.” Then He who sat on the throne said, “Behold, I make all things new.” And He said to me, “Write [“Catch this! Write this, John! Put it down there so the people of God can read this in future times.”], for these

words are true and faithful [They are going to come to pass. You can take it to the bank].” And He said to me, “It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the Beginning and the End. I will give of the fountain of the water of life freely to him who thirsts. He who overcomes shall inherit all things, and I will be his God and he shall be My son.”

Not only do these wonderful, great things happen for the whole world—for all the new heavens and the new earth—but for us, specifically, He is positive that He will be our God and we will be His children. That is how positive He is. He knows He can bring this off. He is Sovereign, He is Almighty, and He will work it out.

So that was what David was thinking about in terms of the end here of Psalm 4, that God is so positive and His face radiates joy that all people need to do is look to God and they should be able to have this uplift in their spirit and know that things have not totally crumbled.

God is still on His throne, God is still there, God is aware. And we can be happy. We can be glad in the day that the Lord has made.

At least He should have this effect on us. He will have this effect on us, if we let Him. But it is up to us because we have to be receptive to God’s Spirit lifting our spirit.

But, too often, we are so focused on our own problems, on our own negativity, on our own self-imposed misery, that even God’s shining countenance cannot breach our pessimism. We just get so down in the dumps, about our lives and what is going on, that God cannot get in. We shut Him out.

Do you realize what has happened when this occurs? When we reach this point, we are showing that we have more faith in our expectation of dire consequences, in our certainty that nothing will ever go right again, than we have in God Himself. We have shown a total lack of faith in what God is able and willing to do.

So God is out there. He is constantly working to bring about our good. He wants us in His Kingdom. Jesus Christ has said no one is able to snatch those He calls out of His hand! And He is out there working diligently to bring us up to the character image of Jesus Christ and bring us into His Kingdom.

But we admittedly go through, probably more frequently than we would like, the valley of the shadow of death. But do you know what David said after that? The very next sentence. After walking through the valley of the shadow of death, he says:

Psalm 23:4 I will fear no evil; for You are with me; Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me.

So we do not need to get depressed when bad things happen. We can be confident that He will turn the situation to a good conclusion and that He will. . .

Psalm 23:5-6 . . . prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; You anoint my head with oil; my cup runs over. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

That is spiritual optimism—when you know God is there, and you know God is going to give you the things that you need, and you know God is going to bring you through all the way till the end. That is the kind of confidence that we need to have in Him.

I know Martin was in Romans 8 quite a bit several weeks ago. But I could not help but go to this last part because it is just so encouraging to me. Maybe I will approach this from a different angle than he did.

I want to read through these verses quickly so we can get the full thrust of the whole passage. What I want to get out of this passage is the feeling, the idea, of what Paul is trying to get across here in terms of what our attitude should be more than any kind of theology. So just think of it that way.

What is Paul trying to do? Is he trying to pick us up? Is he trying to make us more serious? What is the emotion that Paul wants us to have?

Romans 8:18-28 For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us. For the earnest expectation of the creation eagerly waits for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope; because the creation itself also will be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation groans and labors with birth pangs together until now. Not only that, but we also who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, even we ourselves groan within ourselves, eagerly waiting for the adoption, the redemption of our body. For we were saved in this hope, but hope that is seen is not hope; for why does one still hope for what he sees? But if we hope for what we do not see, we eagerly wait for it with perseverance. Likewise the Spirit also helps in our weaknesses. For we do not know what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit Himself makes intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered. Now He who searches the hearts knows what the mind of the Spirit is, because He makes intercession for the saints according to the will of God. And we know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose.

Now did you catch the flow of his thought there, as we went through it and read it just from one end to the other? I will break it down a little bit.

The first half of this passage sets up the seemingly ever-present scenario of Christian suffering. In fact, the whole world is suffering. All creation is suffering, groaning, laboring, in distress, burdened by the corruption of sin. He is saying that sin has made life so difficult and so grievous, and depressing, and futile. Really it makes you wonder why it is worth living with as bad as it can be.

But, in the midst of this, even though he is telling us all these bad things that are happening, Paul is leading to something positive. He is not leaving it down there in the doldrums. He is telling us that something glorious and awesome is going to happen here very soon. What he says here, right in the middle of all of this, is that God purposely made it this way. He purposely allowed it to go to smithereens. He purposely allowed the creation to groan, and be in distress, and be burdened, and have to continue through all the sin and corruption of life. *God made it this way*. Two very important words, let us read that again.

Romans 8:20 For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of Him who subjected it in hope.

Did I not just get finished saying that God is the most positive person in the entire universe? He put us through this in *hope*. Because the passage is actually very hopeful. That is what he talks about. All this suffering, all this trial, all this bad stuff that is happening, is leading to something positive, very awesome, very hopeful. And he names it here in various ways; he calls it “the revealing of the sons of God,” “the glorious liberty of the children of God,” and “the redemption of our body.” That is the thing that all of this is working toward. That is the hope that is out there.

Our spiritual hope is the return of Christ and the resurrection of the firstfruits. That we can join Him in the Kingdom of God, as the children of God, to do all these wonderful things that we are going to do in the Kingdom of God. The creation is waiting for that too because once that happens, it becomes liberated from the corruption of sin and the futility that God has put it under for this time.

So he says this hope—this confident expectation of future good—is why we have been saved. The whole kit and caboodle of Christianity of why God is working with us is precisely to bring us to this amazing goal of becoming His children. That is what God is working toward.

Once we are truly convinced of this, Paul says in verse 25, “We eagerly wait for it with perseverance.” Once we have in mind that the goal we are looking toward is being like God in His Kingdom—this glorious liberty that we are going to have in becoming His children—then our day-by-day attitude, our day-by-day approach, is eager waiting with perseverance, with patience, with endurance.

Yes, the bad things are happening out there, and we must endure them, but we are eagerly, confidently looking forward to that time. Remember I said the optimist does not see just what is going on around him, but he looks forward and sees the big picture. So even though the creation and everything else is going to hell in a hand basket, we can be calm and confident and still eagerly look toward the Kingdom of God and therefore make better decisions, and get through, and overcome, and grow, and be prepared for the Kingdom when God sends His Son back. Put another way, we await it with both optimism and patience. And I think (Do you not?) that it is a goal being worth optimistic about.

Now verses 26-28 give us reassurance so that we can endure with a positive attitude. First, he tells us the Spirit helps us in our weaknesses even if we do not know what to ask for. Even if we are in the midst of a trial and we are unsure about which way we should go and what we might need to get over it, the Spirit (which, in this case, we are talking about Jesus Christ Himself) is our intercessor before God and He knows what to ask for. He knows the right way out of the trial and He asks the Father for it on our behalf and gives it to us so that we can get through the trial and take another step towards His Kingdom and His holy, righteous character. If that does not buoy you up, I do not know what does. It says Jesus Christ is our Advocate in heaven and He intercedes before God on our behalf to help us in times of need.

We should be thrilled that we have Someone who has gone through the life as we have, worse than we have ever had it. He knows what goes on in this life. Yet, He is there by the side of our Father in heaven, saying, “Oh look, I remember, I went through something very similar to this in My life and it was really helpful to have ‘X’.” The Father says, “Do you think he needs it?” “Yes, please give him that.” So the Father says, “Okay!” He has it. He can use it. It is there, if he will use it. Most of the

time we are a little bit too dense, it seems, to take what the Father gives and use it. But they are working for us all the time and they are giving us the good things that we need.

Then we have verse 28. Notice the confidence here. He starts out “And we know. . .” We are confident about this. We know it to our very bones.

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

Do you have that confidence? Do you really know in your innermost being that the things you are going through are going to work out to your good? Think about it.

Whatever your trial is, it does not matter what it is, do you have the optimism to know that it is going to work out just fine? And this good—this good ending, this good potential—goes all the way to being fully conformed to the image of Jesus Christ. Also, that is one in verse 29, because he says: “For whom He foreknew, He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son.” And then in verse 30, it goes all the way to the Kingdom of God, to glorification.

Romans 8:30 Moreover whom He predestined, these He also called; whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified.

That is how far this goodness, this good end, will go for each one of us: For those who love God and who are *the* called. Do you know that? Are you really confident about it? Do you have faith in the fact that God will bring you to salvation and that He is working out the things that you are going through? I think this passage is one of the most encouraging and faith-building in all the Bible.

And we could go on and say what Paul says: “Who is going to separate us from the love of Christ?” It is just amazing the things that God promises here. It should give us a great deal of confidence going forward. It should spur us to be optimistic about life.

Joy, confidence, and pressing forward are main themes in another letter of Paul’s. I would like to turn to the book of Philippians. This whole book just almost explodes with a buoyant feeling that Paul must have had when he wrote it.

What is ironic about that is the man was in jail! He was on trial for his life. Yet he writes the most positive and optimistic book to these Philippians. And they had their own problems. They were not perfect. They had some squabbling that was going on within the church. They had other problems too. But Paul is constantly telling them about his joy and how much he rejoiced in them.

I want to read some of those passages just so you get the feeling of Paul’s optimism, his very positive attitude toward his life and the life God was leading him in. Let us just start here in verse 3 of Philippians chapter 1. He says:

Philippians 1:3-6 I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy, for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now, being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ.

Did we not hear an echo of that in Romans 8? Let us drop down to verse 15.

Philippians 1:15-18 Some indeed [Paul is talking about being in Rome, in prison, and he is preaching the gospel] preach Christ even from envy and strife, and some also from goodwill: The former preach Christ from selfish ambition, not sincerely, supposing to add affliction to my chains; but the latter out of love, knowing that I am appointed for the defense of the gospel. What then? [“What am I supposed to think about this?” he says.] Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice.

Paul is happy about it. He is content. Christ is preached, that is fine. He cannot control the attitudes of those men who were preaching it and the reasons for why they were doing it. So he just had to say “I’m good with it. I will rejoice in it.”

Of all the things that had gone on in his life, he thought that it might have been better if he had just died. He would love to be with Christ, he said, but there are better things. So he says:

Philippians 1:24-26 Nevertheless to remain in the flesh is more needful for you. And being confident of this, I know that I shall remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy of faith, that your rejoicing for me may be more abundant in Jesus Christ by my coming to you again.

See how positive he was! He thought for sure he was going to be exonerated before Caesar and be able to come and visit them in the near future.

Philippians 2:14-18 Do all things without complaining and disputing, that you may become blameless and harmless, children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that I may rejoice in the day of Christ that I have not run in vain or labored in vain. Yes, and if I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. For the same reason you also be glad and rejoice with me.

He was happy to give everything that he had for their benefit. That is how he approached his ministry in his whole life. Let us drop down to chapter 3 verse 1. He says:

Philippians 3:1 Finally, my brethren. . .

Here we are just in chapter 3, halfway through the book, and he is already saying “Finally.”

Philippians 3:1 Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord.

Drop down to verse 3.

Philippians 3:3 For we are the circumcision, who worship God in the Spirit, rejoice in Christ Jesus, and have no confidence in the flesh.

He considers rejoicing in Christ a major part of what we are. Verse 8.

Philippians 3:8-11 Yet indeed I also count all things loss for the excellence of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and

count them as rubbish, that I may gain Christ. And be found in Him, not having my own righteousness, which is from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which is from God by faith; that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death, if, by any means, I may attain to the resurrection from the dead.

Philippians 3:13-14 Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

Is that not a mark of an optimist, one who does not get bogged down by what is going on around but looks ahead and presses toward the goal? That is what Paul did here. Verse 20.

Philippians 3:20-21 For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly [there is that 'eagerly' again] wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself [Is that not what David said in Psalm 118?].

Now turn to chapter 4.

Philippians 4:4-7 Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand. Be anxious for nothing, 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 minds through Christ Jesus.

That is a very positive way to go through life. Verse 10.

Philippians 4:10-13 But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly that now at last your care for me has flourished again; though you surely did care, but you lacked opportunity. Not that I speak in regard to need, for I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. [Notice this statement of positivity here:] I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.

Philippians 3:18-19 Indeed I have all and abound. I am full, having received from Epaphroditus the things sent from you, a sweet-smelling aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well pleasing to God. And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

What a positive and faithful man! Do you see his personality coming through in some of those words? That he was just so full of the knowledge of what God can do, and will do, and had done in his own life that he was confident of so many things that we oftentimes get so down about.

Here he was, a man who had been through peril after peril (if we had time, we could get through II Corinthians 11:23-33), and he tells all the times he had been under the lash and how many times he had been stoned, and how many times he had been in the deep, and how many times he had to fast and go without for long periods of time.

But he was still up about life. He was still positive and confident that God would bring him through every one of those trials, and so he gets to the point where he tells us “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” That is all he needs, it is the strength of Christ, and he is good. So we see there in chapter 3 verses 20 and 21 that he saw his place—that he was a citizen of heaven—and that God will transform him into the image of Jesus Christ and bring him in to the Kingdom of God.

I would like to finish with Jesus Christ to show that He left us with a great deal of joy. Even though He was going to His own death, He told His disciples that they need to be positive. I just want to read a few of these in John chapters 14, 15, 16, and 17. Just like we went through Philippians, we can go through these very quickly.

Jesus Himself, like the apostle Paul, was a very positive person. Obviously, He is the same God who was positive all that time in the Old Testament and who is still positive about what He can bring to pass. But I just want you to see this. Here He is giving His disciples instruction and He, the very next day, was going to give His life. But this is what He had to say.

John 14:27-29 “Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. You have heard Me say to you, ‘I am going away and coming back to you.’ If you loved Me, you would rejoice because I said, ‘I am going to the Father,’ for My Father is greater than I. And now I have told you before it comes, that when it does come to pass, you may believe.”

John 15:9-11 “As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love, just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be [complete].”

John 16:20-24 “Most assuredly, I say to you that you will weep and lament, but the world will rejoice; and you will be sorrowful, but your sorrow will be turned into joy. A woman, when she is in labor, has sorrow because her hour has come; but as soon as she has given birth to the child, she no longer remembers the anguish, for joy that a human being has been born into the world. Therefore you now have sorrow; but I will see you again and your heart will rejoice, and your joy no one will take from you. And in that day you will ask Me nothing. Most assuredly, I say to you, whatever you ask the Father in My name He will give you. Until now you have asked nothing in My name. Ask, and you will receive, that your joy may be full.”

And finally,

John 17:13 [In His final prayer to His Father before His arrest, He says:] “But now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they [His disciples] may have My joy fulfilled in themselves.”

It was one of His great requests of His Father, before He was crucified, that we would have the same joy that He had. And you know, ultimately, we will have that joy when we are resurrected in His Kingdom because, as Psalm 16:11 says, “In Your presence is fullness of joy.” But He wants us to be joyful *now*. He wants us to be uplifted and optimistic because we have so much to be thankful for and optimistic about.

What is better than having God on our side? What is better than knowing that it is His good pleasure to give us the Kingdom? What is better than knowing that Christ tells us very specifically (we just read it) that He will give us what we ask for?

What we need to overcome and grow, He is willing to give it. Because He has had the victory now and sits at the Father’s right hand, we are assured that we too will have the victory. Paul says, in Romans 8:37, “We are more than conquerors.”

I want to finish in I Peter 1 and get kind of a summary of what I have said here today. Peter puts it all in one paragraph.

I Peter 1:3-9 Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His abundant mercy, has begotten us again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, to an inheritance incorruptible and undefiled and that does not fade away, reserved in heaven for you, who are kept by the power of God through faith for salvation ready to be revealed in the last time. In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ, whom having not seen you love. Though now you do not see Him, yet believing, you rejoice with joy inexpressible and full of glory, receiving the end of your faith—the salvation of your souls.

So, yes, we all have trials. Yes, we all get sick or we have a chronic illness or infirmity. We all have troubles with people. Yes, the world and its morals are disintegrating before our eyes. Yes, we are all affected by the ills and the woes of this world.

But Peter says here: “And we know that we have a living hope, an incorruptible inheritance, and an Almighty God and Advocate who will do all that it takes to bring us into His Kingdom.”

So, despite the trials and the bad news, we can have—possess—an indescribable joy, a true spiritual optimism, to carry us through them and conquer.