

Becoming Emotionally Alive

Rich Nathan

March 25 & 26, 2017

Fully Alive

Philippians 4:4-9

How do you think someone should feel who is locked up in jail on trumped up charges because they happen to live in a country which prohibits Christian evangelism and they've been charged with illegally evangelizing? How do you think they should feel?

How would you counsel someone to feel who is regularly criticized and harassed on the job because of their Christian faith? Their boss and co-workers have made a lot of demeaning comments to them about their "stupid Christian beliefs". Sure, you might counsel them to file an EEO claim or a claim with the Ohio Civil Rights Commission, but what if there was no legal remedy available to them? How should someone feel who has been treated unfairly?

Should they feel angry? Definitely! If you've been violated, anger is an appropriate response. Should you feel upset? Of course. Upset is a very natural feeling when life doesn't go the way that it ought to go. But let's say someone came to you for counsel who is going through a really hard time. After you were done empathizing with them, after you were done letting them know that you understand how they feel and how much you love and support them, would you ever tell someone who was going through really hard circumstances to not worry? Don't be anxious. Don't worry.

Would you ever go further than that with someone who was being treated poorly and say, "Well, despite what you are going through, rejoice in the Lord!" How would you feel if someone said that to you while you were going through a really hard time? After they communicated to you that they loved you and you believed them, after they empathized with you, how would you feel if somebody said to you, "Don't worry. Don't be anxious. Rejoice in the Lord!"

I think counsel like this is made easier to swallow if the person who is giving us this counsel deeply understood real pressure, real stress, real anxiety-provoking circumstances. It's hard to hear counsel about not worrying regarding your finances by somebody who is doing amazingly well and has had life paid for them by Daddy and Mommy. It's hard to listen to someone who never has suffered talking to us about how we should feel in times of suffering.

The two people in the Bible who tell us not to worry, don't be anxious, stand with us shoulder to shoulder in the pressures and stress of life. The two people are Jesus and the Apostle Paul. Three times in Matthew 6, Jesus tells us "do not worry". He says, "I

tell you again, do not worry.” And he says a third time, “Do not worry.” If you know anything about Jesus, you know that he didn’t live an easy life. It’s not like he had a large bank account backing him up. He didn’t have an in with powerful people. He wasn’t always bailed out by his mom or dad. Jesus lived with constant pressure and threats and insecurity and so did his follower, the Apostle Paul.

It’s important to remember as we study today’s text that it was written by a man who was writing from prison. I think of people writing from prison, people like Nelson Mandela. People like Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his letter from Birmingham Jail. Depending on where someone is sitting, when they write to us we hear the words differently, don’t we? “Don’t worry” sounds different coming from the mouth of someone in jail than from somebody sitting in a ski cabin in Vail, Colorado. On top of being in jail, Paul talks about having a lot of relational conflicts in Philippians 1. People deliberately were trying to make his life hard. In Philippians 2, Paul tells us that he was anticipating being killed for his faith in a very short time. He believes he is just about to be martyred for the Christian faith.

What Jesus and Paul would say to anyone today who is going through a really hard time or will at some point in the future go through a really hard time, anyone who is suffering, anyone who is under pressure is “I understand what you’re going through. I understand that you have been shamefully treated. I understand that you’ve suffered loss. I understand that you’re grieving.” They would say, “I know pressure, too. I know suffering. I know hardship. I know difficulty. I know grief. But I also know God the Father and I’m speaking from a place of personal experience to anyone who feels stress – do not worry. Rejoice in the Lord always.”

We are now entering the second half of a discipleship campaign that we have called Fully Alive. We have considered what it means to be spiritually alive, what it means to be physically alive, and what it means to be relationally alive. Today we’re going to talk about what it means to become emotionally alive. I’ve called today’s message, “Becoming Emotionally Alive”.

Let’s pray.

Philippians 4:4-9

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹Whatever you have learned or received or

heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Again, I want to say to you that the same counsel found in the mouth of two very different people can feel entirely different. If you are grieving the loss of your spouse and someone who is happily married says to you, “Don’t worry, God is faithful. I know you’re going to make it through,” that counsel might cause you to be upset. But if a dear friend who has themselves lost a spouse says to you, “Don’t worry. I understand what you’re going through. God is faithful and you will get through this” – it feels entirely different, doesn’t it?

The Holy Spirit inspired the Apostle Paul to write incredible promises to us about peace at the very moment that Paul was in jail and facing charges that could lead to his execution. In the words of our series, the Apostle Paul is offering us:

The promise of becoming emotionally alive

Let’s read together verse 7:

Philippians 4:7

“And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Peace that passes understanding

Peace that transcends all understanding. The old King James Version spoke about peace that passes all understanding. What is the Apostle Paul talking about? It may be that he is saying that even under pressure, even when the circumstances of your life are bearing down on you with a weight that should crush you, even when your heart is broken and a part of you is grieving, even when you’ve treated unjustly, accused unfairly and a part of you is really angry, you can have a peace inside that you can’t explain, you can have a peace inside that you can’t explain away.

Friend, have you ever experienced peace that passes understanding? Have you ever said to someone else, “I don’t think I’m in denial. I don’t feel like I’m just putting my head in the sand and playing pretend. I know I should feel anxious about the future. I know I should feel devastated about this situation, but I’m really ok. I just feel the peace of God pushing up from under the water so that I’m not drowning. I feel like my head is above the water and I am being supported supernaturally by God.” Have you ever felt the peace of God when nothing in your circumstance was in any way peaceful? Have you ever felt a peace is coming not from outside of you, but from inside of you, from the Holy Spirit dwelling in your heart.

The peace that transcends understanding. The peace that passes understanding. This peace not only passes human understanding, it passes human planning. Everybody wants peace. Everybody wants to feel secure and we plan and plan so that we can feel secure. Those with the resources buy health insurance and life insurance and home owner's insurance and car insurance. Those with resources and wisdom save for the future. They make retirement plans. Why? So we can feel peace. The Apostle Paul here says there is a peace that no amount of human planning can ever surpass. There is a peace that God can give you that goes beyond any amount of planning that you could ever have. Any strategy. Any investment counsel. God can give you a security that nothing that you come up with can ever give you.

You say, "Wow, these are amazing promises." Paul says that there's another promise for any of you who are struggling, who are suffering, who are under a pressure that feels too great for you to bear.

Philippians 4:7

⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Peace that guards us

The word that the Apostle Paul uses for guard was used of military detachments in Paul's day. Paul in prison was under guard of soldiers. Philippi was a city settled by retired Roman soldiers. And the Apostle Paul pictures our minds as being like a citadel, a fortress, a castle that is under siege by a variety of enemies.

Have you ever felt like your mind and your heart was under assault? Unwanted thoughts are intruding in your mind – God is not going to take care of you. You're on your own. God doesn't love you. God doesn't hear your prayers. It doesn't matter what you do, nothing can ever turn things around in your marriage, in your family, in your life. Have you ever felt unwanted thoughts intruding in your mind? Have you ever felt unwanted worries and fears intruding in your heart? In the Bible, our minds and hearts are portrayed as constantly under attack, under siege by the lies of the enemy, by the lies of this world about what matters, about what works and doesn't work, lies generated by our own sinful hearts.

Paul says that the peace of God will be like a regiment of soldiers constantly on patrol to protect your mind, to protect your heart from being overwhelmed by anxious thinking. It's always helpful for me to remember that the peace which surrounds us and protects us is none other than the peace of God. It is God who is on patrol, protecting us.

Psalms 121:1-4 says this:

Psalm 121:1-4

I lift up my eyes to the mountains—
where does my help come from?

²My help comes from the LORD,
the Maker of heaven and earth.

³He will not let your foot slip—
he who watches over you will not slumber;

⁴indeed, he who watches over Israel
will neither slumber nor sleep.

Even when we are exhausted, God is not exhausted. Even when we sleep, God doesn't slumber or sleep. God never closes his eyes regarding his children. He never looks away. He never has his attention diverted onto something or someone more interesting than you. Listen to these great and precious promises. No matter what you're going through, no matter what you ever will go through, you can have a peace that passes understanding. No matter what you're going through, no matter what you ever will go through, you can have the peace of God guarding your heart and mind. No matter what you're going through you can be emotionally alive!

You say, "Rich, I believe in Jesus. I've had Jesus to come into my heart and into my life, but I sure don't experience the peace – the emotional wholeness and contentment – that the Word of God seems to promising here in Philippians 4:7. Well, Philippians 4:7 is embedded in a text which tells us that these promises are only experienced based upon something else. The something else is a series of commands. The Word of God tells us that if we want to enjoy the promises, we must obey the commands.

The prerequisites of becoming emotionally alive

In this text, we read a series of commands. There are several commands here. A command to rejoice. A command not to be anxious. A command to pray with thanksgiving. A command to think about certain things.

In a moment I'm going to go through some of these commands that are prerequisites for us experiencing peace. But before we look at the particular commands, I'd like for us to step back and consider what a series of commands tell us. I want you to not miss the forest for the trees. Commands are addressed to our wills – that part of our being that is our chooser. Here's a principle about becoming emotionally alive:

How we feel is tied to whether we believe we can choose

Throughout history, apart from faith in the God of the Bible, just about everyone in the world has lived with some kind of determinism. You can't choose how you feel or how you respond. You are determined by some power outside of you. When the gospel

exploded on the scene in the first century Greco-Roman World, people lived with a sense that they had no choice about how they felt or how they could respond. They were under the power of the god. They lived under the power of the fates. They lived under the power of potential curses from others, demonic powers.

Apart from faith in the God of the Bible, almost everyone throughout history has lived with someone kind of determinism. How we feel, how we respond is essentially outside of our control. For Hindus, it might be belief in Karma. Among Muslims, it might be belief in the will of Allah. For Marxists, it might be some kind of economic determinism. For 21st century Americans, it might be some kind of biological determinism or psychological determinism. You are simply the product of your genes and of your family of origin. You're nothing more than that.

The incredible, liberating hope of the gospel is that Jesus Christ on the cross has defeated all the powers, all the determinism, all the fatalistic things that say, "Here's the way that you must necessarily feel. Here's the way you must necessarily respond." Now listen, I'm not in any way suggesting that you and I have ultimate control over our circumstances. It doesn't take too much deep thought to quickly see in our own lives, much less the lives of everyone who has ever lived, that there is so much to life that is outside of our control. And yet, despite the abundance of things that are beyond our human control, the Word of God speaks to our wills and promises us that with the assistance of the Holy Spirit, we can choose to obey God's commands.

Victor Frankl was a Jewish psychiatrist in a concentration camp under the Nazis. At the concentration camp, he lived in the most abominable conditions. Conditions that no one of us can imagine enduring even for a day. He was forced to bury friends. He was forced to watch brutal beatings. He was forced to see people herded off to the gas chambers. Victor Frankl had almost no control over any aspect of his life, including whether he lived or died, whether he ate or starved. The Germans took away all his property. They took away his family. They took away his vocation.

In such a place, under such horrible circumstances, Victor Frankl began to explore whether it was possible to hold on to his humanity. Were the Germans capable of not only imprisoning him physically, but were they capable of taking away his God-given humanity? Here's what Frankl said in his classic book, *Man's Search for Meaning*:

Man can preserve a vestige of spiritual freedom, an independent mind, even under terrible conditions of psychic and physical stress. In the middle of the concentration camp I can remember men walking through huts, comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. There may have been just a few of these men, but they offered proof to me that everything can be taken away from a man but one thing – I call it the last of the human freedoms, the freedom to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances. To choose one's way.

“Every hour,” Frankl wrote, there are choices to be made. Choices about whether to comfort another person or not. Choices about whether to share food or not. Frankl said that even though the conditions, such as a lack of sleep, insufficient food, mental stress, would suggest that all the inmates were bound to react in a certain way. In the final analysis, a person can determine what kind of human being they are going to be. “What kind of man are you going to be?” Frankl would ask. What kind of woman do you want to be?

Over the past 50 years, as the gospel message has receded more and more into the periphery of people’s thinking, as the liberating power of Jesus and what Jesus accomplished in his death and resurrection has receded more and more to the margins and the edges of people’s thinking – what psychologists call the locus of control – the feeling that with God’s help I can choose, the feeling that I have control over how I respond – is waning.

Now, let me add this thought so you’re not confused about what I’m saying. I am not suggesting that if you have, for example, become an addict, you are addicted to drugs or alcohol or pornography, you are addicted shopping or work or computer games, that you can just choose to stop. Just stop it. Nor am I saying that those of you who labor under the burden of a mental illness can just choose to be freed from that mental illness. So, does this power to choose have no relevance if you have an addiction, if you have a mental illness, does this power to choose our response only work for those who are healthy, those who are addiction-free, namely none of us? The power to choose applies to everyone. Becoming emotionally alive is available to all.

For those of us who are addicted, for those of us who struggle with mental illnesses, we can still choose. Maybe we can’t choose to become free of the addiction or to stop the obsessive thinking, but there is a choice that every one of us can make. We can choose to be honest about our problems with a trustworthy person and not keep hiding. We can choose to not lie about what’s going on in our lives. We can choose to get help – to grab ahold of a lifeline that the Lord may be throwing us.

We have an extraordinary lifeline here at Vineyard Columbus called Support for Life. You can find out more about various support and recovery groups including our Friday evening meeting each week called “Celebrate Recovery” by simply looking on our website by using the keywords “Support for Life”.

Beginning in April, Support for Life is also going to be starting an eight-week small group program called “Emotionally Healthy Spirituality” based on the premise that:

It is not possible to be spiritually mature while remaining emotionally immature.

They are going to be starting 8-week small groups focused on this topic of emotionally healthy spirituality. Because some of us have been raised in churches that want a spirituality that deforms our emotions, suppresses them, distorts our vision of God. If you want more information about that contact:

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This is the first principle of becoming emotionally healthy. How we feel is tied to whether we believe we can choose. And all of us – no matter how difficult our circumstances – can always choose to do God’s will. Here’s the second principle:

How we feel is tied to whether we choose to rejoice

Philippians 4:4

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

Let’s break this down and again, I remind you, the person writing this command was himself suffering when he wrote it. The command to rejoice was not written by someone who was floating on an inflatable raft in the ocean off of some sun-kissed Caribbean island with a gentle breeze while a man named Raul brought them a drink with a little umbrella in it. The Apostle Paul was in prison. The Apostle Paul was facing death. And yet he says, “Rejoice in the Lord **always**.” What a comprehensive command! Rejoice always.

Here I would distinguish between rejoicing because and rejoicing despite. There are lots of occasions that we rejoice because life is good – when you get a promotion, when you’ve eaten a great meal, when you’re surrounded by people that you love, when your child gets married to someone you adore, when you just enjoyed sex with your spouse, when you get affirmed by someone whose opinion you value, when you’ve had a great vacation, when the weather is amazing after walking through a park, when you’re listening to great music, when life is good and you rejoice – that’s rejoicing because.

But the Word of God doesn’t simply say “Rejoice when life is good. Rejoice when your pay goes up. Rejoice when you feel loved.” God’s Word says, “Rejoice in the Lord always.” I call that rejoicing despite. Rejoice when life is good and rejoice when life isn’t good. Rejoice when you are accepted and rejoice when you are rejected. Notice that the rejoicing is in the Lord. Paul doesn’t say, “Rejoice that you’ve been sinned against. Rejoice in being victimized. Rejoice in injustice.” God hates sin. God hates injustice. God hates when people victimize others. The Word of God tells us to rejoice in the Lord. How do we do that?

There is a key phrase in verse 6:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

- Rejoice and give thanks that the Lord died for you
- Rejoice and give thanks that the Lord forgives you
- Rejoice and give thanks that your name is written in the Book of Life
- Rejoice and give thanks for the many blessings in your life

There's a contemporary branch of psychology called positive psychology. It's all about cultivating positive emotions. Emotions like joy. Those who have studied emotions their whole lives would say to us that these words written 2,000 years ago by the Apostle Paul have been confirmed over and over by contemporary science. Your level of joy will go up when your level of thanksgiving goes up. Your gratitude will determine your attitude. How you feel is tied to whether you choose to rejoice.

How we feel is tied to whether we choose to pray

Philippians 4:6

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

In other words, don't worry about anything – but if you want to feel emotionally alive – pray about everything. Pray about everything! And here we usually fall because we say to ourselves: This is so little. I don't really need to pray about it. I will just handle it with my own strength and my own smarts. Paul says: Don't worry about anything, but pray about everything. Even the little things. We carry around hundreds of little worries in our hearts. And these little worries keep us from feeling emotionally alive.

The fact is we can come to God our Father about everything. Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord's Prayer about our daily bread, the little mundane things, the little portion that we need today. Even in the miracles of Jesus you see that Jesus meets not only huge needs like the raising of Lazarus from the dead, but also little needs. For example, his first miracle was not the salvation of people. Jesus' first miracle was saving a couple on their wedding day from embarrassment. He turned water into wine so that the couple on their wedding day wouldn't suffer from the social stigma of running out of wine for their guests. Big deal. Just a little embarrassment – but that's how carefully he watches and attends to our little cares. It is why Peter tells us in 1 Pt. 5:7, "Cast all your anxiety, cast every one of your cares upon him because he cares for you." The little concerns with one of your kids. The little tests. The little conflicts. Your car problems. Your credit card debt. Soak everything you do and touch in prayer. And the massive things that are particularly bothering you, you pray about those as well.

How we feel is tied to whether we believe we can choose. How we feel is tied to whether we choose to rejoice. How we feel is tied to whether we choose to pray.

And finally,

How we feel is tied to how we think

Here's what we read:

Philippians 4:8

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

Here's what we read in verse 7:

Philippians 4:7

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Paul linked our hearts and our minds together. How we feel and how we think. Becoming emotionally alive is tied to what you think about. The Apostle Paul loves the verb “to think, to reason”. 34 of the 40 times it appears in the New Testament it's in the letters of Paul. The Apostle Paul loves the life of the mind. The word that's used here means to ponder, to reckon, to let your mind dwell on, to consider and thoughtfully evaluate, to work out the logic of.

If you want to feel God's peace, if you don't want to feel anxious all the time, if you want to feel emotionally alive, you've got to fill your mind with certain things. Choose to think about some things and not to think about other things. What should we think about? Let me just focus on one thing. As I close today. We read:

Philippians 4:8

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.

We need to feed our minds with truth. Two weeks ago when I spoke about becoming physically alive, we talked about the importance of good nutrition. Good, healthy food is the building block of a good, healthy life. If you eat right, you feel stronger and you have more energy. In other words, whatever you sow is what you grow in your body. If you sow Twinkie, Twinkie, Twinkie, you don't get healthy, healthy, healthy. If you sow fat, fat, fat you don't get thin, thin, thin. Whatever you sow is what you grow.

The same thing is true in your thought life. If you sow porn, porn, porn you don't get holy, holy, holy. Whatever you put in determines how you ultimately will turn out. It will determine how you feel. Jesus, knowing that you needed to keep your mind on truth said this:

John 8:32

Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free

The truth is found in God's Word, the Bible. When should you feed your mind? Well, when do you feed your body? In the morning, at noon, at night, before you go to bed. You fill your mind with the truth all day long.

Psalms 119:147

I rise before dawn and cry for help;

I have put my hope in your word.

David also writes:

Psalms 119:97

Oh, how I love your law!

I meditate on it all day long.

And he says in:

Psalms 119:148

My eyes stay open through the watches of the night,

that I may meditate on your promises.

He says in the morning, during the day and even late at night, I'm thinking about God's truth. I'm pondering it. I'm letting truth and not lies dominate my mind. God makes amazing promises to us, brothers and sisters. A promise of peace. A promise that we can be emotionally alive whatever is currently happening, whatever may happen in the future, we'll be ok, that you will be emotionally alive will be fulfilled in your life. He says, "You can experience my peace.

If you believe that you can choose your response, if you choose to rejoice in the Lord always, if you choose to pray about everything, and if you choose to feed your mind with the truth, God's promise.

Let's pray.

Becoming Emotionally Alive

Rich Nathan

March 25 & 26, 2017

Fully Alive

Philippians 4:4-9

I. The promise of becoming emotionally alive

A. Peace that passes understanding

B. Peace that guards us

II. The prerequisites of becoming emotionally alive

A. How we feel is tied to whether we believe we can choose

B. How we feel is tied to whether we choose to rejoice

C. How we feel is tied to whether we choose to pray

D. How we feel is tied to how we think