

## Confidence

### Essay 18 in the series “Ode to Joy”

It’s a great text, but it begins a little awkwardly. In Philippians 4:10-13, Paul’s rejoicing greatly in the Lord that at last the Philippians have renewed their concern for him by having sent Epaphroditus with gifts for him – likely some form of financial support – to help see him through his house arrest in Rome. But is there evidence here of a strained relationship? “At last you have renewed your concern for me.” Maybe. Maybe not. The closest of friends – and Paul is close to the Philippians – strain their friendships sometimes. Right? It’s wise to remember this.

In any case, Paul quickly grants that only now have they had opportunity to show their concern. But it’s then that he breaks into another of his most fabulous passages, verses 11-13.

“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.”

And Paul surprisingly almost sounds Stoic. His word “content” as in “the secret of being content” is the Stoic word – depicting the self-sufficiency that was their highest aim, the ability to transcend one’s circumstances. In contemporary idiom, I think of Paul Simon’s song, “I Am A Rock”:

A winter’s day, in a deep and dark December  
I am alone,  
gazing from my window to the streets below  
On a freshly fallen silent shroud of snow  
I am a rock, I am a island

I’ve built walls, a fortress deep and mighty  
that none may penetrate  
I have no need of friendship,  
friendship causes pain  
It’s laughter and it’s loving, I disdain  
I am a rock, I am an island

Don’t talk of love,

well, I've heard the words before  
 It's sleeping in my memory  
 And I won't disturb the slumber  
 of feelings that have died  
 If I never loved I never would have cried

I am a rock, I am an island

I have my books and my poetry to protect me  
 I am shielded by my armor,  
 hiding in my room, safe within my womb  
 I touch no one and no one touches me  
 I am a rock, I am an island

And a rock can feel no pain  
 And an island never cries

It's so tempting when in pain to feel this way. But to hear this is to realize that Paul has nothing to do with this bleakness. He has learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. So all those times he was in prison, all those times he was severely flogged, all those times he was exposed to death, the five times he received from the Jews the forty lashes, the three times he was beaten with rods, the time he was stoned, the three times he was shipwrecked, the night and day he spent in the open sea, in all the dangers he'd faced he'd learned to be content. But he's also learned to be content when well fed and living in plenty, which judged by America today may be the harder challenge by far – to not let the abundance that we have drive us insatiably, hungrily, toward more.

Paul then shifts the ground beneath Stoicism. It's not self-sufficiency he's found. It's Christ-sufficiency. He writes, "I can do everything through him who gives me strength." Paul has learned that in all things God works for the good of those who love God (Romans 8:28), that nothing can separate us from the love Christ, nothing, good day, bad day, all O.K., and with this confidence Paul knows that although things are always coming together and falling apart, and coming together again and falling apart again, it is often their falling apart that brings healing and creates space for what is new and better. Paul has learned to live in the present moment. He's learned to show up for whatever life offers, to not hold back because things are not going as he wishes, but instead to acquire that kind of invincibility that comes from trusting God and therefore not being attached to any particular outcome. He's learned not to swing at every pitch because not all problems require a solution. And when he finds in himself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, he remembers that he was made for another world.

Paul knows that everything that really matters in life is God's gift to us, that God loves us and equips us for every challenge, that nothing can happen to us that God has not made us strong enough to face. Nothing can happen to us that God has not given us the resources to see us through. We will be alright. Whatever happens to us we will be alright. Good

day, bad day, all O.K. And Paul knows that his model is the one who being in very nature God emptied himself, took the very nature of a servant, humbled himself, became obedient to death, even death on a cross. And even this is O.K. In fact it's in this that one finds the deep purpose in life.

We then are invited to know what Paul knows, to see life as he sees it. It's an invitation to the life you've always wanted: knowing that God works for our good in all things, even when things fall apart; acquiring that kind of invincibility that comes from trusting God and not needing things to go in just one particular way; remembering that God loves us and has equipped us for every challenge, that nothing can happen to us that God has not made us strong enough to face; and realizing deep in our souls, knowing this for sure, that as we empty ourselves God fills us so that one day we will be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Then we will know the secret of being content in any and every situation. Then we will know that we can do everything through him who gives us strength. And with this confidence, we will find our way to lasting joy.

– Dale Pauls