

# Practical Helps to Cultivate a Philippians 4 Mind

Is it magic? Is it “mind over matter”? Does faith mean white-knuckling it with positive thoughts and affirmations? What do you do with negative realities such as ISIS, your spouse’s infidelity or your doctor speaking the dreaded word “cancer”? Is positive thinking compatible with both reality and Christian faith?

That may seem a difficult question for some. There are preachers who teach that speaking (or even thinking) something negative will bring it to pass, and that the only Christian response is to exclusively think and speak positive things. And then there’s the positive thinking “movement,” where the message seems to be that if you visualize something good long enough and often enough, it will come to pass.

Research is abundant that our thoughts and words do have enormous power.

- Cancer patients who hold a positive perspective do better during treatment.
- Prisoners of war who maintained a hopeful outlook came through their ordeal better.
- Athletes, entrepreneurs and others rely on positive thinking to achieve extraordinary results.

The risk with these ideas is that they imply your mind can control anything. And that’s a distortion of the truth. There is truth here, but it’s not the whole truth.

The Stockdale Paradox may help put this into perspective. When faced with extraordinary challenges, it’s important to “retain faith that you will prevail in the end regardless of the difficulties, and *at the same time* confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they may be.”

Our minds are powerful, but they are not all-powerful. But here's the truth:

We tend to give our thoughts too little power rather than too much.

So what about positive thinking and the Bible? Are they compatible?

### **The Bible's Mandate for Our Thinking**

If someone asked you for a Bible verse that describes what you should think about, would you have an answer? In a poll, the most common answer would probably be easy:

*"Finally, brothers, whatever things are true, whatever things are honest, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue, and if there is any praise, think on these things" (Phil. 4:8)*

This is about much more than positive thinking. It has little or nothing to do with positive affirmations about the kind of success you imagine you want. This verse does, however, provide an important checklist for our thoughts.

How many of *your* thoughts—and words—would fit into these categories?

- **True.** This includes what's true about ourselves, our circumstances, our feelings and others. It also includes that which is true about God, about what He has done for us and what He has promised to do in the future.
- **Noble.** This speaks to the truth that you become like what or whom you worship and admire. It includes people and characteristics you aspire to be like, those who encourage you and draw you toward the best you can be.
- **Just.** This includes both living right and doing right. It speaks to fairness and justice to those who cannot

defend themselves. It also speaks to righteous living before God, fulfilling His commands and purposes.

- **Pure.** This means that which is set apart, kept clean. It comes from the same root word as “holy.” It doesn’t take a scholar to know that much of our contemporary media and culture doesn’t fit this quality!
- **Lovely.** This means pleasing, desirable, worthy of praise, uplifting and worth loving. It includes the best in ourselves, in others and in our world. It speaks of beauty, joy and even love.
- **Good report.** This includes “speaking auspiciously.” The positive affirmations some people practice would fall under this category. It speaks of hope and the way you desire things to be in the future.

## **Putting It Into Practice**

Learning to think and talk like this doesn’t come naturally for most people. I didn’t learn this until I was a young adult. But once you do learn this, you develop a resilience and strength to make a difference in the world—and enjoy life in the process.

When you look at this checklist, “positive thinking” is only part of the mandate, and really a relatively superficial part of it. Better words to describe the Bible’s message have more to do with character, with the heart, with something deeper. As Jesus said, “For of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks” (Luke 6:45).

The words this brings up for me are integrity, courage, gratitude, unselfishness, honesty, trustworthiness, resilience, hope, kindness, perseverance and joy. It’s the flavor of things the Holy Spirit grows in us if we let Him (Gal. 5:22-23).

Developing the kind of heart that overflows with Philippians 4:8 kind of thinking is a process, but it is possible! And

I'll be giving you some further tools and examples in the days to come.

May your heart be so filled with truth, courage and hope that what comes out meets this high biblical standard. {eoa}

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## **A Christ-Focused Widow's 2 Keys to Healing in Excruciating Sorrow**

There's no way to make death and grief OK. Death is an aberration in God's universe, and every time we meet it there is suffering. We try all kinds of things to delay it, ignore it and pretend we can evade it, but not one of us can escape death. Death hurts—a lot.

Grief is many things; loss, loneliness, anxiety, stress, anger, depression, exhaustion and so much more. Grief comes in waves, and each one is different than the one before. If you've lost someone close to you, even caring friends are unlikely to fully appreciate its deep and long-lasting impact on your mind, heart and life.

I think the best word to describe the impact of death on those of us left behind is pain. What do you do with the pain as a widow? The death of my husband Al last year wounded me deeply.

And yet I'm still standing. Some days are harder than others, but I keep going. Some have asked how I can do so. It's more than simply knowing God, although that's important.

Several things have been helpful in my grief journey, but there's one thing I've come to know that has made the most difference. And it is this:

### **It's not supposed to not hurt.**

You could take out the double negative and it would still be true; this is supposed to hurt. This is not OK. And when we as Christians try to make it OK, we cripple our own hearts and miss out on the empowerment God would like to gift us with.

For those of us going through grief, it often seems that if we could just make the pain go away, everything would be all right. But that's not what God promises, at least not yet.

And it's not even true. If the pain would magically go away, so would the memories, the love, the gift of that person in your life. That is true even if the relationship also included suffering.

Pain means we care. Pain means we loved. Pain means this is not the way God intended our lives and the world to be. Pain means our love was deep, our lives are different because of that loved one's place in it, and their time on this earth changed us forever. Those are good things. Would we really not want to hurt at the death of someone we cared about so deeply?

### **It's not supposed to not hurt.**

So what do you do with the pain? How do you go on? Can you even go on?

Here are two responses to the pain that encompass what we know of life, God and His kingdom. And these responses apply even if the pain you carry is from something other than the death of a loved one.

## 1. Do It in Pain.

You've heard Joyce Meyers say "Do it afraid." It's the same principle here. Don't wait until you don't hurt to move forward, because "not hurting" is not going to happen. The acuteness of your pain will lessen, but it will not go away. It's not supposed to. That's why God has to wipe our tears away when He makes all things new. (Rev. 21:4).

If you're still alive, God's got something for you to do. Somebody needs you. There's a gift inside you that the world needs. If you wait for the pain to go away before giving that gift, you'll never do so.

Yes, grief takes time. Mourning has a place in our experience. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who mourn." (Matt. 5:4). There are no trophies given for speed as you journey through grief.

But journey you must. You must seek healing. You must keep taking one step forward. You must make the choice to pay the bills, care for your physical health and love those still in your life. The way you do those things may change, but you don't stop. You must decide that you will not wait to feel no pain before you engage—or re-engage—in the purpose for which God still has you on this Earth.

Our western culture and western Christianity has too often given the impression that the goal of life is comfort—freedom from worry, responsibility and suffering. That's neither healthy nor realistic, and it is not what God promised. So quit expecting to stop hurting!

That doesn't mean we wallow in pain. We are absolutely responsible for doing all that we can to live healthy, find healing, and experience peace and joy. But that health, peace and joy come right in the middle of pain and suffering.

It's not one or the other; it's both/and. It's pain and healing. It's suffering *and hope*. It's sadness *and joy*. We

can—we must—embrace them both. Jesus promised His followers both trouble and peace. (John 16:33).

## **2. Look to the Future.**

While embracing our present reality, we can also look forward with absolute certainty to victory in the end. We know the end of the story—that Jesus wins and that death and suffering will be done away with forever.

That gives us amazing power to endure. Think of it this way. However long ago your loved one died, you've made it this far. You've experienced a moment of pain so overwhelming that you didn't know if you could survive a moment longer, but you did. If you're reading this, you're still here. You made it.

And if you could survive that moment, you can survive another.

If you could survive five minutes, you can survive an hour. If you can survive a day, you can survive a week. Or a month.

Because we know with absolute certainty how the story ends, we can survive. Will the end come next month? If you knew Jesus would return next month and your pain would end, do you think you could hold on? What if you knew that would happen next year? It might be hard, but you could make it.

I don't know when Jesus will return. I don't know how long you and I will carry this suffering. It might be a month, or a year, or it might be more years. But I know that you and I can make it. Jesus said, "He who endures to the end will be saved." (Matt. 24:13)

Imagining how long you may have to endure suffering and pain can seem overwhelming. But knowing with absolute certainty that your suffering will end makes it possible. As the long version of the Serenity Prayer says, "Living one day at a time, enjoying one moment at a time," one moment is all we have to worry about.

**In that moment, we can know Jesus is with us. And that's enough.**

Question: Have you been waiting for the pain to end before taking the next step? What can you do today to embrace both the pain and the healing? You can leave a comment by clicking [here](#).

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