



DAY ONE: JOY AND CROWN

Thistles possess equal parts pleasure and pain just like the next wildflower women we meet: Euodia and Syntyche. Sharp prickles prevent herbivores from eating the bloom while the pollen invites bees to stop by for a nibble. They remind me of the Pushmi-Pullyu creature of Doctor Dolittle fame. This gazelle/unicorn animal with two heads on opposite sides of the body brought loads of attention to the doctor when he transplanted them from Africa to England. They were part of one body. But two headed beasts have a tough time agreeing on anything. Thistles often produce more than one head, too. While these two ladies in Philippi fought fiercely for the advancement of the gospel, they also wound up fighting each other. Paul urged them to be of one mind.

My feisty Scottish granny, May Farley, was my thistle. She found no trouble telling you like it is. Her face said it all. If you were on her bad side, you knew by the barbs and bristles sent your way almost telepathically. However, when you wanted someone on your side—someone not afraid to back away from a fight—Granny was there through thick and thin. When my parents divorced, she and my grandpa stayed in our lives through it all. She never missed a holiday. But she also kept me humble.

And wouldn't you know it, thistles are the national flower for Scotland. King Arthur III chose them during the 1200s and they stuck. Thistles are still the symbol on the Scots Guards today. There's a famous legend about the thistle that dates back to when the Norse invaded. A Viking army attempted a sneak attack during the night when a barefooted Norseman stepped on the prickly plant. When he yelped in pain, their presence became known to the Scottish army. Needless to say, the Scots won the day.¹

In Philippians, Paul introduced us to Euodia and Syntyche and he called them his beloved, his *longed for*, and his joy. People love roses despite their thorns. I can attest that I adore thistles, especially when I had the privilege of seeing them grow in their native Scotland. We all have people who are hard to love but are worth it in the end. These women offered great service to Paul and he would go to great lengths to see them restored.

¹"The Scottish Thistle, Emblem of Scotland, Scottish History Online," Scottish History Online, accessed April 17, 2021, <http://www.scotshistoryonline.co.uk/thistle/thistle.html>.

Read the verse below and answer the following questions:

“Therefore, my beloved and longed-for brethren, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, beloved” (Philippians 4:1).

Practical Observation:

1. Who was Paul writing to? What term of endearment did he repeat when addressing them?
2. What phrase did Paul use that lets you know he missed them?
3. What kingly attire did Paul liken to the Philippian believers? What emotion does it symbolize?
4. What is the first request the apostle made to the Philippians?
5. List the other requests Paul made. Do you think these are his priorities?

1. Beloved is a term of endearment. It describes a much-loved person or someone who is dear to your heart. Used over thirty times in his writings, this was a favorite term of Paul's for Christians. God the Father often used this word to describe His only begotten Son, Jesus.

Personal Application:

- a. Look up Matthew 3:16-17, then answer the following questions:
 - Describe what happened after Jesus was baptized.
 - Whose voice was heard, and how did this person describe Jesus?
 - Like Euodia and Syntyche, you are referred to as God's beloved. Write a love note to the Lord responding to His affection for you.

5. United must be the goal for every church, as collectively they make up the body of Christ. A body divided against itself is a symptom of disease. This was an important theme for Paul. “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought” (1 Corinthians 1:10, NIV).

- b. Paul told the Philippians to “stand fast in the Lord” (4:1). Describe a time when you stumbled and share how you regained your stance.

- c. It has been said, “United we stand and divided we fall.” Can others lean on you? Write a prayer for someone in your life who has fallen. Reach out to them this week to lift them up.

DAY TWO: EUODIA AND SYNTYCHE

Can you imagine having your name written in the Bible? That far surpasses the average five minutes of fame one hopes to get in this lifetime. I suppose the follow-up question would be, why? Why was my name written in the Bible? Did I do something awesome or something loathsome? Maybe both. One thing I love about Scripture, unlike social media, is that it is honest. It is not carefully curated to take away people’s flaws, but it’s generous to include their victories. Euodia and Syntyche are in the B-I-B-L-E. Whatever you want to say about them, they made the grade.

By now we’re painfully aware that thistles have thorns. But have you stopped to consider that God created them that way? Every craftsman has plenty of tools in their toolbox. Mr. Hammer is loud. The screwdriver always drives home the point. And the file keeps buffing away all the rough edges of others. But the carpenter needs them all to make something beautiful. Let me speak to you thistles. You are loved. God made you just the way you are. But don’t let Him leave you that way. Perhaps He wants to remove a few thorns so you can be part of His heavenly bouquet.

I’m here to tell you that thistles are valuable. “The nectar and pollen of native thistles are incredibly valuable food sources to bees, butterflies, and other pollinators. Many insects feed on the leaves, stems, flowers and seeds, while some songbirds also feed on thistle seeds. These nectar sources help support pollinators year-round, and can help to increase yields for many valuable crops.”² Can you see the parallels between the thistle and our Philippian women? Euodia and Syntyche labored in the gospel, and they were mass pollinators spreading the seed of the gospel wherever they went. They made room for birds from other flocks to nest at the church in Philippi. Hmmm. Maybe I want to be just like Euodia and Syntyche when I grow up.

Sadly, something went sideways. Once standing side by side, these women were now standing against each other. They were still Christians since the apostle noted that their “names are in the Book of Life” (Philippians 4:3). They were valuable believers or Paul wouldn’t have enlisted all his fellow workers to strive toward their reconciliation.

Whatever went wrong it was a matter of the mind. They had developed stinking thinking. Their once lofty thoughts had become earthly. The Bible describes it as carnal instead of spiritual. Paul offered a solution to this type of behavior to the Ephesians, “Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every

²Lindsey Karr, “Think twice before killing those thistles: Thistle Identification,” Weedwise Program, March 21, 2017, <https://weedwise.conservationdistrict.org/2017/thistle-identification.html>.

form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you” (Ephesians 4:30-32, NIV). “Get rid” implies taking out the trash of worldly thinking. Paul also shared what we can replace the garbage with: grace—the mind of Christ. Sometimes we have to weed our overgrown gardens to make room for other species to thrive.

Read the verses below and answer the following questions:

“I implore Euodia and I implore Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. And I urge you also, true companion, help these women who labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the Book of Life” (Philippians 4:2-3).

Practical Observation:

1. Who did Paul address in these verses first? What word did he repeat to them?
2. What did Paul implore them to do? Why do you think this was his request?
3. What did Paul share about Euodia and Syntyche?
4. Paul called out another Philippian believer by name. Who is he, and who else did Paul name?
5. Where do the names listed above also appear?

1. Euodia and Syntyche are Hellenistic names, as Greece held great influence over the region. Euodia meant “good journey.” Syntyche meant “good luck.” According to Acts 15, the church in Philippi began as a women’s Bible study. Whatever happened between these women was not good and likely public, as Paul found out about it.

3. Labored in the gospel is what Paul said these two women did. It is certain they helped spread the gospel throughout the city, perhaps the region. Note that women not just men were part of forming the early church. Paul enlisted the help of everyone to help reconcile these ladies to each other.

5. Book of Life describes a heavenly book that holds the names of all the saints of all time. It was first mentioned by Moses: “But now, please forgive their sin—but if not, then blot me out of the book you have written” (Exodus 32:32, NIV). God replied that it is His privilege alone to add or subtract people from this book.

Personal Application:

- a. How can Christians “be of the same mind”? Can you think of a Scripture to support that idea?

- b. Although these women fought each other, they also fought for the gospel. How do you labor for the gospel? If you do not, write a prayer asking God to help you share your faith.

- c. Paul mentioned that the names of his fellow workers in Philippi were written in the Book of Life. Make two lists: one of fellow believers who are written in the Book of Life and one of those you pray will be added to this important book.

DAY THREE: JOY AND GENTLENESS

Those of us who relate to the thistle understand how much we need to compensate for some of our thornier traits. True confession, I test as an enneagram eight. That designation is not traditionally a female type. As I look at the list of famous people who are an eight, most of them are men: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Winston Churchill, Oskar Schindler, Martin Luther King, Jr., Mikhail Gorbachev, and Donald Trump. A scant few women make the list: Golda Meir, Indira Gandhi, Serena Williams, Rosie O'Donnell, and Barbara Walters. None of my fellow female eights are considered touchy-feely. In fact, they're awfully confrontational. But they are also leaders in their areas of expertise.

The Enneagram Institute gives the following personality profile for eights: "Eights are self-confident, strong, and assertive. Protective, resourceful, straight-talking, and decisive, but can also be ego-centric and domineering. Eights feel they must control their environment, especially people, sometimes becoming confrontational and intimidating. Eights typically have problems with their tempers and with allowing themselves to be vulnerable. *At their Best*: self-mastering, they use their strength to improve others' lives, becoming heroic, magnanimous, and inspiring."³

Prodding and poking comes natural to a thistle. But Paul wanted them to develop gentleness and joy. That does not come naturally for us, but that is no excuse. We must pray for God to provide it supernaturally. After all, these attributes are listed among the fruit of the Spirit: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, provoking and envying each other" (Galatians 5:22-26, NIV).

Oddly, monarch butterflies make great besties to thistles. Something so fragile with gossamer wings settles upon the spindly thistle to enjoy its nectar and spread pollen wherever it goes next. Therefore, it is possible for a thistle to adapt and adjust to offer gentle assistance to her more sensitive friends. Now, that's worth rejoicing about.

³"THE CHALLENGER: Enneagram Type Eight," The Enneagram Institute, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://www.enneagraminstitute.com/type-8>.

Read the verses below and answer the following questions:

“Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand” (Philippians 4:4-5).

Practical Observation:

1. What did Paul want the Philippians to do and how often?
2. What admonition did Paul repeat? Why do you think he did that?
3. What is the next attribute that is to be present in the lives of the Philippians?
4. Who should receive this second attribute?
5. What final phrase makes you think these two attributes are necessary?

1. Rejoice and rejoicing flood the pages of the Bible. One tips its hat to the other. Rejoice literally means to feel joy. Scripture draws a big difference between joy and happiness. Happy is temporal, and joy is eternal. Happy depends on circumstances while joy springs from the Lord.

4. Gentleness means moderation, forbearance, or reasonableness. Christians should be characterized as those who are gentle in their attitude toward others. It takes all the self-control we can muster to respond gently to some people we encounter. “A gentle answer turns away wrath” (Proverbs 15:1, emphasis added).

Personal Application:

- a. What kind of things make you rejoice? Circle those that are physical (like ice cream) and underline those that are eternal (like God’s Word).
- b. Paul repeats the admonition to rejoice because it doesn’t always come naturally. Journal about something that at first made you grumble but eventually made you glad.

- c. List some ways you should live based on the knowledge of the Lord's soon return. Did that list include gentleness? Why or why not?

DAY FOUR: PRAYER AND SUPPLICATION

The thistle reaches between thirty-one to seventy-nine inches in height making it one of the tallest wildflowers. They thrive in prairies, pastures, and old fields. One thing you may not know about the thistle is that it is also a member of the sunflower family. One of the most distinguishing features of a sunflower is that the bloom always follows the sun. In the morning they face east and by sundown they turn west.

Many who suffer from anxiety will tell you one of the keys to overcoming the affliction is to focus on God instead of yourself. Once you take your eyes off of the Son, the anxiety multiplies and has a field day with your emotions. Just like the sunflower, thistles must fixate on the light source in order to keep the darkness at bay. And because of their great height they stand above most other plants in the field giving them a great advantage to view each sunrise and sunset.

For Euodia and Syntyche to overcome their anxious minds, they needed to refocus on the Savior. The best way to do that is by prayer and supplication, accompanied by thanksgiving. Prayer focuses on personal problems, supplication turns toward others, and thanksgiving directs our attention to God. As these women shifted from inward to outward prayers, they would surely find sympathy and sincere love toward each other. It's hard to be angry at someone for whom you're praying. Sprinkling their thoughts with thanksgiving to God would be like a fresh morning rain inviting new growth.

Read the verse below and answer the following questions:

"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God" (Philippians 4:6).

Practical Observation:

1. What is the first phrase in verse 6 that Paul wrote to the Philippians?
2. What were the Philippians to be practicing instead?

1. Anxious comes from a word that means to be pulled in two different directions. It's like being the Thanksgiving wishbone and you get the short end of the stick. The Bible says that we can experience anxiety in our heart, mind, and thoughts.



3. In what situations were they to practice prayer?
4. What attitude should accompany our prayers?
5. How did Paul describe prayer and to whom are they made?

2. Supplication in Hebrew is a cry for mercy. In Greek it describes a strong petition or request made earnestly to God. Our prayers should not be impassioned. Instead we must offer them from a deep desire full of emotion. Pray to God with your whole heart, because God sees the heart.

Personal Application:

- a. What makes you anxious? Journal about how you deal with your anxiety.
- b. Describe how an attitude of gratitude could be a solution to anxiety. How can you practice this more in your life?
- c. Do you talk to God before you talk to others about your problems? Journal about how you can pray first and talk later.

DAY FIVE: HEARTS AND MINDS

Being half red and half blue, thistles are most often the color purple. It's fun to imagine that Euodia and Syntyche together would make something unique. Sure they had their own identities but blending would be beautiful. Psychologists and experts study the effect of color on people. One recognized color expert said that "purple both calms and stimulates our bodies, putting us in the right place for introspection and focused insight. It fosters creativity by awakening our senses while promoting the quiet necessary to make intuitive, insightful observations. Purple creates a harmonious balance of awareness and peace."⁴

Perhaps Euodia tended toward a red-hot temper and Syntyche suffered from the blues. But together they created harmony like the color purple represents. Jesus is the binding agent. Peace is not the absence of

⁴Kate Smith, "Meaning Of Purple: Color Psychology And Symbolism," Sensational Color, accessed April 18, 2021, <https://www.sensationalcolor.com/meaning-of-purple>.

- b. Paul taught about a peace that “surpasses all understanding.” Have you experienced this kind of peace? Journal about a situation when you felt that peace.
- c. Paul said that God’s peace can guard your heart and mind. Why do you think these two battlefields are mentioned? How do you think the mind and the heart work in tandem?

Thistle

*Thistle fierce and wild
Strong you grow
And spiky
What vital power
Too sharp to grasp
Roots buried deep
No soil to see
From patio and wall
You thrust
I must
In truth
Honour
Your mighty conquest*

—Janey Colbourne

HOW TO GROW A THISTLE

Thistles are usually purple and grow between thirty-one to seventy-nine inches tall. Most of the foliage is covered with sharp spines, which protect them from herbivores. Most plants produce one or two flowers. They are hardy plants that grow well in fields, prairies, and forest edges.

- Light: Full sun
- Soil: Grows in any type of soil
- Spacing: Twenty-four to thirty-six inches and one-fourth to half an inch deep
- Planting: Best during late spring to midsummer

