

HOW  
JOYFUL  
PEOPLE  
THINK

8 WAYS OF THINKING  
THAT LEAD TO A BETTER LIFE

JAMIE RASMUSSEN



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To Kim

You are the most naturally joyful person I have ever found.  
I am so blessed to have you as my wife.  
Thanks for showing me how to choose joy.

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## FOREWORD

I've been at this for more than fifty years, "this" defined as the effort to understand enough about the Christian life to actually *want* to live it, no matter the cost. The book you're about to read strengthened my belief that whatever the cost, it's worth it.

Over the six decades of my identity as a follower of Christ, I've found his words off-putting. In Luke 14:25–33, I hear Jesus saying something like this: "You want to be my disciple? Then count the cost. You must value relationship with me more than you value relationship with anyone else. And you must deny your appetite for immediate relief from the difficulties of life. And one more thing: you must not claim title to anything you own."

As both a somewhat reasonable and rational thinker (a source of pride) and an always thirsty soul eager for complete satisfaction now (a source of frustration), I once turned my back on Jesus. When I entered graduate school at age twenty, I kept my Christ-won ticket to heaven when I died in case

the Christian thing turned out to be true. But I looked to self-help through psychology to enjoy the life I wanted to live before I got there. But five years of graduate study in clinical psychology left me desperate. The answers I was searching for simply weren't there. I came back to Jesus, chastened a bit but with a sulking spirit.

I still found God

unhelpful: I had problems he didn't solve;

unreliable: unanswered prayers outnumbered answered ones; and

uninvolved: I couldn't feel his presence with the same pleasurable intensity I experienced with my wife of then four years and a few close friends.

Now, five decades later, I still find God unhelpful, unreliable, and uninvolved. I still live with unsolved problems God could fix but doesn't. I still live with fervently expressed prayers that remain unanswered. And I still long to experience God's reality with consuming intensity more often than I do. But now in my seventies, the cross of Christ anchors my confidence in his goodness now and forever. Turning my back on the One who died for me is unthinkable.

But—there's always a “but”—more than ever I long to grasp whatever wisdom is needed to live well now, to benefit from biblical truth in a manner that empowers me to know joy in the midst of heartbreak, to know peace in the midst of life's storms, and to know what it is to love another when I'm feeling unsettled. *How Joyful People Think* provides much of the wisdom I need.

For several decades, Jamie Rasmussen and I have traveled through life together, exposing to each other our innermost struggles and encouraging each other with gospel hope. Jamie effectively and powerfully pastors a megachurch, but his identity is not a megachurch pastor. He is a pastor of people, a man who seizes his opportunities to lead, teach, and shepherd fellow followers of Jesus and to share good news with those not yet Jesus followers.

I just finished reading this book, slowly and thoughtfully, during a long plane ride. The hours passed quickly, a rare experience when cramped in coach for too much time. Three words came to mind as I read: precise, practical, and passionate.

Jamie settles for nothing less than careful, scholarly study of whatever passage is under consideration. Eight words recorded in Philippians 4:8 come alive in *precise* understanding of their meaning. The *practical* implications of what it would mean to live the wisdom of these eight words are clearly brought out. And thanks to Jamie's sensitive awareness of both his desire and his struggle to practice what he preaches, the *passionate* heart of a true pastor can be felt in every chapter.

I finished my reading of this book more aware that God *is* wonderfully helpful in ways that matter; that he *is* faithfully reliable, always committed to doing me good; and that he *is* unfailingly involved, leading me in his sometimes inscrutable fashion toward everything I was created to enjoy.

My part is to “think right,” to think the way God wants me to think, to think the way that will bring joy, deliver peace, and release me to love, no matter what is happening in my life. This book makes clear what it means to “think right.”

## Foreword

After reading Jamie's words, I find myself thinking right more than before, more aligned with God's way of thinking. *How Joyful People Think*, thoughtfully read, can do the same for you. My friend's book is a clear commentary on Paul's words in Romans 12:2: "Let God transform you into a new person by changing the way you think" (NLT).

Dr. Larry Crabb

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

No book is written in a vacuum. Influences abound. The original ideas for this book were heard in oral form by the people of Scottsdale Bible Church in Scottsdale, Arizona. I can't thank them enough for their graciousness, love, and faith. Many of them have joy because they have learned to think along the lines of God's Word. A special thanks to the elders of Scottsdale Bible, under the leadership of Jeff Goble, who granted me a generous sabbatical leave in order to complete this project.

The early chapters were read closely by Larry Crabb, Tim Kimmel, Naomi Rhode, and my parents, Frank and Carolyn Rasmussen. It was their initial encouragement to keep writing that led me to continue to completion. A very special thanks goes to my wife, Kim, and my adult children, Hannah, Abby, and Paul, who allowed me time and space to write.

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# INTRODUCTION

Two psychologists from Cornell University conducted a fascinating study a few years back. They wanted to understand the role that *perspective* has in light of one's particular *circumstances*. To accomplish this, they studied Olympic medal winners, specifically the contrasting levels of satisfaction and happiness among gold, silver, and bronze winners. Measuring the athlete's facial expressions and body language immediately following their performance as well as while receiving their medal, these psychologists used a scale of 1 to 10 to determine the athlete's "happiness" response (1 being agony and 10 being ecstatic).

The results were surprising, and the data was overwhelming. The third-place bronze-medal winners were hands down quantifiably happier than the second-place silver-medal winners. Analyzing video footage of the 1992 summer Olympics in Spain, the psychologists found that immediately following the athletic competition and realizing the outcome, silver medalists scored an average of 4.8 on the happiness scale and

bronze medalists an average of 7.1. The researchers observed similar responses when these same athletes subsequently received their medals during the awards ceremony.<sup>1</sup>

What conclusions did they draw? First and most obvious, third-place competitors were thrilled simply to have received a medal. They could have been a footnote to the event; instead, they got to stand on one of the three steps at the end. The second-place finishers, however, focused solely on how close they came to being first. This difference in perspective framed their thinking and was the determining factor in the level of happiness they experienced. The psychologists performing this study would go on to call this phenomenon “counterfactual thinking”: the ability to think differently about a circumstance than the facts would appear to dictate. Or put even more plainly: the ability to have our thoughts make all the difference to our joy.

## **Our Thinking Matters**

I think there is something to all of this. Some people go through a nasty marital breakdown and remain bitter the rest of their lives, while others who experience a similar breakdown become more loving, compassionate, and forgiving. Some people experience a childhood rife with economic struggles and become miserly for the rest of their lives, while others experience the same and become grateful and generous with their current financial blessings. Some people respond to vocational disappointment (whether it is having to work in a job they hate or losing a job they love) by becoming perpetually grumpy and moody, while others in the same scenario rise above it and find joy.

Why the difference? What is it that some people know or even do that others don't? How can some folks get a third-place medal and be happy, while others who compete in the same competition, perform better, and win a silver medal are much less happy? I submit that it all boils down to perspective—the ability to have our thoughts make all the difference to our joy.

This book is all about developing the right kind of thinking.

## **Beyond Positive Thinking**

We must be careful at this point. Our culture already talks regularly and plentifully about “right thinking.” The world has no shortage of self-help books, talk shows, leadership seminars, and church sermons that pine away about the virtues of the kind of thought life that leads to a fulfilling life. So why another book?

Here's why: when contemporary wisdom finds its voice on this subject, it usually weighs in with mantras that follow three trajectories: think positive, think possibilities, and think problem solving. These, contemporary wisdom insists, bring success in life, whether it be in our jobs, our relationships, our health, or even the spiritual realm. We are told that this threefold pattern of thinking determines our access to the good life. The more positive and possibility oriented our perspectives are, coupled with the ability to problem solve, the better life will be.

But, we must ask, to what end? If the goal is simply to nudge our emotions more toward the flowery end of the visceral spectrum, then thinking positive will often work. If the goal is to attain a higher level of achievement in our endeavors, then thinking possibilities will help. And if the

goal is to get over the myriad hurdles that life presents, then having a problem-solving attitude will many times do the trick. Though there is certainly nothing wrong with these goals, I believe God wants more for us. He certainly wants something different than what we might be inclined to settle for. He doesn't want these kinds of temporal goals, which require only temporal thinking, for us.

God is much more concerned with a particularly different *kind* of thinking, which leads to a particularly different set of goals and results. This different kind of thinking involves altered perspectives and a more rigorous application than merely focusing on positives, possibilities, or problem solving. It requires learning to think in ways that God has clearly prescribed. It involves *learning to think as God wants us to think*. It's also the kind of thinking that will make us more mature in our personhood, more faithful to him, more loving toward others, and more satisfied within. It's the kind of thinking befitting a follower of Jesus Christ.

The famous Westminster Confession states, "Man's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him forever." Glory and joy are what God is after: his glory and our joy. Thinking positive, thinking possibilities, and thinking problem solving are fine lines of thought when couched within our success-driven, security-oriented, quick-fix twenty-first-century culture, but they are not enough to deliver transcendent glory and eternal joy. There has to be more to God's economy, and thankfully, there is. God offers a way for us to experience counterfactual thinking in our own lives, but we must learn to live life from the vantage point of his declared mindset. Doing so involves his prescribed way of thinking.

In other words, don't settle. There is more. There is better.

## God's Way of Thinking

This book is almost entirely concerned with one verse from the Bible—one rather long sentence tucked away within the concluding words of the New Testament book of Philippians. At first glance, the verse almost seems an afterthought, like some well-chosen parting words. However, if we allow ourselves to park in front of it, we soon realize that if any verse in the Bible is loaded with perspective-shaping truth, this is it. Though the Bible has many passages that reveal the kind of thinking God wants his people to embrace, this passage stands alone in its concentrated emphasis on God's way of thinking. It is jam-packed with profundity and richness, so much so that we could devote an entire book to it!

This verse comprises about three dozen well-chosen words, one of which is repeated six times. It asks us to consider no less than eight ways of thinking befitting people who desire to find their sufficiency and satisfaction in God. It's for people who want to learn to think differently—who don't want to settle for the status quo of current culture. These are God's attitudes for his people, and they are his way of allowing us to have regular counterfactual experiences as we make our way through all the ups and downs of life in this fallen world.

Here's the verse:

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. (Phil. 4:8)

Notice that each area of thinking is described using one word or a short phrase. Going back hundreds of years within combined Jewish and Greco-Roman cultures, each word and/or phrase is pregnant with meaning and loaded with application. We will spend some time with each word, and together we will get to know them as we would get to know a small group of good friends. And as we do with good friends, we will invite them into the living room of our minds and hearts and allow them to speak to us. Hopefully, we will allow them to change us from the inside out.

In fact, these words come with a promise. The very next verse says, “And the God of peace will be with you” (v. 9). God’s way of giving us peace—real peace—is through our having the right kind of perspective. A perspective that allows us to trust him. A perspective that makes us want to follow him. Don’t miss this: the perspective that God offers is also a perspective that helps us think as he wants us to think. The promise is that if you and I can learn to live life in light of these eight ways of thinking, “the God of peace” will share some of that peace with us.

To start our time with this verse, we’ll look into God’s way of thinking by focusing on a crucial mindset that forms a prerequisite for our journey into the eight ways of thinking. Then we’ll explore each way of thinking in detail and what is involved in learning to think God’s way.

# 1

## THE POWER OF A BIBLICAL “WHATEVER”

Eight Ways of Thinking That Will  
Help You Get the Most Out of Life

I like good strong words that mean something.

Louisa May Alcott

When I was a boy growing up in the Midwest in the 1960s and 1970s, like many of us I was living in a culture in which words and their meanings were changing right before me. If something was originally described as “cool,” it had a lower temperature measured in Fahrenheit or Celsius; then hippies redefined cool to describe people, places, and things that were attractive or inviting or agreed with their way of thinking. “Chick” originally meant a baby bird, but then it changed to mean a nice-looking girl (and some found this rather derogatory). “Smooth” first described the texture of

an object, but then it morphed into describing how a person comes across to others.

Words change over time. Some words that become culturally entrenched in one generation get hijacked by the next generation and take on an entirely different meaning. It's sometimes hard to keep up with the changing meaning of some words, especially as we get older.

### **“Whatever”**

Philippians 4:8 uses the same qualifying word for each line of thinking: *whatever*. It is repeated six times as a front-runner to each of the first six attitudes: whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, and so on. Some scholars argue the repetition is poetic. Others argue it's for emphasis. My guess is both are true. What matters more is what *the author* meant by the use of this relatively common word.

Words change in their meaning. The meaning of this word has changed even within our own culture. In our day, the word *whatever* carries two vastly different definitions, reflecting a tension between a traditional meaning and a more contemporary one. Let's call them the “Doris Day” meaning and the “sarcastic teenager” meaning. In 1956, Doris Day sang “Que Sera, Sera” (Whatever Will Be, Will Be) in the Alfred Hitchcock thriller *The Man Who Knew Too Much*. The song quickly climbed the charts and became number two on the Billboard Hot 100. It won an Academy Award for best original song in 1956 and was the theme song for the *Doris Day Show* for five years running. It eventually made it onto the American Film Institute's list of the top one hundred songs in American cinema. The chorus of the song goes like this:

“Que sera, sera, whatever will be, will be. The future’s not ours to see, que sera, sera. What will be, will be.”

Mixing Spanish with English, this song uses the word *whatever* in a way that defined the mindset of a couple of generations. It is a song about accepting whatever comes. You can’t control the future, so don’t worry about it; just sit back and go along for the ride. Ultimately, “Que Sera, Sera” is a song about fate. Whatever happens will happen. In a time following the atrocities of two world wars and the Great Depression and with the global threat of communism, if there was one thing people in the mid-1950s knew, it was that you couldn’t predict (let alone control) what was going to happen. “Whatever will be, will be.”

With their carefree attitude, members of the counterculture movement of the 1960s took this concept even further, shunning societal norms in lieu of free love while traveling across the country in VW buses. “Whatever will be, will be.” Though opposed to the biblical perspective, in which a sovereign God is in control of everything and is worthy to be trusted, the “Doris Day” meaning of the word became deeply ingrained in the psyche of Americans—many of whom still embrace this use of the word today.

But words and their meanings change. Though many people still use the word *whatever* in the traditional sense, a younger generation now uses it very differently. I affectionately call this the “sarcastic teenager” use of the word. We’ve all heard it used this way. You ask your teenager to clean up a mess, and the look you get is as if you just asked them to fly to the moon and plant a flag. You then repeat your request, this time with a little more authority behind it, and your teenager responds with the often-heard phrase

“Uh, like, whatever.” It’s clearly a dismissive, sarcastic, I-think-you’re-an-idiot use of the word. Subtly different in tone, vastly different in meaning from the fate-laden “Doris Day” understanding, *whatever* is used by today’s teenagers to communicate disagreement and a resigned acceptance. For them, saying “whatever” is a conversation stopper. They clearly mean, “I think you’re wrong, but I know we won’t see eye to eye on this. So let’s move on.”

To be fair, saying “whatever” could also be part of your teen’s way of asserting their independence and separation from their family of origin. This is what adolescence is about. Still, it’s just no fun being a parent on the receiving end of this dismissiveness.

### **Game Changer**

Why is all this important? Why trace the meaning over the last sixty years of a common word from its “whatever will be, will be” use to its current “like, whatever” use? Here’s why: neither of our contemporary uses of the word *whatever* comes anywhere close to what Philippians 4:8 means by this word. If the use of a word can change within a generation or two, imagine how it can change in two thousand years over many generations and across different cultures.

When the apostle Paul, inspired by God, originally wrote Philippians 4:8, the word *whatever*, repeated six times, was a common one in the Greco-Roman culture of the first century. It is the Greek word *hosos* (pronounced *HAH-sahs*), and the New Testament writers used it some 115 times. The word also appears literally thousands of times in Greek literature from the ancient world. However, what is most fascinating about

this word is that it is a positive word—even an inspirational word—primarily used to describe the *extent* of something. One prominent Greek-English lexicon defines *whatever* as “as much as; as long as.”<sup>1</sup> It is a word used to refer to limitless volume and extent.

A rather pictorial example of this meaning emerges in the Gospel of John, where the writer used this word to describe the miracle of the feeding of five thousand people. He wrote, “Jesus then took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated. So also the fish, *as much as [hosos]* they wanted” (John 6:11, emphasis added). The people ate “as much as [whatever]” their hearts desired. A couple of fish miraculously multiplied to feed five thousand. The word used is *hosos*—a visionary word used to expand the possibilities and broaden the horizons.

I believe Paul the apostle used this word the same way in Philippians 4:8. He prefaced each particular way of thinking with a resounding *whatever* to get us to dream about all the possibilities this kind of thinking can have when applied to our lives. He challenges us to approach each God-ordained perspective with a Spirit-led creativity and a vision that conjure in our mind’s eye what these possibilities might look like as we learn to think along these lines. “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just . . . whatever . . . whatever . . . whatever.” He invites us to dream big on a very personal level. Paul used the word *whatever* to show us how to turn a couple of fish into a full-course meal when it comes to how we think.

To see how potent the use of this somewhat commonplace word is in this verse, imagine how it would read if *whatever* was *not* included. The verse would say, “Finally, brothers, [if

something] is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, [and/or] worthy of praise, think about these things.” Certainly, it doesn’t become a bad verse; it is somewhat stoic and paternalistic maybe but still pretty good stuff.

However, like a scratched CD stuck on the same phrase, the repetition of the word *whatever* catches our attention. By repeatedly weaving this word throughout the verse, God makes his message clear: *whatever* is intended to be applied to each of the eight ways of thinking. We are led to envision much more within our thinking and to explore endless God-enabled possibilities. We are offered the opportunity to ponder all the implications and applications imaginable as we learn to think with God’s perspective in mind. We can approach each moment of each day with a passion born of thousands of potentialities as we learn to think with truth, honor, purity, love, and excellence leading the way in our minds and hearts. No longer do we have to follow the pattern of our culture with a passive “whatever will be, will be” in mind. Nor do we have to go through each day with a sarcastic, dismissive “whatever” trailing behind us. We can now live with the power of a biblical whatever guiding us through each thought we have and each choice we make. It’s a game changer if there ever was one.

### **Imagining the Possibilities**

Let me show you how this might work. One of the things I tend to struggle with is frustration while driving. I wouldn’t say I ever engage in road rage, but I can get frustrated in urban traffic, especially at the end of a long day or when I am in a hurry to get somewhere. By the time I finally arrive at my

destination, my mood can really be spoiled. I’m not alone. A recent AAA national study of 2,705 licensed drivers found that nearly 80 percent of them reported “significant anger” while driving at least once in the past year. Even scarier, the report found that over half of the drivers surveyed admitted to tailgating an offending vehicle and that just under half of them admitted to yelling or honking their horn at another driver.<sup>2</sup>

This is where the power of a biblical whatever can become a game changer. Say somebody cuts me off in traffic or is going too slow in the fast lane (which should be one of the seven deadly sins). What I have practiced over the years is to slow down (literally and figuratively) and filter my thinking through the eight thought arenas of Philippians 4:8. I then apply the power of a biblical whatever to each one to determine the creative possibilities each might entail. Here is what this practice looks like in this situation:

“Whatever is true”: Well, it is true that the person in front of me doesn’t know how to drive as well as I do. Few people do. But it’s also true that I sometimes do what they did. I cut people off now and then. I get caught holding someone up in the fast lane if I am not paying attention. I don’t mean to, but if truth be known (as it is right now), I sometimes do these things too. I guess I’m more of a hypocrite than I want to admit. Maybe I should cut this guy some slack.

“Whatever is honorable”: Though I am tempted to lash out and join the 50 percent of tailgaters, honkers, and yellers, I can’t see God or even my wife seeing that as honorable. Honor would look differently than lashing

out or responding rashly. Let's protect my honor and take the high road (pun intended).

“Whatever is just”: It is probably just and fair that there should have been a cop present to see what this person did (where are they when you need them?). However, there wasn't. Justice wasn't served *again*. But it's not my role to take matters into my own hands. We have traffic officers and traffic cameras for such situations. It's my job to back off and get to where I am going safely—and with my integrity intact. And though it's hard to see justice skirted, the alternative is worse. So I'm moving on (literally).

“Whatever is pure”: Purity is the ability to be good and relate well. This is how God demonstrates purity. There would be no purity in showing someone any of my fingers, save for my thumb pointing straight up! So if I do show any finger, that will be the one. Better yet, let's just move on. I have better places to be than here.

Before I know it, with just half of the thought arenas of Philippians 4:8 applied to the problem at hand, combined with the power and vision of a biblical whatever leading the way, I am already feeling better. In fact, just going through this mental exercise distracts me from what else I might have been thinking as it focuses my mind elsewhere (even upward). Joy is right around the corner.

The obvious point is that Philippians 4:8 provides new ways of thinking. The power of a biblical whatever ignites them with possibilities and vision. With a renewed perspective comes a renewed focus. And many times focus is what

God uses to help us see our way through a problem to the other side.

How many scenarios occur in your daily life that could use the power of a biblical whatever? Maybe it’s

- a decision at work that has you perplexed;
- what to do with your teenager who each day is increasingly distant from you;
- a personal habit that continues to get the best of you, and you can’t seem to see your way clear to victory; or
- a nagging spiritual problem such as doubt, confusion, discouragement, or fear.

I wonder what slowing down and filtering your thought process through the grid of the eight perspectives of Philip-  
pians 4:8 would teach you. The power of a biblical whatever is bound to make a difference.

With a firm grasp of the power of a biblical whatever driving each of the eight perspectives, we are now ready to begin exploring and discovering a new kind of thinking God has for his people. We are now ready to dive deep into the realities of Philippians 4:8. Unlike any kind of cognitive therapy our world offers today, this way of thinking promises to transform. How could it not? It comes from God.

Let the journey begin.