

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your graciousness^[b] be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶ Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Rejoice, The Lord is near

Rejoice in the LORD always, I say again Rejoice. This is a favorite passage for many, many know it, love it, memorize it – but not as many know why we should rejoice in the Lord. Instead they'll focus on the action of being joyous. Put on a happy face. We might even go so far as to say that if you're going to be a faithful pious Christian then you must act as if everything is okay, fake it until you make it. That's not what Paul is saying. That's not what our church has been teaching. Paul doesn't instruct us to rejoice in our suffering but in the Lord and even if we are suffering we can rejoice in the Lord. Moreover there are times when we are instructed to mourn, Paul writes in Romans, "*Mourn with those who mourn. Rejoice with those who rejoice.*" (Romans 12:15). Don't rejoice in the bad things that happen but in all things rejoice in the Lord.

Because no matter what is happening in your life, no matter how bad life is, you can rejoice because you have a Lord who loves you, a Savior who died for you, and a promise that God is near. We are instructed to rejoice in the Lord. And we rejoice not because of the circumstances of life but because of the Lord and he is near.

Last week we spoke about the background to the book of Philippians. Paul is writing to the people of Philippi while under house arrest in Rome. We're not even sure if he was able to write this letter with his own hand since he's made reference to his chains. Paul didn't have many problems with the Philippians but then chapter 4 rolls around and we find out there are some issues with this congregation. They're human after all. In fact two women and their discord is forever immortalized in this letter. Euodia and Syntyche are instructed to *be of the same mind in the Lord*. There was division in the church and opposition outside the church. They are persecuted and life just isn't as joyous as it once was. So Paul instructs them, "*Rejoice in the Lord.*"

There's the other problem. You don't usually need a command when people are acting as they should. If you're favorite team wins you don't need to be told to rejoice. You're rejoicing already. Here's the other problem. The Philippians appear to be in a rut. They aren't rejoicing. They aren't full of joy, the letter is. They are depressed, anxious, and uncertain about the future. And if rejoice isn't enough Paul piles on another command, "*Don't be anxious about anything.*" Can't they get a break? This is a tough time for the faithful Philippians.

Maybe that's familiar to you. It should because we struggle with the same sin. I'm anxious about the future. I'm afraid of what might happen. Being afraid is often excusable. If a bear is charging at me I'm afraid because I can't out run a bear. Fear comes from what we can see, from what we know, from an understood threat. Anxiety on the other hand is fear of the unknown, the uncertain, the things that we can't see or don't even know about. This is the opposite of what God wants for us. This is the opposite of joy and leads to depression, anxiety, and misery. Paul urges us, "Don't you know who you are? Don't you know whose you are? Don't you know what has been done for you? Paul knows we need encouragement. We should also know that sometimes we need help.

Mental illness can be the cause of depression and anxiety. It's a chemical imbalance and if you are struggling with anxiety seek counseling and get medical help. Paul says to pray but we don't just pray over cancer patients, they also get help, so also with depression. Pray but then get help because this is an effect of living in a broken and sinful world. Anxiety is an effect of living in a sinful and broken world but fear and worry over the world often displays a lack of trust in God.

We say we believe in, "*God the Father, Almighty,*" but then act as if God is unable to save, too small to save, or he just doesn't care. So we'll worry about every single thing in life as if God is not in charge. This sin is addressed and condemned here. If we fully understood all that the Lord protected us from during the day and night we'd all be

bumbling fools. But as it is, we are blissfully ignorant and focused on what we have and how we can protect it. We worry about more than just the day. We worry about the week, the year, our future, retirement. The more we have the more we have to worry about. But Paul says, "*Rejoice in the Lord always.*" Jesus tells us, "*Consider the birds of the sky: They don't sow or reap or gather into barns, yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Aren't you worth more than they?*"²⁷ *Can any of you add one moment to his life span^[b] by worrying?*" (Matthew 6:26,27).

We forget about the gifts given, the giver, and the reason for the hope we have.

Paul writes to the Philippians from prison to those who find a struggle inside and outside the church. "*Rejoice in the Lord always... for the Lord is near.*" God is near. Jesus is near. So is Paul referring to "near in time" or "near as in close"? Is he talking temporally or spatially? Can't it be both? Jesus promised his disciples, "*Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age.*" We hear again, "*Wherever two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am with them.*" While some Christians restrict Jesus as Lord and God to one location, at the right hand of the Father, we recognize Jesus is true God. He is the God-man. And he is with us always. His omnipresence surrounds us. He is "*in our midst,*" as Zephaniah says in the Old Testament reading.

God came down to earth. He entered into our sinful and broken world to be broken for us. He did something about our suffering and pain. He did something for the Philippians that brings hope no matter what may happen. We preach Christ crucified, risen, and ascended Lord who now takes us full use of his divine power and authority. The one who conquered death now cares for you. Our joy and our strength come from the promised one who is with us.

In the midst of the sad and difficult circumstances of life we are still the Lord's. While we will still deal with hurt and pain we have his word that he *will never leave you nor forsake you* (Hebrews 13:5). Rather because we are the Lord's we can as Paul instructs, "*Let your graciousness^[b] be known to everyone. The Lord is near.*"⁶ *Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*"

When we are anxious or worried we can do something. This is not the power of positive thinking. God does not promise us that we can overcome all pain and problems by simply staying positive, in fact that sounds funny coming from a God who was crucified on a cross. But what we can do is pray. When we don't know what to pray God has given us the Holy Spirit who intercedes on for us and on our behalf. When you don't know what words to pray God has given us a prayer, "*Our Father in heaven. Hallowed be your name. Your kingdom come. Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this daily bread and forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us, lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.*" You have the Lord's Prayer. He has delivered us from evil. He has not lead us into temptation. You have the Lord who gives us our daily bread whether we recognize it or not, whose will is done and whose kingdom comes even without our doing. His name is holy and he gives his name to us.

We can make our petitions with thanksgiving. Petitions are requests for specific needs. Paul is telling us that there is need to small for God. If God is concerned with the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, I think he can spare some time for you, whom he describes as the apple of his eye. We can bring every specific worry, care, concern to God in prayer *with thanksgiving*. This is done by remembering what you still have.

You have what God has given you. He's placed his name on you making you his child and an heir of eternal life. In Lord's Supper he comes to us physically for the forgiveness of our sins. Rejoice! Because the Lord is near. If you have been anxious and worried about anything there is forgiveness freely given. That is *the peace that surpasses all understanding*. It's a peace we can't explain. We can't create it. We don't earn it. It's a peace that cannot be taken away. That is the peace that only comes from the completed work of Christ. This peace isn't a matter of our emotions or our mental state it is a matter of our identity.

Paul isn't telling Christians that they must always be happy. He is telling us to rejoice in the Lord. He's telling us that everything will be okay because Christ has risen. He brings us back to the reality of our situation in Christ and

Philippians 4:4-7

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possibly back to Paul's reality as *this peace will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus*. Paul has a guard but even the guy he's chained to isn't in charge. So there is no problem, soldier, hospital or doctor that can stop this peace. It is a peace that will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. And those are the same words I end sermons with, "May the peace of God which surpasses all understanding guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen