

### Sermon Summary #19

#### Anxiety, Prayer, and the Peace of God Philippians 4:4-7

Rejoice in the Lord? Are you kidding? Is Paul kidding? Does he have any idea what he's saying? Is he so out of touch with the harsh realities of life that he can be this flippant and happy-go-lucky?

Rejoice in the Lord? It's only been two weeks since the devastating tornado hit Moore and wiped out a large portion of that city. And yet you expect Christian men and women whose lives were turned inside out by that disaster to "rejoice in the Lord"? Seriously?

Or again, how am I supposed to rejoice in the Lord when the memory of past sins weighs so heavily on my heart? How can I obey this command when people I love are being persecuted and are suffering unjustly? I just lost my job. My mother died last week. My children won't even talk to me. The car won't start and I don't have the money to get it fixed. I'm supposed to see the doctor next week but I'm too scared of what he'll say. Rejoice in the Lord? Yeah, right.

I understand this reaction. Truly, I do. But before you dismiss Paul as some sort of first-century Pollyanna, remember this: He wrote those words while in prison. He wrote those words not knowing if he might be beheaded for nothing more than declaring his allegiance to Jesus Christ. The man who wrote those words knew more about suffering and deprivation than all of us combined. So, if you still want to dismiss his counsel as unhelpful, go ahead. But don't do so on the assumption that he was naïve or unacquainted with grief or was insulated from the kind of pain and heartache that you're facing right now.

Is it not obvious that Paul is calling us to an experience that is unrelated to our external circumstances and in some way transcends them? Charley Brown once said that "Happiness is a warm puppy." But what happens when the puppy runs away? What happens when the puppy dies? No, the kind of "happiness" that Paul has in view, the joy and delight that he calls for in this passage is not tied to a warm puppy or money in the bank or a clean bill of health or peaceful family relationships. It's tied to Jesus Christ.

So let's begin there, with Jesus Christ. After all, it is there, in him, in relation to our Lord, in the context of all we know that he has so graciously done for us, that we are to rejoice: "Rejoice **in the Lord!**"

Joy is expressed in a variety of styles and circumstances. Paul couldn't care less whether it is with hands raised or one's face pressed against the ground. It matters not whether it is to the rhythm of a fast-paced worship song or in solemn silence with tears streaming down one's face. What concerns Paul, and must concern us, is the ground or reason of our joy. There is a sense in which Paul is declaring: "Jesus is our joy," and he is ours and we are his regardless of whether the sky is clear and sunny or threatens us with an approaching funnel cloud. That is why we can rejoice "always," at all times, in every circumstance, no matter the pain or pleasure. Our joy is constant not because our circumstances are but because Jesus is.

That is the **first** of three exhortations: "Rejoice in the Lord always: again I will say, Rejoice" (v. 4).

The **second** exhortation comes in v. 5 – "Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand."

This word translated "*reasonableness*" (ESV) is hard to interpret. The KJV translates it, "let your *moderation* be known to all." But this is not a call for temperance or abstinence. Others suggest the idea of *generosity* or the *willingness to make allowances*; the quality that keeps one from always insisting on one's full rights. It's **the opposite of entitlement**; the opposite of always demanding one's due. It is **the patient willingness to yield wherever yielding does not compromise moral principle**.

As we've already seen in Philippians, Paul does not mean we are to be quick to compromise on our doctrinal beliefs. Neither is he suggesting we accommodate or adapt to the world's standards of conduct (see 2:15; Romans 12:2). He's not telling us to be wimps, but he is telling us to be willing to bend a bit; to not be so brittle or inflexible that people bounce off us like a golf ball on concrete.

And please note that this quality of character is not to be confined within your heart. It is something you must strive for all to see: "let your reasonableness **be known** to everyone." So, *what do you most want to be "known" for?* Is it your physical appearance, your bubbly and infectious personality, your wealth, your wit, your wisdom, your ancestry, your work ethic? Perhaps we should focus on something far less sensational, but more spiritual: reasonableness.

What reason does Paul give for this advice? "The Lord is at hand" (v. 5b).

This phrase "at hand" could be taken temporally or personally. That is to say, he may be referring to the nearness of Christ in terms of time or space. If it's time, he may be alluding back to what he said at the close of chapter three. There we were encouraged to keep our eyes fixed on heaven from which "we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ" (3:20b).

But I'm inclined to think he is speaking in spatial or relational or personal terms. His point, then, is that the Lord is *close to you, present with you, aware of your conduct, concerned about your relationships with others, available and willing to come to your aid and assist you*. This may well be why Paul immediately follows this declaration with an urgent command that we pray. If the Lord is near to help and encourage and strengthen us, we need to be quick to pray to him about everything! We hear an echo of this in Psalm 145:18 – "The Lord is **near** to all who call on him, to all who call on him in truth."

The **third** of Paul's exhortations is a familiar one. We read of it in v. 6 – "do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."

There are two experiential realities in which a Christian might live: anxiety or peace / worry or rest / consternation or contentment. Here Paul contrasts these two and tells us that the way to move from one into the other is by prayer.

Clearly Paul is drawing on the teaching of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount (Matt. 6:25-34). The word translated "anxious" is the same as what we find in Philippians 2:20 where it had the positive and even virtuous sense of being sincerely concerned for the welfare of another person. *So what is the difference between sinful anxiety and sincere, spiritual concern for someone else or for some circumstance in life?*

Here in Philippians 4:6, unlike 2:20, Paul is speaking of godless concern for things over which we have no control, and even for things over which we do have control but should still entrust to the Lord. This sort of gnawing, corrosive worry is a form of unconscious blasphemy.

Paul is not speaking of imaginary or phantom anxieties. He is not making light of the troubles they face. He is simply convinced that God is able and willing to help.

But Paul does not simplistically command them to stop worrying without offering an alternative cure. But the cure Paul suggests is not what many have come to expect:

It is not inaction or passivity.

It is not apathy. Paul does not tell us to ignore or deny the problem.

It is not withdrawal. In moment of anxiety the easiest thing to do is retreat into a corner of safety and complain and grow bitter.

Paul says the alternative to anxiety or worry is the pouring out of one's heart to God in prayer. Release from anxiety comes through laying yourself bare before God. As D. A. Carson has said, "*The way to be anxious about nothing is to be prayerful about everything*" (Basics for Believers, 112).

But how does this work? What is it about anxiety and prayer that put them in conflict with one another? More specifically, *what is it about prayer that makes it an effective antidote to anxiety?*

- Anxiety is rooted in self, while prayer is rooted in God.
- Anxiety is the fruit of a narrow, constricted view of life. The only thing one can see is the problems or perplexities surrounding us. Prayer is the fruit of a broad and expansive view of life in which God is so big that everything else, even our worst problems and worries, shrink into insignificance.
- Anxiety is horizontal in focus. Prayer, on the other hand, is vertical in focus. That is to say, when you worry you are consumed with looking to the left and to the right, forward and backward. When you pray, you can't help but look up.
- Anxiety never raises your eyes above your problems, your situation and circumstances. Prayer raises your eyes above and beyond yourself to God and his power.
- Anxiety looks to self to solve problems. Prayer looks to God to endure problems.
- When you are anxious, your circumstances and problems control you; they have sovereignty over you; you invest in them a power and authority to shape your life. When you are prayerful your circumstances shrink and are devoid of any such power to shape your life.
- Anxiety is a concern over circumstances you can't control Prayer is confidence in the God who controls your circumstances.
- Anxiety is an expression of fear. Prayer is an expression of faith.

That, quite simply, is why the antidote to anxiety is prayer.

There are two elements in Paul's theology of prayer.

First are the **characteristics** of prayer, six of which Paul delineates for us.

(1) **"in everything"** – I.e., in every circumstance, no matter how serious or casual, no matter how tragic or trivial; and at all times. The contrast is striking: in **nothing** be anxious, but in **everything** be prayerful.

(2) **"prayer"** – This is broad term that encompasses all kinds of prayer: adoration, praise, petition, thanksgiving, confession, intercession, etc.

(3) **"supplication"** – This word is more narrow and specific in its focus. Here Paul has in mind the reality of need and want. This word thus points to our dependence on God for everything. Could this possibly be why most prayer meetings are attended by women?

Men believe the way to success and respect in today's world is by cultivating an image of self-sufficiency and radical independence. Men typically do not open up and confess their inadequacy or give indication of their great need. This is to admit weakness, a fatal mistake in today's world. Male pride is not conducive to the kind of prayer Paul has in mind here.

(4) ***“with thanksgiving” – Before you ask God for something new, thank him for something old.***

Thanksgiving is not here another kind of prayer, along with petition and supplication. Here it is the mood or mindset or attitude that characterizes all prayer. So why does Paul want all our prayers to be bathed in thanksgiving? Several reasons.

First, it is hard to be bitter in the presence of God when our minds and mouths are filled with what God has done for us in the past. When you are thankful you realize that everything you have is of grace and that you deserve nothing but death.

Second, it is difficult to doubt God and his promise to answer us when you are thanking him for the blessings he has already bestowed! If you think I'm making this up, try it. For example: “But God, I'm not sure you can . . . Oh, yeah, o.k., yes, I remember when you did something similar before. O.k., thanks.” Or again, “But God, I have no reason to think you are either able or willing to step into this situation and make things right. Oh, yeah, o.k., yes, I remember now how you did this on several occasions earlier. How stupid of me to think you wouldn't be able or willing to do it again.”

Third, thanksgiving is the fuel for future requests. In other words, if your mind is first filled with remembrance of what God has graciously done in the past, it will empower and expand your requests for what you need now and tomorrow. Having seen firsthand what God can do in response to prayer, your prayers grow and intensify. If you've received a little in the past, why not ask for a lot in the future?

Fourth, when you recall God's goodness and mercy in the past it's hard to remain burdened in the present. Thanksgiving has a way of alleviating the pressure of the present by reminding us of God's power at work on our behalf in the past.

Fifth, by constantly keeping fresh in our minds all that we have to be thankful for, we will be less inclined to disregard others who are less well off.

Sixth, as strange as this may sound, we also need to thank God for saying No. Why in the world would we do that? Here's why.

On some occasions, ***if God were to grant us the requests we make of him it would bring us harm that we are unable in the present to foresee.*** Contrary to what you may believe, you and I do not always know what is best for ourselves. We have to pray with confidence that God knows us better than we know ourselves. Just as an earthly father has to deny his five-year-old son's request for a hunting knife, so our heavenly father has to deny certain requests we make of him.

On some occasions, ***God will say no to a request in the present because he has something far better in store for us in the future.*** Thus what strikes us as a definitive No is in fact a loving Wait.

There are actually some prayers to which God says No because ***unbeknownst to us we are praying at cross purposes with another believer.*** What happens when a job is open and two or more Christians apply for it? When God answers the prayers of one he must say no to the other. Or again, when you pray for holiness and happiness, it may be that purity comes only through persecution. Sometimes the only way God can answer your prayer for holiness is by leading you through heartache and persecution and loss.

So Paul wants us to thank God in every prayer, whether or not what we ask comes to pass as we hoped it might. If it does, thank him. If it doesn't, thank him for having the wisdom not to give us what we couldn't handle. If it doesn't, thank him for how he will address your needs in a way that is far superior to how you first envisioned.

(5) **“requests”** – Here Paul has in view the actual content of our prayers; the precise details. It’s Paul’s way of reminding us **not to hide behind generalities and vague religious platitudes**. **Be specific**. Be concrete. It’s amazing when you think of it. Prayer, on the surface, seems so impertinent: that fallen, hell-deserving finite creatures should ask the infinitely glorious Creator for anything! What makes it seem even more impertinent is the expectation we have that God might actually do or provide what we ask!

(6) **“to God”** – Or more literally, in the presence of God, face to face with him, as it were. Consider how this works in our relationships with other people. Often times we must know a person really well before the conversation flows freely and we open up and let them in on the struggles and needs of life. We can talk about the weather and Bedlam football and the demise of the Thunder and the threat of tornadoes but until we know them and are confident of their love for us it rarely goes deeper than that. There are certain things that I share with my D-group that I might not share with all of you. There are things I talk about with Ann that my D-group will never hear. But there are a lot of things that God and I talk about to which no one else on earth may have access.

May I suggest that if your prayer life is dull and sporadic at best it may be that you’re talking to a stranger!

Having unpacked the characteristics of prayer, Paul now describes its **consequences**.

Paul describes it in one gloriously beautiful and reassuring phrase: the peace of God guarding our hearts and minds in a way that no human mind can fully comprehend.

Did you know that this phrase “the peace of God” occurs only here in all the NT? He’s not talking about peace **“with”** God. That is presupposed. If you aren’t at peace “with” God you can’t experience the peace **“of”** God. If the enmity between you and God has not been removed by faith in the blood of Christ’s cross you can’t experience the sort of peace Paul has in mind. That feeling in your heart of ease and contentment and all’s well in the world is a lie. ***If you haven’t invested your trust in Christ as your treasure and your only hope for forgiveness of sins, what’s going on in your mind and heart is a psychological delusion, a deceptive trick that ultimately lead you straight into eternal death.***

But for those who’ve been reconciled to God through faith in the blood of Christ shed for them on the cross, there is God’s very peace that now enters their hearts and rules and reigns and triumphs over all anxiety.

You do realize, do you not, that ***Paul isn’t talking so much about the peace that God gives as he is about the peace that exists in God himself. It is “God’s” peace, not so much because he gives it but because he experiences it.*** This is the tranquility and joy and calm and serenity that characterizes the being of God himself. And yes, he does give it; he does impart it; he does infuse it in us when we pray to him. People, think of what Paul is saying:

*When we fervently and honestly and passionately pour out our requests to God, something of the very nature of God himself, his inner peace, what he himself as God experiences, comes into us and takes up residence and governs our hearts and overcomes and replaces our anxious thoughts and enables us to experience the depths of that spiritual serenity that God himself feels and enjoys. This is what Isaiah spoke of when he said of God: “You keep him in perfect peace whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you. Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting rock” (Isa. 26:3-4).*

Something else is said about this “peace” of God that becomes ours when we pray: it far surpasses and outstrips and transcends all human comprehension. The human mind can’t fully grasp it. The human hand can’t reproduce it in a factory. The human eye can’t begin to envision what it looks like. As much as we pride ourselves in our scientific and technological achievements, this peace is something that will never be reduced to merely human terms or explained by even the greatest and most brilliant minds.

This peace isn’t some cheap psychological trick to get you past a few problems in life. No diagnostic manual or self-help book can reproduce it. It is God-shaped and God-given.

And look at what this peace **“does,”** yes, “does,” for it is not impotent or quiet or weak or inactive: it ***guards your hearts and minds.***

This would have been an especially vivid image for Paul as he wrote these words, for he did so as he sat in chains in a Roman prison. The city of Philippi was home to a Roman garrison and the sight of soldiers keeping careful watch over the area would have been a common phenomenon for these Christians. Hence, God's peace, like a garrison of soldiers, will stand guard over your hearts and minds. In the midst of God's peace you are as secure from worry and fear as any well-armed fortress.

What precisely does this peace guard as a garrison of soldiers? *Not our bodies*, because we can still fall sick or suffer damage from a tornado or be cast into prison for our faith and even martyred. *Not our possessions*, because the enemies of the church can still steal and confiscate our property. *Not our bank accounts*, because the economy can still collapse. *Not our reputation*, because we are still objects of slander and gossip and abuse.

Rather this peace guards our *"hearts" and "minds"* which is Paul's way of referring to the core of our spiritual life, our values, our passions, our thoughts, that place of deep intimacy with Christ himself. *Spiritually* speaking, God will never permit an assault on his children to be successful.

But don't be misled into thinking that this is a promise or guarantee for just anyone. This is not a universal promise that just anyone can lay hold of. This is a protection which comes from the peace of God that is found *only in Christ Jesus*. If you don't know Christ, if he isn't your treasure, if your faith isn't grounded and fixed in him alone, this passage promises you **nothing**.

Finally, observe what Paul *doesn't say* about prayer. He doesn't say that all our requests will be answered in precisely the way we articulated them. He doesn't say that the problems and perplexities and pain that may have caused the anxiety in the first place will suddenly and forever disappear. What he *does say* is that a loving heavenly Father will guard your heart and mind in Christ Jesus as you face and endure and patiently persevere in the midst of whatever this world throws in your direction.

### *Conclusion*

As we bring this to a conclusion, permit me for just a moment to remind us all once again of the simply stunning, utterly breathtaking reality that undergirds everything Paul says here. He is telling us, without hesitation, without tongue in cheek, without the slightest tinge of insincerity or rush of sensationalism, that *God has designed and ordained this universe in such a way that he will act and intervene on our behalf when we ask him to*. Unbelievable!

That truth apart from which nothing here makes any sense at all is that God has promised to do for his children, for those who are in Christ Jesus, marvelous things that we simply cannot do for ourselves. And no less true is the fact that if we do **not** pray as we are here instructed to pray he quite likely will **not** do for us what we need done.

Does it not blow your mind when you hear Jesus say something like: "Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you" (Matt. 7:7)? Do you and I really take James seriously when he tells us, "You do not have, because you do not ask" (James 4:2)?

***The all-powerful, all-wise, all-loving God who called this universe into existence out of nothing wills for your prayers to be the occasion of his acting on your behalf.***

Think about this in relation to our mission as a church. *We exist to exalt Christ in the City through Gospel-centered Worship, Discipleship, Community, and Mission*. Do you think any of that will be accomplished to anyone's benefit if we do not take seriously the exhortation in this passage to pray? Don't delude yourself, dear friend. ***Never assume that God will do for us apart from prayer what he has promised to do for us only through prayer.***

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