

Natalie W. Bell
October 8, 2017

Finding the Peace and Joy Philippians 4:1-9

Friends, listen to the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Philippi as we continue our sermon series today.

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

2 I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.

3 Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

4 Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

8 Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

9 Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

I was reading this week about the **conditions** under which Paul would have been writing this letter. Remember that he was writing from a prison cell, possibly in Rome.

In Christian History, John McRay wrote about Paul's **imprisonment**, and it's pretty harrowing.

First of all, we should remember that Paul spent roughly **one-quarter** of his missionary career in prisons!

Roman imprisonment meant being stripped and flogged, then sitting in painful leg or wrist chains.

The cells were dark, and cold in winter.

The unbearable cold, lack of water, cramped quarters, and sickening stench made sleeping difficult and daylight hours miserable.

Because of this, many prisoners begged for a speedy death.

Others took their own lives.

Yet it was in this setting that the Apostle Paul wrote

encouraging, joyful letters and preached the Good News of Jesus Christ.

Elesha Coffman, Christian History Connection (6-1-02), from Christian History (issue 47)

Can you even ***imagine?***

Isn't that amazing?

How did he do it?

How did he write about ***joy, and hope, and peace***, amidst those conditions?

How do any Christ-followers speak of joy and peace while walking through the valley of the shadow of death?

Because for most of us, our ***circumstances dictate our emotions***.

It's not natural for us to feel joy and peace amidst pain and suffering.

Presbyterian Pastor and writer, Frederick Buechner once said,

*In our lives in the world, the temptation is always to go where the world takes us, to drift with **whatever current happens** to be running strongest.*

*When good things happen, we rise to heaven; when bad things happen, we descend to hell. ... I know this to be true of no one as well as I know it to be true of myself. I know how just the weather can **affect my whole state of mind** for good or ill, how just getting stuck in a traffic jam can ruin an afternoon that in every other way is so beautiful that it dazzles the heart.*

*We are in constant danger of being not **actors** in the drama of our own lives but **reactors**. -from PreachingToday.com*

What if our ***response*** to life doesn't have to be wherever the current takes us?

What if it's a ***decision***, of whether to give into the anger and sadness and frustration of life, or to rise above?

Could it be that we can choose to be ***actors*** in life, ***instead of reactors?***

It's sure ***not easy***.

I spend a good deal of time ***reacting*** to situations in my life, and in the church, what about you?

So ***what do we do?***

How do we become the actors, and not the reactors?

What if we go back to Philippians 4, and look at it closely.

This might be where you want to get your Bible out.
Because to our American ears we might hear **slogans**,
or self-improvement words in this passage, right?

Rejoice!

Do not worry!

Think about the good things!

That's about as helpful as telling someone hanging off a cliff:

Don't be afraid!

But what if this is **not a self-help slogan** at all?

What if this would not make a great self-improvement book
in Barnes and Noble?

Let's look at the entire thing, beginning to end.

You know how these **words begin?**

They start with Paul asking two **women leaders** (yes I said women leaders!)
to work out their **conflict**.

We don't know what their conflict was,

but Paul has heard about it, and he is urging them to **reconcile**.

Paul's uplifting, challenging, and hopeful words begin with a church conflict!

Think about that for a minute.

He's **realistic** about life.

His words start in conflict, but they end with **peace**,
and the God of peace will be with you.

What does that **say to us today?**

Well, for one Paul is **realistic and practical** about the struggles that we face,
even as Christians, even within the family of faith!

Praise God for that, right?

But it says something really powerful about **God's power**
to **move us beyond** our circumstances—

because Paul goes on to say **rejoice!**

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.

5 Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.

I think sometimes we hear those words, rejoice,

and we forget that **Paul told that to a church experiencing conflict!**

But he also knew how they could find joy---
Why does he say we can rejoice?

because the Lord is near.

Why can we rejoice, even in adversity?

Because God is just a breath away.

Paul goes on to say something else powerful, ***straight from Jesus:***
6 Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

It sounds almost impossible, 'do not worry', doesn't it?
How helpful is it when someone says that to you?
Not so much to me!

But there's more than just a command, or a self-help slogan!
Do not worry, but bring your requests to God, with thanksgiving.
That's a very specific action that takes away worry, right?

*In Matthew 6:25-34 Jesus says, Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, ... Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life^[a]?
²⁸ So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² ...But ***seek first his kingdom*** and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.*

Jesus said to ***seek first the kingdom*** of God, and that would cure our worry.
What does it mean to seek first the kingdom?
What if it's Paul's words about praying and thanking God?
Do not worry, ***but bring all your requests to God, with thanksgiving.***
Seek first God's kingdom, ...pray and praise God.

I was telling you last week about how incredible it is for me to take my daily walks through the neighborhood,
and just spend that time ***counting blessings.***
It's transformative.
And I always see ***something new*** on those walks,
and I often get some new insight.
I think it's because I'm focused on what God has given me.

When do you count your blessings?

When do you spend time ***praying, just thanking*** God for all the good things in your life?

When things like Las Vegas happen in our world, it reminds me to be ***grateful***. ***Life itself*** is a precious gift that can be taken at any minute.

Are we taking it for ***granted***?

Or ***treasuring*** each moment?

My favorite devotional, ***Streams in the Desert***, had this to say about worry:

“What good has worrying ever accomplished?

It has never made anyone stronger,

helped anyone do God’s will,

or provided for anyone a way of escape from anxiety or confusion.

Worry only destroys the lives that would otherwise be useful and beautiful.” –

Darlow Sargeant, in *Streams in the Desert*, edited by L.B. Cowman, October 8th.

Wow. Worry ***destroys lives***.

I think I agree, what about you?

But what if we are able to follow Paul’s encouragement to ‘not worry’, because we are spending time in ***prayer and thanksgiving***?

Worship is one of the best places to do that,

but you can praise God ***anywhere***, anytime, right?

This week I found a story online from a few years ago about a nun who got trapped in an elevator for 4 days!

While staying alone in her convent, an 85-year-old Catholic nun got trapped inside a broken elevator for four nights and three days.

She tried pushing the inside elevator door, but the electricity went off.

She had her cell phone with her, but there wasn't a signal.

Fortunately, she had carried a jar of water, some celery sticks, and a few cough drops into the elevator.

At first she said to herself, *This can't happen!*

But then she decided to turn her elevator into a personal prayer retreat.

"It was either panic or pray," she later told an interviewer for CNN.

She started viewing the experience as a "gift."

"I believe that ***God's presence was my strength and my joy***—really," she said. "I ***felt God's presence*** almost immediately. I felt like he provided the

opportunity for a closer relationship." Jenny Wilson, "Nun Stuck in Elevator Survives Four Nights on Celery Sticks, Water and Cough Drops," Time.com (4-28-11)

What if that's it—God's presence with us,
the Lord being near,
 Our sensing that presence through ***prayer and praise***—
 what if that's how we ***get to the joy and peace?***

Paul continues his powerful letter in verse 7,
 And it's perhaps the key to understanding the whole passage.

When I wonder how on earth we are supposed to rejoice, and not worry,
 I remember that God is the only one who can help us do that
 Right in the trials of life.
 I often think about these words.
 I believe it's one of the most ***beautiful promises*** in all of the Bible:

7 And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

What do you think of when you hear those words?
 I know I have ***prayed them for so many of you*** over the years.

I noticed something ***different*** when I was studying this verse this week.
 It doesn't say 'have peace'
 It doesn't say 'get peace because you know Christ Jesus'.
 It says that the ***peace of God will guard your hearts and minds*** in Christ Jesus!

Do you know what the word for ***guard*** means in Greek? It's ***phrueo***.
 It means: *to guard, protect by a military guard, either to prevent hostile invasion, or to keep the inhabitants of a besieged city from flight*
It means to protect by guarding, by watching and guarding.

Now let's think about that for a minute.

What is Paul saying?

He's saying that the peace of God ***is like a guard, a sentry, a military guard*** who is there to ***prevent an invasion*** into our hearts and minds!

That speaks to me,
because sometimes doesn't it feel like our hearts and minds are being
invaded—by all the **negative** images and messages we see and hear every
day?

Or even by our **own negative thoughts and anxiety**?

The **peace** of God is there to **prevent an invasion of all that junk**
into our heart and minds!

It's there to protect us from all that!

I love that.

The peace of God is **also like a guard that keeps the inhabitants
of a besieged city, from flight.**

In other words, God's peace keeps us

from running away when we feel attacked!

The peace **prevents our feelings and thoughts from running away with us!**

A few weeks ago I mentioned how **every word** of Paul's letters is important
because he knew he needed to be **direct and succinct** to speak to these
churches.

Philippians is no different.

He didn't choose that word **guard** for no reason!

He also knew that he was speaking to the church in Philippi—
an **imperial Roman colony!**

They would have known exactly what he meant by guard,
for they would see such guards all around them!

Isn't that amazing?

In **2 Corinthians 10:5**, Paul says something **very similar**:

*We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the
knowledge of God,*

and we take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ.

We **take captive every thought.**

What does it mean to take every thought captive?

What if it means that we **take our thoughts to Jesus?**

What if we let Him decide whether it's good, or bad?

What if it means that we **give our thoughts to Christ?**

I don't know about you, but I find that **reassuring**.
 When the negative thoughts of worry and fear come—
 I can **hand them over to Jesus**,
 and see **what He has to say** about them!

What if we did that?

Can you imagine what might happen?
 Would Jesus really *have us put ourselves down*?
 Would Jesus really have us *worry about every little thing* in our lives?
 Would Jesus have us *react every time* someone hurts our feelings, or makes us
 feel less than?

Streams in the Desert had this to say for October 7th:

What is a believer to do in times of darkness?..
.'when you are confused and don't know what to do, do nothing'...
the right thing is simply to trust God, for while we trust, He can work."

What if we **followed that advice**?

What if, when the worry and the fear and the anxiety comes, we **did nothing**?
Nothing but rest in the presence of God!

Did you know that science has even proven this **power of doing nothing**?
 Recent studies are showing that taking time for silence restores the nervous
 system, helps sustain energy, and conditions our minds to be more adaptive
 and responsive to the complex environments in which so many of us now live,
 work, and lead. Duke Medical School's Imke Kirste [recently found](#) that silence
 is associated with the development of new cells in the hippocampus, the key
 brain region associated with learning and memory. Physician Luciano
 Bernardi [found](#) that two-minutes of silence inserted between musical pieces
 proved more stabilizing to cardiovascular and respiratory systems than even
 the music categorized as "relaxing."

Justin Talbot-Zorn, ["The Busier You Are, the More You Need Quiet Time."](#) Harvard Business Review
 (3-17-17)

What if sometimes doing nothing means just resting?

The University of Michigan in Ann Arbor is just one of the colleges with a
'napping station'...in the school's undergraduate library, which is open 24/7.
 First-come, first-serve, with a 30-minute time limit on snoozing,

Sara Mednick, author of *Take a Nap! Change Your Life*, says napping boosts productivity. David Finch, Elk Grove, California; source: Olivia B. Waxman, "Colleges Provide Campus Snooze Rooms," Time (8-29-14)

All this brings us to the ***end of the passage***,
and I think it helps us understand the ***beginning*** as well.

8 Finally, beloved, ***whatever is true***, whatever is honorable, ..just, .. pure, .. pleasing, ...commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. **9** Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

At the beginning, after urging reconciliation in the church,
Paul says twice that we should
Rejoice! Rejoice in the Lord.
The ***second half*** of that exhortation is pretty important.
He doesn't say rejoice ***in your circumstances***, because those may stink!
It says rejoice ***in the Lord. And the Lord is always good!***
If we are ***focused on Jesus***, wouldn't that enable us to rejoice?

And here at the end of this passage,
Paul urges us to ***think about what is good and true***,
and honorable and praiseworthy!
How are we to do that in the face of adversity and pain?
We can do it because ***God is always near*** to us.
We can do it because ***our hearts and minds are guarded by the peace of Christ!***

Friends, ***this is the Good News*** of the Gospel:
Finding joy and peace in the midst of pain is ***possible***, when we know and follow Jesus Christ!
Joy and Peace have nothing to do with our circumstances,
It's about knowing ***who is right beside us***.
Joy and peace are ***not an escape*** from the pain of life,
they are a new perspective. ***God's perspective***.
Because God's peace guards us, we can ***rejoice!***
This is the promise of God!
May we all believe this good news! And all God's people said, Amen!