

Philippians: Prayer, Perspective and Peace

Philippians 4:4-9

Psalm 23

As we continue our series in Philippians, we come to a delightful and beloved passage. It's one of those Bible passages that feels like a warm bath. It brings a sigh of relief, and there is a calmness and assurance in this passage that is refreshing, much like Psalm 23. At the same time I want to say to the apostle Paul, "This is easier said than done." And I suspect he would agree with that statement, as we will see.

When we read through the entire letter to Philippians in one sitting this section is like the exclamation point at the end of a long, full, affirming and edifying sentence about God being at work—what God is doing and has done in Jesus Christ, and will continue to do—and how we respond in our lives, and in our life together. And now all of this is brought together in a wonderful reminder about prayer, and putting all things into large perspective.

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, 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.

This is the Word of the Lord!

In high school and college I had a fun summer job at a local swimming pool teaching swimming lessons to kids. If there's one thing I learned, it's that instruction *about* swimming is boring—especially for the kids. Getting into the pool and learning and practicing swimming is fun. Especially when a child gets over their fear of water.

My experience in preaching and teaching on prayer is somewhat the same. *Talking* about prayer isn't as interesting as practicing it, and learning by doing. We learn to pray by praying. However, for a few minutes we're going to talk about it, and if there was ever a passage from the Bible that's wonderful to use as our guide, this is it.

There are 4 main admonitions in here, on how to “be,” prayerfully, which combine to give us one *big* encouragement about perspective on ourselves and our world. These 4 admonitions about what, or how, to be are:

1. Be... joyful. Rejoice in the Lord always. Choose joy, and let your joy be found in who God is and what God does. Be joyful... *in the Lord*. Not in

circumstances or in things, but in who God is and what God does (blesses and loves and redeems). Be joyful, and return to joy again and again.

2. Be... cool. “Let your gentleness be known to everyone; the Lord is near” is what he says— be cool, be calm, be gently confident (or confidently gentle) because you know the Lord is with you. It’s instructive that he doesn’t say, “Let your righteous indignation be known to all; the Lord is coming to judge.” He doesn’t say, “Let your strong opinions be known to all, because the Lord is with you to straighten everybody out.” The wisdom here is: what the world needs is confidently calm, or calmly confident, Jesus people. Gentle and considerate. Be cool. Let your gentleness be evident to all.

3. Be... prayerful (and grateful). Let prayer and gratitude replace worry.

4. Be... mindful. Meditate on beauty and truth. Feed your mind nutritious mental health food.

Be joyful, be cool, be prayerful, be mindful. And then, as a result, God’s hidden and mysterious peace will guard your heart and mind. That all sounds wonderful. And... easier said than done sometimes! However, these admonitions

provide some practical ways we can keep a big picture; and not just survive, but thrive in the midst of change and challenge and anxiety.

Brief aside: Paul talks about anxiety in this passage. Anyone feel anxiety about anything these days? Is that a dumb question? I just want to acknowledge it, and recognize that we live in anxious times. That could be said of many times in history, or perhaps of times in our personal life. But our time, our country, is fraught right now. And it helps to read Scriptures like this and know that people were anxious back then, and the world was fraught then too. As I mentioned in the introduction to this series, there were things going on in and around the Philippian church and in the world that were causing concern or confusion, or even conflict, which led the apostle Paul to pen these words. And if there is a measure of comfort we can take, it's that we are in the company of those who throughout history have lived through difficult and anxious times.

And in the midst of difficulty and change, anxiety and uncertainty, Paul says, first, "Rejoice in the Lord always." That phrase alone reminded me of something I saw when visiting a church for a meeting many years ago... ("Joy is an act of resistance" banner) It's saying, we refuse to let what is going on around me

dictate how we feel or act. I choose to resist despair and fear. I choose joy. As an act of resistance. Very cool. (slide off)

It strikes me that in this passage Paul uses all of the prayer and praise language that's available to him: rejoice, prayer, petition, request, thanksgiving, meditate. He offers most of the Bible's prayer and praise language and gathers them here into one power packed encouragement, to remind us that God is bigger than everything, and God is more powerful than anything that could possibly do us wrong, or do the world wrong. This is a nice, big, perspective.

And by encouraging us to gain a larger perspective, what Paul is also telling us is that fear, worry and anxiety are potentially powerful forces. So much so, that the Bible talks about this just about as much as anything else, topically. Remember, Jesus' most oft-repeated phrase is: Fear not! Be not afraid. That tells us something about how this is a real human experience for many, and apparently has been for humanity from the very beginning.

And so Paul, along with Jesus, gives us some encouragement and some tools to practice a prayerful approach to life.

And like swimming, this does take practice. Because worry and fear don't always go away that quickly and easily. Paul is talking about an ongoing practice

of joy and prayer and gratitude and meditation that takes time. It's a journey, and *over time* this practice will shape and cultivate our hearts and minds to become more reflexively prayerful and peaceful. This isn't a quick-fix solution he's offering, but a journey toward a place where we gain larger perspective as we go. This is Pilgrim's *Progress*, not Pilgrim's *Prescription* for a quick fix, which is what our culture tends to want, and offer to us.

And so, I have come to believe that there is no such thing as a "non-anxious presence." Have you heard that phrase? It gets used a lot, especially in leadership workshops and training. We're supposed to have a non-anxious presence. Well, good luck with that. I don't believe there is such a thing, unless a person is genuinely wired that way (and there are people like that). I think it's better to talk about having a *less* anxious presence, cultivated over time. The goal is to become less anxious, over time.

Now, sometimes we pray and make our gratitude list and rejoice and we experience God's peace and perspective in the moment. And other times we are invited to keep coming back. Because there is more praying and waiting and trusting to do. I'll come back to this in a moment. This is such an important part

of our life of prayer with the Lord—of persistence and patience and acknowledging that it's a journey.

Another thing that might be helpful to know is that the apostle Paul, though giving us wonderful admonitions and advice in pointing us to the God of peace, also struggled with this—he is one of us on the journey. For example, when we read his letters to the Corinthians, he is often anything but worry-free. In 2Cor.11, he's telling them about his life and his hardships and everything that has happened to him in his work, and in verse 28 he says, "And besides all of this, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for the churches."

So, he who says, "Be anxious for nothing..." also experienced daily anxiety. Which I actually find comforting. He's a real human being like everyone else, and, in his letter to the Corinthians he also said, "When I am weak, I am strong; God's power is made perfect in our weakness." So, somehow even worry and fear can glorify God in the process of our giving things over to him in prayer, over time. And that's what I believe Paul is teaching us in Philippians. He's farther along in the journey now, and wiser; he's learned to turn things over and let God be God in the midst of daily struggles.

When we can practice replacing fear and worry with rejoicing and prayer, gratitude and meditation on beautiful things, large and important things stay large and important, and small things stay small. We keep perspective. Most of all, God remains as large and powerful as God really is.

And we do all of this through prayer. Pray about everything and in every way, Paul says. That means there is nothing too small, or too big, nothing too insignificant, or too far reaching to pray about, and leave in God's hands.

And as we pray, we need to be clear about our expectations and understand what's promised to us. Notice in our passage that we are not promised that we get what we ask for necessarily. What we get is peace. He doesn't say "Pray, and God will present you with the answers to your requests just as you want them." He says, "turn everything over to the God who is near, with gratitude, and God will post a sentry at the gate of your heart & mind to protect you with his peace that passes understanding." The word "guard" is the same word used for a Roman soldier guarding an outpost, or guarding the door of a building, or the gate of a city. This would've been a familiar image to his hearers. I like to think of it as like the good shepherd, whose job, in part, is to

guard and protect the sheep from predators. This peace of God is like the good shepherd, who guards and protects his sheep.

So, we rejoice and pray and give thanks.... and what we get is peace. We leave the timing and the substance of God's answer to our prayers in his hands— God will answer, and we can be assured of that from the many places in Scripture where we are told God hears and answers. But in the present moment when we are praying, and unburdening ourselves with God, he is more concerned about the state of our heart and mind. He wants us to experience his rest, his peace— green pastures, still waters, restoration of soul.

And again, if we don't experience his peace right away, this can mean we are being invited to continue praying, or return to prayer and rejoicing, as I mentioned a moment ago.

Because if we don't *feel* peace right away, that doesn't mean that God isn't guarding our heart with his peace. It means that the feeling of it isn't part of our awareness, at that moment. God *is* present to us; that's a fact. Whether or not we *feel* God's presence or peace affects nothing, objectively.

So, again, if we aren't experiencing God's peace in the moment, in addition to a return to prayer, it's also a call to trust that God is doing something beyond

our senses, or beneath our senses. Just because we don't feel it, doesn't mean God isn't at work. It just means it's hidden from sensation for a time, and the experience of it will come, in time. God is at work beneath the surface of our awareness. And we are asked to trust that.

Because, it's a peace *that surpasses all understanding*, which means... we won't always understand it, or feel it! And maybe we're not supposed to. Because God wants us to trust the inner work that's being done.

Henri Nouwen, Jesuit priest who wrote many books on prayer, says this: "My daily time with God is not a time of deep prayer in which I contemplate the divine mysteries or feel a special closeness to God. On the contrary, it is full of distractions, inner restlessness, confusion, and boredom. It seldom, if ever, pleases my senses. Even though I do not feel God's love the way I feel a human embrace, even though I do not hear a voice as I hear human words of consolation, even though I do not see a smile like I see a human face, still the Lord speaks to me, looks at me, and embraces me there. The way I become aware of God's presence is in the remarkable desire to return to that quiet place without any real satisfaction. And I notice, maybe only retrospectively, that my days and weeks are different when they are held together by these regular and seemingly

“useless” times. God is greater than my senses, greater than my thoughts, greater than my heart. I do believe that God touches me in places that are hidden even to myself. And I do believe that when I pray, I am in touch with the divine presence, which guards my heart and mind.”

Paul says that our hearts and minds are guarded by the peace *that surpasses all understanding*. We need to trust that the good shepherd is indeed guarding our heart and mind, even when we aren't aware of it, or understand it—in the same way that sheep grazing in a pasture may not see the shepherd all the time; it doesn't mean the shepherd isn't nearby, present, and guarding the flock. Good shepherds are very aware persons. And so the sheep learn to trust the shepherd. And we are invited to trust our Good Shepherd.

Because, in the bigger picture of things, God is putting everything together, making everything fit, making our lives whole and well.

A great song for us as we come to the Lord's table today: My Shepherd Will Supply My Need