

Christian Peace in the Age of Anxiety

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[0 : 0 0] Philippians chapter 4, and we're going to read that short section from verse 4 to verse 7, thinking together about Christian peace for anxious times.

Philippians chapter 4 and at verse 4. Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again. Rejoice.

Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

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

Now, I came across a comment that stuck with me this week as I was thinking about this passage.

[1 : 1 0] It was a Bible scholar by the name of Gordon Fee, who was making the point or suggesting that we as the church, as the people of God, will serve society well, and we will be most effective in our mission when we live out this good news of true peace and wholeness and fullness of life that Paul is talking about here.

And as we point others to Jesus as the true source of that peace. Now, I don't know what you think about that suggestion, but I'm sure you recognize with me that peace is a quality that's in high demand.

There are many people around us who have various troubles, concerns, anxieties, whether we're thinking about our own personal lives or whether we're thinking globally, we see the need for peace.

But at the same time, it can seem for so many so hard to come by. And in that context, the Christian testimony to a life marked by a deep peace and a solid joy, indeed, a church's testimony to life and joy and peace found in Christ Jesus may well prove to be our most compelling argument to the world as to why they need to consider Jesus the Savior.

As we listen to Paul this morning, Paul the preacher, who also at this point in his life is Paul the prisoner, what we're going to see in that short section towards the end of his letter is that there are two practices concerned with peace and anxiety that we are to cultivate and there are two promises to cling to.

[3 : 1 6] Now, as we gather together, I don't know everybody here, there's lots of visitors, obviously, but I know that many of us, we have anxieties and concerns for ourselves and for our families.

There are lots of people who are moving on and people are not always sure what they're moving on to. This word, I guess, is one that we all need to hear, one that we all need to hear regularly.

And so my hope is that all of us, whoever we are, however we've come here, wherever we've come from, that we will feel compelled to trust in this same Jesus, to know peace in anxious times in the same way as Paul came to experience joy and peace through knowing Christ Jesus as Lord.

So we're going to think, first of all, about these two practices that we are to cultivate, the first of which we find in verse 4, Paul commands us to be joyful.

And that's very striking, perhaps. It might be confusing to us, especially if we think of joy in connection with simply our emotions or joy as a response to the circumstances of our life, then it can seem almost far-fetched to be told to have joy always.

[4 : 51] If you have lost your job, or if you have family members who are ill, or you have anxieties of various kinds, it can be hard to imagine where joy might come from.

But here's where the Bible helps us. Because the Bible is careful to connect our thoughts with our feelings. That right thinking leads to right feeling.

That thinking the right thoughts about God and His Son, Jesus Christ, can produce and will produce joy in us. When our joy is rooted in knowing Jesus, when our joy is focused on that relationship that is available in Him, when it's rooted in facts about Him, then we can have solid joy, even if our circumstances are chaotic and all over the place.

Paul is a great example of this in this particular letter. So we read Philippians chapter 1. What do we learn about Paul in that chapter?

Verses 7, verse 13, it's clear that he's a prisoner of the Romans. In verses 15 and 17, it's clear that there are some people who are in the church who are trying to make Paul's life more difficult for him in prison, even as they're preaching about Jesus.

[6 : 25] And in verse 20, we see that he is facing the very real prospect of death. So here surely is somebody who has just cause for a loss of joy.

But what do we find? Chapter 1 again, we see him expressing joy for the partnership in the gospel that he has with this church in Philippi. Joy in God's saving work, that if he begins a good work, he will carry it on to completion.

That gives Paul joy. He has joy in verse 18, in the fact that the gospel is spreading. He doesn't care whether it's false motives or true. Jesus is being preached.

People are being saved, and that gives him joy. In chapter 2, we didn't read this, but he has joy in the faithful witness of the Philippians as children of God, as they shine like stars in the darkness, as they hold out the word of life.

He can face death with joy because of the testimony that he sees to their transformed lives in the Lord Jesus Christ. Chapter 3, verse 1, it's on our page as he turns to, finally, what's the note that he wants to strike?

[7 : 40] Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord. This is a letter marked by Christian joy.

Helpful definition from John Piper. Christian joy is a good feeling in the soul produced by the Holy Spirit as he causes us to see the beauty of Christ in the words and in the world.

So this Christian joy isn't superficial. It's experienced in our core of who we are, in our souls, and it's prompted by God's Spirit, not by circumstance.

And it's based on seeing the goodness and the beauty of Jesus. Where? In the word of God, in the word of the gospel, in the word of salvation.

There is joy in that message, and there's also joy from Jesus in God's world, among God's people, the joy of fellowship, the joy of enjoying all of his good gifts, the joy of a wedding, like Roland and Evie's wedding yesterday, good gift from God and a source of Christian joy.

[8 : 57] And so we discover that the more that we see the beauty of Jesus as individuals and as a church, the more that we celebrate and cultivate a joy and thanksgiving, the more attractive our lives and our message will be.

There will be a compelling force to them. We see clearly that Paul has come to understand that life in Christ Jesus is a life of joy.

That for Paul, as a believer, Jesus is everything to him. Jesus is his Lord, his creator, his sustainer. Jesus is the one who has saved him at great cost, giving his own life to pay for sin, to redeem him and give him new life.

Jesus is his way of life, the one who he seeks to follow and imitate. Jesus isn't just his present, but also his hope for his future.

So in the battle that goes on in our hearts and minds against anxiety, here is a practice to cultivate. The joy of knowing Jesus.

[10 : 14] Now that's not to say that we should all wear plastic smiles and pretend like life is going wonderfully when it's not. But it is saying to us that there is something solid and substantial in knowing Jesus that can sustain us even when life goes bad.

But we need to adopt this discipline of reminding ourselves of what we have in Jesus, of preaching the gospel to ourselves every day, to remind ourselves what Jesus has done for us and what Jesus continues to do for his own people.

What's Jesus doing for us now in the glory of heaven? He is praying for us. He is keeping us. He's sending his spirit to be with us. That is cause for joy.

And remember this is written to a church. It's saying, church, there should be this attitude of joy among us all. So we need to encourage one another sometimes to fight for joy when our experience would say there is much cause for anxiety, to remind one another of the hope that we have in the Lord Jesus.

I've been really struck recently reading a book by a man called J. Todd Billings. He's a theologian in the States, same age as me, father of two young children who was diagnosed with a terminal cancer.

[11 : 54] And he's written a book called Rejoicing with Lament, which is an incredibly helpful study on using the Psalms to process suffering and how we talk to God in suffering from that position of, I know that I'm in a covenant with God and he's made promises to me.

How do I deal with it when life seems to be opposite to my expectations? And here are some of his words, not written from the ivory tower of an academic, but written in a cancer ward.

And he says, For true hope in the face of death, we have nowhere else to go besides the word of God, which finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the Holy One of God.

In praise and in lament, in life and in death, we hope in this Holy One of God, because truly we have nowhere else to go.

What's he saying? What's Paul saying? What's the Bible saying? It's saying that to value Jesus Christ above all else, to long for nothing more than his smile and to be in his presence, is where we can find peace in anxious times.

[13 : 20] So that's the first practice that Paul calls us to cultivate. The second we find in verse six, and that's to pray with thanksgiving.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

Pray and pray with thanksgiving. Why pray with thankfulness? Well, it gives us a right perspective. It gives us that right perspective that fundamentally God is good.

And it's a sign of us being willing to submit to his good rule. But why pray at all when we feel anxious?

The words of David Paulus and a Christian counselor are perhaps helpful for us. When he says, praying is worrying Godward instead of letting worries stay in the pit of your consciousness.

[14 : 27] Those worries that can keep us awake at night, those worries that cause that upset in the pit of our stomachs, are worries that we can take to Almighty God, our Father in heaven.

So prayer is deliberately inviting God in. In all the details, in all the circumstances, choosing to pray instead of choosing to fret and worry and stress out and feel like we have nowhere else to go.

So we're trying to deal with it all by ourselves. And we're trying to deal with it all Alec Mateer, another biblical scholar, points out that part of stilling our anxious hearts comes from remembering who we are praying to.

We're in conversation, and we're not just in conversation with any old person. It's not just somebody who might give us good advice. It's not even simply a counselor.

We are placing our trust in the all-wise, all-powerful, all-loving God who has, the Bible says, appointed the circumstances in our lives.

[15 : 47] All of them. So we take those circumstances and we invite God in. We take those circumstances to Him and we pray over them remembering who He is.

If you want an example of this in the Bible, King Hezekiah, Isaiah chapters 36 and 37, is a great example of what we should do in terms of prayer when we're surrounded by trouble.

So Hezekiah in Jerusalem hears message of foreign attackers who are coming against Israel and coming against the city. And the enemy king's ambassadors, they come and they've got a message.

They've got letters promising in such and such a time, we're going to come, your city's going to be absolutely destroyed. You've got no hope. We've done this to all the other nations. We will destroy you too.

It's over, Hezekiah. What does Hezekiah do when he gets those letters? Isaiah 37. He goes straight to the temple and he spreads the letters out before God, asking God to intervene and reminding himself of who God is.

[17 : 08] His is the example that we are to follow. We are to spread our needs before God, spread our worries and troubles before Him and how we feel about them.

We take our anxieties before God. We don't need to pretend. God knows our hearts. He knows our thoughts. So we can be honest and we can invite Him in and we should invite Him in, remembering that God is with and for His people always.

Again, words from J. Todd Billings who came to value the language of the Psalms of lament for processing his new reality facing terminal cancer.

He understood that the psalmists live in the genuine, biblical, mysterious paradox of serving a good, almighty God who holds the world in His hands even when the world seems to be spiraling out of control.

What should we do when we find ourselves in those circumstances? We should pray to our almighty God who is our Father in heaven.

[18 : 31] We should cast our cares upon Him because He cares for us. Pray the Psalms. Remember who is for us.

So those are the two practices that we are to cultivate to find peace in anxious times. There are also two promises God's people are invited to cling to.

The first is in verse 5 where He says, Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

He's saying to them, I know you're facing opposition. Face opposition like Jesus. Treat your enemies with gentleness and remember the Lord is near. He's writing to assure the Philippians, Your future is secure.

Yes, you're facing opposition now but your hope, your future is secure because your faith is in Christ Jesus, the Lord who is near. The one who said to His followers, I am with you always to the end of the age.

[19 : 44] The one who says to His people, I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you. The one who says, I will come back and take you to be with me.

The one who says, I am coming soon. The Lord is near. And because that is true, we can entrust our lives to His care.

He's not a distant stranger. He is the friend that sticks closer than any brother. He is an invitation not to deal with our anxieties on our own.

Here is cause for rejoicing with hope because the Lord is near. For praying when we feel anxious because we've not been abandoned, but rather, the Lord is near.

that God in Jesus has drawn near to us. He's experienced life with all of its joys and sorrows. He's come near to us in our need.

[20 : 50] He's taken our sin on His shoulders. He's suffered and died to end our separation. He comes near to us, living in us by His Spirit so we are never alone.

Rejoicing reminds us of this great promise. The Lord is near. Praying catches hold of this great promise. The Lord is near. You and I, we will all find times when the one thing we want is to have somebody in our corner.

Somebody who is there with us and for us, holding our hand, walking with us. Here is this wonderful promise in the Bible that for those who have faith in the Lord Jesus, we have Jesus with us in our corner, promising to be near.

And there's another promise in verse 7. The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

The peace of God to guard our hearts and our minds. Here is truly a priceless gift. Here is something we all want. Peace.

[22 : 13] True peace. Lasting peace. So to help the Philippians to understand what they have in Jesus, Paul gives them a picture.

Philippi was part of the Roman Empire. But it wasn't a typical city. It was an outpost city. So it was a part of Rome, but it was surrounded by enemies.

And because of that, Rome needed to work hard to protect the citizens of Philippi. So you had a wall and you had soldiers that would guard the city walls and the city gates to protect the citizens.

And Paul uses this picture. For us, we're very fortunate where we are. We're in Edinburgh. Some of you have maybe been to visit the castle or will visit later on.

Let me invite you to think. Put yourselves in Edinburgh Castle for a moment during a siege. So imagine you're looking out over the wall and you can see enemies coming on every side.

[23 : 20] What do you have when you're in Edinburgh Castle? You've got the solid rock, the castle rock, and you've got those heavy stone walls that you're behind. You'll have those heavy iron gates that have been drawn up.

You'll have all of those cannons primed and aiming down at the enemies at all points. You'll have the soldiers standing guard on the wall.

And Paul is saying, this is what God does for his people. When anxious thoughts come to lay siege on our hearts and our minds, the God of peace sends his peace to be our guard.

God himself is present to help us, to guard us, to give peace to us in the battle for our heart and for our mind.

And he brings a peace that we're told transcends all understanding. It goes beyond any peace we could ever produce for ourselves or imagine for ourselves.

[24 : 32] That it is possible facing opposition, facing death, to have peace, Paul is saying, because of the Lord Jesus who is near and with us.

So often, how Christians hope with suffering, how Christians cope with trouble and adversity makes a huge impression on friends and family and colleagues.

This is a peace that transcends understanding. It's a precious gift from God and it can help us stand out and stand up for the Lord Jesus.

So, what is Christian hope for anxious and troubled people? It's that we have a loving and a powerful God who is present with us and for us always, no matter what our circumstances are.

there is hope in that we are invited to bring our anxieties and cares to this God who cares, who hears and who is near.

[25 : 48] And we have cause for joy in the middle of anxiety because God loves us, because Jesus has died for us and is now raised to life for our present and future hope and security.

so God and thee might very well be right that true peace through knowing Jesus is one of the great gifts held out to us in the Bible and it's one of the great gifts that we hold out to a world that is seeking peace in anxious times.

Do you know this peace? Then rejoice. And if you don't then let me invite you to come to Jesus to talk to him to pray to him to tell him about your needs and your worries because he already knows.

To confess your guilt to confess your rebellion to trust him as Lord and Savior to come to him that you too might know this peace that transcends all understanding.

Let me pray. Let me pray.