

Four Keys to a Gracious Life

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[0 : 0 0] Heavenly Father, as we look into your word together now, we pray that you would speak to us through it, challenge us, to encourage us, and to bless us, and to make us a blessing to one another. Amen.

Traditionally, the different Sundays in Advent celebrate a different theme each week. Hope, peace, joy, and love is one of the sets of themes that there is.

Not always it has to be said in the same order. It varies quite widely. And one of the readings for today is this passage from Philippians chapter 4, particularly verses 4 to 7.

It's one of the Advent readings, and in a sense you could say that it covers all four. Hope, peace, joy, and love. Because it's all about the difference that Jesus brings with him as he enters our world along with all its complications.

Jesus addresses them all. Overall, the letter to the Philippians is deeply joyful. It's hopeful, and it's affectionate.

[1 : 1 5] There seems to be such a bond between Paul and the church in Philippi. They seem to have really clicked and got on well together, and from what else Paul says in the letter, they were very supportive of him in his travels.

But what shines out very clearly here is that Paul wasn't writing to a church in a sort of bubble, sort of detached from reality.

That Paul was in some sort of bubble of his own, and the church was in a bubble of their own, as if the cares and the problems of the world didn't affect them. What shines out clearly is the difference that Jesus brings into a very troubled world, and all the difficulties we face in it.

As John would say, as he began his Gospel, the light shines in the darkness. And that remains that, in this age at least, the darkness remains very real.

And we can see that in Paul's circumstances. He is in chains. As he introduces himself in the letter, he is in chains, he is in prison, he is locked up, he is guarded, and he is facing possible execution.

[2 : 3 3] He didn't know at the time that it wouldn't happen yet, that he would be liberated and free to continue his ministry, but at that time, he was locked up. As he's writing to the Philippians, we get mention there of two women who had been very supportive of Paul's ministry, but they weren't getting on with each other, Euodia and Syntyche.

And Paul pleads with them to agree together in the Lord. They're squabbling. The breaking in of the light of Jesus, and of his death and his resurrection, make a difference to the real world as it is.

And this chapter in Philippians, the closing chapter, combines the good news of the Gospel of grace with practical advice on how we are intended to respond to it.

We believe, we come to know the Lord, what difference is that going to make in our lives? And in these, and I'm just really concentrating on the middle paragraph, there's three paragraphs in the reading that Willie brought us, and it tells us to be joyful, to be gentle, to be prayerful, and to be converted, to be changed, to be transformed.

So very briefly, what do we find here? First of all, be joyful. Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again.

[4 : 05] Rejoice. And that can sound very strange, coming as it does from someone who is, A, locked up, B, in chains, C, facing execution.

Joy isn't the thing that you most immediately associate with those circumstances. Circumstances can indeed be dark, even evil.

The joy comes from seeing that Jesus isn't defeated by it. Paul is able, because of his relationship with the Lord Jesus, to rise above his circumstances.

So Paul says it again. He doesn't just say rejoice. He says rejoice in the Lord always. I'll say it again. Rejoice. He really, really does mean it.

The rejoicing comes because of his relationship with the Lord. There's a song, For the Joys and For the Troubles, that we're not going, in fact we are going to sing it later, for the joys and for the sorrows.

[5 : 14] And it says in the chorus, For this I have Jesus. In the place of the darkest and the hardest and most complicated and most challenging, difficult times, we have Jesus to help us through.

It's not escapism, but it is hope and comfort and strength. And so Paul says, Rejoice in the Lord always.

And if he can rejoice under his circumstances, he must mean it. The next thing he says, Let your gentleness be evident to all.

The Lord is near. Be gentle. Now, if you're a scholar here, it's actually not the same word for gentleness as we find listed in the fruit of the Spirit.

It's a different type of gentleness that Paul's on about here. It's more a sort of sense of moderation. And sometimes, one of the things we struggle with is pride.

[6 : 19] When we are offended, when we are upset, when we are affronted, so often we don't want to lose space and we push back, we dig in. We don't want to be seen, to be downtrodden.

We find so often that the sinful nature feeds on guilt and punishment. When something goes wrong, we instinctively look for someone or something, preferably someone else or something else, rather than ourselves, to blame.

Something has gone wrong. Someone, not me, should be punished for it. And isn't that why bad news sells in the newspapers, in the media?

Something's gone wrong. We can feed on that and we can look for a sense of vengeance. Who's going to be punished for this? And Paul is addressing that and saying, have nothing to do with that.

Instead, be gentle. Be moderate. If Euodia and Syntyche took this to heart, and Paul must have had them in mind as he wrote these words, because he's just mentioned them, if they took it to heart, they wouldn't be at odds with each other, and they wouldn't be digging in, and they wouldn't be insisting on their own way.

[7 : 39] Whatever was the cause of the spat between them would matter less to them than the relationship that they should have as sisters in the Lord. Be gentle, Paul says, and let your gentleness be evident to all.

this is a light that we shouldn't cover up. Be seen to be gentle. Be seen to be moderate. There's a pride element in this as well.

Pride is usually self-reliance. That's another aspect of pride. I've got a problem here. I've got to sort it out myself. I have got to come out on top.

I'm going to win this. I'll fix it. And we tend, don't we, to be so self-reliant. And perhaps we don't instinctively pray.

And I'm preaching at myself here. Because I like how many times have I faced a problem and I've wrestled with it and I've struggled with it and I've thought about it and all sorts.

[8 : 44] And the very, very last thing I do is then think, hang on, why don't I pray about it? Taking things for the Lord seems to be the last thing that I do.

So many times I think, why didn't I pray about that first? Why don't I instinctively turn to the Lord and pray about things when they go wrong?

Rather than it being the last thing when all else fails and I think, oh, I should have prayed about this long before now. Now, isn't that pride?

Paul says, let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. And perhaps the antidote to that pride that keeps us from being gentle and keeps us being self-reliant is a lack of awareness that the Lord is near.

The Lord is here with us today. The Lord is with you when you go home. If you are in Christ, the Lord is as near as anything or anybody possibly can be.

[9 : 51] He is part of us. He is within us by his Spirit. We cannot overemphasise how near the Lord is. And a third thing about pride here that the gentleness is an antidote to is that pride so often, deep down, conceals an underlying unhappiness.

Because if I find my joy and my dignity and my hope and my love and everything else that I need in life in Jesus, I don't need pride.

Because the things that pride stand up for, I no longer need if I have Jesus. If I find my joy and dignity in Jesus, that unhappiness goes away.

Be gentle. The third thing Paul says is be prayerful. Don't be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your requests to God.

And, Paul continues, and the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Jesus. Jesus. It's been described as the great exchange.

[11 : 18] There's different words perhaps that the great exchange will do. It's pure gospel. The essence of the gospel is that Jesus died on the cross and took our sin from us and gives us in return his righteousness.

There's a great exchange going on. There's a trading being done. We give something to Jesus. He gives something to us. Jesus takes something from us.

We can draw on him. What Jesus has and what we have swap over. That's the essence of the great exchange. Jesus takes our sin.

He gives us his righteousness. We lose our sin. We gain his righteousness. Jesus dies our death and he gives us his life.

We lose the death that we should be dying and we gain the life that we don't deserve but can look forward to living. That is the essence of being a Christian.

[12 : 24] When I die physically I will go to be with the Lord. Life is not end in the grave.

Because of that great exchange Jesus takes my death and gives me his life. And in Philippians 4 there's a variance of that here.

That Jesus takes our sorrows and gives us his peace. There's an element of Isaiah 53 here. that he has borne our sorrows and he gives us his peace.

That grand old hymn what a friend we have in Jesus makes the same point. Are we weak and heavy lame? Take it to the Lord in prayer.

I mentioned earlier in the service some teenage memories of how I became a Christian and how that completely transformed my understanding of Christmas.

[13 : 32] I remember back in those days other memories of Christian music. Some of you might. Let's go on a nostalgia trip here. Second chapter of Acts nutshell Larry Norman any of you remember them?

gospel singers back in the 70s and Parchment. Parchment played a song which actually one they covered they didn't write it called Pack Up the Sorrows.

It covered a protest song but it's so close to this idea of the great exchange it could have been written as a commentary on Philippians 4.

You could lose them pack up your sorrows you could lose them I know how to use them give them all to me. I'm going to suggest that we just pause for a moment and we're going to listen to that song it's quite brief they wrote short songs in those days but reflect on that picture acknowledge that Jesus has died for us and offers us so much and wants to take so much from us this great exchange idea and the sorrows and the worries and the concerns we have think of those and Jesus' offer to take them from us he has borne our burdens and the things surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows yet we considered him stricken by God smitten by him and afflicted but he was pierced for our transgressions he was crushed for our iniquities the punishment that brought us peace was upon him and by his wounds we are healed we all like sheep have gone astray each of us has turned to his own way and the

Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all Lord we thank you for that great exchange of what you've taken from us carried for us and offered to us there's one more exchange here in Philippians 4 verses 8 to 9 of being converted of changed to the right things Paul concludes here finally brothers whatever is true whatever is noble whatever is right whatever is pure whatever is lovely whatever is admirable if anything is excellent or praiseworthy think about such things as we are forgiven we are enabled to forgive and that exchange we remind ourselves of every time we say the Lord's prayer forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors forgive us we forgive the old life simply won't do in the new life we take off the old life like a manky old suit of clothes and put on the roads of righteousness that

[17 : 00] Jesus has for us in Charles Dickens is Oliver Twist when Oliver is rescued from Fagin's gang he is rescued and taken in by kindly Mr.

Brownlow and part of the care that Oliver Twist receives is new clothes I'm going to read a few lines from Oliver Twist they were happy days those of Oliver's recovery everything was so quiet so neat and orderly everybody so kind and gentle that after the noise and turbulence in the midst of which he had always lived it seemed like heaven itself he was no sooner strong enough to put his clothes on properly than Mr.

Brownlow caused the complete new suit and a new cap and a new pair of shoes to be provided for him as Oliver was told that he might do what he liked with the old clothes he gave them to a servant who had been very kind to him and asked her to sell them they were sad rags to tell the truth and Oliver had never had a new suit before ditch the old rags get rid of them they are rags and the Lord and the Lord God wants us to come to him empty handed so that we can receive new ones new clothes from him here in Philippians 4 we're called to ditch the old ways to make room for the things that Paul lists whatever is true whatever is noble whatever is right and so forth Paul is looking forwards these

Christlike qualities make life far better for us and everybody around us and they get us used to the idea that the God of peace really is with us and as we look forward to Christmas again this year isn't the incarnation Emmanuel God with us at the heart of what we prepare to celebrate because then Christmas has its true meaning that gives everything else that we understandably do look forward to purpose and point and meaning Jesus at the centre