

October 12, 2014 – Philippians 4:4-13 (OT: Isaiah 25:6-9 Gospel: Matthew 22:1-14)

Rejoice and do not be anxious, the Lord is at hand!

Popular songs tell us: “don’t worry, be happy.” Motivational speakers encourage us to “change our thinking” and meditate on positive affirmations to overcome our fears and anxieties.

It may seem that our sermon text tells us the same things. We are told to “*rejoice...always*”, “*be anxious for nothing*” and to meditate on things that are “*true...noble...just...pure...[and] lovely*.”

There is one big difference, however. That difference is reason we can do these things. Popular songs often don’t even give a reason that we should be happy and not worry; motivational speakers usually base their encouragement on a person’s innate strength, ability or worth. But the reason we are told to rejoice and not worry is far greater! That reason is the Lord.

You see the Lord in almost every verse of our reading: Verse 4: “*Rejoice in the Lord always*.” Verse 5: “*The Lord is at hand*.” Verse 6: “*let your requests be made known to God*.” Verse 7: “*the peace of God...will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus*.” Verse 9: “*the God of peace will be with you*.” In verse 10 Paul says that he “*rejoiced in the Lord*.” And in verse 13 he says he “*can do all things through Christ*.”

What a difference the Lord makes! He changes these words from an empty encouragement to words built on a solid foundation that enable us to rejoice and not be anxious.

Verse 5 tells us: “*The Lord is at hand*.” This short sentence (only 3 words in the original Greek) provides the key to the rest of these verses. It tells us that the Lord is near – He will return soon to judge the living and the dead.

Without Christ, this would not be a reason to rejoice. By nature, we are children of God’s wrath and can only expect to be thrown “*into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth*” (Matthew 22:13) like the guest “*who wasn’t wearing the proper clothes*”, in Jesus’ parable from our Gospel reading.

But the Lord Jesus came into the world to save the world. He took away the world’s sin by His death on the cross. You can look forward to His coming again, because He has taken away your sin. We eagerly await the “*feast of choice pieces*” described in our Old Testament reading which Jesus likened to a wedding feast. The Lord God “*will swallow up death forever, and...will wipe away tears from all faces*.” (Isaiah 25:6-9). That is a reason to rejoice!

The Lord Jesus lived a perfect life, something none of us have done. He clothes us with His righteousness instead of our filthy rags, so that we will not be thrown out into outer darkness, but instead be welcomed at the wedding feast of the Lamb. This too, is a reason to rejoice, as Isaiah said, “*I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels*.” (Isaiah 61:10).

We can “*rejoice in the Lord always*” because the Lord is near. We have the confidence that something better waits for us at His return or when He calls us from this earth if His return does not happen in our lifetime.

But our reason to rejoice is not limited to a future hope. “*The Lord is at hand*” also tells us that the Lord is with us here and now. By the blood of Christ, shed on the cross to pay for your sins, we “*who once were far off have been brought near*” to the Lord (Ephesians 2:13). Jesus promised, “*I am with you always, even to the end of the age*” (Matthew 28:20). And v. 9 tells us,

“*the God of peace will be with you.*” This too, give us a reason to rejoice. The Lord is with us – Immanuel (see Matthew 1:23).

While we have all these reasons to rejoice, it can be difficult to do so when we face difficulties here on earth. If someone tries to encourage you, even with words from the Bible, you might be tempted to tell that person: “Easy for you say! You’re not going through what I’m going through!” When we hear the words in our sermon text, we might think the same thing: “That’s easy for Paul to say!”

But remember where Paul was when he wrote this! He was in Rome under house arrest facing trial and possibly death. And that was not the only problem that Paul had to face. In 2 Corinthians 11 he tells us some of the things he had experienced in his ministry: “*Three times I was beaten with rods; once I was stoned; three times I was shipwrecked; a night and a day I have been in the deep.*” (v. 25) He goes on to say that He has been “*in weariness and toil, in sleeplessness often, in hunger and thirst, in fastings often, in cold and nakedness*” (v. 27). He talks also about other things he has faced in that chapter, but you get the idea. How do these things compare to what you have experienced your life?

But it isn’t about who has it the worst. It is about the Lord and how He enables you to endure all things by His presence and that He has given you the reason to rejoice always because of what He has done for you in Christ.

In verses 11 and 12 Paul says “*I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content: I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound. Everywhere and in all things I have learned both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need.*” How did Paul learn to be content in every situation? It wasn’t because he had made it through these things, but the reason why he had made it through them: “*The Lord is at hand.*” Paul was able to endure all things “*through Christ*” who strengthened him.

The same is true for you. You can be content in every situation through Christ who is with you and strengthens you. He is your Immanuel.

The fact that “*the Lord is at hand*” leads us to verse 6: “*Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.*” The solution to anxiety is not pills or positive thinking (as much as they may help), but prayer! Through Christ we have access with boldness and confidence to God (Ephesians 2:18, 3:12). Because “*the Lord is at hand,*” we can come to Him in prayer whenever and wherever we are.

Instead of worrying, God wants you to bring your concerns to Him. He tells you to cast “*all your care upon Him, for He cares for you*” (1 Peter 5:7). He can handle anything and everything you bring to Him.

We are to pray “*in everything.*” Difficulties often lead us to pray, but when life is easy we sometimes “forget” God and fail to come to Him in prayer. Our loving Heavenly Father desires to hear from us at all times, even when things are going well.

When you do face problems, do you ever view prayer as a last resort: “Well, there isn’t else we can do now except pray...”? God doesn’t want us to come to Him after we have exhausted all other options, but to turn to Him first, and always.

Verse 6 also reminds us that it is important to come to God in every situation “*with thanksgiving.*” Someone once said, “A prayer without thanksgiving is like a bird without wings. It has

trouble rising upward.¹⁷ It isn't easy to be thankful when you are in the midst of some trial, but giving thanks to God can keep us from being self-centered in our prayers. It forces us to lift our eyes up from ourselves to look at all that God has done for us and has given us. He is at hand, and has saved us and given us an inheritance in heaven. We do have a lot for which to be thankful.

Verse 7 shows us why prayer is so important: it brings us the peace of God. The words of verse 7 are included in our traditional order of worship and are spoken after the sermon, and rightly so. Every sermon should contain the good news that we have peace with God and from God through Jesus Christ.

But the original context, as we see here, is prayer – making your requests known to God. Casting your cares upon Him brings you peace from God. In the words of hymn 457: “Oh, what peace we often forfeit, Oh, what needless pain we bear, All because we do not carry Everything to God in prayer!” (The Lutheran Hymnal)

This peace from God is a peace “*which surpasses all understanding.*” It isn't based on your earthly situation. A storm may be raging in your life so that there is no earthly reason for you to be at peace, but “*the Lord is at hand*” so that you can have His peace. The gentleness you exhibit, even in difficult times, will make no sense to the human mind – it is beyond all understanding.

These words also mean that the peace of God is “superior to every mind.” God's peace is better at protecting our hearts and thoughts than we are. It is far more effective at guarding us from being anxious than our thoughts and minds. We are to turn to God, not positive thoughts, to find peace.

So where do our thoughts fit in? We see here that it is only after we know that “*the Lord is at hand*” and have brought all of our requests to Him and received His peace that we are to meditate on “*whatever things are true, whatever things are noble, whatever things are just, whatever things are pure, whatever things are lovely, whatever things are of good report, if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy.*” This order is important! It is only after we know that the Lord is with us and we have laid all of our concerns on Him that our minds are freed up to “*meditate on these things.*”

We are not to replace our worries with more worries. Instead we are to read and meditate on all the true, noble, just, pure and lovely things that we find in God's word. In verse 9, Paul encourages his readers to do the things which they learned, received, heard and saw in him. While we have not seen or heard Paul ourselves, we have the letters that God inspired Him to write and which God has preserved for almost two thousand years. We can turn to and meditate upon them. When you seek to do these things, that same promise that Paul wrote here applies to you: “*the God of peace will be with you.*”

So “*rejoice in the Lord always!... Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God*” for “*the Lord is at hand.*” May you always remember and meditate on these things, “*and the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.*”

1. Harlyn J. Kushel, *People's Bible Commentary Pilippians/Colossian/Philemon* Revised Edition, St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House 2005, pg. 92

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