

Text: Philippians 4:4-7

Title: How to Experience Peace in Your Inner Person

Truth: A glad and gracious life in the Lord with prayer = peace.

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Introduction

One of the most common sections of the Bible I use in ministry to others, and in my own life, is this part of Philippians 4. The pervasive problem that brings us to this teaching is anxiety and a general lack of physical and spiritual calm. Stress arises from our inner response to perceived or real stressors. We may have inner struggles with what we are doing or who we are (identity); we may have grief over things that have happened in the past; we may have problems in school or job or relationships; we may be unsettled in our relationship to God; we may expose ourselves to news and social media in such volumes and of such a sort that we cannot properly cope with all that is coming at us.

But that response is not only “immaterial” or “spiritual.” Stress has physical effects as well—because we are unitary beings consisting of material and immaterial parts—we will just call them body and spirit in this message. Stress not only “stresses” our minds, it also can damage our hearts, upset our GI tract, and cause tension in our bodies that manifests as headaches and other pains. Stress can be a killer.

A popular productivity book that I recently read is called *Getting Things Done* by David Allen. It expresses the issue in the subtitle: “the art of stress-free productivity.” It advocates an approach to bring your work and life into a place where you can focus on whatever you are presently doing with undivided attention, calm confidence, and an unfrazzled state of mind. The implicit idea is that stress is a major problem for busy people. But his thesis is designed to deal with the “productivity” area of your life—work, school, other such *stuff*. What about your inner thoughts and difficulties or relational things, things that cannot be managed on a list or planner?

This problem is not new at all—it is as old as humanity. Yet it is also different in our current context. We creatively invent new ways to be anxious and stressed about things. Our ancestors may have been anxious whether their food supply would last until the end of the winter. In prosperous conditions, we sometimes worry about far less important matters. We have more time to worry because we are idle—some of us are just not as busy as previous generations. In fact, idleness itself may be one *cause* anxiety and lack of sleep because we are not using energy productively in our bodies, instead spending that energy on mental anxiety. Or our great possessions and business matters may intrude in our restfulness as well. Eccl. 5:12 says that a laboring man’s sleep is sweet, but the abundance of the rich man will not permit him to sleep. We “eat the bread of sorrows” (part of the get up/stay up late/worry rat race) and lose sleep over those anxieties.

The Christian faith offers a solution to anxiety and stress—and the only one that actually works in the long term and is soundly founded on first and true principles. It cannot be founded upon “mental strength” or “self improvement” or other such things because those are based on an inherently weak, limited, and sinful object—ourselves! It must be based elsewhere, in God. Unless our lives are really centered around God, we will not know true satisfaction or the solution to our anxieties.

Observations from the Text

A. The structure of the passage is very interesting. Over the years my appreciation for the entire package of verses has increased. My conviction is that we must look at them as a *whole*, not merely as stand-alone individual verses in a sequence. For example, we cannot legitimately lift verses 6-7 out of their context and focus on praying more as a one-dimensional solution to our lack of inner peace. Let me give an abbreviated structural diagram of what we read here to illustrate the point:

⁴Rejoice...⁵be gentle...⁶do not be anxious...⁷instead pray with thanksgiving to God...**and the peace of God...will guard your hearts and minds.**

⁸Think on things good and godly...⁹follow the exemplary teaching and conduct of the apostle Paul... **and the God of peace will be with you.**

- B. There are two paragraphs (verses 4-7, 8-9). Notice how both end with the result of peace that flows from the Christian activities expressed in the first part of the paragraph. Taking only one of these items as a “preferred prescription” for peace is not going to cut it because anxiety is a multifaceted problem and requires a multi-pronged solution. The one medication of “prayer” is not going to entirely solve the gut-eating, heart-damaging power of anxiety. You cannot expect to win the battle against stress in your mind if while you are praying, at the same time you are not living as a contented Christian, not following the Biblical example of good conduct, and not filling your mind with good things. If you pray but are meditating on trashy stuff, not living godly, are harsh against everyone, and are never thankful or rejoicing, then prayer alone is not going to cut it.
- C. If you have no peace, there is a reason for that. You can and should stop to think about what the reason or reasons might be. For instance: people often ask about their lack of assurance that they are bound for heaven. That is because there is something amiss in their relationship with the Lord *now*. Either they do not confidently believe God’s promises, or they have been wrongly taught what the Bible says and so they believe errant information, or they are “living in sin” as we call it—and that does not only mean shacking up. It could be lack of contentment, lust, lack of self-control, and many other things that elevate self and dishonor God. Or, it could be that you have no assurance because you do not know the way of God’s plan of salvation. That is very common, but thankfully straightforward to fix—not easy, but straightforward. And that fix—the gospel of Jesus Christ—is the foundation of everything in the letter we are reading. Without entering into this relationship with God, you may feel like you are happy and stress free at times or much of the time, but those feelings will be fleeting with the change of circumstances. The Christian has a permanent foundation for joyful thought patterns because he has a hope beyond that offered in this temporal existence.

I. Rejoice, v. 4

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice.

A. The command to rejoice. This theme permeates the Philippian letter. In fact, Paul told the believers there to “rejoice in the Lord” in 3:1 (see the notes there for more). Why is he saying it again? Life in this world is punctuated by bad situations and bad people. Our own natures can tend toward melancholy or depressive feelings because of circumstances or health. As soon as joy is experienced, it wanes and within a short time it can entirely disappear. We constantly need reminders of the joy that we should—and in fact can—possess.

Christians are called to be glad—thankful instead of complaining, happy instead of dour, satisfied instead of discontent—because we have very good reason to be glad. God has loved us in His Son. God has saved those who are His. God has transformed us, given us good hope through grace, forgiven us. Why be sour?

B. The sphere of rejoicing: in the Lord. Notice that God is not telling us to magically wish our problems away, pretending they do not exist, nor to rejoice in our shifting and bad *circumstances*. Rejoicing *in the Lord* is possible because He is always good, He is always gracious, He is always kind, He is always on His throne, His mercy endures forever. He is constant, unchanging, immutable in all that goodness. So we can be thankful and happy and glad in Him.

C. The timing of rejoicing: always. At all times Christians are to rejoice. Yes, even in difficult times and during difficult circumstances. Our rejoicing in the Lord always is possible because the Lord is always the same. Remember this in the frequent times you are tempted to express an attitude different than rejoicing in the Lord. The Lord’s immutable greatness and goodness is the basis of our constant rejoicing.

D. The repetition: The God-breathed word of rejoicing is repeated, calling us to think about this deeply. It is as if between the first sentence and the second sentence, someone interrupts: “Objection! I cannot rejoice in my present circumst...” “I say again, rejoice!” is Paul’s interruption to that wrong-headed thought.

II. Cultivate a Gentle Spirit, v. 5

⁵Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is at hand.

- A. Let be known...this is a command. But it is given in the context of a book that teaches us to be humble with its statement, “let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus,” so it does not convey a “show off” idea. Without saying a word you should be known as a gentle person. Hopefully this is evident after you have begun to believe in and follow Jesus. That transformation can sometimes be tremendous, and I hope that you have made good progress on that path yourself. It will be seen by outsiders. They will probably also see the overflow of your rejoicing.
- B. Gentleness means graciousness, possessing a forbearing spirit, moderation, reasonableness. A pastor is to have this quality (1 Timothy 3:3). All Christians should display this kind of peaceable spirit, instead of being harsh or brash or pugnacious or inconsiderate (Titus 3:2). Heavenly wisdom teaches us all to be peaceable people, gentle, fair, accommodating, and merciful (James 3:17). It means you do not insist on every right or privilege that you might think you have. The opposite could be someone who is harsh, crooked, dishonest, unfair.
- C. Reason: Jesus is soon returning. We do not find this thought unbelievable because He already came once, and the history about Him is extremely well-attested. The Lord’s imminent arrival could be a threat to you, or you could take it as an encouragement.

III. Pray instead of Being Anxious, v. 6

If you are evidencing the work of God’s Spirit in you by being gentle and rejoicing, then you will be a long way toward experiencing peace in your inner person. But there is a more direct attack on those things that eat away at peace, and that is given in verse 6.

⁶Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God.

- A. God can handle—and help you to handle—anything. The things that trouble you do not trouble God in the same way. (I am thinking that those things that do *not* trouble us very much are the things that cause God consternation.) What you cannot do, He can do. What you do not know, He knows. What you are unsure how to handle, He knows how to handle. So, ask God about these matters. By doing so, you are not throwing your cares into the darkness, hoping for a reply. You are instead demonstrating your humility toward God and placing your cares with someone who can do something about them.
- B. For what reason are you anxious? Is it that you do not understand that God is in control of all things? Or, perhaps you do not really trust God? Or do you believe that you are the one who controls things in your life, and since sometimes that does not work, it breeds stress?
- C. We are *commanded* not to be anxious. Most people would say that is impossible. If you are in that group, just be aware of your arrogance: you put yourself above the words of the living God and downplay what He has said. In increasing measure, the Christian *can* learn to control his emotions (that is *self-control*) and not be anxious. Instead, he or she turns his anxious thoughts into prayers and supplications (two words that are nearly, but not exactly, synonymous, referring to petitions to God). By so doing, we ask God to manage the circumstances at hand, and help us to cope well with them. And when we pray, we need to exhibit a true heart of thanksgiving toward God, not merely complaining and grumbling. We have examples of that in earlier Scripture that warn us of from being like the pagans (Romans 1:21, Exodus 16:2-3).
- D. Objection: “Christianity is for weaklings or people who believe they have an imaginary friend who can help them. No thanks—I can manage my own problems.” That thought has a measure of consistency within the atheistic religious worldview. But it fails both at its endpoint and in its underlying support. There is one big problem at the end of your life that you cannot manage—and that is death. The reality is that there is something beyond death, and then judgment beyond that (Hebrews 9:27, Acts 17:31). In addition, the foundations of the atheistic worldview fall apart

when you consider that nothing cannot make anything, nor can any dead thing making a living thing. Random chance does not account for the laws of nature or logic or morality. The “weakling” argument only works because you are looking through a limited viewing window that fails to see the big picture. Atheism argues from its no-God starting point back to that same point again.

IV. Result: God’s Peace in the Inner Person, v. 7

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

- A. Peace of God. It has often been explained that this is different than peace *with* God. The latter comes from salvation and is an objective standing before the Lord. That is a very basic but true truth (Romans 5:1). We should notice that if you do not have peace *with* God, you cannot have the peace *of* God. The peace of God is the peace that comes from Him to His children. It is a calm, confident assurance in Christ over against the billows of cares that blow into life.
- B. This peace, which is experienced by people in the hardest of circumstances, is in the final analysis inexplicable in mere human terms. It is supernatural in origin. It outstrips the capacity of the human mind to understand how God works it in us. We might be dying of cancer (or a loved one may be) and yet we have a calmness that is inexplicable in mere human terms. This is not “resignation,” which is a fate-based term. Peace is a subjective feeling that can be present despite pain, grief or loss.
- C. God’s peace is a sentinel, a garrison, a night watchman. It guards the heart against falling victim to anxiety, against falling into sin, against complaint and ingratitude toward God. It guards the mind against becoming angry with God when circumstances do not work out in accordance to our plans. The peace of God protects us from “going places” (spiritually, not physically) that are dangerous for us.
- D. Practical suggestion: read the Psalms if you are in a troubled state. Those words will do good to your soul and help you to pray.

Conclusion

The Philippian church needed the constant reminder to be glad in the Lord. I believe that we need that same kind of reminder very frequently because day by day we forget to be thankful to God. We elevate other things above God and make them our constant thought (the object of our anxiety). But by living with a gentle spirit, a rejoicing inner person, a thankful heart, and a praying disposition, we can overcome anxious thoughts with great success.

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