

Philippians 4:4-7

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

Today we continue with letters written by the Apostle Paul. We have these letters because of two different problems; conflict within the churches and because Paul is in prison and his only option of communicating to the churches is by writing letters. Paul had suffered some significant setbacks for the gospel and could have easily been discouraged, depressed, and anxious. However, he is joyous because he knows that the gospel has advanced. We are in a position to see the tremendous benefit that having these letters has contributed toward faith development of church and of ourselves. We know that that there is a lot more benefit than disadvantage due to his setbacks. When the Apostle Paul writes to the churches, he is in prison and is uncertain of his outcome. The possibility of death looms over him. However, in the midst of his suffering and the uncertainty of his fate, his theme is joy. Paul's major concern is not for himself, but for the well being of the church. His focus is Christ and unity. His desire is to bring the church together in harmony. He knows that this is done by focusing on Jesus and the gospel instead of individualism. Paul is an excellent example of courage while facing suffering and death, and he is an example of surrendering your life to Christ. He models his life after Christ and teaches us to do the same.

Recently I was reading a devotional and the author was writing about a parent that was in the hospital facing cancer surgery. The author wrote that God is in control of the situation. But he wondered why he still had fear of losing a parent if he knew that the all powerful God was in control of the situation. I think we need to be careful with the personification of God and humanistic impressionism of the divine. Many people want to take ownership of God. They want their own personal version of God. They want God to suit their needs and assume God's protection from natural life events. During a theological discussion I once told someone that God allows fate to happen. The response was "I don't believe that." My response was "I encourage you to believe what Bible teaches." Some people believe what they want to believe instead of what the Bible actually teaches. No one is exempt from death, pain, or suffering. People expect God to exempt them, to free them, from death, pain, and suffering. Even though we all know that everyone experiences death, pain, and suffering. Many Bible heroes experienced death, pain, and suffering. God will not favor you over the Bible heroes. God will not pick you over the Apostle Paul and eliminate your suffering when Paul endured suffering for the gospel. God will not exempt you from pain and suffering, when God's own son suffered. God will not stop you or your loved one from dying when everyone else dies including God's own son.

Let's look at what the Bible actually teaches. First of all, the Apostle Paul's main focus is always Jesus and his main lesson is for Christians to be like Jesus in action, attitude, and spirit. He teaches that it is necessary to completely change your life to model after Jesus and that the church is to be united with everybody being one with Christ. The predominant theme of the Apostle Paul is joy. He is joyous because of what the Lord has done and he teaches us that we are to be full of joy. He does not just say be joyous, he says always. No matter what he is going

through (prison, threat of death, torture, pain, and suffering) his attitude is always joyous. Nowhere in any of Paul's letters do we see woe or lamentations. The contemporary lesson for us is to follow Paul's example. Focus on the joy of the Good News, the Joy of what the Lord has done for us. I think the main thing for us to understand is that we all go through normal life challenges but no matter what we go through we have a suffering Savior to help us.

The next point the Bible teaches us is to let your gentleness be known to everyone. We are all to be gentle like Christ. This is easier said than done. However, when you follow Christ these things come automatically. That means there is no complaining, demanding, blaming, or arguing, and there is no self righteous indignation. There is no "Woe is me, I got pain and you did not call." Have an attitude of humility and let your gentleness be so great that everyone knows about it.

The next point that the Bible teaches us is not to worry. Again, this is easier said than done, especially when you or a loved one has a terminal illness. We all worry at some point or another. Life itself is full of worries. What the Apostle Paul teaches is that instead of worrying about your problems, turn it over to God. Again, I think we need to be careful in understanding the contrast between what the scriptures actually teach and what contemporary society prefers to believe. People often pray selfish prayers - God take my problem away - and expect some personal favoritism when no one is exempt from problems. What do you turn over to God? The Apostle Paul teaches everything. Turn everything over to God. The Bible does not teach that God will fix your problems for you. The Bible teaches you to pray to God, not just when you want something from God; turn everything over to God with thanksgiving.

When you turn everything over to God with thanksgiving you get peace. What people expect is a fix. What the Bible promises is peace. The peace of God is beyond all understanding. It will not exempt you from pain and suffering. It will benefit you with the peace and comfort of Christ. You are not alone in your suffering. You are able to get through suffering. Peace replaces anxiety and comfort replaces worry. The Apostle had multiple problems but he had joy and peace in spite of his hardships because he had the peace of God. Turn your petitions to God with thanksgiving and you get the peace of God.