

Rejoice Always

Philippians 4:4-7

“Rejoice in the Lord always!” Have you ever struggled with that piece of advice from the apostle Paul? ALWAYS?

Is it possible to rejoice even when you're in pain, when you owe more than you own, when you are worried as you sit by the sick bed of someone you love? Is it possible to “Rejoice” when others attack you, they criticise you, or you feel as though you don't have a friend in the world?

When things are going all wrong, we can attempt to look happy on the outside but inside we feel awful, and eventually it shows!

How real is Paul being when he says, “Rejoice in the Lord **always**”?

Paul was, after all, in prison when he wrote these words and had been very cruelly treated by his enemies; and yet he is able to be so Christlike, so caring and gentle with his jailers. We might conclude that the apostle is one of those really annoying people who are always happy and who always see a silver lining on every grey cloud and who are not frightened to tell people to not worry about anything and to just be happy.

When you're really down, the last thing you want to hear is “Don't worry, be happy”. It can be heard as such a patronizing put-down!

Happiness is a human emotion that relies heavily on the circumstances in which we find ourselves. It is very much focussed on ourselves. When things are going well for us, we feel happy. When we feel badly treated by others, or the world, our sinfulness kicks in, and, instead of being a peacemaker or offering forgiveness, we worry how we can fix things — and that might include getting back in some way against the people or events that have spoiled our fun. It's not hard to feel sorry for ourselves and so become unhappy, angry or frustrated.

So, what is Paul really trying to tell us when he says, “Rejoice in the Lord always”? And to make sure we get the point he proclaims, “I will say it again: Rejoice!”

Take note of the words “*in the Lord*” — “Rejoice, in the Lord”. True joy is found “in-the-Lord”. Paul insists that regardless of what is going on in our lives, trusting “in the Lord” enables us to rejoice even in the face of the worst difficulty. Paul insists that regardless of what he is going through — even in the stench of a dirty, cold prison cell — he could be joyful and encourages his readers to “Rejoice in the Lord always”.

Paul had learnt a very valuable lesson through all the trials that came his way - he had learnt to be confident of God's love and presence with us, whatever the circumstances.

He writes in Philippians 3, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learnt the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well-fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength”.

It is important for us to note why Paul could be so contented in the face of everything that was happening in his life. It wasn't because of some strong inner force, or self-discipline, or spiritual meditative strategy. The reason he could be content is that he knew that no matter what trial or

need came his way, God was always with him. He knew that in the face of every soul-destroying disaster that came his way, God was with him.

Fortunately, he didn't have to rely on his own strength and ability to survive these troubles; but through his trust in God's strength and love for him, He knew that God would only want the best for him.

So when Paul tells us to "Rejoice in the Lord always", he is talking from experience. Paul may have been a super-hero of the faith in the Bible, but he was also a human just like you and me. He encountered life at its lowest and experienced the worst that others could do to him. He had his own issues; he struggled with all the things we do, including health, temptation, sin, guilt and despair; and yet he is able to rejoice because he was "in the Lord", and so he truly trusted Jesus' promise, that "I will be with you always".

Paul encourages us to relax. Jesus is journeying with us. Jesus invites us to call upon His Name and to tell him our needs. Let Jesus shoulder our pain; our frustrations; our sicknesses; our faulty relationships; our fears and our worries. In doing this, you enact your faith in Him and in His power. God promises us, as He did Paul in 2 Corinthians 12, that "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

When we're overly concerned about our problems: about the world; about finances; about the people around us; or about our situation in life, He encourages us to take our needs to him in prayer. If we keep all our problems and worries to ourselves, they grow and multiply and threaten to suck all the joy out of our lives. In this sense, worry is like a contagious disease that spreads through every corner of our lives and takes away all our reasons to rejoice. The antidote for worry and anxiety is in prayer. Confide in the living God, our Heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus who trod the earth in the same way as we do. This is the God who came down for us, was born into poverty and finally was crucified as a falsely accused criminal and became the glorious resurrected Christ. It is He who listens for your prayers,

Paul urges us today, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God". God cares. There is no need for anxiety and worry. God is waiting to hear from us. He would dearly love for us to take every situation to Him in faith and unload onto the outstretched arms of the crucified Saviour, every burden and trouble that comes our way.

As we pray, God gives us his peace. God's peace is far better than any calmness we could ever achieve by our own reasoning or actions. God fills us with his peace; peace that comes from knowing and trusting that everything is in his almighty and all-knowing hands.

Jesus cares so much for each of us that there is nothing that He can't handle. As a result, the focus has shifted from our problems and troubles. Even though our outward circumstances may not have changed, we can be joyful because we are one with Christ, we are "in the Lord", to use Paul's words. We are uniquely and personally loved by the almighty God.

We are just days away from Christmas, and now we are reminded that the baby born in Bethlehem is Immanuel — "God with us". He came to bring reconciliation, forgiveness and peace. He came to show us the love of God and how, through his death and resurrection, we are adopted as his own beloved children and can walk confidently with Him in peace and joy.

Martin Luther's daughter, Magdalena, died when she was just fourteen years old. As they laid her to rest, Luther said, "Oh my dear Magdalena, you will rise and shine like the stars in the sky. How strange to be so sorrowful, and yet to know that all is at peace and that all is well."

The strange combination of sorrow on the one hand, and peace and joy on the other, is only possible "in the Lord".

Finally, Paul uses a military picture. He writes, "The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus". Like a guard or sentry on duty, God's peace watches over us and keeps us from all harm, including eternal death. In God's peace, we can be joyful in all things. All we need to do, as described in John 15, is to remain connected to Jesus who is described as the True Vine. We can tap into this true vine through meeting Him in daily reading of the Word and by weekly feeding on the Sacrament of God's grace and forgiveness found in Holy Communion. We have so much to rejoice about!

And so, "may the peace of God, which is far beyond human understanding, keep our hearts and minds safe in union with Christ Jesus." Amen.