

Antidote to Anxiety

Philippians 4:4-9

Covenant Waterfall, 26 November 2023

Introduction

Last week Friday I woke up to discover that an intruder had been snooping around in my yard in the middle of the night while I was fast asleep. Thankfully nothing was taken or damaged in my property, but one of my neighbour's wasn't so fortunate, their house was broken into and they got robbed. Not the most comforting thing to discover this and as you can imagine, I was sleeping with one eye open for a couple of nights, not much peace of mind!

As South Africans, there are many reasons for us to be anxious – whether it's crime, way our country is governed, the economy, insecurity about the future. Not only here in SA, but the world over – real fracturing of especially Western culture. Lots of us are anxious, some even struggle with depression.

In a similar way, the Philippian church was also experiencing anxiety at the time Paul wrote this letter. They were anxious about disunity and quarrels within the church. Saw this last week with Euodia and Syntache. Also worried about destructive false teachers (Judaizers and prosperity gospel). Their founder, their pastor, Paul, who had discipled them and grown them in their faith was locked up in a prison in Rome hundreds of miles away from them. This young church plant faced some significant threats and so they were understandably anxious. Paul speaks directly into this situation in this morning's text. So what we will see that because God grants us his peace in Christ, there is no need to be anxious. Instead we can rejoice in the Lord.

- Rejoice in the Lord!
- Rest in God's peace
- Trust in the gospel

A. Rejoice in the Lord! (vv. 4-5)

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”

It’s easy to rejoice when life is good. But what about when life is a mess, when tragedy strikes – when there is nothing in our circumstances that is worth rejoicing about? Is this verse then saying that we must fake it and be happy even when it seems impossible to do so? No – true Christian joy does not fluctuate, it does not come and go, and is not rooted in circumstances. Instead, as verse 4 tells us, it is rooted **“in the Lord”**. And is possible to find **“always”**.

How is this so? If our joy is **“in the Lord”** this means that it is rooted in him who **“is the same yesterday today and forever”** (Heb 13:8), whose **“steadfast love endures forever”** (Ps 118:1), who is our rock, our refuge, our shield and our salvation (Ps 18:2), who is faithful even when we are faithless (2 Tim 2:13) and who promises to never leave us nor forsake us (Deut 31:6). Because our joy is rooted in our God who is abundantly faithful, rooted in his unchanging nature, this means that we can always rejoice in him.

Our problem tends to be that we seek joy in undependable things, in things that change, whether it be in people, abundance of possessions, leisure time, our career, our bank balance, desire for comfort and security. None of these things are guaranteed and they all are subject to change. If our hearts find security and joy in these things, as soon as they are no longer there, our world falls apart.

Contrast this with Paul. This theme of joy permeates throughout this letter to the Philippians. Remember his circumstances? He’s imprisoned, he has lost his basic freedoms, he is waiting to hear whether or not he will be executed. His circumstances are far from ideal. Yet he is full of joy because his joy is not found in his circumstances, which are bound to change, but in the Lord who does not change.

The Prophet Habakkuk understood this truth as calamity fell upon the nation of Judah, as everything he ever knew was destroyed and plundered by the invading Babylonians.

Habakkuk 3:17-18:

“Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines, the produce of the olive fail, and the fields yield no food, the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls, yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.”

Verse 5 continues: **“Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand...”**

How do you respond in the midst of calamity, when things don't go how we expected, when circumstances seem so out of our control, when we experience the bitter providence of the Lord? The great temptation is to think that we don't deserve this. We think we've done our bit, we've lived a decent life, we've prayed every morning, we've been faithful – and now God has let us down?! Temptation for us to become bitter, angry, feel a sense of entitlement. But here in verse 5 it says, **“Let your reasonableness be known to everyone...”** Better translation of the Greek = let your gentleness / kindness be known to everyone. In the heat of severe trials, this is not easy! Probably the opposite of our instincts – want to throw our toys out of the cot, demand our rights!

Yet it is this attitude of gentleness and graciousness is what we are called to have. Why? We don't deserve anything from God except his wrath. It is only for the sake of Christ that God chose to have mercy upon us, forgive our sins and grant us grace that we don't deserve. Surely this means that our only response to even the most challenging circumstances should not be one of entitlement and bitterness? Instead, since we are the recipients of underserved grace, we should let our gentleness, kindness and graciousness be known to all.

Verse 5 ends with the phrase, **“The Lord is at hand.”** This is a reminder to us that indeed we are never alone in times of crisis. His promise to us is that he is near to us now by his Spirit to comfort and help us. He is also “at hand” in the sense that he promises to return in glory and then all suffering will be brought to an end, all wrongs made right and then we will know his perfect peace. And because of these promises, we can certainly rejoice now!

B. Rest in God's Peace, vv. 6-7

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”

When we're really anxious about something, we typically fall into an unhealthy downward spiral – the burden feels like a weight upon us, stress, hopelessness, lose perspective and we battle to sleep. We hold on to the issue, let it consume our thoughts. Yet this is so destructive and unhelpful!

Instead, God's Word says that we shouldn't be anxious about anything. Easy to say that. So how are we to deal with anxiety right in the heat of it? Verse 6 – pray! As we lift up our eyes to praise him, to focus upon him and his glory and majesty and not ourselves, already things are put in perspective. Regularly giving thanks to God in prayer also helps us out of our self-destructive pits – remind ourselves just how much God has given us and done for us. We have so much to be thankful for: loving families, daily bread, roof over our heads, the beauty of creation around us, God's amazing grace to us in Christ, his steadfast love. Giving thanks to God for these things makes it harder for us to be overwhelmed by anxiety.

And then instead of holding onto our burdens, verse 6 says that we should let our requests be known to God. Prayerlessness is so often the reason we find ourselves consumed with anxiety in the first place. God invites us to lay our burdens before him in prayer. Incredible privilege as a Christian – we have access to the throne room of the God of the universe through Jesus Christ our Great High Priest. Ask God to intervene in your situation, to provide for you, to comfort you, to grant you wisdom and peace - knowing that he really hears you - he's the living God after all. James 5:1 says, **“Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray.”**

Verse 7 continues... **“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”**

God gives us a promise here that even in the midst of crisis and stress, he grants us his peace. This peace from God is able to guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. This describes what many of us may have experienced. In the midst of a massive tragedy – the death of a loved one or the news of terminal illness – if we're in Christ, the world doesn't fall out from beneath our feet. Instead, God holds us and guards us in his peace which surpasses all understanding.

C. Trust in the Gospel, vv.8-9

“Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Resting in God’s peace in Christ and having laid down our burdens in prayer before the Lord, verse 8 instructs us now to keep watch on our thoughts. Especially during tough times, it’s easy to get caught in destructive and sinful thought patterns – from being overtaken by despair and hopelessness, to seeking escapism through lustful and sexually immoral thoughts. Instead, we are to heed God’s Word to think about “these things”: whatever is true, honourable, just, pure, lovely, excellent and worthy of praise.

Who embodies all of this? Ultimately only Jesus Christ. Jesus is the Truth, he is the Just and Holy One, he is the God who is love, the only perfectly pure and righteous One and the only One who is worthy of praise. Set your thoughts upon him. Lift up your eyes to him, worship him who is near to the broken-hearted and saves the crushed in spirit (Ps 34:18).

Verse 9 concludes: **“What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me— practise these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”**

What is it exactly that the Philippian church has “learned, received, heard and seen” from Paul? It’s the gospel! Paul is the one who over the years has preached and taught them this gospel, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day and appeared to many. This message of good news, that in Christ, we are no longer in our sins, we are no longer deserving of God’s wrath, we are no longer destined to a life of hopelessness – but that now we are forgiven, loved and known by God, chosen in Christ as his adopted sons with the promise of eternal life, that nothing can snatch away from us and that we cannot lose.

It is this gospel that was learned, received and heard from Paul and then seen by the Philippians through his godly life lived in a response to this gospel, that Paul instructs the Philippians to “practice”. How so? It’s impossible to “practice” the gospel in the sense that it’s impossible to “do” the gospel, or even live the gospel. Why? The gospel has already been done – it’s the news of Christ’s finished work for us. Faced with anxiety, stress and increasing expectations to “do more” and strive more – the gospel is like crisp, fresh water

in a parched and dry land. The gospel brings rest to the weary and burdened soul – Jesus in Matthew 11:28-30:

“Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. ²⁹Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. ³⁰For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Trust in this gospel as the true antidote to anxiety – practice it by continuing to learn it, receive it and hear it preached – and God’s promise to us is that he will change us through it, he will grant us the rest that we so desperately need. Just as God transformed Paul’s life through this message, so he will transform ours in order that we may live for his glory.

Conclusion

Reality is that outside of Christ there is no true peace – now or for eternity. Now – left alone to carry your own burdens and anxieties. Eternity – will face the dreadful wrath of God that your sins deserve.

True peace is only found in the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ. How so? Romans 5:1 declares: **“Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.”** Because Jesus has paid the debt for our sins, because he took upon himself our sins that separated us from God and faced God’s wrath in our place by his death on the cross – we are forgiven of our debt and this means that in Christ, there is now peace between us and God. Peace now and peace for all eternity. Because of this, we can indeed rejoice in this true hope that Christ is ours forever.

Trust in Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, the one who has reconciled sinners to God in peace through the forgiveness of sins. Trust in him who is with you in the midst of the valley of the shadow of death, who gives you rest and relief from your burdens, who strengthens you with his joy and who promises you his peace that surpasses all understanding now and for all eternity in his presence.

Amen.