

“FINDING JOY AMID ADVERSITY”

Philippians 4:4-7

Philippians is a remarkable letter. It is remarkable for its SETTING. When Paul wrote Philippians, he was not lounging beside a fireplace, or sipping hot cocoa, or admiring a beautifully decorated Christmas tree. He was in prison because of His Christian faith. **“I am in chains for Christ,”** he said in Philippians 1:13. And prisons in the First Century A.D. had none of the amenities of modern prisons. Instead, they were dark, dismal places, where prisoners were routinely beaten, starved, kept in chains or stocks, and forced to lie in their own waste. “Merry Christmas, Paul.”

Philippians is also remarkable for its PURPOSE. As dire and unjust as Paul’s circumstances were, he did not write a self-serving letter to the Christians at Philippi. He did not say—though we would not have blamed him if he had: “I need help. I’m being brutally treated. I’m an innocent man. I’ve done nothing wrong. Get me a good lawyer.” In fact, in Philippians 4:11 he wrote, **“I am not saying this because I am in need.”** Rather, his concern was for the Philippians, whom he urged on in love, faith, and fellowship, actually telling *them* to **“rejoice”** and not to **“be anxious about anything.”** Yet, he was the one in prison.

Additionally, Philippians is remarkable for its DOCTRINAL CONTENT. In what was essentially a “thank-you note” to the Philippians for their past generosity and support, the apostle Paul included one of the most majestic descriptions of Christ’s true deity and true humanity found in the New Testament.

And Paul used this great teaching about Christ not only to encourage the Philippians in general, but to encourage two Christian women in particular—Euodia and Syntyche by name—to set aside personal differences and display the same attitude of Christ. **“Your attitude,”** wrote Paul, **“should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross,”** Philippians 2:5-8.

Most of all, the letter to the Philippians is remarkable for its JOYFUL TONE. Though writing from prison; though uncertain of his eventual release or execution, of living or dying—Paul wrote in Philippians 1:20, **“I eagerly expect and hope that I will in no way be ashamed, but will have sufficient courage so that now as always Christ will be exalted in my body, whether by life or death”**—this ‘prisoner for Christ’ still used the words REJOICE, JOY, CHEER and GLAD nineteen times in Philippians; a letter of only four chapters and 104 verses. Amid the happiest circumstances of your life—marriage, birth, confirmation, graduation, promotion,

recovery from an illness—have you ever used the words REJOICE, JOY, CHEER, and GLAD nineteen times in a single letter? Paul did. And he was in prison. Remarkable.

As of today, December 9, 2018, Christmas is only sixteen days away. Decorations are up. Temperatures are down. Bing Crosby is dreaming “of a white Christmas.” People are already saying, “If I don’t see you, have a merry Christmas.” So, will you? Do you feel joyful? Or do you feel more like a prisoner—no, not a literal prisoner like Paul was; rather, a prisoner of personal circumstances? After all, debt can feel like a prison. Serious illness can feel like a prison. Constant pain can feel like a prison. A troubled marriage can feel like a prison; and for that matter, so can depression, poor self-image, loneliness, addictions, temptations, and guilt.

Surely, at times, we have all confessed with Paul in Romans 7: **“I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but cannot carry it out.”** And he goes on to say, **“For in my inner being I delight in God’s law, but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members.”**

In reality, any problem can become a prison. And when this happens, the Christmas lights and trees, cards and newsletters, presents and family gatherings, may actually “bring us down” rather than “cheer us up.” In 1997, when newly divorced, the first Christmas I spent alone and without my two small sons was almost unbearable. Just listening to the lyrics of certain Christmas songs—“Have yourself a merry little Christmas,” or “I’ll be home for Christmas, if only in my dreams”—brought tears.

So, I can only imagine how Paul felt in prison: chained, hungry, beaten, bleeding, ridiculed, in pain, and not knowing if he would live or die. Yet, my friends, it is clear from this remarkable letter of Philippians that Paul found joy and freedom in Jesus Christ long before he was released from prison.

In fact, according to Acts 16, after Paul and Silas were severely beaten and then temporarily jailed in Philippi, at midnight they were—doing what? Moaning? Weeping? Complaining? No. They were **“praying and singing hymns to God,”** Acts 16:25. They were FINDING JOY AMID ADVERSITY. This is the lesson of today’s text. And in four remarkable verses, the apostle Paul tells us how to find true joy and keep it.

First, find your joy in Jesus Christ. Paul wrote in Philippians 4:4, **“Rejoice in the Lord always.”** The Greek word construction is very descriptive and emphatic. The verb **“rejoice”** is in the present tense and imperative mode, and is therefore an urgent call to continuous joy. To the verb Paul added the modifier **“at all times.”** He then placed the verb **“rejoice”** and the modifier **“at all times”** at the beginning and end of the sentence for great emphasis. Translated literally, Philippians 4:4 is ‘Go on rejoicing

in the Lord at all times.’ Or said another way, ‘Never stop rejoicing in the Lord at any time.’ It’s as if the apostle Paul wrote these words in large, bold, capital letters; then underlined and italicized them; and then followed them with a row of exclamation points.

Wait. Do what? Go on rejoicing in this crazed, chaotic world? Go on rejoicing when my life is riddled with problems—collections agencies calling from 8:00 AM to 9:00 PM; serious illness, troubled marriage, expensive car repair, ungrateful child or unreasonable employer, job loss or loneliness? Did I hear that correctly, Paul? Yes, you did.

In fact, the apostle Paul anticipated your questions and objections. For he repeated the verb **“rejoice”** twice. **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”** Rejoice, not for the sake of rejoicing. Rejoice, not because of all the extraneous preparations of the Christmas season: lights, trees, cards, presents, cookies, cash and checks. Instead, Paul wrote, **“Rejoice in the Lord.”**

How many electrical appliances do you have in your home? A refrigerator? Microwave? Oven? TV? Lamps? Fans? Washer and dryer? Would you expect any of these appliances to work, if they were not plugged into an AC outlet? Of course not. Living a joyful life is no different. To find joy amid adversity you must be plugged into the right power source. And that right Power Source is Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself said in John 15:5, **“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remain in Me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from Me you can do nothing.”**

Often, we base our happiness and joy on personal circumstances. Did you know that the word “happiness” is related to the word “happening”? A happening is an event. Yet, what happens to our happiness when circumstances or events change? And they will change, because everything earthly changes: health, wealth, governments, stock market, weather, relationships, plans. This is why Paul urged us to rejoice in the Lord. He doesn’t change. When you and I rejoice in the Lord, we always have Someone and something to rejoice about.

Linus of Charlie Brown fame was right. Christmas is not about lights or trees or decorations or presents or holiday parties. It’s about this: **“And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. And the angel said unto them, ‘Fear not; for, behold, I bring you good tidings of GREAT JOY which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord,”** Luke 2:8-11.

Regardless of your personal circumstances today, REJOICE because Christ came to redeem you. REJOICE because Jesus atoned for all your sins. REJOICE

because God chose you to become a part of His family. REJOICE because, if God is for you, nothing and no one can defeat you. REJOICE because through faith in Christ you have eternal life. REJOICE because that which God spoke through the prophet Zephaniah centuries ago He speaks to you today: **“Do not fear; Zion, let not your hands be weak. The LORD your God in your midst, the Mighty One, will save; He will rejoice over you with gladness, He will quiet you with His love, He will rejoice over you with singing,”** Zephaniah 3:16-17. Oh, what a picture—Almighty God Himself rejoicing and singing over you. How can you hear that and not be joyful?

Every blessing of salvation and every measure of true joy flow from a connection to Jesus Christ by faith. And you’ll notice this same connection through today’s text. In verse 4: **“Rejoice in the Lord.”** In verse 5: **“The Lord is near.”** In verse 7: **“Will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”**

Second, find your joy in the nearness of Christ. Paul wrote in Philippians 4:5, **“Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.”** The Greek word Paul used for “gentleness” in this verse, EPI-EIKAS, is not easy to translate into English. It includes the ideas of gentleness, patience, forbearance, kindness, consideration, selflessness, and a non-combative spirit.

In other words, EPI-EIKAS is the opposite of the so-called ‘Christmas spirit’ frequently displayed this time of year. Think Walmart on Black Friday. Think mobs of shoppers pressed against the doors in the feverish attempt to swoop up the best bargains, snatch the last items, and claim the most convenient parking spaces. “And heaven help anyone who dares to get in my way.” No, EPI-EIKAS means a willingness to help, not hurt; a willingness to forgive, not seek vengeance; a willingness to serve, not be served; selflessness, not selfishness.

Frankly, there is no faster way to diminish or lose your joy than to dwell on something someone did to you, or said to you, or took from you. I can still remember the name of a boy who punched me in the back at Robinswood Junior High School, Orlando, FL, in 1967. His name was Douglas Horton: about 5’9” tall; brown hair, wiry build, mischievous grin, assassin’s eyes. And to this day, when I happen to think of dear Doug, I often find my jaw clenched and my fingers rolled into white-knuckled fists. He humiliated me in a crowded hallway. And, if only I could run into Doug today, because I’m a lot bigger now. Why, I would...” You know the rest of the story.

I’m certain you have similar hurts; some old, others fresh. But if we can’t let our hurts go; if our thoughts are constantly on past pain and the burning desire for revenge, how can we experience true joy? Biblical joy is simply not compatible with anger.

However, when our thoughts are on Jesus instead of personal circumstances and personal injustices, we can afford to be gentle, patient, forbearing, kind, considerate,

and selfless; because, as Paul wrote, **“the Lord is near.”** This may refer to the nearness of Christ’s Second Coming, when He will right every wrong. Or, it may refer to the manner in which Christ is personally near us every second of every day. Both of these views are true. Both should fill us with great joy and great patience in the way we respond to others. And both should move us to say, “No, I refuse to allow this matter to upset me and rob me of my joy. I refuse to let the desire for revenge to control me. The Lord Jesus will take care of all my hurts.” When we respond this way to adverse circumstances, we are making our gentleness known to all. We are showing the world how near and dear our Savior is to us.

Third and finally, find your joy by giving all your worries to Christ. Paul wrote in Philippians 4:6, **“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”** The Greek word for anxious in this verse, MERI-MNAO, literally means “to have a divided mind;” hence, to be torn in multiple directions; to be beside oneself with doubts, fears, and worries. Jesus used this same word of Martha, saying in Luke 10:41, **“Martha, Martha, you are worried and upset about many things.”**

Is your mind torn in multiple directions today? Are you worried and upset about personal, national, or even global circumstances? Are you worried and upset about your job, family, friends, spouse, or children? Are you worried and upset about your health, finances, buying groceries or medication?

Are you worried about your faith or the faith of loved ones? Are you worried about the car breaking down or terrorist attacks or taxes or illegal immigration or nuclear warheads in Iran? Worry, worry, worry—which, as our Savior reminded us, cannot add a cubit to our height or an hour to our life. So, don’t go on worrying. Instead of talking to yourself, talk with God in prayer. Present your worries to the Lord; because excessive worry, like anger, can rob you of joy.

God does not want you to worry. God the Son Himself said this three times in His Sermon on the Mount: **“Therefore I tell you, do not worry,”** Matthew 6:25. **“So do not worry,”** Matthew 6:31. **“Therefore do not worry,”** Matthew 6:34. God does not want you to worry, because He is in complete control. So, as the saying goes, “Let go. And let God.”

God did not say, “Give me some of your worries.” He did not say, “You worry about your neighborhood, and I’ll worry about the world.” He did not say, “You worry on Monday through Saturday, and I’ll give you a break when you attend church on Sunday.” No, He said: “I do not want you to worry about a thing. Not one thing. Period.”

Am I wrong? Note carefully what the apostle Paul wrote in Philippians 4:6, **“Do not be anxious about ANYTHING, but in EVERYTHING, by prayer and petition,**

with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” And when we do this; when we are willing to say, “Lord God, I’m giving these worries and burdens to You; I can’t carry them any longer”—what happens? Indeed, what happens immediately; not a month from now or a year from now, but the instant we commit our worries and burdens to the Lord? Oh, such remarkable words in such a remarkable letter: **“And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus,”** Philippians 4:7.

What a change. When we rejoice in the Lord, we change. We go from being imprisoned by adverse circumstances to the Lord Himself standing guard over our peace of heart and peace of mind. Amid his darkest hours, chained, hungry, beaten, bleeding, not knowing if he would live or die—it wasn’t the Roman soldiers Paul saw standing guard over him. It was Jesus Christ. And this is what made Paul the prisoner rejoice.

How do we find true joy amid adversity? Listen once more to the words of today’s text: **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”**

This is how to have a Merry Christmas every day of the year.