

KEEPING YOUR JOY - The Heartfelt Theology of an Isolated Prisoner – Part 19

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HOW GREAT JOY SHUTS OUT SMALLER FEARS

Philippians 4:4-7 - “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. [5] Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; [6] do not be anxious 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.”

Verse 4 is such a tantalizing sentence. The way it's put together causes one to probe its meaning. If one is already *in* circumstances incredibly grand one doesn't have to be ***told*** to experience joy. Surely no one has to be ***told*** to rejoice if he or she has just struck oil or won a million dollars or been healed of incurable cancer. Joy, one imagines, in such circumstances is ***reflexive***. It simply ***washes over us*** automatically.

On the other side of the coin, if one is experiencing ***desperate*** times - if one has been bound in circumstances that cry out with deep pain and irretrievable loss - then the command to rejoice must be heard like a lame man would hear the command to run the hundred yard dash. It is precisely the ***absence*** of joy that ***makes*** the trial a trial. It is the ***absence*** of joy that ***makes*** the loss such a burden. To rejoice in ***these*** situations seems beyond our reach. Can emotions like joy really be commanded? And yet they ***are*** commanded over and over in the Scriptures.

In short, the command seems either ***unnecessary*** in pleasure or ***impossible*** in trial. **Verse 4** looks silly and useless on the surface. But perhaps we've gone too quickly here. If there is any striking feature in today's text - perhaps more evident here than anywhere else in this whole letter - it is the ***connectedness*** of these four verses. Each thought derives its meaning - in fact, is ***dependant*** for its meaning - on the verses preceding and following.

What we know for sure is this. The cumulative effect of **rejoicing in the Lord (4:4)**, and **remembering the Lord is at hand (4:5)**, and **praying with thanksgiving in everything (4:6)**, is our minds will be **guarded** with the **peace of God (4:7)**, rather than peppered with **anxiety and fear (4:6)**. All of which seems precious enough to merit a careful study this morning.

1) **THE JOY PAUL DESCRIBES IN VERSE 4 IS NOT AN EMOTIONAL CONDITION BUT A PERSISTENT SATISFACTION IN THE LORD**

This is made clear by the wording Paul chooses - **Philippians 4:4** - **“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”** If we were doing a **CSI** (Crime Scene Investigation) on this verse we would draw chalk lines around two segments - **“...in the Lord,”** and **“...always.”**

The word **“always”** tells me Paul isn't thinking of joy the way I was picturing in my introduction. He was thinking of a joy **independent** of my circumstances of either deep pleasure or deep pain. He was talking about a type of joy that was fixed and constant - that was **“always”** - rather than joy that was pinned to emotional states and circumstances.

The second phrase also helps clear things up. Paul says we are to rejoice, not in our **circumstances**, but **“in the Lord”**(4). So this joy is somehow **above** earthly sources to **give** and earthly thieves to **remove**. It comes from **outside** ourselves and our circumstances. It is something out-sourced in Christ and being **“in Him”**(4) in some living way in our minds and hearts.

That's all Paul says at this point but it tells us something very important about the Christian life. Paul **identifies** the Christian as a person who has found his greatest

and deepest joy in Christ. Many things are *important*, but nothing else is ³ *as* important as Christ.

If you are a Christian at all, this is where Paul plants your heart - *in Christ*. You don't apprehend your place in Christ accurately if there is *anything* that is just as important to you. You and I *misrepresent* the beauty and the importance of Christ to the world if anything else is even *perceived* to be as great and meaningful and important to us as Christ. Christians rejoice "*in the Lord*"(4). And this is meant to be *seen*. We'll consider that in just a moment.

Paul's Biblical logic of joy isn't new. This has always been the identifying stance of the one who knows God - **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, [18] yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation."**

Paul is repeating what has always been the tell-tale sign of a renewed heart. Once you grab on to this key thought, the theme of our Philippian text starts to unfold layer by layer. Everything else relates to this foundational idea, which Paul repeats *twice* in **verse 4** for added emphasis. The *reason* for Paul's emphasis is the spirit of this age gears *everything* about you life and mine to shift the center of joy in our lives. That's why Paul says we must *maintain* the nucleus of joy *in the Lord*. We must do this "*always*"(4).

Let me try to explain how this works because it has everything to do with how the peace of God "*guards*" our hearts and minds (7). Every day of this coming week will test your joy in the Lord. This is not something that *might* happen to you this week. It *will* - it *absolutely will* happen. It will start to happen as soon as you leave

this sanctuary.

There are only **two types of events** coming into all our lives. Either **good, pleasure producing** events will happen or **bad, sorrow producing** events will happen. **Every** event comes from a point somewhere on a spectrum between these two ends. And they both can do something terrible to your soul.

Good events (especially **really** good ones) can pull your heart away from rejoicing in **Christ** to rejoicing in **them**. They draw the affections of our hearts like a magnet. The **delight** they bring is addictive. They cry out for more and more attention. We crave more of the adrenalin pumping excitement they bring. They can make Christ seem distant and boring as they inject more and more carnal delight in our minds.

You are what you love. And you discover what you love, not by the worship songs you sing, but by the things and pursuits that bring you the most joy. None of the words of our text ring true or make sense if this core fact is forgotten.

But there are other events besides good events. **Bad events** (especially **really** bad ones) can empty the life of all hope and joy. The despair they produce can cause life to feel empty. The loss seems all-engulfing. The hopelessness looks permanent - almost eternal. The key point here is really deep tragedy claims the same undivided attention from the heart as really deep pleasure. Christ is crowded out. Everything we have in Christ Jesus is clouded over - shut out of our senses - by the stunning, numbing shock of deep loss and grief.

This is why Paul describes rejoicing in the Lord as promoting a peace that will **guard** the heart (7). Only true delight **in the Lord** can stabilize the Christian mind. Joy **"in the Lord"** is the ballast that keeps the heart from capsizing either by delighting inordinately in **pleasure** or despairing hopelessly in **pain**.

This, in the face of a thousand popular and truly goofy interpretations, is what those frequently quoted words from Nehemiah mean - **“The joy of the Lord is your strength.”** These words have nothing whatsoever do to with dancing a jig. They are a reminder to treat nothing as substantial and driving as your relishing of Christ.

The way I tried to say it in the title of this teaching is **great joy shuts our smaller grief**. What I **should** have said was **great joy shuts out smaller grief - and smaller joy**. As for great joy shutting out temporary grief, if you just discovered you have won ten million dollars you won't as desperately mourn the fact that you've lost an earring. The loss is counter-weighted by the glorious weight of the good news.

But a really great joy also regulates smaller joys as well. Suppose you knew you only had three months to live. I mean **only** three months, and not a day longer. This diagnosis wasn't just a **possibility**, but was absolutely **certain**.

Then the most wonderful thing in all the world happens. You are healed. Not just **kind of** healed, but really, totally, completely healed. You're good to go for another forty years! That is the best news you've ever heard. Now, how much does that thrill increase just because you **found** that lost earring? Not at all. Truly great joy shuts out both smaller grief **and** smaller joy.

This is what lies behind Paul's command to rejoice **in the Lord** - and to do this **always**. All sorts of circumstances will come, both delightful and distressing, bent on **shifting your heart from the Lord**. They will all try to push the **joy in the Lord** into the background. Do not be moved from it. This is what **guards** your life in Christ. Do **not** leave your life **unprotected**. Keep Christ your **only extreme joy**.

This is how you guard your heart.

2) **YOUR HEART'S DELIGHT IN THE LORD MUST BE OBSERVABLE IF THE GOSPEL IS TO BE BELIEVABLE**

Philippians 4:5 - "Let your reasonableness **be known to everyone**. The Lord is at hand...."

If you look in different translations you will rarely find two that have the same English word for the term translated "***reasonableness***" in the English Standard Version. Other translations read "***gentleness***"(NIV), "***moderation***"(KJV), "***gentle spirit***"(NASB), and a host of others. The reason for the variety is there is no single English word into which the Greek word "***ep-ee-i-kace***" can be easily translated. But its root has to do with the idea of ***appropriateness***. Paul is talking about having my joy so rooted "***in the Lord***" that there is never anything ***extreme*** or ***excessive*** in my reaction to whatever circumstances or people may bring my way.

Moderation is another way of saying it, meaning I am careful ***not*** to give the impression that anything else - good or bad - is ***so*** important to me that I allow it to give the impression that I am ***controlled*** or ***ruled*** either by its delight or distress. "Let everyone ***see***", says Paul, "***that your life is governed and supremely satisfied in Christ***. And let them see that in ***all*** circumstances"(5).

This is the same idea Paul was advancing in **Philippians 2:14-15** - "Do all things without grumbling or questioning, [15] that you may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and twisted generation, **among whom you shine as lights in the world....**"

In doing ***everything*** without grumbling, in ***all*** kinds of circumstances, including the

trials they were navigating, the watching world would see their treasure **wasn't** here on earth. People would see their lives **shine** with a light those in the world didn't possess. Everyone would be made to see the magnificence of Jesus.

"Let your reasonableness be known to everyone"(4). Let everyone see that you don't **overrate** earthly pleasures. Let everyone see that you don't **insist** on your own way. Let everyone see that you never **lose everything** as long as you have Christ

James penned the same theology: **"Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. [8] You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, (the same idea - the heart is *unswayed* by either pleasure or trial) for the coming of the Lord is at hand"**(James 5:7-8).

This leads into our third and final point:

3) **KEEP YOUR SOUL THANKFUL IN ALL THINGS BY REMINDING YOURSELF OF THE LORD'S SOON RETURN**

Philippians 4:5b-7 - "...The Lord is at hand; [6] do not be anxious 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."

The more I envision the nearness of the coming of the Lord - the more I see Him as **"at hand"**(5b) - the more I will refuse to yield my heart to the control of

circumstances, pleasurable or painful. In James' words, I "**establish my heart**" by looking **through** every circumstance, tracing each individual circumstance through to the ultimate **end** of everything - the coming of the Lord.

All events are **relativized** by the greatness of that one event. It's like facing the blizzard knowing you're leaving for Phoenix tomorrow. Only we have a hope that is to live **constantly** in our hearts. I am constantly **thankful** for the Lord's coming. I am thankful because in the light of the nearness of the Lord's coming the circumstances that seem incredibly **wonderful** are reduced in significance so they never become **idolatrous**. And the circumstances that are **terrible** are never **so** terrible as to cancel out the **hope** I have in Christ. They never become **ultimately** despairing.

This is the importance of thankfully remembering the Lord **in all things**. This is how the heart is guarded - protected from **anxiety** - **Philippians 4:6** - "**....do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.**"

The way to be **anxious about nothing** is to be thankfully, thoughtfully prayerful about **everything**, framing everything about your life - good and bad - against the living hope of the coming of Jesus.

"Always rejoice **in the Lord**," Paul would say. Let this **regulate** all the lesser experiences of life. And they are **all** lesser experiences. Let your contentment in Him **moderate** everything else - great and disastrous - about your circumstances. This is how one lives a life **guarded in God's peace**. This is life in Christ at its **safest**.