

THE RECOVERY OF LOST JOY - Part nine

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SPIRITUAL WEARINESS AND THE FORTIFYING POWER OF THE PEACE OF GOD

Philippians 4:4-9 - "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. [8] Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, 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. [9] What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you."

What marvelous words these are! Without a doubt, we are looking at some of the greatest words of spiritual instruction and encouragement ever written. And notice the repeated emphasis on the subject of **peace** (7) and the **God of peace** (9). That's why I've chosen to wrap up this series of messages on spiritual weariness with this subject, ***"The Fortifying Power of the Peace of God."***

And notice his promise in the middle of **verse 7** - **"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."** You guard something that is valuable. You don't lock up your Kleenex. You put alarms on your **house**, or your **BMW**. Your bird house might be nothing more than a flimsy piece of wood, but the vault at the bank isn't. That's because the vault in the bank is for valuables.

Paul says there's something in your being that needs protecting. Your **heart** and your **mind** aren't automatically safe. They need certain provisions. There are enemies outside that must be **kept** on the outside. You must constantly make sure that they don't get control of your heart and mind.

Heart and mind are terms frequently used as synonyms in the Scriptures - "**As a man think in his heart, so is he.**" But not always. Sometimes we can see slight variations in emphasis. Your **heart** in the Scriptures is often the seat of your **will**. In other words, your willingness to choose and steer your life properly comes from the heart. That's why David prayed for God to create in him a **clean heart**.

Your **mind** is related to this, but often something a bit different. It is usually described as the place where all of the **options** for the will to select in any given situation make themselves available to you. It's the way you look at things - the values that get shaped and the priorities that you will come to live by.

Now, Paul says, there are all sorts of things that happen in the world of our circumstances - things outside of us - that can infiltrate and take captive the control center of our spiritual lives. And he says there is a way of "guarding" - literally "garrisoning" - our lives against that invasion.

These six verses are important because they deal with a subject that everyone is interested in - peace. But they're more important because they reveal we will never find peace by looking for it. Much like joy, peace is a fruit - a byproduct - that comes from other choices. So like **joy** or **freedom** - you lose them the minute you start looking for them.

Pursue godliness and you get joy, peace and freedom thrown in all at the same time. Pursue any of these things without first pursuing godliness and you end up with counterfeit addictions and emotional let-downs.

What are the steps Paul outlines to guard - fortify - our lives with the peace of God?:

1) **MAKE GLORIFYING THE LORD THE CENTRAL CONCERN OF EVERY ACTION OF YOUR LIFE**

Philippians 4:4 - "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"

The command is not "***rejoice.***" It's "***rejoice in the Lord.***" Let me read you a comment from one of the most prolific Christian authors of our day on these very verses to show how easily this can be missed.

"Because we have repeated the term and several synonyms throughout the book so often, the whole idea could begin to lose its edge. Don't let it. Rejoicing is clearly a scriptural command. To ignore it, I need to remind you, is disobedience. In place of worry, start spending time enjoying the release of your humor. Find the bright side, the sunny side of life. Deliberately look for things that are funny during your day. Loosen up and laugh freely. Laugh more often. Live lightheartedly. Stop reading only the grim sections of the newspaper."

Listen, that may be very good advice for a lot of people. But that's not what this passage of Scripture is all about. Paul isn't just telling people to "lighten up and laugh more." The church needs to read many contemporary Christian authors with a careful eye. Discernment is needed.

Paul's emphasis in this verse is that little phrase "*...in the Lord.*" If my joy is founded on the wrong things, it's going to evaporate when trouble comes. I have no peace if what makes me tick can disappear with a fall in the stock market or a depressing doctors report.

"Rejoice in the Lord" isn't a glossy religious slogan. It's a heart-searching reminder. Let me ask you a very important question. Don't answer it too quickly. Do you ultimately find your joy in the things of the Lord? I'm not asking you if you're a morally good person. I'm asking you if you enjoy what you know about and have in Christ Jesus more than you enjoy anything else in this world?

Paul is diagnosing much of the source of spiritual weariness with his command to ***"rejoice in the Lord."*** He knows that's the true measure of the relationship with God through Christ Jesus. It's the greatest delight the human soul can ever discover. This is how spiritual life is fueled and energized in the human heart. You can see this over and over in the Scriptures:

Psalm 1:1-2 - "Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; [2] but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night."

This is an obvious truth. I won't meditate "**day and night**" on the ways of God just out of obligation - at least not for long.

Psalm 37:4 - "**Delight yourself in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.**" Of course! If my delight is truly found in the Lord His ways are what I will desire above all else. If my delight is in the Lord I will crave that delight more and more. And if that's the case, what will I be asking God **for?** I will be seeking more and more delight. I will be asking for more and more of His will. So **of course** He will give me those desires of my heart. Because my heart wants more and more of the delight of obeying God's ways!

Psalm 119:14 - "**In the way of your testimonies I delight as much as in all riches.**" What a wonderful verse! The Psalmist knows how easily we throw around pious words when addressing God. How many times will the average church-goer in North America sing about how much he or she loves God today?

So, to keep those words from becoming sentimental and hollow, the Psalmist forces himself to quantify and qualify just how real his professed love for God actually is. And he's intensely practical and down to earth - "**Take all the money I will make this week - or this year - put an actual dollar figure on it. All of it together won't satisfy my heart like you do! I would rather lose it all than lose you! That's what I mean when I sing of my love for you!**"

Psalm 119:92 - "If your law had not been *my delight*, I would have perished in my affliction." Now the Psalmist looks at the joy of the Lord from another perspective. And this gets very close to Paul's thought in our Philippians text. The Psalmist is saying if his joy is rooted in anything ***other*** than God, it will fly away like a bird when whatever else my joy is rooted in is removed.

This is a great verse to have underlined in your Bible. ***"If my joy is in anything other than you, I will perish!"*** This is a kind of truth it's easy to ***agree with*** and say ***"amen" to***, but is big and deep enough to build your future around. There's a kind of Christian life that thousands of believers know nothing about anymore. Many people can barely relate to the words of the hymn-writer when, out of his passionate heart came boiling up these intense words:

"All that thrills my soul is Jesus
He is more than life to me.
And the fairest of ten thousand,
In my blessed Lord I see!"

There are two things about the making of that kind of heart. It rarely happens quickly and it is never formed in public. It's formed over time and it's formed by long periods of time alone on your knees and before His open Word.

So Paul would remind us if we want to have the peace of God in our hearts and crave a life that endures in faith through the storms that will come there is a promise for us. Look to the source of your joy. There's a picture of your future.

Let me wrap up this first point by giving you the best definition of the Christian life I know of. It's found in **Romans 5:2** - "**Through him we have also obtained access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and we rejoice in hope of the glory of God."**

We are saved and we **stand** by God's grace in Jesus Christ. And what does that grace **do**? What are the ongoing effects of divine grace in my life? Paul says grace changed what we take **joy** in and what we **hope** for. In other words, divine, justifying grace changes our **aspirations** completely.

When Paul says we "**rejoice in hope of the glory of God,"** he doesn't mean we look forward to heaven. That's **included** but there much more to it. He means when God's grace reaches a person's heart that person starts to look forward to something he never even considered before in his earthly life. He gets his greatest joy when his life brings glory to someone **other than himself**. He knows he doesn't glorify God perfectly **yet**. But when he gets a chance to put Christ Jesus on display so God is praised and prized, this Christian gets the greatest buzz of his life. And he's filled with the hope that one day his life will glorify God **perfectly**.

"There," says Paul. "That's the clearest picture of what saving grace produces in the believer's life. And that's what Paul's describing in our Philippians text.

2) **LIVE LIFE GOVERNED BY DIVINE REASON**

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

"Reasonableness." The word is "**epiekes**" (ep-ee-i-kace). It's used only once in the New Testament and is difficult to translate. The **King James Version** says "**moderation.**" The **NIV** says "**gentleness.**" The idea behind the word is just that - a patience, a reasonableness. Perhaps the best idea is ***an ability to keep things in balance when everything is spinning out of control.***

Times of trial come. Times of turmoil come. There are moments requiring big decisions, and you don't feel prepared to make them. There are times when loyalties are tested to the limit. You get the picture. Stuff happens.

And my tendency at those times is to panic - to scatter - to abandon ship - to take things into my own hands. After all, if I don't look after me who will?

And Paul rushes to an answer to that question. In some of the more fragrant, promise-filled words in the whole Bible, Paul says, "**the Lord is at hand.**" When everything is coming unglued ***the Lord is near.*** I know you might not ***feel*** Him close right now, ***but He's right there.***

There's something in me that doesn't want to rush past those simple words. Where are you right now? What has your soul churning? Are you wrestling with disease? Do you wonder why everything is suddenly ***out of season*** rather than ***in season?***

The tendency is to feel you have to suddenly **do** something drastic to make God care. And what I want to bring to your heart today is the promise that you don't have to **get** God to come to you. You just have to know He's **at hand - up close to you - right there.**

When I was very little I was deathly afraid of the dark. It made me panic. And I can remember when we would be on a family vacation, perhaps in a tent at a camp site. And it would get jet black at night. And I was in a strange place. I was not used to anything in my surroundings. I would think everyone was asleep and I was the only one left awake. For me, there was nothing lonelier than that. And then I'd just hear my mom's voice - **"We're right here, Don. We're right here."** That was all I needed. I'd fall asleep in peace.

I want to just practically press that point for a minute. When you feel like you've failed too badly and God couldn't possibly care **"the Lord is at hand."** When you think you can't possibly live with that spouse a minute longer **"the Lord is at hand."** When you think nobody knows or cares about how faithfully you serve in that ministry **"the Lord is at hand."**

That's what Paul is saying here. Keep your joy **in the Lord.** And to do that you need to avoid the rashness that forgets His presence. Remember the **"Lord is at hand."** Let the Holy Spirit help you restrain foolish words and actions. You don't have to resort to panic. You are not alone. You can pray, seek God and take the time to respond to life properly. Be moderate - not swept off your feet. The Lord will help you because He's right there - up close.

3) **WHATEVER ELSE HAPPENS, STAY SOFT BEFORE THE LORD
IN PRAYER**

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."

There's something quite strange in those words being included right at this point in the passage. You would think that Christians plagued by fear and worry would just naturally bombard heaven with earnest prayer.

Yet Paul tells these troubled Christians to remember to pray. I take that to mean prayer can easily drift from our first response to life. When things are going tremendously well, I forget to pray. When things are causing me fear and worry - sometimes deep personal upset and tragedy - then I don't feel like praying.

Other times I feel ***unworthy*** for prayer because I know I've contributed to my own problems. Sometimes I feel like my faith is so weak my prayer won't help anyway. Sometimes I just feel like a deer frozen by the headlights of circumstances - I just get immobilized - caught by the enemy.

The truth is, in a church this size there are people here who are in serious situations and are not praying. There are people here who are in serious situations because they never **did** pray or **quit praying** long ago. So we all need this simple reminder from Paul. The things that make us **anxious** - “....**do not be anxious about anything....** - should all ignite prayer.

God wants to hear you pray. Look at that sixth verse again carefully - “....**do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.**” That last phrase just seems strange - “....**let your requests be made known to God.**” But doesn't God know all about life already? Doesn't he know my days from beginning to end? How can we make anything **known** to an **all-knowing God?**

It's your **request** that He wants raised. He already knows all of your **circumstances**. He wants you to **ask**. He wants to hear that **request**. He wants you to **pray** about those circumstances even though He already knows all about them.

Why? The text tells us. Our praying is what **develops our faith**. When we pray about our fear and worries and problems - and when we pray about them “**with thanksgiving**”(4:6) - our **hearts** get changed. We begin to get a bigger picture of our lives.

4) **WHEN YOU'RE UNDER ATTACK, KEEP CONTROL OF YOUR MIND**

Philippians 4:7-8 - “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. [8] Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, 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.”

The first thing that happens in any trial or any temptation or any unsettling set of circumstances is the ***mind gets knocked off its normal footings***. It gets momentarily fuzzy - blurred.

And there's another factor set to complicate the picture. Your ***mind*** and ***will*** are the primary objects of satanic attack during the whole process. I didn't say all of your unpleasant ***circumstances*** are directly caused by the Devil. What I'm saying is he is always ready to ***use*** the trials of life to effect maximum spiritual damage.

So remember, the mind and the will are the two things that need guarding - protecting. That's the point Paul is getting to in our text - **Philippians 4:7 - “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”**

This is such an important principle. It doesn't matter what the situation is. Maybe you're worried about the future. Or perhaps you're panicking because you might be the next one laid off from work. Or you're lured into horrible temptation because you're sure that this other person would be a much better partner for you than your present spouse. Whatever the situation is, if you let your brain just go blank, it's going to go in the wrong direction.

Paul says your mind and heart need guarding. Paul is reaching for words to say that when you're under attack, it takes protection to think straight. That means, if you're going to make it through - and you can - there are certain ideas that you're just going to have to kick out of your mind before they pollute your whole system. You'll have to treat them like a virus on your computer's hard drive.

You would not believe how many Christians ***don't know*** that! They come to entertain options and opinions that aren't even in the ballpark of Scriptural teaching.

That's why this verse isn't just flowery prose about nice things. Paul is saying that there will come times in all of our lives when we have to get down to brass tacks and find out what the truth really is.

“Whatever is true!” Your mind won't automatically discern what's true when God isn't front and center.

But if I obey this verse, there's a beautiful power in the truth of God. It liberates. It clears the mind. It brings peace to the soul. Let it light up your mind and it will guard ***all the other parts of your life put together***. Which is exactly what the Psalmist meant when he said, **“I have stored up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you.”**

This verse isn't describing a ***“lucky rabbit's foot”*** called God's Word. The Psalmist is talking about the discipline of putting Biblical truth and principles up against the millions of reflex reactions that would push to rule his life ***if he hadn't had God's Word to overrule them***.

5) **WHAT YOU KNOW IS RIGHT, DO RIGHT AWAY**

Philippians 4:9 - **“What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me—practice these things, and the God of peace will be with you.”**

You can lose control of your own heart. You can get to the place where a part of you wants to be put right, but you realize that it's just the smaller part. Most of your being doesn't care anymore.

What I'm saying needs to be said once in a while. You can get to the place where you don't have peace - where you know you're miserable and you're making life miserable for all of those around you - but you still stubbornly embrace the kind of life that makes you feel the most miserable. You just don't want to change. That's a huge part of what the Bible calls the "**wages of sin.**" It's being miserable and selfishly liking it.

But right now, while God speaks, Paul says you can control your heart. That's what these verses promise. You can usher in the presence of God. You can welcome Him as the **God of peace** - "**...and the God of peace will be with you**"(9).

And Paul says he found the secret to doing that: "I never **separated** the grand ideas of the Christian life from my daily, routine actions. I never left them only as high sounding ideals and phrases ringing about in people's minds. I translated them into deeds. I made it possible for people to see the teachings of the gospel embedded in the way I lived. And you must do the same!"