

Philippians 4:4-7. ⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Rejoice in the LORD always.

The Lord comes near with his grace.

His peace guards and keeps our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Christmastime is certainly a time of great joy. The holiday greetings, the happy get-togethers with family, friends, and co-workers. The Christmas traditions, including the services and programs. Who can't smile when they think about the children standing up in front, with smiles on their faces as they sing the praises of Jesus the newborn king? Some of the children make it very clear that they are filled with cheer as they gleefully belt out the good news as loud as they can. Christmastime is certainly a time of great joy as we get together and celebrate, as we consider how God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son for us, for you and for me. A child was born. A Son was given. Rejoice!

Christmastime is certainly a time of great joy. Except when it is not. Those happy traditions sometimes bring with them an anxiety of trying to get things just right. Those happy get-togethers over the years have lost their luster as family members are no longer with us, and the sting is revisited. The guilt of past sin resurfaces. Perhaps as we are face to face with the people we have hurt, we are forced to consider how our relationships have been severely strained because of something that we said or did. Illness and disease, disaster or tragedy, hardship or difficulty, make their sad mark and leave their awful scar. Such are a few of the thoughts can trouble our minds and disturb our hearts. Especially as we consider how such things which are magnified in the season tend to follow us into the new year.

What keeps a person from being overcome by the worries of the day, the anxieties of life, the troubles of the moment. How can Paul possibly say those words, ***"Rejoice in the LORD always."*** **In his grace, the Lord comes near with the good news of great joy that is for all people. His peace guards and keeps our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.**

As Paul writes to the Philippians, he writes of the joy that the Lord, Jesus Christ, gives. This is a major theme throughout the book of Philippians, to rejoice in Jesus. But

certainly, that does not mean that the life of these believers or anyone else will somehow be mysteriously devoid of any hardship or sadness, difficulty or strife. In fact, we remember that as Paul wrote he had been imprisoned because of the message of Christ. And in the words leading up to this well-known encouragement to rejoice, Paul had made reference to some division and strife that was going on among this congregation. He speaks of two women who had both been active in supporting the gospel in Philippi, but they had fallen into a disagreement that had caused tension to build within the fellowship of believers. He says to them, ***I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord...*** Paul also encourages a third person within the congregation to help ***these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life (Philippians 4:2-3)***. He writes of this problem which increased tensions in the congregation and threatened the joy and the peace that the believers there knew in Christ; and how did he seek to address it? He shares with them the grace and peace of the gospel. He makes this appeal to come together based on the good news that through faith in Christ their names are in the book of life.

These are his very next words, ***4 Rejoice in the Lord always***. And for good measure, because he knows full well the troubles and trials of life, he says it again. ***"I will say it again, rejoice."*** Even in the midst of the trouble of this world, in the midst of our pain, our struggle, our anxieties, our frustrations, our sinful spats, our stresses at work, our issues at home, and church, and school, and all the rest, the Lord comes near with his Word. With words of blessed reassurance, he says to us. You are mine. I have called you by name. In the waters of baptism, in the whisper of his word, in the personal assurance of the supper, the Lord comes near with his steadfast assurance that he is with us. In this season he reminds us especially of the fact that he came near, quite literally. In his great love for you, for all sinners, he came down from heaven, was born as a child for you, to rescue you and me from sin and darkness and give us joy. Jesus comes near and through the power of his Word, he grants us a childlike faith that believes, that trusts, that knows, that he has given us the joy of eternal salvation. And nothing, no anxious moment, no holiday malaise, not even hardship, tragedy, or earthly pain can take away our heavenly reality.

In his goodness, the LORD comes near with that undeserved love and he grants us the peace of God which transcends all understanding. We could never fully fathom why God would do this for us. Why would he send his own Son for sinners who broke his perfect world? Why would God take on flesh and pour out his blood to pay for and cover our sinful words, our hurtful actions, our unkind thoughts, and cruel ways? It is only by his grace. Why would God promise to rescue us from this world of pain and sorrow and bring me to eternal joys that we do not deserve? Only because of his

undeserved love for us.

His grace, his undeserved love for us, is the source of this peace. This peace of God which transcends all understanding is what God uses to guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. And this peace of knowing what God has done for us in Christ pushes out our minds those things that seek to haunt and terrify. The guilt that wants to seize our hearts. The uncertainty and anguish and pain that rushes to the forefront, is cut off and thrown out, as the peace of God stands guard at the door of our hearts and minds. The temptations of thought and the feelings that betray, the onslaught of despair that attacks, the thoughts of unworthiness that rise up against us, are all held at bay as the guard stands at the threshold of our soul. Therefore, blessed with this gift that comes through faith, we can rejoice. We can rejoice with quiet confidence or with full-throated praise because of what God has done for us in Christ Jesus.

The Lord is near.

The God who graciously gave us his Son will certainly give us all that we need in life. He will meet our every material need as he supplies our daily bread, he will give the strength we need to endure hardship and pain, difficulty, struggle, and disease. The LORD comes near with the good news of Jesus that fills our hearts and minds with joy.

Think of the children rejoicing at Christmas in the good news of Jesus. As they sing their praise and shout in gladness, they are reflecting what fills their hearts and minds in that moment. May the Lord be with us and lead us to think more and more, to meditate on and take to heart what Christ has done for us. May this good news so fill our hearts that it overflows into our daily lives as we live lives of gentleness that is evident to those around us. As the Lord has been generous and good, patient and forgiving to us let us also be good and gentle towards others. May this good news so fill us that it overflows and is made evident in our lives.

He came as a baby to save us. The Prince of Peace came as a child to live in this place of sorrow and pain, suffering and sickness so that we might be with him in the glories of heaven for all time. And that good news is given to us, that good news changes us into heirs of eternal life. This grace helps us to stand each day in the peace of Christ that transcends all understanding, and nothing can separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

It is said that the peace we have in Christ is the smile of God reflected in the soul of the believer. Smile, rejoice, dear children of God, in the good news of your Savior. Rejoice even when singing and smiling does not come easy or at all, for the Lord comes near, and he will come near again. He has given us the hope of eternal life, and he has given us the certainty that he will care for us each day.

As Paul assures the Philippians that the Lord is near, he also encourages these believers to come near to God with their prayers. He writes, "Don't be anxious about

anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”

There is peace in knowing that God cares about us each and every day. There is peace in knowing that the God who came to live as one of us, has made himself available to help us in the problems of life and eternity. He promises to hear our prayers. The Lord is near. When the anxieties of the season swell, go to God in prayer. When the troubles of the day annoy, when illness and sorrow, pain and hardship, make their mark and mount their attack, go to God with your prayers, with your petitions. With every little thing, with every major concern, go to your dear Heavenly Father in prayer. And notice what Paul says here about how we should pray, “Don’t be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”

With thanksgiving, present your requests to God. It is said that a prayer without thanksgiving is like a bird with no wings. Such a prayer has difficulty rising upward. In our pain, in our need, we can get so focused on our request, our need - the thing that is in our minds missing or lacking - we tend to forget about the one that is there. We sink down into our difficult lot and get stuck there. But as we pray with thanksgiving, as we consider the goodness of God - his mighty deeds, his gracious face which has so often shined so tenderly on us - our requests are lifted up to the heavenly Father and they are laid and left at his feet. He is in control. The one who made the heavens and the earth. The one who sent his son for me. The one who cleanses me from my sin and calls me heavenward day by day. He will take care of all of this.

With a childlike trust, we present our troubles, our requests, before the LORD. The LORD comes near. In his presence, our anxieties subside, because the holy God has been good to us. By his grace he calls us to be his own, he fills us with joy in his presence. We are blessed with a peace that comes from him that fills our hearts and minds and our lives.

The peace of Christ is as if the smile of God is reflected upon the soul of the believer. In his undeserved love, God has smiled favorably upon us in Christ Jesus. In his undeserved love, his grace, he sent his Son for you, for me, so that we can rejoice in any and every season. Living in the light of his love, guarded by the peace that Jesus alone brings, we can rejoice like children at Christmas time as we recall what great things God has done for us, and how he is faithful to all his promises. With a childlike faith, with a childlike trust, let us rejoice in our Lord always.

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