



Paul's letter to the

PHILIPPIANS

LESSON 8

PHILIPPIANS 4:2-9

“The Blessing”

A few weeks ago over 65 churches in the United Kingdom, representing hundreds more, came together to sing a blessing over their land (“The Blessing” by Cody Carnes and Kari Jobe).

Encouraged by The Pittsburgh Blessing, which consisted of a group of churches in the United States that recorded the worship song, hundreds in the United Kingdom followed suit. The video has since gone viral and has over 2.4 million views.

The diversity of churches involved in the video provides a beautiful picture of Christian unity and solidarity as together they sing words of hope, encouragement, and blessing.

Not only is it a moving and beautiful recording, it also reminds me that we have so many brothers and sisters in Christ around the world who are walking through the same uncertainties that we’re facing and who are also striving to be a blessing each day.

The video ends with an important and timely reminder for us all:

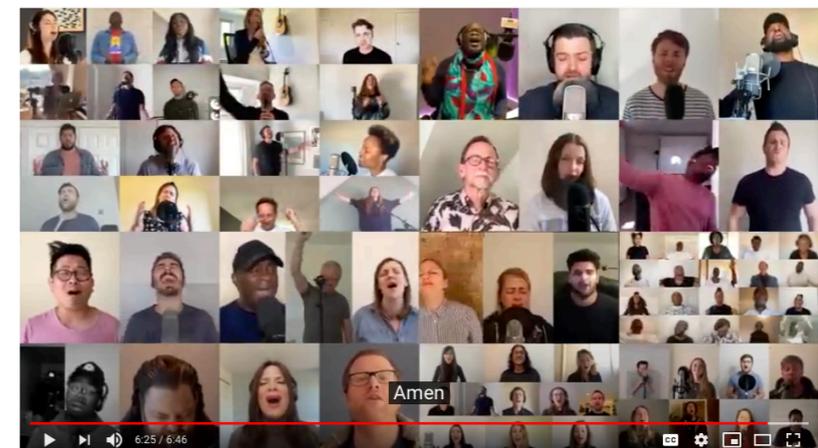
“Our buildings may be closed but the church is very much alive!”

You can watch the video on YouTube [by clicking/tapping here](#).

Below are the lyrics to “The Blessing” which come from Numbers 6, among other places in scripture:

The Lord bless you and keep you, make His face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn His face toward you and give you peace. Amen.

May his favor be upon you / and a thousand generations / and your family, and your children / and their children, and their children / May his presence go before you / and behind you, and beside you / all around you, and within you / He is with you, he is with you / In the morning, in the evening / In your coming, and your going / In your weeping, and rejoicing / He is for you, He is for you. Amen



Philippians 4:2-9 (NIV)

Words of Encouragement

² I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. ³ Yes, and I ask you, my true companion, help these women since they have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

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 every situation, 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.

⁸ Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹ Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Philippians 4:2-9



As we move into Philippians 4, we have a sense that we are moving toward the end of the letter. In this chapter Paul gathers together particular things that he would want to say to any community—although here there is still the characteristic Philippian note of joy and celebration. In order to “stand firm” (4:1), what needs to be done, in Paul's view, is to live by the promise that Christ will transform us, and will subject all things to himself (Philippians 3:21).

This promise has specific effects in the present. It calls for reconciliation between church members who have had a falling out (4:2-3). It nurtures habits of the heart (4:4-7) and habits of the mind (4:8-9) that open us to the peace of God (4:7), which is indeed the presence of the God of peace (4:9). In other words, Paul says that our focus on Christ and our imitation of Christ's example (2:5-11) should have immediate ramifications for the here and now. The following sections explore those ramifications as they appear in our text this week.

1. Reconciliation and Unity (4:2-3)

First, Paul pleads with two women leaders at Philippi who apparently are at odds with each other to come to “a common mind in the Lord.” Paul has spoken earlier in the letter about people who need to bring their thinking into line with one another and here is a very particular instance of this. We know little else about them or their situation. This is frustrating for us as modern readers because Paul didn't add any footnotes explaining what the problem is about. People have speculated on all sorts of reasons, but I don't think we were meant to know and it's impossible to figure out. They clearly are people who have had a falling out, and Paul sees that in any small community there isn't space for that. So he calls them to a common mind in the Lord.

Paul follows with another line in verse three. He makes a request to an unnamed “loyal companion” to help resolve their dispute. Who is this loyal companion? We don't know who this is, but it's somebody there who he can appeal to, trusting that this person will come alongside Euodia and Syntyche and do some diplomacy between them. It appears that Euodia and Syntyche are not simply two women who happen to be church members. They are two leaders in mission – valued fellow missionaries who had shared Paul's struggles: “They have struggled hard in the gospel alongside me” (4:3).

We also know that Paul's plea for reconciliation draws on his earlier depiction of “the mind of Christ” in Philippians 2:1-5. Just as Paul called the Philippians to “be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind,” so now he brings it home in a specific situation of disagreement. He also lists Euodia and Syntyche among those “whose names are in the book of life.” That's an unusual expression in Paul's letters, but the fact that it appears here causes us to consider the way in which the hope of eternal life encourages us to be reconciled to our fellow Christians. We will be spending a long time with them!

Ultimately, the general command about unity earlier in the letter is to find very specific and practical expression in community. When speaking about unity and reconciliation, Paul speaks in both local and cosmic terms. In 2 Corinthians 5, Paul speaks about the ministry of reconciliation in which we all share, and he grounds that work in cosmic terms—in the fact that God was in Jesus reconciling the entire world (or cosmos) to himself. Then in the letter to Philemon, Paul speaks and works on a local level to reconcile and bring Philemon and Onesimus together. **Indeed, the pursuit of unity and reconciliation must be local as well as cosmic.** Paul is working not only for the larger unity of the church but also for reconciliation in every time and place where there has been bitterness or bad blood.

So even though we don't know very much about who these people were, that may not be the point. The point is that they stand for this principle of pastoral work, working toward the unity that we should have in Jesus.

Philippians 4:2-9



2. Habits of the Heart (4:4-7)

This leads Paul back again to the most characteristic theme in Philippians: in verse 4, Paul says “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” In this emphatic call to rejoice, Paul may have some Old Testament imagery in mind because there are some interesting passages there about joy. In Ezra 3 and Nehemiah 12 we find descriptions of the Jews returning from Babylon and building the walls of the city and rebuilding the temple, that historic place of worship where God had promised to make himself known. And there’s a passage in Nehemiah that describes the celebrations that went on there. It says the joy of Jerusalem could be heard far away (12:43). In other words, joy (in that passage at least), is something we can hear, from a long distance!

So when we hear Paul saying rejoice, it makes us wonder whether he means something more than just a feeling of happiness deep inside. Maybe he means we need to get out on the street and let the joy out. And that’s perhaps why he says immediately, “Let everyone know how gentle and gracious you are. The Lord is near.” It’s as if Paul is saying, “The Lord is near, and as you celebrate his presence, you must not do it in a way that is harsh or implies you are looking down your noses at all these other people. You must make sure that the reason you are known in the community is because you are gentle and gracious people, people in whom the nearness of the Lord is experienced by your community, even though the world around you may not realize what’s going on.”

There are plenty of reasons for Paul to say that the Philippians should find ways to let their joy in the Lord be heard from far away. He expects the imminent return of Christ who will put all things right. He also experiences the nearness of God in Christ even in his present captivity. The Lord is near, so Paul says to rejoice! Joy is not something you can manufacture by putting on an artificial grin. Joy comes from knowing the nearness of the Lord, knowing what he has done, knowing what he is going to do, and realizing that this cannot be taken from you by anyone. There is a new creation underway, and we are called to act as part of it. So Paul says to celebrate and to let everyone know how gentle and gracious you are.

Paul, however, seems to know that we’re plagued with anxieties that get in the way of rejoicing. So he tells us to pray in *everything*, bringing everything, no matter how trivial or how difficult it may seem, to the God who loves us. We’ve already seen that Paul is capable of talking about his own anxieties and sorrows. In 2 Corinthians he has a lot to say about that. He says at one point he arrived in Macedonia and his “spirit had no rest” as he “faced conflict from every direction, with battles on the outside and fear on the inside. But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us” (2 Cor 5:5-7). We can be sure that Paul took his own advice and let God know what he needed in every area of life. He prayed and made requests. It wasn’t a matter of pretending never to be anxious. It was a matter of going through the process each time. We might picture him saying: *“Yes, this anxiety is overwhelming. I have to go back to prayer. I have to go back to God. I have to say, ‘Father what is going on here? What is this about? I seem to be in a mess again.’”*

Too often the Christian world discourages people from honesty at this point, as though honesty about our real anxieties might be seen as sign that we’re not as spiritually mature as we think. It would be nice if we had no anxieties, but since we do, Paul says that this is how to cope with them. **In every area of life, let God know what you need as you pray, make requests, and give thanks as well. Thank God for what he has done and for what he is going to do. And then, as Paul says in 4:7, God’s peace, which is greater than our understanding, will keep guard over your hearts and minds in Christ.** This doesn’t mean there won’t be more anxieties breaking out the next day. But like a row of angels, God’s peace stands around us and guards us. God’s own peace is his gift to us. Jesus says again and again to his followers, “Peace be with you.”

The challenge, therefore, is not to live a life free of anxiety, because those are inevitable. The challenge is to know what to do with them. And so it seems that here, as in 1 Peter 5, there’s this constant appeal to cast all of our cares on God. This demands the regular discipline of prayer. Without that regular discipline it would be very artificial to go through this process and name our anxieties. But within the regular discipline of prayer, which Paul constantly encourages, we can let God know our requests. And once we’ve done that, we have to let them go. Once they’ve been given to God, we must have the courage to leave them there. Christ will meet us at the place of worry and in our deepest anxieties because Christ has descended to the depths of human despair; he knows the experience firsthand. As a result, God has become for us the God whose peace “guards” our minds and hearts, even beyond what we can possibly understand. It is a peace that pushes the limits of our imaginations, challenging us to constantly reconsider what it is that makes for peace, for whom, and how. Because God’s imagination is larger than ours. God’s peace protects us by drawing us deeper into relationship with Christ, the source also of our joy.

Philippians 4:2-9



3. Habits of the Mind (4:8-9)

Finally, Paul tells us to focus our minds on what is true, honorable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent, and worthy of praise. This ties directly into Paul's closing word: "Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me" (4:9; 4:1; 3:17). He gives a list of admirable qualities, things that Christians are to think about and cultivate as habits of the mind (definitions come from Anthony Ash, *Philippians, Colossians, & Philemon*, 121):

True: "not truth reached as the end of a logical thought process, as much as truthfulness; i.e., integrity and reliability of character."

Noble: "lofty things, honorable, worthy of respect. Thought should not center on the cheap and vulgar."

Right: "to be just, both with regard to [people] and in obeying God"

Pure: "proper motives, and in the Christian sense, centered on God"

Lovely: "word found only here in the New Testament...It referred to that which was lovable and pleasing by nature."

Admirable: "commendable, kind and winning, not offensive"

Excellent and praiseworthy: "summary terms [which make up] the entire scope of proper thought"

Every day we hear and see a culture that focuses on the negative (not to mention the opposites of what Paul says to think about; i.e. what is vulgar, unjust, impure, unpleasing, offensive), and it's easy to think that acting with hope and joy is unrealistic. But Paul sees another reality coming from the future into the present. The reality of God's presence and redemption, already here and still drawing near.

Training our minds to think of this, and thus to act with joy and hope, is a daily discipline. And we can't do it alone. For such a discipline we need to experience the presence of God and the mind of Christ in the midst of our relationships. So Paul calls the Philippians to take inventory of where they have experienced such things in Paul and elsewhere. "Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me" (4:9). He offers his own relationship with the Philippians as an example of how that type of bond can root out despair and keep their minds focused on their mission. Paul reminds them to follow his example. They have learned, received, heard, and seen these teachings from/in him, and now they must put all this into practice.

There's a different way of life and Paul modeled it. Paul had modeled what it meant to live a genuinely human existence. As we discussed last week, we must remember that when Paul came into a new city, the people there had never seen anyone behaving like this before. And for the early Christians, this would become a different way of life, standing out from the rest of the world. Now Paul says to look out into the world and think about all the good things which are there, figure them out, and think about what they mean. Once again Paul is teaching them to think, to create habits of the heart and mind as they learn to think with the mindset of Christ. He is a teacher and a model. He is pointing them to the Messiah and getting them to think for themselves what that will mean in practice.

Our text concludes with Paul promising that the outcome of these habits of heart and mind will lead to peace: "And the God of peace will be with you," he says. More important, "peace" for Paul is not merely an individual experience, but often occurs among authentic community (Romans 14:19; 15:33; 1 Corinthians 7:15; see also Colossians 3:15; Ephesians 2:14-17; 4:3). For Paul, God's peace is not an optional add-on, but part of the experience of authentic faith and spirituality. In living this out, "the God of peace will be with you" (4:9). The God of peace, who gives a peace and fullness beyond words, will be with us and will enable us to go through everything the world throws at us with reawakened joy and hope.

Reflections

1

Joy

In verse 4, Paul urges the Philippians to “rejoice in the Lord always.” There are many things that can be a cause of rejoicing: good news; an unexpected reprieve; achievement of a hard-won goal. In some cases, the “joy” will be fleeting; where the cause of rejoicing has an enduring impact, the “joy” will continue. To “rejoice in the Lord always” points to a “joy” that is not only enduring, but that sustains us even when we are worn down by life challenges. This requires something more than seasonal cheerfulness. It is a “joy” rooted in an ongoing relationship, built on trust, that is able to negotiate the moments of joylessness in ways that ultimately work for good (see also Romans 8:35-39).

Critical, here, is relationship: our relationship with God through Jesus Christ, but also our relationship in community. For Paul, “rejoicing” is cultivated through mutual support (2:17-18; 4:10; 1 Cor 16:17; 2 Cor 7:16). This doesn’t mean that everyone always agrees or gets along. Rather, it reminds us that each of us has a role to play in creating the supportive relationships that are the foundation of “joy” and a cause for “rejoicing.” (H. Hearon, “Philippians 4:4-7”)

2

Prayer & Thanksgiving

We are invited to make ourselves known to God, and to ourselves, at our points of greatest vulnerability. Further, we are told to do so with thanksgiving—before we know the results. Thanksgiving, in this way, becomes an expression of our openness to process, because we have confidence that we will be supported and sustained by the One who is faithful. Once again we should remember that Paul had a capital charge hanging over his head and was writing to a people who had very little in material terms. Many times our anxiety about the future obscures our sight of the gifts and benefits that have been showered upon us. Gratitude to God for all that we have been given will allow the peace of God to guard our hearts and minds. (M. Hooker, *Philippians*, 548)

3

Peace

Paul concludes in 4:7 with the promise of peace. The peace that Paul speaks of is a gift because it is produced by God. Yet it is not a gift to be received passively; to be set on a shelf and admired. Nor is it an act of divine intervention that suddenly makes all things right (at least, from our perspective). It is a peace that pushes the limits of our imaginations, challenging us to constantly reconsider what it is that makes for peace, for whom, and how. Because God’s imagination is larger than ours. It is also a peace that guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. To guard is to protect. There is no shortage of evidence that our hearts and minds, two powerful forces that drive our imaginations and shape our attitudes and behaviors, need protecting -- not only from the influence of outside forces, but sometimes from ourselves. God’s peace protects us by drawing us deeper into relationship with Christ, the source also of our joy. (Hearon, “Philippians 4:4-7”)

4

Putting Them All Together

It’s no coincidence that joy, prayer, thanksgiving, and peace all appear as emphases in the same brief passage—these identify the essence of Paul’s spirituality. The same Paul who encourages prayer and thanksgiving amid ominous circumstances also emphasizes joy and the reality of a peace beyond all understanding. The key lies with the fact that the Lord is near—both now and to come. In a post-Christian, post-modern world, which has generally lost its bearings because it has generally abandoned its God, such spirituality is very often the key to effective mission.

In a world where fear is a much greater reality than joy, our privilege is to live out the gospel of true shalom, wholeness in every sense of the word, and to point others to its source. We can do that because the Lord is near in this first sense, by the Spirit who turns our present circumstances into joy and peace and who prompts our prayer and thanksgiving. And we should be at that task with greater concern than many of us are, because the Lord is near in the future sense as well. (G. Fee, *Philippians*, 177)

Discussion

1. What brought you joy this week? Why was this so joyful?
2. What does Paul suggest we do with our worry, and what is the result? How do you feel about this? Give an honest assessment of how you typically respond to worry and anxiety. Do Paul's words challenge you to respond differently?
3. How do prayers of thanksgiving play a role in what Paul says in 4:6-7?
4. Reflect on the promises of verses 7 and 9. How have you experienced the peace of God in the midst of difficult circumstances? Talk about the significance of experiencing this peace during these difficult moments.
5. Throughout this letter we see Paul using his influence for the sake of unity. How can you use your own influence to bring greater unity to the people who are closest to you right now?

Taking Philippians 4:6 as your model, pray about areas of life which you have considered too insignificant, or perhaps even too impossible, to bring to the Lord. As you pray, claim the promise that God's peace will keep guard over your heart and mind in Christ Jesus.