

UNEDITED DRAFT

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Before us today is one of those rich places in Scripture that you'll do well to come back to again and again and again. To start with, I want to read the whole thing to you without commentary so you become more familiar with it, then we'll dive in deeper:

Philippians 4:4-8 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. Finally, brothers, 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.

“Rejoice” is the traditional name given to this Sunday of the church year. This time of year is one that's known for joy. “Joy to the world, the Lord is come!” is a Christmas classic hymn most people know and love. Together with joy, this time of the year is characterized by peace. “Peace on earth and mercy mild. God and sinners reconciled.” So here we are with Christmas less than two weeks away! Are you feeling it? Joy and peace. Joy and peace.

Or not? If you're not feeling it, you're not alone. I doubt you'll be surprised to hear that this is actually a season which brings increase depression to many, many people. It's a season that creates anxiety and tension. It's a season that causes fights in families over stressed budgets and overfull calendars.

For a season that billed for its joy and peace, it's often anything but. So let's take a break from the holiday frenzy – the shopping and buying and baking and partying and wrapping. And let's discover the secret that *actually will bring joy and peace* this holiday – and for the rest of our lives.

Can you imagine? What if every day for the rest of your life, you truly did have joy? Wouldn't that be incredible? What if you experienced true peace – always! Wouldn't that be the best thing ever? I truly believe you can... because God says you can.

To discover how, we're going to listen to a man who taught the secret – the apostle Paul. And he teaches us how in a letter that he wrote while he was in prison. Ask most prisoners, current or past, “Describe prison for me.” I doubt many would say, “Ah, yes, prison! Two words: joy and peace.” Yet Paul teaches us exactly that from a letter he wrote in prison. I would suggest to you that if Paul experienced joy and peace in prison, you can also have joy and peace no matter what you are currently going through in life.

Philippians 4:4-8 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! [It's a message we can easily dismiss. “Yeah, whatever.” So he repeats it. No really – rejoice! But look at the key to the rejoicing: “In the Lord.” A person who does not know the Lord *or remember* the Lord will not be able to rejoice. Rejoice in the Lord. We'll come back to that.

Let your gentleness be evident to all. [Arrogant, bombastic, self-centered, narcissistic – if you see those characteristics, I can almost guarantee that person is not experiencing joy and peace, and if they are it won't last long.]

Rejoice and be gentle... why? **The Lord is near.** Jesus is coming again soon. Whatever has you down will be passing. Your current circumstance will not last for long. A person can put up with anything when you know it's just for a time. The Lord is near.

Do not be anxious about anything, [If someone says or acts anxiously, that's a sure sign that joy and peace are at very low levels. The two don't go together. So get rid of anxiety. How?]

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. [What are you anxious about? Present it to God in prayer. Know that he is God and he will take care of it as he knows is best. Unload your burden and anxiety on him, then walk away. Leave it on him. He can bear it. He invited you to do it. He promised to handle it. It's now God's problem, not yours!]

And the way you let go of it after you pray about it is to pray *with thanksgiving*. Isn't that an odd thing to do? Normally we pray, then we wait, and if we get what we asked for, then we thank God. But Paul says, "Present your requests with thanksgiving." Thanksgiving acknowledges that God will now have the problem in his hands and he'll do with it what is best for you. "Thank you God for taking this issue and handling it for me! I know that whatever you decide will be a blessing to me, because I have no doubts about your love for me, and your unlimited power at work for me."

And [rejoicing; gentle; not anxious; presenting requests with thanksgiving] the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. [Guard is a military word. Like a garrison of soldiers surrounding a city for protection. Isn't your heart the very place where you lose joy and peace? It all originates in the heart. But God will guard it and protect it in Christ Jesus.]

And now... where should we direct our thoughts? You do get to control your thoughts, you know. You do get to choose how you think and feel about circumstances and what other people do. "Why are you so angry/ disappointed / bitter / anxious?" "Because they... Because situation..." Stop right there. Not true. You control your thoughts and attitudes. And so Paul gives us this instruction: **Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right [have more to do with the mind], whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy— [these are attraction – LOVE] think [ponder; chew over; reasonably think;] about such things.**

So to have joy and peace, the apostle Paul boils it down to just three basic things: Think. Thank. Love.

1) Think.

- a. When the world talks about peace, they almost always talk about removing certain thoughts – or all thoughts! Meditation is an emptying of your mind. Blanking the mind. Expel the bad. There is no joy or peace in nothingness.

The problem with this approach is that you merely refusing to allow yourself to see how bad things really are. Ignoring reality cannot bring true or lasting peace, any more than alcohol or drug use (which people use to forget about the bad) bring true and lasting peace.

So the Bible never tells us to empty our minds, but to fill our minds with God.

- b. Rejoice... in the Lord. Peace OF GOD. Requests *to God*. Think about...

- c. Think about what? There is a place to think about our real condition. Sin. Lies. Deception. Self-examination. These lead us to realize that a mind filled with self is a very corrupt mind indeed.
 - d. Think about Jesus. His perfect life. His death on the cross for you. His resurrection. Ascension. Coming again in glory. These are things God wants our attention on!
- 2) Thanksgiving.
- a. In the Lord – with the Lord. Directed at all God does.
 - b. I'll keep this short because we talked about this at Thanksgiving, and in Bible class... and when we read through the text above. It's vitally important to thank God in all things. It is praise that acknowledge him and his greatness, love and power. Thank God daily. Thank God while you ask!
- 3) Love.
- a. Love the wrong things [family; money. Etc.] and you won't have peace and joy. Love things you're not in control of... and you'll fall apart.
Ancient philosophers: Love your own virtue and integrity because you can control.
 - i. Loving the wrong things is called wickedness. The wicked are not people without love. That's why we get offended that it even be suggested that we be called wicked. We're not wicked! We love deeply! But if we love the wrong things, we are indeed wicked. If we don't love God first and most, we are wicked. And being wicked (loving the wrong things) removes peace, because we love that which changes, and when it changes we get anxious and angry. There is no peace with God if we love the wrong things.
 - b. Problem: Your virtue and integrity are not under your control! It's every bit as uncertain. You don't have control even over yourself.
 - c. Don't love things outside, don't love what's inside. Only love that which is unchangeable. GOD! It's the only unchangeable things. The worst circumstances in life actually give you more of it: the presence of God.
- 4) God makes it EASY to love him above all things. He did the most beautiful, attractive, gorgeous. (Nothing in his looks that drew us to him, but his actions!)
- a. Jesus lost all of his peace on your behalf. The cross. The Father punished his Son for your sins. No peace between the Father and the Son as he suffered hell on the cross for you.
 - b. Jesus was robbed of every last bit of joy when he died on the cross. He ENDURED it. There was a joy that would come after it... and he knew it. But on the cross, Jesus was totally drained of joy. "My God, my God..."

Now you know the secret of true joy which also bring lasting, unshakeable peace. There is nothing else that can bring you true and lasting joy and peace.

- There is nothing in the world: not riches, fame, or power – because those things don't last and they're incomplete...
- there is no other person: not father or mother, not spouse, not children, not a friend that will bring true and lasting joy and peace: all people are sinful, and sinful people ALWAYS disappoint. They will not bring you the joy and peace you seek and desire. So there is nothing "out there" that will give the peace and joy.

- And neither is there anything inside you that will give it. Your virtue, character nor integrity will not give you lasting joy and peace because inside you too there is sin and imperfection. Sooner or later, you WILL disappoint even yourself, and when you do, your peace and joy will collapse with it.

Keep your heart and mind rooted in and locked on to the Lord Jesus Christ. In Christ you will find all that is **true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy**. The first thing in the morning is to set your mind on Jesus. Throughout your day, take 90 second pauses to fix you mind on Jesus. The last thing you do before you go to bed at night is to fix your mind on Jesus. The perfect Son of God took away your guilt and made you right with God. What's more important than that? If that is your focus... if Jesus is your love... then you can lose your wealth, but you'll still have Jesus: joy and peace. A dear loved one can die: but you still have Jesus – joy and peace. You can be fired from your job: but you still have Jesus – joy and peace. You can get sick – even terminally sick – but you still have Jesus – joy and peace.

Nothing can truly harm you in this world. The worst the world has to offer can only bring you closer to Jesus – and that's the very place where you find joy and peace.

When things go wrong and you feel the joy and peace seeping away, one thing we tend to think is: “Maybe I’m being punished.” No! Look at the cross! All punishment fell on him! This isn’t a punishment from God. It’s impossible because Jesus took your full punishment.

“Maybe God doesn’t care.” No! Look at the cross. God cared so much that he sent his son to die for you there.

Think. Think about Jesus and all he did for you. (The opposite? Forget.)

Thank. Thank God always – even *when* you make a request, knowing the answer will be best and a blessing. (Opposite? Taking for granted, or arrogant expectation of God’s blessings.)

Love. Love God. Love the will of God. Love what God loves. Opposite? Could be hate.

But more likely it’s loving the wrong things.

With this instruction from the apostle Paul you will have joy and peace this Christmas, and year round!

Rejoice in the Lord. I will say it again, rejoice! And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.