

Facing All Things
Philippians 4:4-23
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We've been surveying Paul's letter to his friends in the church at Philippi. We've heard Paul's affirmation of them and prayer for them. We've seen his joy that the gospel is going forward despite his being in prison. He has called them to stand for the truth of the gospel as they face opposition from their surrounding culture. He's encouraged them to be united and serve one another. And he's given them the great example of humility and service that we see in Jesus Christ. Paul tells some of his own story to show them how following Jesus means giving up advantages and status, even religious advantages and status, in order to know Christ now, to grow in knowing him, and finally to gain Christ fully when he returns. Paul keeps pointing to the future hope we have in Christ. Because of their confidence in Christ, he calls them to rejoice and to stand firm in the Lord. Now we come to the last part of the letter.

4:4-9 Joy in the Lord, Prayer without Worry, How We Think, How We Live

Paul begins this section by telling the church to rejoice in the Lord always. Then he repeats his encouragement: rejoice! Joy is a theme in this letter. The Philippians are facing tough circumstances. Christian living in a pagan world is full of uncertainties. There's always the possibility of persecution of some kind. What would it be like to claim Jesus as the only Lord and Savior in a world where the emperor, Caesar, was called "Lord" and "Savior" and worshipped as a god?

Still, they could rejoice, they could celebrate in the Lord. Joy goes deeper than happiness. Happiness depends on circumstances, but joy is constant and steady. We rejoice *in the Lord*. That's one of Paul's favorite descriptions of Christian life. It's lived in the Lord, in relationship with Jesus Christ.

Don't you imagine that the Philippian jailer and his family are in the congregation? As he listens to what Paul wrote, he remembers how years

before Paul and Silas were in his jail. They were rejoicing in the Lord, singing and praying when an earthquake came and opened the prison. That rejoicing even in those circumstances led to the jailer and his family coming to faith in Jesus and finding new life in him. I think he would be encouraged to keep rejoicing in the Lord.

So Paul is saying to rejoice, to celebrate, to be exuberant in the Lord. At the same time, he says, let everybody see your gentle forbearance. At the very least, that means we in the church need to cut each other a little slack. We don't excuse sin, but we don't expect immediate perfection either. And we can't expect everyone to see everything our way. "Let your gentleness be evident to all."

Three main things come together when our celebration in the Lord is both joyful and gentle. There is prayer that overcomes anxiety. There are patterns of thought that celebrate God's goodness throughout creation. And there is the style of life that embodies the gospel (Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*).

Because our joy flows out of an abiding relationship, we can rejoice always. Paul goes on to say, "Pray about everything." He connects giving thanks with such ongoing prayer. The emphasis of Paul's own life was thanksgiving. He couldn't imagine Christian life that wasn't a constant outpouring of gratitude to God. Thanksgiving is the basic attitude of believers. It's the context where we bring requests to God. When we live in gratitude we acknowledge generosity shown to us and we become more generous (Gordon Fee, *Philippians*, New International Commentary New Testament).

Paul then states, "The Lord is near." He seems to mean two things here. The Lord is close to us now. "The Lord is near to all who call on him in truth" (Psalm 145:18). He also seems to be saying that the return of the Lord is near. He points to that great hope to encourage his friends to keep rejoicing and not to have anxiety.

This leads Paul to say, "Don't worry about anything. Don't be anxious about anything." What? Don't worry about *anything*? Even though he's referring to what Jesus said (Matthew 6:25-34), we may wonder how Paul could say not to worry about anything. We might think that's easy for him

to say. But remember where Paul is as he writes this. He's in prison and though he's confident he will be released, that's not certain. He's been attacked and harassed almost everywhere he's been. He has all these churches he founded that face false teaching, persecution, division, and other threats to their well-being. Paul would seem to have the right to worry. Yet he says, "Don't worry—pray."

What do we worry about? Most of us worry about things we can do nothing about. Most of what we worry about never happens. Yet, we still face worry, confusion, the pressures of daily life, and uncertainty about the future.

Worry gnaws at us. Years ago, in the pioneer days of aviation, a pilot was making a flight around the world. After he had been gone for about two hours from his last landing field, he heard a noise in the plane that he recognized as the gnawing of a rat. When he was on the ground, a rat got into his plane. It could be chewing through a vital cable or control. The pilot nearly panicked. At first he didn't know what to do. It was two hours back to the last landing field and more than two hours to the next.

Then he realized that a rat is not made for the heights. It lives on the ground and under the ground. So the pilot began to climb. He went up a thousand feet, then another thousand and another. Finally, he topped 20,000 feet. The gnawing stopped. The rat was dead. It couldn't survive in the atmosphere of that height. More than two hours later, the pilot brought the plane safely to the next landing field and found the dead rat.

"Worry is a rodent. It can't live in the secret place of the Most High. It can't breathe in the atmosphere made vital by prayer and familiarity with the Scripture. Worry dies when we ascend to the Lord through prayer and his Word" (Clovis Chappell, *Questions Jesus Asked*, in *Illustrations Unlimited* 496).

The opposite of a worried life full of anxiety is a life of rejoicing, gentleness, prayer and thanksgiving in the Lord. Also, we're called to think in line with our relationship with Christ. Paul has urged the church to have the same mindset. Now, he tells them to think on, to consider, or to take into account the best things they find in their culture and in the world God

has made. This list of virtues is something the Philippians would have been familiar with. It was part of their Greco-Roman heritage.

Paul affirms what is best about their culture. We can embrace whatever is good wherever we find it. At the same time, we need to use wisdom and discernment. The gospel guides how we embrace the good in the world. Paul reminds the Philippians to put into practice what they learned and received and heard from him or had seen in him. That's referring to the gospel of the crucified Messiah. We don't just think about the gospel. We also "do" the gospel.

We don't have to check our brains at the door of the church. We don't have to abandon goodness and truth and beauty that we find in nature or the arts or education or the media—or anywhere else. But our thinking needs to be devoted to God who reveals himself and redeems us in Jesus Christ. And we must be ready to practice the gospel.

How do we know how to practice the gospel? How do we know what God wants us to do? We walk in the light that God gives us. An eight-year-old boy was growing up on the family farm. Each member of the household had chores to do. The boy normally did his chores before and after school each day.

In the fall, after the clocks had been set back, he came home one afternoon to find that it was already dark when it was time to do his chores. His dad told him to go on and do them and the boy went out to go to the barn. But he got scared because he couldn't see the barn in the darkness.

He went back inside and told his dad how he felt. His dad was wise and said, "You're getting to be a big boy. We can trust you to carry a lantern to the barn and do your chores." He lit the lantern and sent his son out onto the porch carrying the light into the darkness.

The boy stood on the porch and held the lantern up, but he still couldn't see more than a few feet in front of his face. He certainly couldn't see the barn across the yard. He was still scared.

He went back inside and told his dad how he felt. His dad was wise and said, "Son, do you trust me?" The boy said, "Yes." His dad said, "Do you believe me when I tell you that the barn is still out there across the yard?" The boy said, "Yes." The dad said, "Then I want you to go back outside and

take a step off the porch toward the direction of the barn. Take one step at a time and work toward the edge of your light, and I promise you the barn is still there" (Jeff Greenway, *The Asbury Herald*, 114:2, p. 5).

"Walk toward the edge of your light." That's a good way to see how God leads us to pray and think and do our lives in relation to him according to the gospel.

4:10-20 Contentment and Generosity

In this section we see the key qualities of *contentment* and *generosity*. As Paul thanks his friends for financial support they have sent him, he says that he has learned the hard lesson of being content whatever the circumstances. This contentment is part of a relationship with the Lord. Paul is again showing them his own example, this time of how to live without anxiety. Contentment is possible not because of self-sufficiency, but because Christ gives us the strength to face all situations.

We find true contentment in Jesus Christ. We can be content because we rest in him, we are secure in our relationship with him. Living in that relationship we can be content in any circumstances because we can face all things with the strength Christ gives us. This *strength* recalls knowing Jesus in the *power* of his resurrection (3:10). Everything we need is in Christ: knowing Christ; Christ gives us strength; my God will supply all your needs according to his riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

Paul thanks the church for their generosity to him. Remember, gratitude acknowledges generosity, but it also makes us more generous. He says that the gift they had sent fully satisfied him. Then he says that God will fully satisfy all their needs.

A great point in this section is that when our life is shaped by the cross of Jesus we're not controlled by either wealth or want. "Those in 'want' learn patience and trust in suffering; those in 'wealth' learn humility and dependence in prospering, not to mention the joy of giving without strings attached!" (Fee).

The mention of God's riches in glory leads Paul to praise God: "To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen."

Now all that's left is to give some closing greetings to finish the letter.

4:21-23 Grace for all God's People

The "saints" are all the people of God in Christ Jesus. Grace is at the heart of what Paul wants his friends to experience. Christ is the center of all that Paul has written throughout the letter. Truly, to live is Christ, knowing Christ is the greatest ambition we can have, and Christian death and resurrection will mean gaining Christ more fully.

I once heard a story that kind of sums up Paul's attitude throughout his letter to his friends in Philippi. It's about a man who served in World War II. He was twenty-nine, a little older than a lot of the other soldiers. On D-Day he and a couple of other men hit the beach together and immediately came under fire. Hiding behind a sand bank, they were shaking with fear. The older man grabbed the two younger guys around their necks, pulled them in close and told them, "We're going to pray and ask God to take away our fear and protect us. And he will. But if he doesn't—we can get to heaven from here!" (Bob Stamps).

I like the line in *The Lord of the Rings*, after Frodo and Sam have destroyed the ring and the dark lord's kingdom is crumbling. Frodo says to Sam, "For the Quest is achieved, and now all is over. I am glad you are here with me. Here at the end of all things, Sam" (J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Return of the King*, Ballentine ed., 277). Our Lord is with us in all things now. And the Lord we know now is the one who will be with us at the end of all things. And that makes us glad.

Rejoice, pray, give thanks, trust, think, listen, learn, observe, do, be generous. Life in Christ involves all of these.

And the Lord who is near, the God of peace, who gives strength for all situations through Christ and who meets all our needs—this is the God who is with us. More than gifts, God gives himself. Live in union with Christ. Live a prayer-filled, thankful life in relationship with the God of peace, who is with us.