

An Unsinkable Joy July 11, 2021

Philippians 4:4-7

Hey family, if you were with us last week then you get to see me again for round 2. If you weren't and we haven't, my name is Allen and I am one of the pastors here at Midtown. We are continuing in our series on Philippians so let's start with reading our passage and then we will work through it together.

4 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.

Today's passage of scripture has phrases and verses that lend themselves toward catchy mottos. They get the coffee mug treatment or the more modern kitchen letterboard, and maybe even a tattoo. The verses that are short, sweet, and super encouraging.

Rejoice *always*. Don't be anxious *about anything*.

It's very easy to put these verses on an artsy instagram square, but when examining them closer and seeking to apply them; we are likely to have two strong competing reactions to these verses.

That sounds amazing - to rejoice always and to never be anxious. Gosh I want that. But also that sounds impossible - to rejoice always and to never be anxious. These verses seem to add to the burden rather than relieving it.

And in the wrong hands, even with the best of intentions, these verses can be really unhelpful.

- You have a setback at work, and all of a sudden money seems like a bigger issue than it was before
- Your family relationships, your marriage feels like it's falling apart, and no matter how hard you try, there's just no movement
- The world is not right. The injustice and brokenness is so real, and it seems so close to us sometimes
- There's a loss – whether it be life, friendship, job, life situation

How do you rejoice always? Is it possible to not be anxious?

Lots of people who are prone to anxiety and really struggle in this area are very familiar with these verses because sometimes people use these verses in an unhelpful way. They usually have good intentions, but fail in execution.

LifeGroup Gone Bad.

Usually it's something like, "Hey dude, the Bible says don't be anxious."

Oh, ok. Thanks. So I should just quit. Ok, sounds good, but I can't. It doesn't work like that.

Or other times it comes in the form of, "If you're anxious, you should just pray. Have you prayed about it?"

Oh, ok. Thanks. I have been praying and I still feel anxious so what now?

We bring all of this into the text today. Inspiration, Amazement, Frustration and maybe even discouragement. So I would say these things as we begin to work through this passage today:

1. As we talk today, I want us to have at least 2 categories for anxiety - the first being clinical anxiety or some type of anxiety disorder. We are not really going to address anxiety disorders today because of their complexity although a good bit of what we will be talking about today will be helpful as one of the means for working through your condition. The other type of anxiety is the day to day, big and small anxiety that all of us experience to varying degrees. This is the type of anxiety we are mostly focusing on.
2. If you ever have been assaulted with these verses or maybe in the past you have found them to be unhelpful or even discouraging. Let's look at this passage afresh today and be open, because you're right Paul is neither saying "stop it" nor is he using prayer as some magical anti-worry potion.
3. This last one is for all of us. We need more hope in our lives. This life is possible. What Paul is saying is actually possible. It is possible for your life to not be ruled by the anxiety and circumstances that are in and around you. It is possible for your life to be marked by joy and peace, no matter who you are or what you're wiring is. It's possible.

Prayer

What are joy and peace?

Let's define our terms a little bit. Potentially another barrier for us in this passage is that we think joy and peace are different than what the Bible says they are.

In particular, **we naturally equate joy and happiness with each other.** And that makes sense as the Oxford english dictionary says joy is "a feeling of great happiness." However, that's not

exactly how the Bible talks about it, especially when we equate happiness with pleasure. Many times, joy and happiness are related, and they occur simultaneously. However, we can look at examples in the Scriptures where people are rejoicing, but they are not necessarily happy, they are not experiencing pleasure.

- James 1, count it all joy when you meet trials of various kinds
- Romans 5, we rejoice in our sufferings
- 1 Peter 4, but rejoice insofar as you share Christ's sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when His glory is revealed
- Psalms 94, when the cares of my heart are many, God your comfort brings me joy

So again, while joy and happiness are related, they're not the same.

I think Tim Keller, a long-time pastor in NYC, puts some really good language around joy. He says,

Joy is a buoyancy, a spiritual buoyancy, that comes when you're rejoicing in God...That doesn't mean we're impervious to suffering. It means we're unsinkable.

Like a beach ball pushed under water, joy pops us right back up. We are unsinkable. I love that! Whatever the circumstances are, whatever is going on in the outside world or even within your own heart, there's a buoyancy – a little bounce.

And peace is certainly related to joy, especially for Paul. He groups them together in different places in his letters, particularly Romans and Galatians. **But while joy is a spiritual buoyancy, peace is a spiritual steadiness.** No matter the chaos of the outside world, God's peace brings steadiness and security.

Again using Keller's terminology: **Joy is the boat, and peace is the anchor.**

Rejoicing in the Lord, having the joy of the Lord means that in anything, we can be unsinkable. And having God's peace means that in anything, we can be secure.

Do not be anxious

So if that's what joy means, the opposite of joy isn't sadness, it's despair. And the opposite of peace would be anxiety. And that gets us right back into Philippians 4 verse 6, "do not be anxious about anything."

Anxiety is one of those things in our culture that seems like it's everywhere. It seems as though everyone is anxious, everyone talks about how they're anxious, and everyone's working to be less anxious. In 2019, about 11% of American adults self-reported having a large amount of

anxiety. In 2020, that number was up to 25%, a 127% increase. If you limit the age range to people 18 to 39, that number is up around 40%. We live in an anxious age.

In preparing for this sermon, I read an article in the Harvard Business Review called “What to Do When Your Mind (Always) Dwells on the Worst-Case Scenario.” In the article, she compared our minds to a smoke alarm and uncertainty as the smoke. When facing uncertainty the alarm in our mind is triggered and we are scrambling to figure out the problem: did I just burn the toast again, is this just a false alarm, or wait a minute is the house on fire and we are all about to die.

This is a great description of anxiety. An alarm going off inside of us alerting us to a problem. It’s that sense of worry and unsettledness. Either worry about things that are wrong, or things that could go wrong, or even a false certainty that everything will go wrong.

And anxiety can have serious crippling, debilitating effects on our lives. As in last week, we talked about pressing on. Straining toward the goal. Our overwhelming anxieties have the potential to slow us down, to halt our pursuits.

I don’t have to sell you on this. I’ve never met anyone who was glad to be anxious, who thought worrying was helpful or good for them. But I also know that we tend to feel helpless with our anxiousness. Part of this is actually because our anxiety is rooted in a lot of truth.

Our anxiety is actually a truth teller. It’s telling us three truths.

1. **We live in a fallen broken world.** Both the world around us and the person inside of us. We realize, recognize that the world is not what it should be or what we want it to be. We realize that we are not what we should/want to be. As the Bible would say it, the world is fallen, broken and a fallen broken world has troubles. That’s why we are always trying to change and improve ourselves, it is also why we lock your door at night. That’s why we have health insurance. It’s why we make new year’s resolutions. Things are not right, not as they should be. Neither in us or around us.
2. **Good things are worth caring about.** It’s right to be concerned about our family, our job, our marriage, our kids, our future, and caring about injustice in the world. These things are valuable and you want what is best, what is good and just. And because the first truth is real (we live in a broken world) the things that we value will be affected by your sin and the troubles of the world.
3. **We are not in control.** We do not have the ability to control the circumstances or the people in our lives. There is a sense of the unknown. What will happen next? Will I get this? What if this happens or does not happen? Loss of the illusion of control makes us feel helpless.

And these are true things. They are true and good concerns about the world and us. However, genuine concern for someone or something becomes sinful anxiety when we focus so much on those three truths, and we only see the problem. You guys know this, you know how it works. When you are overwhelmed by your current situation or overwhelmed by your future apprehensions it's all we can focus on. In the moment when our anxieties are heightened, all we can think about is the problem at hand.

- Yes our anxiety points to truth, but they can also limit our perspective.
- Blocked, blurred, and/or blinded to the realities of an active and present God who loves us dearly.
- We are so caught up in what is happening (small circle) that we begin to ask the questions like, “is God really in control? Does He really love me? Will he really take care of me?”

Prayer and Thanksgiving

Let's read verse 6 again together:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Paul's command is two fold, don't be anxious about anything, but in everything pray. So you can't just stop at “don't be anxious.”

This makes sense. Anxiety is anti-prayer. It causes us to focus on our problems and ourselves whereas prayer causes us to focus on God. Anxiety causes us to lose sight of God, our vision of God is blocked, blurred, or blinded. But prayer helps us to regain sight.

Pray does not mean, “God I am anxious, make me not anxious, in Jesus name, Amen.” God is not a genie and prayer is not the magic way to rub the God genie lamp. **Prayer is pushing into the Presence of God.**

Our anxieties, our focus on the first three truths, and realities consumes us. It blurs our vision. We lose sight of the real active presence of God and his promises. So Paul's instruction to us is to pray. When you lose sight of God or when you start to see God in an altered state, pray.

Prayer changes our focus. It changes our perspective. In prayer we are reminded of God's presence; that God is present, watching, attentive, listening, knowing, and near.

A present and listening God does not mean your circumstances will immediately change, remember God is not a Genie. But prayer does change our perspective. Our goal in prayer is to intentionally focus our thoughts on Jesus. That He is real, good, active and present with us no matter the situation or circumstance.

Paul also tells us to Pray “with thanksgiving.” **Praying with thanksgiving reminds us of God’s faithfulness to his Promises.**

Last week we talked about forgetting what lies behind, an active discipline of the mind to let go of anything that weighs us down and prevents us from running. We also mentioned the discipline of remembering, the active discipline of the mind to hold onto things that help us to run faster. Praying with thanksgiving is remembering. Actively holding onto thoughts that help us run faster in the right direction.

When we pray, we are intentionally reminding ourselves of God’s presence and when we pray with thanksgiving, we are intentionally reminding ourselves of God’s fulfilled promises, what he has done for us. Thanksgiving turns our perspective from ourselves and rightfully places our attention on God’s faithfulness. Thanksgiving is past oriented. It reminds of how God has fulfilled his promise.

This also connects us back to rejoicing in God. It’s why when we started this study of Philippians, we said that we wanted to be marked as a people of joy. In order to do that, we said that we wanted to practice gratitude as a church family. Being grateful, praying with thanksgiving, grows in us that spiritual buoyancy. Because I’ve seen God be faithful, He will not change, so I can rejoice, I can be secure, in whatever today is bringing.

Remember the three truths that our anxieties tell us?

1. We live in a fallen broken world
2. Good things are worth caring about
3. We are not in control

Praying with thanksgiving helps to train us to focus on these three truths about God:

1. We are not in control but **God is in control**. From a biblical commentary on Philippians by Ralph Martin, “When prayer leads you to remember that God is King and you are not, that reminds are hearts that He is able to do what we cannot.” We rightly remember God’s character and place and in so doing remember truths about us.

God is my Shepherd ... so I’m going to be taken care of

God is our Father ... and I know that he loves me

God is our Creator ... and no thing, person, or power is outside of His authority

2. Good things are worth caring about and **God cares about good things more than we ever could**. It would be incorrect to read the Bible and conclude that God does not care. He created a *good* world, we messed it up, and He has been working ever since to make it good again. He sees it *all* and cares about it *all*. We can get overwhelmed looking at our social media feeds and seeing the problems of the world, but God sees it all, He cares, and because He is in control, He can do something about it. Which leads us to...
3. We live in a fallen broken world, but **God is going to make the world right**. This is what the finish line looks like, Revelation 21 – “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.” And he who was seated on the throne said, “Behold, I am making all things new.” Everything. Everything that is wrong, broken, hurting, untrue is going to be dealt with and made right.

And that’s what praying in thanksgiving trains us to do. We press into the presence of God, we train ourselves to remember and focus on who God is and what He’s done.

When we only focus on your anxieties then they will obscure (block, blur, blind) the cross and the character of God. Meaning if your primary focus is on your situation it will mean that the cross is blurry and your anxiety will cast a dark shadow on your view of God.

Rather when you focus on the cross. God’s love for you. His grace poured out. Jesus’s sacrifice for you must become your focus and let the cross illuminate your situation and circumstances. Let the cross of Jesus help you to better understand your life and the world around you..

Conclusion

I also want to say this because I think this is a really important thing to pair together when we’re talking about spiritual practices like prayer. We get frustrated with these verses sometimes, like I mentioned at the beginning, because we pray and nothing happens. We practice gratitude, but nothing happens. We’re still anxious. We’re still in despair.

Spiritual practices don’t work like we want them or expect them to work. Kolman - believe the lie that one day I will just wake up mature.

We want the **light bulb moment** - low effort, instant results...you hit the light switch, and the light comes on. That’s not how discipleship with Jesus works. Discipleship, spiritual disciplines, following Jesus together rarely works like electricity. Alternatively, the Bible talks

about discipleship and change in farming terms. Farming takes work and time, and the results bear fruit out over time.

Let's also change the win, especially when it comes to anxiety. Instead of victory being getting rid of anxiety all together, **the real victory is a constant awareness of God's presence and his promises.**

II Corinthians 12 - Paul says that he boasts in his weakness so that the power of Christ might rest upon him. When I am weak, I am strong.

The real victory is a constant awareness of God's presence and his promises. If you have a natural inclination toward anxiety, it could actually become a spiritual advantage... your weakness becomes a strength if it triggers you to go to God.

So let's press into prayer with thanksgiving together. If it's not a practice of your life, your family, or your LifeGroup to pray together consistently over more than just a meal, make it a practice. Make gratitude something that you do regularly with the people around you. And here's the thing, if you're not anxious or despairing right now, there's a good chance someone in your life is. So, when you pray together or when you practice gratitude together, God is actually using that in their lives as well.

Look back at verse 7 - Paul says rejoice, don't be anxious, press into God through prayer and thanksgiving - And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

God's peace is an active agent. As we press in through prayer, God is active at work to guard, grow, and shape us into a people of joy and peace.

We want to end our time together with **practical application**: Let's pray together. I am going to lead us through some prayer prompts.

Prayers of Gratitude and Thanksgiving

- **Acknowledge God's active presence** - Jesus thank you that you are with me.
- **Confess your anxieties** - Tell God about your anxieties. What has your focus? What concerns you, preoccupies your mind? Where are you seeking control?
- **Remember with Thanksgiving** - Thank you God for... Focus on God's character, thank him for how God has moved in the past, and cling to God's promises