

Philippians 4

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 27 September 2015

Preacher: Mark Johnston

[0 : 00] I want us to turn the seat this morning to these verses that we've read together from Philippians chapter 4. We'll be looking especially at the beginning of the fourth verse where Paul says, 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 passes all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. There's one thing that unites us in our humanity.

It's the fact that no matter how much we may have or how little we may have, how well things are going or how badly things may be going, there is almost no one on this planet who is free from anxiety.

And the fallout from being anxious or worrying about the issues of life. And that's true not just out there in the wider worlds for people who are not Christians, but it's also true within the family of God's people.

[1 : 07] To become a Christian is not to be delivered from the world and all its pressures and stresses. The Lord Jesus Christ told his disciples on the night before he was betrayed that he was not taking them out of the world, but they would be in the world, exposed to all the rigors of life in a fallen world, all the pressures that it brings to bear upon us.

But because they were not of the world, they would have resources at their disposal that those who are not yet Christians do not have. And those resources that come ultimately from God in heaven are what will keep us, what will carry us, what will enable us to rise above the trials and tribulations of the world and of life in the world.

If you're familiar with the book of Philippians, it's somewhat enigmatic in that even though at a superficial reading it seems to be a letter written to a church where everything was going wonderfully well.

Because there's so much said about joy and about the need to rejoice in the letter to the Philippians that it was said by an older generation of commentators that this was the epistle of joy.

It stood out as being different from so many of the other New Testament letters because there was no absolutely obvious problem that was troubling the Philippian congregation. But the strange thing about that is that if you use the argument or come with the premise that you only use the strongest medicine for the most serious ailments, then when you come to Philippians chapter 2 you find what is perhaps some of the strongest theological medicine that the Apostle Paul administers in any of the New Testament contexts to which he speaks.

[2 : 56] He reaches for language in what is sometimes called the Carmen Christi or the hymns of the Lord Jesus Christ where he speaks of the Lord Jesus Christ as the one who did not see equality with God as something to be grasped or held on to, but rather he humbled himself and made himself of no reputation and became obedient unto death, even death upon the cross.

That extraordinary and eloquent and lyrical portrayal of unfathomable truths of the Lord Jesus Christ. And there are parts of the statement that Paul issues there that are almost impossible to fathom with the limits of a fallen human mind.

But Paul reaches for that language. He dispenses that pastoral medicine in the context of relationships that were obviously struggling in that congregation and the implications for those struggling relationships in the lives of individual believers.

And the fourth chapter bears testimony to that because he begins by pleading with two key women in that congregation, Euodia and Syntyche, to work well together.

Presumably because they were not working well together. And that one disrupted relationship was having significant impact upon the whole church and its life and work and witness in the area where it was placed.

[4 : 22] But then Paul says this. You should rejoice in the midst of these struggles, in the midst of these troubles.

You should rejoice. And he says emphatically, rejoice in the Lord always. I say it again, rejoice because the Lord is near. But then he goes on in the rest of that passage that we read together to make an extraordinary statement about how we respond to those things that disturb us in life. And he gives us, let me try and break it down into four component parts. In this passage Paul issues two commands to which he attaches one promise which he then backs up with a word of personal testimony and then presses home with one all-important key truth that is the key to everything that he is saying.

Two commands, a promise, a testimony and one all-important key that holds them together. The commands are very obvious.

They're there written in verses 6 and 7. He says, Do not be anxious for anything. That's the first of the two commands.

[5 : 48] Do not be anxious for anything. I may come across to us this fairly innocuous language in our English translation. It's the kind of thing that we might say to one another in the course of ordinary conversation.

But in the language that Paul was using, the Greek language, he is able to inject greater emphasis, greater force to what he's saying and he uses words that were available to him to make this a very emphatic command that he was issued.

Be anxious about absolutely nothing. There is no level of issue in life that we should allow to so get under our skin that it leads us to anxiety, to worry and fretfulness.

That may well be that Paul was bearing in mind what Jesus himself had said in his teaching of the Sermon on the Mount. Because there the Lord Jesus Christ tells people, which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to the length of your life or a single cubit to the height of your stature depending on which way you read that statement in the Gospel of Matthew.

But the Lord Jesus Christ speaks about the futility of anxiety. And even though we face issues that do indeed perplex us in life, do indeed disturb us in life because they are not things that we would choose for ourselves, they have come uninvited into our lives, it's very easy to allow those things to loom so large on our horizons that they become overwhelming and undermining in our experience, that they disturb the tranquility, the peace, the equilibrium of our life.

[7 : 36] And Jesus is simply stating the obvious. Actually, being anxious about those things is only adding insult to injury. Far from solving any problems by fretting about them because they're beyond your control, by allowing them to consume your thinking time and consume your passions, actually, you're only making a bad situation even worse by worrying about those things and becoming consumed about those things for the very simple reason they belong to that category of things in life that are beyond our control.

The very fact that they are disturbing us is because they are not issues necessarily of our own making. They have come to us as uninvited guests in our lives.

And Paul was saying that to the Philippians. There will be those kind of issues and there are those kind of issues that are disturbing the peace in the congregation of Philippi because they're disturbing the peace of your lives.

And Paul says, emphatically, do not allow them to loom so large on the horizon of your lives that they eclipse everything else, not least the sovereign hand of an all-controlling God and the promised grace that comes to us through a wonderful Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

And almost immediately, without drawing a breath, he has the second command. If he has said, in such emphatic language, be anxious about absolutely nothing, he goes on to say about, by way of response, rather pray about absolutely everything.

[9 : 16] So with equal force, he counterbalances the negative statement that he has just made. Do not be anxious about anything. Rather, instead, you should pray about everything.

And in issuing that command, he is echoing again what the Lord Jesus Christ said, that we are to pray at all times. But that doesn't mean to say that we are actively praying, consciously praying, every moment of every day, waking or sleeping.

But rather, he is saying that as the children of God, we should have that prayerful spirit, that sense of our permanent, 24-7 access to the throne of God in heaven, through the mediation of Jesus Christ, our great high priest, of whom we were reminded in Hebrews chapter 4, just a few moments ago, that we should be so utterly aware of that access that we have to the Father, that openness of communication to the Father in heaven, that we should take full advantage, of that line of communication.

And it's such a relief in so many spheres of life, in a working environment, for example, where you are facing the challenges, perhaps of a new job, or the ongoing challenges of a job that always has issues that need to be addressed, that if you were left merely to face them by yourselves, it would be an overwhelming and a daunting thing, but the fact that you know, because of your line management, you've got access to those who are more experienced, who've got greater wisdom, who've got a higher level of responsibility that you have, that you are able to go to them and bring your needs to them at any hour of the day if you so need to.

Well, here is Paul reminding us that we have access access to the High King of Heaven, that we have a door that is never closed, that brings us into the very presence of God Himself, gives us the ear of the Lord of all the universe, the God who not only made all things visible and invisible, but the God who, through His mighty Word, is controlling and directing absolutely everything that there is, causing all things to work together ultimately for the good of those who are His children, called according to His purpose and who love Him, but also for the glory of His name.

[11 : 52] And to be reminded of that, that God is working all things for His own glory as well as for His people's good, means that even though there are 101 things and more in life, that we will never ever fathom in this life, when the story is finally told in all its fullness, when all the mysteries of life are finally revealed, we will realize that those circumstances that descended upon us in life, that caused us such angst and grief in the providence of God, were used in an extraordinary way for the honor of His name.

And for a greater appreciation of grace. If you want the ultimate proof of that, think of the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The cross at which Jesus did not balk, He became obedient unto death, even death upon a cross, but the cross over which Jesus agonized.

You cannot fully understand what happened at Calvary without grasping something of what took place in Gethsemane, where the Lord Jesus Christ, confronted with the looming shadow of that Roman gibbet on which He would be immolated the next day, pleads with the Father, agonizes in prayer with the Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.

If there is another way, Father, then let it happen. And as far as the watching world was concerned and as far as His disciples were concerned, what unfolded when that prayer was not answered or so it seemed.

[13 : 48] And Jesus was handed over to the wicked men who crucified Him that next day. But even though His disciples thought this is the end, this is disaster, everything is collapsing in the worst imaginable way, that the cross, as Jesus Himself knew and prayed in anticipation of that event, was the pinnacle of glory.

The place where He was glorified, the place where His Father was glorified, and where salvation was secured for His people and for a cosmos under the curse of sin.

And if it was true that that was what unfolded through the darkness of the cross into the light of the resurrection and into the spread of that light through the preaching of the gospel through the ages, then how much more could we take comfort from this promise, this encouragement that we have that we are to go to God in prayer with the issues that we face in life rather than privately!

and we are to seek to shoulder them ourselves in a way that will only crush us. There are the two commands but they are swiftly followed by a promise that when we do this, when we consciously and deliberately refuse to be agitated by anything and allow it to become oppressive to us, but instead pray about all the different issues that confront us in life.

Then, he says, the peace of God which transcends all human understanding will guard, garrison your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus our Lord.

[15 : 49] There's a number of things about that that are worth teasing out. The first is, what does he mean when he talks about the peace of God which passes understanding? Well, it can't mean peace with God, the kind of peace that he speaks of in relation to what it means to be justified by grace through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Romans chapter 5, Paul says, therefore, being justified by faith we have peace with God. The God who was against us because we were rebel sinners and we who were against God because we were rebels by nature and rebels by choice and because that relationship, the relationship for which we were made, but the relationship in which we find breach and ruptured relationship because of our sin and our guilt and disobedience, that there is a reconciliation between alienated parties in that relationship when we are justified.

When our sins are forgiven because our sins have been reckoned to Christ and laid upon him and we are reckoned righteous in God's sight because the righteousness of Christ manifests through the life that fulfilled all righteousness by complete obedience to God's law was reckoned to be ours. So that great exchange that took place at Calvary where what was rightly ours became his and what was rightly his became ours, the effect of that was that God is no longer against us, but God is for us and God will never ever turn his back upon us.

So the gospel does speak about peace with God, but that's not what Paul is speaking about here, he's speaking about something that's had its roots in Old Testament teaching, indeed so deeply rooted in Jewish culture that right down to the present time in the Jewish community whenever two Jewish people greet one another it's with the word Shalom.

[17 : 58] which is the Hebrew word for peace. My last church in Philadelphia, we had a Jewish believer on staff, he was one of my co-pastors, delightful man, come to faith early in life, his family had abandoned him because of his Christian faith, but he went on to serve God in remarkable ways, and I remember him giving me just this wonderful definition of what Shalom meant and means in the Jewish mind, nothing out of place, everything as it should be.

Nothing out of place, everything as it should be. Of course the whole issue that Paul was addressing in the church in Philippi was that everything seemed to be out of place, nothing seemed to be as it should be.

That from a human perspective there was no way in which you could engineer this situation to be orderly and to be peaceful in that sense.

And yet Paul says in this wonderful promise that he gives from God that there is this peace that is of the very essence of God himself because the triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, in their divine unity yet diversity is the God throughout eternity for whom it can be said.

Nothing has ever been out of place in him or in his actions. Everything has always been as it should be because he is the God who is and who does all things well.

[19 : 48] What about this piece? What does it do as it begins to take hold? This other worldly piece that he describes. Well, he speaks about it guarding. Guarding our minds and guarding our hearts.

Guarding our minds because when things go wrong for us, things get disturbed for us in life. Our minds work overtime. Our minds run ahead of themselves.

ourselves. And Paul is simply reminding us that when we begin to grasp that we are not in control, it is God who is in control that we can rightly accept his wise and loving supervision of our circumstances, his direction of our lives, saying this is not my problem Lord, this is your problem.

I don't need to think myself silly over this issue. But of course, we are not just minds in terms of how we approach life.

We have hearts as well. That we are affected emotionally. We are affected deeply in our inner self in terms of our circumstances.

[21 : 05] That even though our minds may be alert and clear, very often we can be disturbed and deeply unsettled in ourselves because of the issues that we face.

And Paul uses the language of military protection. The effect of the peace of God is to shield our minds from disturbing angles on life, disturbing perspectives on life.

To think not as the world thinks with no reference to God, but to think always with God in the center frame of our understanding of what's happening to us and what's going on around us.

At the same with our hearts. That we don't allow our emotions to take control. We don't allow our emotions to run riot and to lead us into deep disturbance.

But rather we are content to know as God says to Moses and through Moses to the Israelites in Deuteronomy chapter 29 that the everlasting arms of the everlasting God are round about and underneath us.

[22 : 20] When we don't know what's going on, we know that the bottom is not going to fall out of our world because the arms of God are supporting us through the worst of situations.

Paul's promise is backed up by a word of personal testimony. It's strange that for those in the Christian ministry through the ages that those who serve as ministers are not merely called to perform certain duties and fulfill certain tasks the most central of which is to proclaim the word of God and to seek to pastor the people of God but actually they are called to walk the path of the issues about which they preach themselves.

So it is not unusual for pastors who will inevitably find themselves preaching about suffering to actually be called by God to walk the path of suffering in some shape or form.

That almost inexplicably and in ways that often baffle us as ministers. We find ourselves walking roads that we have preached about to others that we suddenly have to experience for ourselves and under those circumstances our confidence in the message that God has given is put to the test. It is very easy to stand in a pulpit and to preach in abstraction about these things things. It is a very different thing to preach those same things to yourself and to your family when you are in the thick of it and going through the furnace.

[24 : 13] Yet it is only as God takes his servants through the furnace that he proves that his word is not true theoretically it is true in reality.

And so for Paul Paul goes on to speak very candidly about his own personal experience of life because he goes on to speak in verses 10 and 11 about the way in which the Philippians were showing him their generosity and supporting him in his need and he responds by thanking them for that by saying I am not saying this because I am in need for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances I know what it is to be in need and I know what it is to have plenty I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation whether well fed or hungry whether living in plenty or in want he can put hand on heart before his listening congregation and say dear brothers and sisters I may not be experiencing exactly what you are experiencing but I have been there myself I have been there in the challenges that God has brought me through in a way that has put my faith to the test in the way that your faith has been put to the test in which

I am being brought out of my depth in the way that you have been brought out of your depth to realise that we stay afloat not because we can swim through these difficulties but because God keeps us through these difficulties God makes a promise and he will not break it the only way that you can test that promise is if you find yourself in circumstances where it is put to the test that doesn't mean to say it's easy to go through these troubles it doesn't mean to say that Paul went through these trials that he speaks about extreme need as much as extreme provision doesn't mean to say that he went through them all with some kind of smiley face artificially stuck on his lapel but rather it was because he came to the other side and he knew that poverty had not sunken and wealth had not distracted him but he could literally go to either ends of the spectrum of the experience of life and be derailed by neither it's just as easy to be derailed in our faith when things are going well as when things are going badly and Paul was able to testify bear witness

I've been through the worst and God has kept me I've been through the best and God is still kept me and it's good to be able to know that when you face these circumstances that we all face that we are not alone that's one of the first thoughts that crop into our mind nobody understands because nobody has walked this way before and again go back to that little passage that Paul read before our pastoral prayer that we have a great high priest who is not unable to sympathize with us in our weakness but who has been touched with the feeling of our infirmities has been tested in every way like as we are yet remained without sin that the ultimate proof the ultimate testimony that God keeps this glorious promise that he makes is the way that he kept it to his own son in human flesh during his time on this earth that the

Lord Jesus Christ was never utterly abandoned but even in the cry of dereliction when he cried out my God my God I am forsaken why that was not the Lord Jesus Christ being swallowed up in despair because that same Lord Jesus Christ who uttered those very words knew full well that God had promised I will not leave let my Holy One see decay I will not abandon him to the grave!

[28 : 37] And that's why the Lord Jesus Christ was able to speak his last words on the cross as words of absolute confidence Father into your hands I commit my spirit because he was kept by the promise of God he was upheld and he in his own experience through the gates of death into the tomb where he was laid not merely for the resurrection he experienced but to the enthronement that is now his as he sits at the right hand of majesty on high he is literally living proof that God keeps his promise not just to his own incarnate son but to all his sons and daughters in the Lord Jesus Christ who have been adopted into his family which brings us to the last thing what is that one

