

Philippians 4:4-7 *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.*

Dear friends in Christ our Savior,

The excitement for Christmas is building. We are putting up the trees, lights and decorations at the office and at our homes. Christmas music is playing on all the stations. It's hard not to get into the spirit and sing along with those favorite, well known and loved songs. The presents are starting to gather under the tree. There are Christmas parties at work and in the neighborhood that help you to put the work down for awhile and relax a bit. Plans are being made for Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Perhaps you are seeing relatives or friends that you haven't seen for awhile and the anticipation of getting together is adding to the excitement. You might be traveling or they might be traveling. Christmas is coming and joy is in the air.

Sadly, with all this joy flying around us, Christmas can actually be one of the most depressing times of the year. Maybe joy is not what you are feeling or what fills your heart right now. It might be the first Christmas or another Christmas that you don't get to celebrate with loved ones who live far away. It might be the first Christmas or another Christmas that you are celebrating without that special person who is in heaven celebrating with Jesus. Holidays have a way of heightening the loneliness that we feel. This can also be one of the busiest times of year for us. We can be robbed of our joy because we are overwhelmed with the frenzy of trying to get everything done. In addition to what we normally have to do, we have the extra cleaning, cooking and shopping. Then there is the hassle of the extra traffic and crazy people who are amidst the myriad of shoppers. You have the stress of trying to get all the Christmas cards addressed, stamped and sent. You might be dreading the day when everyone is going to get together because you know the fights and arguments that are going to happen because they happen every year! You might already be looking for this to be over! Maybe you find your joy knowing all of it will be over.

On top of this, maybe you are dealing with other things in your life that don't go away just because the holidays are here. There maybe difficult bosses or employees that you have to deal with. Christmas doesn't take away the sicknesses or ailments or chronic or even terminal health problems that you or loved ones close to you are dealing with. Perhaps you are dealing with the raw and hurtful results or consequences of sin that you committed or that someone committed against you and the holidays don't make those hurts go away. Relationship problems don't make these times any easier either. This time of year is supposed to be one of joy and peace and perhaps those are the farthest things from what you are experiencing. How easy to let the joy of this season pass by! This world and its cares and problems can too easily rob you of the joy that God has for you.

How good it is for us to sit back and listen to God speak to us today. Today is called "Gaudete" Sunday. That means rejoice. In the midst of our busy Advent season of preparation, we have the opportunity to sit back and listen to God as he raises our spirits and refocuses us on where our true joy and peace come from. In this busy season, we take some time from the frenzy of our lives to let Paul redirect our thoughts. Paul's encouragement is simple: **Rejoice Always!** Regardless of your circumstances. Regardless of your situation. Rejoice.

The word that Paul uses to encourage us to rejoice tells us that this rejoicing is to be a continual and habitual action. Rejoicing for God's people is to be a constant, habitual action no matter what the circumstances might be. Our first reaction to this might be, "Really?" Is that really possible? He didn't say think favorably about God. He didn't say have positive feelings about him. He said, "Rejoice in the Lord always." No matter the situation. No matter the circumstances, let your life be one constant rejoicing in the Lord. Is that possible?

As incredulous as this concept of rejoicing always may be to us, it is even more incredulous when you understand the circumstances in which Paul wrote this letter. Paul had every reason to do anything but rejoice. He had been under house arrest for nearly two years awaiting a verdict in his case from the emperor. After enduring a riot, several other prisons and a shipwreck, Paul expected to win his case, but there was uncertainty because the emperor could rule "guilty" and even have Paul hauled off for execution. There were problems in Paul's congregations as envy and ambition infected some and false teachers attacked others. Just prior in this same chapter Paul had dealt with two prominent ladies who were having sharp disagreements and not getting along. Paul had every reason to be down and depressed, to be robbed of peace and joy and burdened with anxiety.

Yet Paul is able to say, "*Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*" How could Paul find joy in these circumstances? How could he encourage the Philippians and us to find joy despite whatever situation you find yourself in? Note where Paul's joy came from. It came "*in the Lord.*" That is, his joy came in the sphere of the Lord, in context with his relationship with the Lord. This is where true joy comes from. Real joy comes from the union that we have with God through faith. Real joy come from calling to mind what this season is all about and remembering why Jesus came down to this earth.

We are mindful of that from our Gospel reading today. There John the Baptist minced no words when he preached to the people, especially to the Pharisees and Teachers of the Law. He addressed them, *"You brood of vipers!"* Talk about harsh. But he wasn't just talking to them. As hard as it is for us to admit, he is talking about us too. By nature, we approach God not as his spiritual offspring but as offspring of the ancient serpent. We show that our natural DNA is snake-like by the poison of viper that is on our lips. With the sin entered into by the devil's temptation and passed down from Adam and Eve, we were destined to hell. We know that remnant of the viper that remains in us. Too often it reveals its dark and poisonous existence. We know what it is like to cry from the depths of our sin as the Psalmist reminded us in Psalm 130. But here is the joy of Christmas: God acted to divinely alter our status from brood of vipers to brothers and sisters of Jesus and heirs of eternal life. God sent his son in love for us to rescue us from the depths of our sin and promised that he will come again to take us to the eternal mansion of heaven.

It is this divinely altered and established relationship God has given to us in Jesus that makes us circumspect about our life. We can step back, look at life from a different perspective and see a bigger picture. Advent is more than just getting ready for Christmas. That is part of it and it is coming quickly. We have already lit the third candle! But it is also preparing for Jesus' second coming which is also near. Jesus is coming back and will take his people from this world of pain and tears to live in his glory forever. This gives us a different perspective on this life with its problems. Knowing that Jesus is near and returning soon to take us to the glory of life with him fills our lives with joy and peace despite all of the dangers and difficulties that we face.

What Paul is encouraging is not a call for silly numbness to one's circumstances or a giddy insensitivity to other's problems. Far from it. He means that even amid tears we have an attitude that looks up to see and rely on God's goodness and then looks for reasons and ways to express happiness. C.S. Lewis said it well: "Life with God is not immunity from problems, but peace in difficulties." A Christian's emotional or physical pain is still pain. Hurts, whether they are our own or others, still hurt. Being a Christian does not mean being absent from conflict or immune from the troubles of life or exempt from sickness, heartache or death. We will be troubled by past sins. We will face life's sharp edges of unemployment, financial problems, uncertainty and relationship problems. Yet despite this, we can still have joy and peace. We have the peace of knowing that we are reconciled with God. We find our joy in our oneness with Christ. His gospel message is what fills our heart with joy: joy of forgiveness, the joy of knowing that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, the joyful assurance that Jesus is coming again to give us full physical possession of our eternal inheritance in glory. Our faith comprehends our status as God's blood bought children and brings joy to our hearts.

The outward circumstances of life do not determine the condition of our heart. God's peace which is beyond our human understanding stands guard over our hearts. The word Paul used had the connotation of a group of soldiers standing guard to keep something safe from attack. It wards off doubts and fears. It pushes back against false teaching and false hope. This peace God brings to us in the forgiveness of our sins drives away anything that would threaten our faith in God and love for others.

Not only is this joy ours in Jesus today, but it is also the joy we live in on Monday and the rest of our week as we live to serve our God. As that joy takes permanent residence in our hearts, we can't help but express it in our lives. Paul gives us some examples of how we express that joy. He encourages, *"Let your gentleness be evident to all."* The word gentleness carries the thought of "patient steadfastness." It is the ability to submit to any injustice, disgrace or maltreatment without hatred or malice, trusting God in spite of it all. It is the concept that Christians ought to be people who would rather suffer wrong than inflict it. This gentleness is another of those distinguishing characteristics that marks Christians as different people in our world. Our joy in Jesus shows itself by treating others gently as Jesus treats us.

We also express our joy this way: *"Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."* Whether it is the days before Christmas or the days after, our lives can easily be filled with worries and concerns and cares and anxieties. Whether it is the bills that are piling up and the money running low or the loved one enduring a serious, even life-threatening illness; whether it is concern for our own health or the burdens of school or work or home or our own guilt threatening to overwhelm us, we need not be anxious about anything. Remember who God made you in Jesus. Remember what God did for you in Jesus. Don't display a lack of trust in God by being full of worry or anxiety. Rather take it to the Lord in prayer. Bring your requests before the Lord and know that he who rescued you from your sin has promised to be with you and will hear and answer your prayers. We know too well the words from the hymn: "Oh, what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry everything to God in prayer."

The Lord is near. Jesus is coming. Being deeply conscious of this fact brings joy within us and gentleness without. As we fight through the busyness and frenzy of this season, as we face the challenges and struggles of life, don't let any of it rob you of the joy and peace that are yours in Jesus. When the worries and anxieties and problems come, don't try to handle them yourself. Don't look to this world for solutions which won't last. Don't despair of help. Take it to God in prayer. Trust that he has rescued you and brought you into his family and will provide what you need to stand up under those challenges. Through it all, be mindful of the eternity of peace and joy that awaits you in God's kingdom. In Jesus, you can **Rejoice Always**. Amen.