

## When Peace Feels Out of Reach | Philippians 4:4-9

### INTRODUCTION

Most of us know what it is like  
to be tired enough to sleep,  
but too worried to rest.

The room is quiet.  
The day is over.  
But your mind is still rehearsing  
the diagnosis,  
the conversation,  
the bank statement,  
or the tomorrow you cannot control.

You can sincerely trust Christ,  
believe His promises,  
and know genuine joy in the Lord one moment,  
and the next find yourself lying awake  
with a mind that will not slow down.

For some of us, worry is obvious.  
The pressure is heavy enough that everyone can see it.

For others, worry is a quieter burden.  
We carry it behind closed doors,  
replaying the same questions,  
imagining everything that could go wrong,  
and exhausting ourselves trying to control what we cannot.

And when the same fears follow us  
through the day and into the night,  
peace can begin to feel out of reach.

This morning, we come to the final message  
in our series called Fragile Faith.

Throughout this series we have seen  
that in the hardest seasons of life,  
fragile faith is not failed faith when it clings to a strong Savior.

In Psalms 42 and 43, we considered the sorrow  
that weighs down the soul.

Last week, in Romans 8, we considered the accusation  
that troubles the conscience.

This morning, in Philippians 4,  
we consider the fear  
that reaches into the future and unsettles the mind.

Not only sorrow over what has happened.  
Not only accusation over what we have done.  
But now fear over what might happen next.

Now, the church in Philippi  
was founded under remarkable circumstances.

When Paul and Silas first arrived in the city,  
they were opposed, beaten with rods, and thrown into prison.  
Their feet were fastened in stocks.  
Their future was uncertain.

And yet, in the middle of the night,  
they were praying and singing hymns to God  
while the other prisoners listened.

So, the church in Philippi was formed  
seeing peace under pressure with their own eyes.

Years later, Paul writes them this letter,  
once again from prison,  
and now to believers facing pressures of their own.

They were opposed because of their faith in Christ.  
They were concerned for Paul and what might happen to him.  
They were under financial strain.  
And two prominent women in the church  
were in a conflict that was affecting the congregation.

Opposition. Uncertainty. Money. Relationships.  
The kinds of things that still keep people awake at night.

So Paul is not writing as a man protected from hardship  
to people who have nothing to worry about.  
He writes as a prisoner to pressured believers.

And when he tells them not to be anxious about anything,  
he does not shame them for having anxious thoughts.  
He shows them what to do when those thoughts come.

Which leads us to our central takeaway this morning:  
*When peace feels out of reach, turn to the God of peace  
through prayer, truth, and faithful practice.*

And we will see what that looks like in three ways:

- I. Bring Everything to God in Prayer | Philippians 4:4-7
- II. Set Your Mind on What Is True | Philippians 4:8
- III. Practice What You Have Learned | Philippians 4:9

## I. BRING EVERYTHING TO GOD IN PRAYER | PHILIPPIANS 4:4-7

Paul begins in verse 4:

*"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice."*

This is a familiar verse.

You may have seen it on Christian decor or greeting cards.

But Paul is giving us far more than a cheerful saying.

There are many good things in life worth rejoicing over,

but circumstances change. Good seasons come and go.

The Lord does not.

If our joy rests on our circumstances,

it will rise and fall with them.

But because our joy is "in the Lord,"

it can remain even when life is uncertain.

That is what makes this command possible,

even from a prison cell.

And notice the repetition: *"Again I will say, rejoice."*

Paul is not running out of things to say.

He repeats it because worry has a way

of making us hard of hearing.

Earlier in this series,

the psalmist repeatedly told his soul, *"Hope in God."*

Paul repeats himself for the same reason,

because some truths must be preached to ourselves

again and again.

And note that "rejoice" is a command.

But Paul is not telling us to manufacture a cheerful emotion

or pretend that everything is fine.

To rejoice in the Lord is to intentionally remember and treasure who Christ is and what we have in Him, even when our feelings lag behind.

In the same way, I can come home from work very tired and still rejoice at the sight of my daughters playing outside. The tiredness is real. But it is not what my joy was resting on.

The prophet Habakkuk understood this:

*"Though the fig tree should not blossom,  
nor fruit be on the vines . . .  
yet I will rejoice in the LORD;  
I will take joy in the God of my salvation."*

Habakkuk does not pretend that the field is full. He names the empty field and rejoices anyway, because his joy was never growing on that tree.

Then Paul continues in verse 5:

*"Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.  
The Lord is at hand."*

In short, rejoicing in the Lord should produce a gentle spirit toward others. And not only toward those who are easy to love, but toward everyone.

That speaks directly to the two women in verse 2 whose conflict was troubling the church.

And it speaks directly to us, because worry has a way of making us irritable with people. When we feel overwhelmed by tomorrow, we become impatient with the people in front of us today.

Now, I say this not as a rebuke,  
but to offer some biblical course correction.  
We have all spoken a harsh word in an anxious moment.  
But a heart that rests in the Lord  
can be softened toward others.

Paul then grounds both commands with this assurance:

*"The Lord is at hand."*

The Lord is not absent. He is near to His people.  
As the psalmist says,

*"The LORD is near to the brokenhearted."*

Anxiety tells us that everything depends on us.  
The nearness of the Lord reminds us  
that we do not face tomorrow alone.

That brings us to verse 6:

*"Do not be anxious about anything,  
but in everything by prayer and supplication  
with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God."*

We often become anxious  
because we cannot bear the thought of losing control.  
And there may very well be decisions to make,  
conversations to have,  
and wise steps to take.  
But if we are going to take them  
without tripping over our own anxious minds,  
we must first bring them before the Lord  
and allow Him to establish our steps.

The Lord Jesus taught the same truth  
in the Sermon on the Mount.  
He told His disciples not to be anxious  
about what they would eat or wear,  
because their Father already knew what they needed.

So the way to calm an anxious mind  
is not greater control.  
It is deeper dependence on God.

And Paul describes that dependence with four words:  
prayer, supplication, thanksgiving, and requests.

Supplication is asking God out of real need.  
Requests are the specific matters we place before Him.  
And thanksgiving remembers His faithfulness.

Thanksgiving can be difficult in seasons of worry,  
but it keeps prayer from hardening into demands.  
Anxiety has a way of shortening our memory.  
It can recite everything that might go wrong tomorrow  
while forgetting everything God has already done in the past.  
But a dose of thanksgiving can help lessen this.

And when Paul says,  
    *"Let your requests be made known to God,"*  
it is not because God needs the information.  
It is because we need the dependence.

Then comes the promise in verse 7:  
    *"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,  
    will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*

This is more than peace of mind.  
 It is "the peace of God."  
 A peace outside of us,  
 that we cannot manufacture and at times cannot explain.  
 It is a peace that often meets us in the very place where we expected to fall apart.

And Paul says this peace will "guard" our hearts and minds.  
 That is a military word.  
 Philippi was a Roman colony settled with retired soldiers,  
 and Paul writes this while chained to a guard of his own.  
 They knew exactly what the image meant.

Paul's point is that God's peace is not a mood  
 that drifts in during a good week.  
 It is a garrison stationed at the gate of your heart,  
 guarding your affections and your thoughts.

And notice where that protection is found:

*"In Christ Jesus."*

This peace has an address.

So when peace feels out of reach,  
 do not merely worry in God's presence.  
 Redirect that worry into prayer.  
 Name what is weighing on you.  
 Give thanks for what God has already done.  
 And entrust to Him what you cannot control.  
 You are not informing God. You are depending on Him.

#### TRANSITION

But perhaps you are thinking, "I have prayed about this for years,  
 and I am still anxious."  
 If that is you, then keep listening, because the peace that guards the mind  
 also calls us to direct the mind.

## II. SET YOUR MIND ON WHAT IS TRUE | PHILIPPIANS 4:8

Paul continues in verse 8:

*"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."*

That phrase, "*think about these things*," means to weigh them and take deliberate account of them. This is not passive positivity. It is the intentional discipline of directing the mind toward what is good and true.

And notice which word comes first:

*"Whatever is true."*

An anxious mind often causes us to dwell on what is not *yet* true and *may never become* true. We rehearse conversations that have not happened. We take one uncertainty and carry it all the way to the worst possible scenario. An anxious mind can give us a very vivid imagination.

That is why we need the peace of God to guard our minds. But it is also why God calls us *to direct* our minds. His peace guards the mind, and His Word teaches us where to set it.

And we are called to set it on whatever is true. Whatever is honorable. Whatever is just, and pure, and lovely.

Now, these qualities were admired  
even in the wider culture of Paul's day.  
But for the Christian,  
they are understood in the light of God  
and perfectly embodied in Jesus Christ.

Christ is true.  
He is righteous and pure.  
He is altogether lovely  
and worthy of praise.

So Paul is not telling us to escape our problems  
by thinking pleasant thoughts.  
He is telling us to fill our minds with Christ.

And this is the same discipline  
we saw in the first week of this series.  
The psalmist asked,  
    "*Why are you cast down, O my soul?*"  
He did not deny his sorrow.  
He named it honestly,  
and then answered it *with truth*: "Hope in God."

Paul teaches us the same discipline here.  
Only now, the struggle is not sorrow. It is worry and fear.

So what have you been dwelling on this week?  
What conversation have you been rehearsing?  
What possibility have you begun treating as a certainty?  
What worry follows you through the day  
and meets you again when you lie down at night?

Name it honestly. Write it down if that helps.  
Then ask: what do I actually know to be true?  
What has God said?

You cannot always choose which thoughts enter your mind.  
But you do not have to set a table for every thought that arrives.  
You do not have to rehearse it, feed it,  
or give it the final word.

So when peace feels out of reach,  
examine what you have been dwelling on.  
Pour your fears out before God,  
and fill the space they occupied  
with the truth and goodness of God.

### **TRANSITION**

But perhaps you are thinking,  
"That may help when the problem is only in my head.  
But my problem is real.  
It is a diagnosis, a job that may be ending,  
or a bill I cannot pay.  
What do I do with this in those situations?"

That leads us to our third and final point.

### III. PRACTICE WHAT YOU HAVE LEARNED | PHILIPPIANS 4:9

Paul concludes in verse 9:

*"What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me,  
practice these things,  
and the God of peace will be with you."*

Paul has told us where to take our worries,  
and where to direct our minds.  
Now he tells us to put these truths into practice.

The Christian life is not merely  
a collection of truths to understand.  
It is a pattern of life to be lived out.

And notice the four words Paul uses:  
"Learned and received, heard and seen."

The Philippians had learned the truth from Paul's teaching,  
but they had also seen it worked out in Paul's life.

When they first met him,  
he had been beaten, imprisoned, and fastened in stocks.  
Yet they also heard of him praying and singing hymns to God  
in the middle of the night.

And now, years later, Paul is once again writing from prison.  
The circumstances have changed,  
but his confidence in Christ has not.

So Paul is not giving them an untested theory.  
He is teaching a way of life  
that has sustained him through suffering.

And he says: "Practice these things."  
That word matters.

Peace is not usually learned through one dramatic moment.  
It is cultivated through repeated dependence on God.

We pray, and then we pray again.  
We redirect our thoughts, and redirect them again.  
We choose gentleness when anxiety makes us grumpy.  
We take the next faithful step  
even when we cannot see how it will turn out.

And verse 9 comes with a promise:  
*"And the God of peace will be with you."*

Notice the subtle but important change.  
In verse 7, Paul promised that the peace of God  
would guard our hearts and minds.  
Here, he promises that the God of peace *Himself*  
will be with us.

Paul moves from the peace God gives  
to the God who gives the peace.

This does not mean we earn God's presence through obedience.  
Everyone who belongs to Christ already belongs to God.  
But as we walk in faithful obedience,  
we experience the sustaining presence  
of the God who is with us.

But what does all this look like?  
Later in this chapter, Paul shows us in his own life.

In verse 11 he says:

*"I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content."*

Notice that Paul says, *"I have learned."*

Contentment did not come naturally, or all at once.

It was learned through experience,

as Paul repeatedly discovered that Christ was sufficient.

Contentment is learned

through repetition,

and often under conditions we would not have chosen.

Then Paul says in verse 12:

*"I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound."*

Paul learned contentment in both directions.

He learned it when he had little, and when he had much.

We often assume contentment

is only necessary in seasons of need.

But abundance has its own temptations.

Need can tempt us toward fear.

Abundance can tempt us toward self-reliance.

And both seasons require us to practice dependence on Christ.

Then Paul writes in verse 13:

*"I can do all things through him who strengthens me."*

This is one of the most familiar

and frequently misunderstood verses in the Bible.

Paul is not promising that Christ will enable us

to accomplish anything we decide to pursue.

In context, *"all things"* refers to

the very circumstances he has just described.

Paul can endure having little.  
He can faithfully steward having much.  
He can remain content when the gas tank is full  
or when it is running on empty,  
not because Paul is strong,  
but because Christ strengthens him.

And a few verses later he concludes in v. 19:

*"And my God will supply every need of yours  
according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus."*

Again, this was written by a prisoner,  
to a church facing its own struggles.  
But Paul reminds them that God will supply every need, not every want.  
And the measure is not the size of our shortage.  
It is the riches of His glory.

This is what it looks like to put all of this into practice.

So what you have learned and received and heard and seen, practice these things.  
Pray while you are still afraid.  
Think on what is true while questions remain unanswered.  
Practice faithfulness while circumstances are still difficult.

Peace is not found by mastering tomorrow.  
It is learned by depending on Christ today.

## CONCLUSION

For the past three weeks, we've seen three fragilities and one Savior.  
Cast down, but held.  
Accused, but justified.  
Anxious, but guarded.

As we close this series,  
think once more about that midnight in Philippi.

Paul and Silas did not sing because the chains had fallen off.  
They sang while the chains were still on.  
Their peace was not the certainty of getting out of prison.  
It was the presence of God within it.

This passage does not promise  
that every circumstance will change.  
It promises that the peace of God will guard you,  
and that the God of peace will be with you.

So if worry has made you pushy with others,  
remember that the Lord is near, and pursue gentleness.

If fear has filled your mind with what might happen,  
set your mind again on what is true.

If you have prayed for a long time  
and the circumstances have not changed,  
hear the promise again.  
Verse 7 does not say that the storm will stop.  
It says that a guard will be posted.

And if you are here this morning and you are not in Christ, hear this.  
There is no peace of God without peace *with* God.  
That peace was purchased at the cross,  
and it is offered to you this morning.  
Come to Him.

Because all of this is possible  
only because our King and Lord, Jesus Christ, has secured our peace.

In Gethsemane, Jesus prayed,  
and the cup was not removed.  
He went to the cross,  
where the punishment  
that brought us peace  
was laid upon Him.  
So, the peace He gives is the peace He purchased.

In a few moments, we will come to the Lord's Table.  
And when the bread is in your hand,  
remember where your peace comes from.

Your hand may tremble as you reach for it.  
But even a trembling hand can cling to a strong Savior.

Because fragile faith is not failed faith  
when it is clinging to a strong Savior.