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Rejoice Always
Philippians 4:4-7 and Paul’s Equation for Peace of Heart

by Andrea Frey

In the often-quoted verses of Philippians 4:4-7, Paul provides instruction, encouragement, and consolation that the peace of God will come if the Philippians follow the plan he offers. As a testament to his love for his friends, Paul lays out step by step instructions that describe how to work and get along as a community and combat the anxiety that would have been a very real part of life for the Philippians. While these instructions were relevant to the
correspondents of Paul long ago, it seems that they are just as important in maintaining peace today, both internally and externally. Even through imprisonment, Paul’s words call all to rejoice, seek gentleness, avoid worry, pray, focus on thanksgiving and positivity, and do good deeds, and a result, the peace of God will follow.¹

Paul speaks to the Philippians with love and respect in what has been called a “friendship letter” between the apostle and those he loves.² While these verses are part of the end of chapter four, and serve as a series of instructions, the previous verses discuss a conflict that is occurring in the community between Euodia and Syntache. This may have been part of the reason that the letter focuses on unity, reconciliation, and selflessness for the good of the community and not about who was right or wrong.³ Paul reminds the Philippians that dissension rarely goes away without some sort of help and he calls on those who are there, his companions, to serve in this role.⁴ This inner conflict within the church and community, which may have involved individuals who were preoccupied with their own agendas and thus jeopardizing the unity of heart and mind in the Philippian church, was likely in addition to other external issues that would have caused worry for the Philippians, such as opponents outside of their community and Paul’s imprisonment in Rome.⁵ Paul provides a “bullet-point ‘to-do’” list for the Philippians which comes from a place of great love for his beloved friends.⁶ He is not speaking as a parent with a list of rules, but instead gives instructions that will provide a solution to the anxiety that could threaten to disrupt their joy and deprive them of peace.⁷

The first instruction that Paul gives is so important that he says it twice in the same verse: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice.”⁸

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³ Osborne, 106.
⁵ Johnson, 211.
⁶ Johnson, 211.
⁷ Johnson, 211.
⁸ Philippians 4:4 (Today’s New International Version)
Paul has a “constant insistence on joy” that is not mere cheerfulness. By encouraging the Philippians to rejoice he wants them, and everyone, to meet every circumstance with joy in the Lord and to be united with Him. By using the word “always,” Paul emphasizes that the Philippians should rely on the presence of God in their lives, not on present or temporal situations, to determine their joy. Even while imprisoned, Paul preaches a message of finding joy in all circumstances and he encourages his readers to do the same. This command to “rejoice always” does not mean that humans will not feel sadness or loss or grief, as those are a real part of humanity, but instead it urges the Philippians to resist the desire to focus on problems and to continue to rely on the presence of God to bring joy and connection to all circumstances. Johnson writes that in rejoicing we “…concentrate our minds deliberately on treasuring the Lord Jesus Christ…until our hearts are profoundly persuaded that he really is all we need in every situation.”

In verse five, Paul urges the Philippians to allow their gentleness to be known to all. “Gentleness” in this case may mean to be reasonable, gracious, and magnanimous, to have a calm and kind disposition. When others are aggressive, the person exhibiting gentleness will not be swayed or quarrelsome. Someone gentle will accept a lesser portion and will stay calm and gracious under persecution. Perhaps this was a bit of a commentary from Paul on good citizenship and a reminder, given the preceding verses of this chapter, for members, and leaders, in the church to treat each other well, but it can be equally relevant today as the Christian who behaves in a gentle manner can make a great impact on all of those around them. Paul also mentions in this verse that, “The Lord is near.” Regardless of whether Paul was writing of “nearness” in an eschatological sense relating to the second coming of Christ or in reference to Christ’s nearness to all people through the Holy Spirit even

10 Johnson, 216.
11 Johnson, 217.
12 Osborne, 111.
13 Murray, 1189.
14 Osborne, 111.
15 Philippians 4:5b (Today’s New International Version)
now, it is both a warning to consider choices and behavior, and a promise that all strivings toward a spirit of gentleness will be worthwhile. 16 17

Verse six includes the remaining instructions and begins with encouragement to not be anxious, or worry. In *Philippians: Verse by Verse*, Grant R. Osborne calls this an “impossible command”, but the rest of the verse provides more insight into how Paul believes that the Philippians can move through worry to peace. 18 He reminds them that in “every situation”, which is reminiscent of the “always” used earlier regarding rejoicing, they are to bring their requests to God, or in other words, to pray. This response to worry is based on expressing in and through prayer an absolute trust in God. 19 In prayer, particularly prayer rooted in thanksgiving for the ultimate gift from God, His son Jesus Christ, there is freedom to bring every sort of need and concern. 20 To live in the joy that is called for earlier by Paul, every situation must be covered in prayer. 21 Prayer is comprehensive and embraces all situations and all circumstances. Regardless of God’s knowledge of the workings of human hearts, speaking to God of specific situations and needs expresses supreme trust in His love and an awareness of the dependence of humanity on Him. 22 Paul is teaching that God delights in and loves His people so much that He desires to hear their every need and concern.

By including the instruction that all prayers are accompanied “with thanksgiving”, Paul expresses the importance of the centrality of God in prayer. Overflowing gratitude is at the heart of communication with God. In blending thanksgiving with requests, gratitude can take what may be a prayer filled with complaints, demands, and needs, and turn it into a loving conversation with the Lord. Any conversation or relationship becomes tiresome if it is filled with only requests and no appreciation, honor, or words of love, and Paul reminds the Philippians that it is no different when in conversation and relationship with God. While not

16 Johnson, 217.
17 Osborne, 111.
18 Osborne, 111.
19 Murray, 1189.
20 Johnson, 218.
21 Osborne, 111.
22 Johnson, 218.
spoken of directly, Paul’s instruction to petition includes the needs of oneself but also petition to God on behalf of others. Through prayer, Paul comes full circle, back to a spirit of joy in the Lord and care for neighbor, through specific deeds and intercession which is a way to find joy, to show God’s love, and to draw closer to God and the Christian community.

Finally, in verse seven the result of Paul’s instruction is described as the “peace of God, which transcends all understanding”. In short, Paul says that an active prayer life focused on God will result in the peace of God, which is not only the opposite of anxiety, but also the solution to finding a life without worry.23 Whether God’s answer is yes or no or maybe or not yet, there is a sense of tranquility provided in knowing that God is at work and is more capable of accomplishing what is right and good. The active working of God’s peace in the lives of His people can handle more than any human effort would find possible and can perceive and heal in ways that humans cannot.24 The Greek verb for “guard” or “keep” that is used at the end of this verse is not the typically used verb, but instead is a military term that would generally indicate the building of a fort of protection.25 The peace of God provides answers to the questions and needs of the Philippians and all of humanity, calms anxious hearts and spirits, and brings wholeness to relationships and communities, and it does so by offering an ever vigilant, always aware guard that surrounds His people with a wall of defense.

While the remainder of the letter to the Philippians is also a lovely ode to Paul’s friendship with them and the joy they bring him, as well as the joy that he longs for them to receive, the few verses discussed here offer a basic equation for peace. Choose to be joyful in the Lord at all times and in circumstances good and bad. Seek to be gentle in all interactions with oneself, one’s neighbor, and one’s community, offering a spirit of calm and kindness. Remember that the Lord is near, through the Holy Spirit and in the return of Christ to come. Stay in conversation with God through prayers of gratefulness and thanksgiving followed by petitions for one’s own needs and those of others, and while the result will not remove

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23 Osborne, 113.
24 Osborne, 113.
25 Osborne, 113.
all sadness or grief from life, it will offer a peace that allows anxiety to disappear and will guard and surround the heart. With this kind of peace and protection, the rejoicing in the Lord will bubble up, gentleness will be natural, prayer and petition will spring forth, and the circle will continue as the depth of relationship with God becomes more personal and fulfilling. Paul’s approach to this life of peace is radical and anchors the hearts of God’s people deeply in His love while focusing on a life filled with joy that is defined by Christ’s life, death, and resurrection. These words of Paul to his friends, the Philippians, remind them, and the church today, how to live as a community, as well as offer clear guidelines for protecting themselves and their relationship with God from both the internal and external forces that may threaten them.

26 Johnson, 212.

Bibliography


