

+ Philippians 4:4-7 + Rejoice that Your Lord Is Near! + 13th Sunday after Pentecost + 14 August 2016 +

What are you looking forward to? This time of year you might be looking forward to one last vacation before school starts or maybe you parents are looking forward to the kids finally going back to school. For some, you are looking forward to a new start whether that's a new school or a new job or a new family member by birth or by marriage. For others, you are looking forward to an end—maybe graduation or retirement or the end of years of payments on a car or home. Maybe what you are looking forward to isn't so big. Maybe you simply look forward to your next meal or to a new morning or to a good day at work or time spent with your spouse or family.

To a certain extent, every one of us is looking forward to something. When it's something like a trip or a big event, that looking forward may motivate you to get things done. I tend to do that when I know that vacation is coming soon or that I'll be attending a conference. I try to cram in as much work and preparation as I can before I leave. Perhaps you have a similar attitude because you know that event that you are looking forward to is finally coming soon.

This morning we find the Apostle Paul looking forward. In fact, he's eagerly looking forward and he's trying to get his readers to eagerly look forward too. By getting them to look forward to what's coming, Paul hoped to encourage his readers in the Greek city of Philippi to actively serve their Lord and the people around them. So what is it that Paul is so eager about? **"The Lord is near."** That's it? Paul is excited and eagerly looking forward because **"the Lord is near"**? Well, let's take a closer look.

This summer we've been digging into Paul's letter to his beloved congregation in Philippi—a city that had status in the Roman Empire because it had been founded as a retirement spot for Roman veterans. The congregation, however, was rather small and insignificant. They had their share of challenges, but no big issues threatened their existence.

Paul, however, had challenges. He had nearly been killed by a Jewish mob in Jerusalem, arrested by the Romans, bounced from prison to prison because no judge wanted to handle his case. So being a Roman citizen, Paul appealed to Caesar, meaning he would stand trial before the Roman emperor himself. Depending on the whim of the emperor, Paul could be acquitted or he could be imprisoned or even condemned to death.

On top of all that, Paul had also received word of troubles in some of the congregations he had planted in Turkey and Greece. As for the Philippians, while they didn't have major issues in their congregation, Paul had heard about a disagreement between a couple of the ladies—Euodia and Syntyche. Paul urged them to **"agree with each other in the Lord."** Their disagreement wasn't worth all the fighting. These sisters in Christ had faithfully worked with Paul and others to take the Gospel to their city. Yet if left unchecked, their disagreement could harm the entire congregation threatening the unity that had been established through the Word of God.

Things didn't look all that great for Paul and new challenges kept mounting for those he served. Yet right after he urged those ladies to agree with each other in the Lord, Paul wrote something unexpected. **"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!"**

How could Paul rejoice? With so many challenges and troubles facing him, what could possibly lead Paul to rejoice? First, let's talk about what kind of joy Paul is calling for here. This is not some forced, strained joy that Paul is trying to squeeze out of himself or his readers. He's not urging any of us to paste a false smile on our faces in times of hardship or persecution or grief, but instead he urges each of us to **"rejoice in the Lord."**

You see, **"in the Lord"** is where we find an unending source of true, lasting joy. This joy comes not because life is good, but because you are in and loved by and saved by and protected by the Lord who is good, but don't just **"rejoice in the Lord."** No, **"rejoice in the Lord always!"**

If hardship or trouble is plaguing you day after day, rejoice in the Lord who endured a life of pain and poverty, hardship and trouble in your place. If guilt is trying to crush you, rejoice in the Lord who was crucified to pay the price for your sins. If grief is swarming around your heart and mind, rejoice in the Lord who conquered death and opened the gates of heaven by abandoning the tomb. Paul is so eager to rejoice in the Lord and so wants readers like you to rejoice with him that he cries out, **"I will say it again: Rejoice!"**

Now you might be tempted to think, "Well, that's easy for you to say, Paul! You're an apostle! You've spoken with Jesus himself. You're supposed to rejoice in all situations, but in my life, that's not so easy." That's when Paul lifts your eyes heavenward from the trouble and sadness of this life so you can look forward with him and

see why you can **“rejoice in the Lord always.”** Paul points towards heaven and simply says, **“The Lord is near.”**

What’s he talking about? Well, the Lord has promised to always be with his people to the very end of time, but this is different. When Paul says, **“The Lord is near,”** he wants you to look forward to the Last Day. Paul wants you to look forward to who’s coming. Not grandma and grandpa. Not mom or dad after a long business trip or a sister or brother after being away. No, it’s even better! Look forward to Jesus coming! The Lord is coming soon, and since you know that, you can rejoice in the Lord always.

...But Paul doesn’t just tell us to rejoice. He writes, **“Let your gentleness be evident to all.”** While there weren’t major issues in the Philippian congregation, Paul wanted them to be aware that persecution could come. After all, they did live in an important Roman city where most people were Roman citizens with certain rights. Being Romans it was expected that everyone would join in the community sacrifices to the local gods. Being Christians following the one and only true God, Paul’s readers couldn’t do that anymore. That earned them suspicion from their neighbors and even earned them the title of “atheists” because they denied the Roman gods. When they didn’t join in the community sacrifices to the health of the emperor, some might even think they were committing treason. In a sense, Paul’s readers would have to face insults, harassment, lawsuits, false accusations, loss of property, or worse simply because they followed Christ.

So is Paul urging them to be meek and gentle and just let all of that come their way? Is Paul urging them to be weak, simply coping with persecution or is he speaking of something more as he did with rejoicing? Perhaps a clearer word than **“gentleness”** would be more appropriate here, words like graciousness, peacefulness, or forbearance—the act of patiently and generously letting a debt or right or obligation go unpaid. That’s what we have here.

That’s why Paul urged Euodia and Syntyche to set aside their differences and **“agree with each other in the Lord.”** That flies in the face of doing what comes naturally to us. If someone wrongs me, I expect, even demand that they pay me back in some way, shape, or form, but being **“in the Lord”** means setting aside that demand and letting it go unpaid. With a peaceful serenity, forbearance towards those who were persecuting the Philippians Christians would be a powerful witness to their persecutors. They would basically be saying, “No matter what you do, you can’t harm me, you can’t take away what’s most important to me because I am **“in the Lord.”** Now in the world in which we live, that kind of attitude is surprising, unexpected, even counter-cultural. People who try to goad or ridicule or argue with Christians like you and me can only do so much when we patiently and peacefully lay aside our own desire for vengeance or payback recognizing that no matter what they do or say, we’re still in Christ.

But it seems so weak to do that, doesn’t it? Because you feel that weakness, Paul points you towards heaven again and has you look forward. **“The Lord is near.”** Christ is coming soon so let your forbearing spirit be evident to all as you reflect what being **“in the Lord”** really means.

Right on the heels of that reminder, Paul urges his readers, **“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”** Ever lose sleep or get heartburn or a sick stomach because you didn’t bring to the Lord what the Lord actually wants you to bring to him? Why do we do that? Well, like our natural desire for payback, you and I are naturally wired to get worried and anxious about so very much. While it is necessary to be concerned when trouble or uncertainty or hardship confronts us, what good is being anxious or worried or stressed about it?

It’s really a matter of trust, isn’t it? I get anxious because I’ve put too much trust in myself. Finances getting tight? “What am I going to do?!” Uncertainty about my job or a loved one’s situation or what the future holds? “What can I do to make sure that everything turns out the way I want it to turn out?” So my stress level goes up. My sleep gets worse, and anxiety, worry, and fear set in—all because I didn’t climb up into the lap of my loving, heavenly Father to share with him what’s troubling me.

That’s what Paul wants you and me to do! Climb into the safe lap of the One who made the mountains to ask him to move the mountains in your life. Why be anxious or stressed or worried when you have a Savior-God who conquered death for you? Surely he can help you through your most difficult times, even if he does it in a way that you do not expect even though it’s the best route for you to go. Or maybe he provides help for that loved one who doesn’t realize they need his help or help for those people you don’t know, but who need you to offer prayers to God who guides all things for the good of his people, the people whose hope is in his unflinching love. You can do that with thanksgiving as you leave what worries you with the One who has taken care of

your greatest worry and who is coming again soon. Even if you start getting stressed or anxious again, Paul points you to heaven and reminds you, ***“The Lord is near.”***

...But if you're still feeling anxious, Paul has one more assurance. ***“And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”*** Whether difficulty or grief or sadness threaten to rob you of your joy in the Lord or you face hardship or pressure or even mild persecution because of your Christian faith or anxiety or worry or stress try to get you to trust in yourself, the Lord who is coming soon has peace for your heart and for your mind—peace he earned for you.

Now this is some amazing peace! This peace ***“transcends all understanding...”*** It surpasses all understanding because it's the peace we have because we are ***“in the Lord.”*** We are declared not guilty in Christ. We are citizens of heaven through Christ looking forward to the day when Christ will come again to bring us home.

“The Lord is near!” So rejoice in the Lord always! ***“The Lord is near!”*** So let your forbearing spirit be evident to all! ***“The Lord is near!”*** So bring everything to your gracious and almighty Lord in prayer—no matter how big, no matter how small! ***“The Lord is near!”*** His peace is yours until he brings you home to heaven. With that peace guarding your heart and mind through faith in Christ Jesus, look forward because ***the Lord is near!*** Amen.