

This morning, I am continuing in a sermon series through the New Testament book known as Philippians, which is a letter written by the Apostle Paul from a Roman prison to a church in Philippi that he had started. This morning, I will be in 4:4-9:

Philippians 4:4-9 - *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 everything, 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.* ⁸ *Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable-- if anything is excellent or praiseworthy-- think about such things.* ⁹ *Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me-- put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.*

Apparently verses 6-7 are the most highlighted verses in the entire Bible. **Do not be anxious about anything... what does that tell you about how many people struggle with anxiety?** I am sure I don't need to convince you of how prevalent anxiety is in most if not all of our lives. As Max Lucado writes in his book *Anxious for Nothing*, "Anxiety and fear are cousins... fear sees a threat. Anxiety imagines one. Fear screams, 'Get out!' Anxiety ponders, 'What if?'" Anxiety is what keeps you awake at night, tightens your chest, persistently distracts you from the task at hand. Anxiety over losing a loved one, or potential financial or job loss, or difficult conversations or meetings, or any number of things that we think could go wrong in the future. For some of you, your anxiety gets so bad that it can be hard to get out of bed in the morning. It's no wonder that anxiety is so prevalent; with so much change and uncertainty in our world, it's hard not to feel like life is out of control. Yet somehow Paul has the audacity to tell us to not be anxious about anything.

Now, before you dismiss Paul as some fanatical religious man in a monastery, blissfully unaware of the hardships and challenges of this world, glibly telling us to rejoice and not be anxious, remember where Paul is writing this letter from: prison. And remember what else he has suffered in the recent past:

2 Corinthians 11:23-28 - *Are they servants of Christ? (I am out of my mind to talk like this.) I am more. I have worked much harder, been in prison more frequently, been flogged more severely, and been exposed to death again and again.* ²⁴ *Five times I received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one.* ²⁵ *Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I spent a night and a day in the open sea,* ²⁶ **I have been constantly on the move.** *I have been in danger from rivers, in danger from bandits, in danger from my own countrymen, in*

danger from Gentiles; in danger in the city, in danger in the country, in danger at sea; and in danger from false brothers. ²⁷ I have labored and toiled and have often gone without sleep; I have known hunger and thirst and have often gone without food; I have been cold and naked. ²⁸ Besides everything else, I face daily the pressure of my concern for all the churches.

2 Corinthians 1:8-9 - *We do not want you to be uninformed, brothers, about the hardships we suffered in the province of Asia. We were under great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we **despaired** even of **life**. ⁹ Indeed, in our hearts we felt the sentence of death. But this happened that we might not rely on ourselves but on God, who raises the dead.*

More than most, Paul was acquainted with suffering and anxiety. And yet this man who was beaten, shipwrecked, imprisoned, and constantly concerned about many churches, tells them to not be anxious about anything, but to rejoice in the Lord always. This passage is the best passage in Scripture in speaking to our anxieties.

Now, before we dive in to the passage, I need to tell you that this past Friday I was in Barnes & Noble waiting for someone and just happened to see a book on dealing with anxiety, so I picked it up to see what the great minds of our world had to say about how to handle anxiety. The book was an easy read, at just about 150 pages but with lots of soothing pictures. Here is a summary of the advice. Are you ready for this?

- Steer clear of negative people
- Track your triggers
- Accept how you're feeling
- Look for the positive
- Just be yourself
- Realize that fear is normal
- Know what you stand for
- Recognize your limits
- Challenge procrastination
- Ease the pressure
- Appreciate your omegas
- Be honest with yourself
- Don't stress about things you cannot control
- Don't overthink it
- Manage stressful encounters
- Realize that you're not alone

Ask yourself, “What is the worst that could happen?”

Avoid comparisons

Don't be a second-guesser

Try not to problem-solve at night

Trust your instincts

Set a goal and be inspired

Take a digital detox

Change your view of you

Try to get 8 hours of sleep every night

Don't believe everything you think

Don't let the past control you

Try mindful mantras

Help others

Control your mindset

Appreciate the basics

Practice mindfulness

Unfollow negativity

Clear the clutter

Embrace health and fitness

Accept what you can't control

Ask yourself, “Will it matter in five years?”

Create the life you want

Make yourself a priority

Take an active break

Be more like a cat

Give yoga a go

Get outside

Be patient with bereavements

Have worry windows

Share a positive outlook

Take a break from worry

Talk to someone about it

Learn how to prioritize

Make your phone your friend

Keep evolving

Turn anxiety into a positive

Realize it's OK not to be OK

Remind yourself that you're a survivor

Try Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Tell yourself to “Stop”

First of all, that is an overwhelming list. I'm actually more anxious after reading this list than I was before reading it, given all the things this author thinks I should be doing to combat my anxiety. Secondly, it's almost all strategy based - Do this, don't do that. It's not really dealing with the big questions that are behind everything and have a huge impact on our anxiety: is there a God? If so, is God actively involved in this world? Is there a right and wrong? Does anything really matter? Not that those strategies are unhelpful, but they do not get at the underlying anxiety that exists on the belief level. And thirdly, yes, I would love to be more like my cat, but he doesn't have bills to pay.

Let me give you a better way to approach our anxiety. We are essentially told to do four things in this passage, and they are all very much related to each other:

1) Rejoice in the Lord

⁴ *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!* ⁵ *Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.*

Many of you have probably struggled with this passage. How am I supposed to rejoice when I can't see my kid, or my parent dies, or my mental illness will not be cured? Is Paul just telling us to put on a happy face? Don't worry be happy?

The answer is – **he does not say to rejoice in your circumstances, but to rejoice IN THE LORD.** The reality is that our emotions tend to be tied to our circumstances – whether or not we are happy or sad, encouraged or discouraged, depends upon our weight, our relationships, our looks, our success, our health. But Paul is in prison, chained to a guard at all times. He's going to have a hard time steering clear of negative people, or keeping a gratitude journal, or appreciating his omegas. He's going to have to find something outside of his circumstances to locate his joy.

And this is why he tells them to rejoice IN THE LORD. The truth is that no matter how terrible your circumstances might be, there is more than enough cause to rejoice, to find your joy, in the Lord. Remind yourself of who God is, what He has done, and what He has promised to do.

His character

Thank you that you love me – **John 3:16** - *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.*

Thank you that you are all-powerful – **Mark 10:27** - *Jesus looked at them and said, "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God."*

Thank you that you are full of grace and mercy – **Psalms 103:8** - *The LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love.*

Thank you that you are good and faithful – **Psalms 100:5** - *For the LORD is good and his love endures forever; his faithfulness continues through all generations.*

Thank you that you are just and righteous – **Deuteronomy 32:4** - *He is the Rock, his works are perfect, and all his ways are just. A faithful God who does no wrong, upright and just is he.*

Thank you that you never change – **Numbers 23:19** - *God is not a man, that he should lie, nor a son of man, that he should change his mind. Does he speak and then not act? Does he promise and not fulfill?*

You are sovereign over everything. You are trustworthy. You know the end from the beginning

What He has done

Thank you that you died for my sins – **Isaiah 53:4-5** - *Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.*

You ransomed me from the devil – **Mark 10:45** - *For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*

You forgave me and reconciled me to God – **2 Corinthians 5:18-19** - *All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation: ¹⁹ that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.*

You adopted me as your beloved child – **John 1:12-13** - *Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God-- ¹³ children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.*

You have promised me an inheritance in Christ – **1 Peter 1:3-4** - *Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, ⁴*

and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade-- kept in heaven for you,

You gave me your Holy Spirit – Romans 5:5 - *And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.*

You conquered sin and death - John 11:25-26 - *Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; ²⁶ and whoever lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?"*

His promises

Thank you that you are always working all things for good

Romans 8:28 - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.*

You will use this for my good, to make me more like Jesus or equip me to minister to or empathize with others in a way that I could not otherwise.

You promised to come again to take you to be with him - John 14:2-3 - *In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. ³ And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.*

You promised to never leave me nor forsake me - Hebrews 13:5 - *Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."*

You have promised instant access to him when I am in need - Hebrews 4:16 - *Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.*

You promised to supply all my needs - Philippians 4:19 - *And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.*

You promised to give me wisdom when I need it - James 1:5 - *If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.*

The deeper your joy, the more untouchable it is. So rejoice in the Lord! In the midst of circumstances that make you want to cry, that make you want to die, when

you are experiencing the worst worldly sorrows, when you are in prison or poverty or loneliness or exhaustion, turn your eyes to the Lord and find your joy in Him.

This takes work – when you see yourself being controlled by your circumstances, you can stop to rejoice in the Lord. Remember the Psalmist in Psalm 42:

Psalm 42:5-6 - **Why** are you **downcast**, O my soul? **Why so** disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and ⁶ my God.

This does not come naturally. It comes by finding your joy in the Lord. Recounting the reasons you have to praise Him. As Martin Lloyd-Jones wrote in his book *Spiritual Depression*:

Have you realized that most of your unhappiness in life is due to the fact that you are listening to yourself instead of talking to yourself? Take those thoughts that come to you the moment you wake up in the morning. You have not originated them, but they start talking to you, they bring back the problems of yesterday, etc.

Somebody is talking. Who is talking? Your self is talking to you. Now this man's treatment was this; instead of allowing this self to talk to him, he starts talking to himself. 'Why art thou cast down, O my soul?' he asks. His soul had been depressing him, crushing him. So he stands up and says: 'Self, listen for a moment, I will speak to you.' ...

The main art in the matter of spiritual living is to know how to handle yourself. You have to take yourself in hand, you have to address yourself, preach to yourself, question yourself. You must say to your soul: 'Why art thou cast down' – what business have you to be disquieted?

You must turn on yourself, upbraid yourself, condemn yourself, exhort yourself, and say to yourself: 'Hope thou in God' – instead of muttering in this depressed, unhappy way. And then you must go on to remind yourself of God, Who God is, and what God is and what God has done, and what God has pledged Himself to do.

Then having done that, end on this great note: defy yourself, and defy other people, and defy the devil and the whole world, and say with this man: 'I shall yet praise Him for the help of His countenance, who is also the health of my countenance and my God.'"

2) Pray your anxieties to God with thanksgiving.

⁶ *Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, 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.*

Remind yourself who He is and what He has promised. And then lift your anxieties to him and leave them there. It is okay to feel the anxiety, but do not end there. Lift up the prayers to God, not just asking for His help, but thanking Him. Again, remind yourself as you pray who God is, and what He has promised. Pray along with His promises. He works all things for good. Thank you that I can trust you. Thank you that no matter what happens, you are in control.

This is where a gratitude journal can be helpful, or developing some other rhythm or habit of thanking God for His character, what He has done, and His promises.

What will He do?

He will give a peace that will guard your hearts and minds. He will give a gentleness, the ability to be okay in everything situation. He is near. He is not unaware. He cares.

3) Think about that which is good

⁸ *Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable-- if anything is excellent or praiseworthy-- think about such things.*

Again: Think. Think about who God is and what He has done and what He has promised you. In the midst of your sorrows or anxieties, do not dwell on your circumstances to the point of despair or fear, but meditate on Christ, on the character of God, the promises of God, the truth of God. Rejoice in it. Thank him for it.

This is not some magical “think positive and positive things will come your way” like *The Secret* or other books on manifesting things. That’s magic and superstition, not faith. Instead, this is recognizing that circumstances may be good or bad, but our emotional stability and trust is not in the things of this world but in God and who He is and what He has promised.

Remember the truth. God created you. Jesus died for you. His Spirit is with you. Heaven is promised to you. God works all things for good. He will never leave you nor forsake you. In this world you will have trouble, but take heart – He has overcome the world. Your grace is sufficient for me, for your power is made perfect in weakness.

*2 Corinthians 10:5 - We demolish arguments and every pretension that sets itself up against the knowledge of God, and we take **captive** every **thought** to make it obedient to Christ.*

When that thought comes in, don't let it control you, and don't dismiss it. Ask if it is from Him? If not, tell it to leave, and focus on what is good.

The reality is that many of you do focus on what is negative, what is bad. And it is filling your minds and hearts with anxiety. Watch your inputs. Question them.

4) Put what you learn into practice

⁹ *Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me-- **put it into practice**. And the God of peace will be with you.*

It's not just about thinking, but putting it into action. Obey Him. Trust and obey. Get to know him, rejoice in him, thank him, think of what is good, lift your anxieties to him, and trust him.

Rejoice in the Lord – His character, what He has done, and His promises
 Pray your anxieties to Him, thanking Him for who He is and what He has promised
 Fix your mind on that which is good, especially once again his character, what He has done, and His promises
 Put all of this into practice

And the God of peace will be with you. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.