

Paul begins his epistle reading by saying: "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand." That sounds pretty good to us. I think we can get behind that pretty easily. Joy is something we understand. Joy is something that we want. We could talk all day about joy in the Lord. So maybe we ask: "Well, what else do you have to say, Paul? What else you want us to know?" So he goes on to say: "Do not be anxious about anything." And suddenly it gets a lot harder. What does he mean, "not be anxious"? How is that even possible, we might ask? How is it possible to not be anxious, especially when there are so many things to be anxious about in the world today? How are we supposed to find peace and joy in the midst of an anxious world?

And so maybe, we would say: "Well, Paul, you just really don't understand. You don't get it." Maybe he's writing this at a table with the paper in front of him and a very nice, cozy chair and a very nice, warm house. Totally separated from the realities of the world. "Because," we say, "he couldn't write this if he was living in my situation, if he was living in my life. Because there's so many reasons to be anxious about today!"

First of all, we might feel anxious because we have a sense that we don't control our own lives. I'm not talking about the weather or about anything that's totally beyond our control. That's not what I'm talking about here. I'm talking about those life changing decisions that are being made about our life by somebody else. You think of government mandates, for example, laws which are affecting everybody. Things we're supposed to follow. Or vaccine mandates at work, which tell us we have to get the shot or we're going to lose our job. And what are we supposed to do about that? It's not like we can go down to Washington, knock on the door of the Oval Office, and tell the president how we think about it. We'd never get anywhere close! And so that can leave us feeling anxious. What are we supposed to do in this situation? Where can we turn? Or even the supply chain problems that we're facing or the inflation which seems to be going up all the time, so that prices are going up and up and up, and there's nothing that we can do about it. It leaves us feeling anxious, asking all kinds of questions. What else is going to happen to us? What can we do? What if this happens? What if that happens? And on and on the questions go. We feel anxious, because we feel like we don't control our own lives.

A second reason we feel anxious is because of the news. The news makes us feel anxious. We hear of some disaster, some tragedy that has happened somewhere in the world. And it leaves us feeling angry or fearful or sad or disgusted or any number of emotions. What are we supposed to do about it? But I want you to ask yourself a question, Christians. Why does it affect you? Because the only reason you know about what is happening is because the news has told you. If you turned off your TV, would you even know what was happening? If you turned off your phone or your computer, how would that change how you're living today? Because if you never heard about it, today would be just the same. It is the news which is making us feel anxious. Because the news tells us all the problems of the world, puts them on our shoulders, but then it doesn't give us a way to deal with it. It doesn't give us a way to cope with this information, and that leaves us feeling anxious. We have the whole weight of the world on us, and it seems like we can't do anything about it.

The third reason, of course, is our own personal problems. I have problems in my family, problems at work, problems with money, whatever it may be. Things that make me wonder what

tomorrow is going to be like. Am I going to be able to deal with it? What else is going to happen to me? And on and on those questions go.

And so all of these things together, Christians, make us feel anxious, worried about what might come. And so we say: "Paul, what you say sounds so good! But you don't get it. You don't understand what I'm going through. I have very good reasons to be anxious about my life. And so what you say sounds good, but I'm just not sure how it's true for me."

But Christians, Paul is not writing these things as platitudes, as sayings which are empty, sounds so good, but they don't really mean anything to us. Because honestly, Christians, there have been few people in the history of the world who had more reason to feel anxious than Paul. Because Paul did not write this letter sitting at home in a comfortable chair in a warm house. Paul did not write this letter in an ivory tower, separated from the reality of the world. When Paul wrote the letter to the Philippians, he was in chains. Paul was in prison in Rome awaiting trial when he wrote this letter. And he was in prison because the Jews had falsely accused him. And because of their lies, Paul was facing the possibility of being put to death. And worse than that still, on his way to trial, Paul got into a shipwreck and very nearly lost his life. It's hard for us to imagine a worse situation to be in. Paul had all kinds of reasons to be anxious. It would've been very easy for him to worry about what was going to happen in the days ahead.

And yet Paul in chains, Paul falsely accused, Paul facing the death penalty could still write: "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand. Do not be anxious about anything." Even in the midst of what he was going through, Christians, he could still rejoice in the Lord.

Why? First of all, because Paul knew that his name was written in the book of life. Paul belonged to Jesus, and nothing was ever going to change that fact. Nothing in heaven or on earth could ever take him away from his Lord. And even if Paul died, even if he was put to death, he would still go to be with Jesus. And what could possibly be better than that? Not even death could take him away from God, and for that reason, and maybe even that reason alone, he could rejoice in the Lord.

Paul could rejoice, because he knew that God is in control, that everything was in his mighty hands. And even Paul's chains, Paul's imprisonment was not an accident. He was exactly where God wanted him to be. And even more than this, the Lord was at hand. The Lord would soon come and take all of this suffering away from him. So he could rejoice, knowing that God controlled all things. And that no matter what happened to him, he would still be with the Lord.

And Paul could rejoice, because even in his chains, Christ was glorified. As he says in Philippians 1 verse 12: "I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the Gospel." Even though he was in prison, God was still using him to bring others to know the Lord. And for that reason, Paul could rejoice, knowing that his imprisonment could not stop the Gospel. Christ was glorified even while he sat there in chains. And so all of these reasons together gave Paul enough reason to rejoice. He did not have to be anxious about anything, because the Lord is at hand.

So how do we find this joy, Christians? How do we find this peace? We find it through prayer. As Paul goes on to say: "But in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." Bringing all things in prayer to the Lord, Christians, takes away our anxiety. And it gives us a peace that we can only find in God.

Why? Because first of all, Jesus promises to hear the prayers of those who trust in him. We don't have to wonder. We don't have to doubt. There is no "if." God has promised to hear his people through his Son, Jesus Christ. And so when we repent of our sins and come before the Lord in faith through prayer, God will hear us and answer us in Jesus.

We can know peace and joy through prayer because it shows us who is actually in control. God has all things in his mighty hands. Even our troubles, even the things that make us worry are still in his control. So why should we focus our attention on those problems when we have a God who is our fortress? When we have a God who will not fail us? When we have a God who will listen?

And Christians, we can know peace and joy through prayer because it puts all of our problems into the hands of the one who can actually do something about them. It puts all of our problems into his more than capable hands. So why should we worry about those problems when a solution is already available? When we already have an answer in God? Not our solutions, of course. Those would never be good enough. But God's perfect and best answer. And even if that means that we end up in chains like Paul, yet we know that God will care for us, because he is the one who can do something about it.

So put it into his hands, Christians. When you are worried about not having things in your control, put it in his hands. When you are worried about the news and the things happening in the world, put it in his hands. When you are worried about the things happening in your lives, put it into his hands. And be patient! And stand firm! Don't give in! And keep praying. Because God will not fail to answer in his Son, Jesus Christ.

So rejoice, Christians. Do not be anxious about anything. Take it all to the Lord in prayer. And then "the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." You will be able to face all things, because God hears and answers the prayers of his people in his Son, Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have promised to hear us in your Son. Take away all our worries and anxieties, because you are the one who can do something about them. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.