

Once again, quietening the storm that rages in your mind, find a place of stillness and peace to reflect on Paul's words. That's not just a call to cast off doubts and struggles but also all the background noise of life, the noise of the day you find yourself in, to focus your mind on just this one thing.

*"Be anxious for nothing, 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 minds through Christ Jesus."* Philippians 4:6-7

It's now time to deal with the broader context of these two verses. It's time to see how they fit in Paul's overall challenge that he has placed before the church at Philippi and before us. Let's start in chapter 3:1 and you will hear some familiar words, "rejoice in the Lord". Interestingly enough that's the same command we find in Philippians 4:4, "rejoice in the Lord always. Again I will say, rejoice!". It shouldn't be too difficult to see there is a connection between these two verses. A key piece to finding the power to cast off our anxiety and find God's peace is being joyful in the things of the Lord. This, once again, highlights the need for contentment with such as the Lord has given you.

The need for rejoicing, or a joyful attitude, is a thread that weaves its way throughout this letter;

*"What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice."* Philippians 1:18.

In Philippians 1:9-11, Paul prays that the Philippians' understanding of love may abound so that they could approve the things that truly matter. This kind of discerning love would produce eternal reward but also, as we will see, it would have great blessing for the present.

Then in Philippians 1:12-18, Paul gives them a personal example of what this discerning love looks like. He was in prison but that great limitation to his personal freedom did not hinder the gospel going out. God had taken Paul's limitation and used it in two ways. First, it meant that the guards who kept watch over Paul saw and heard the gospel through his example. The guards and Roman officials came to realise that Paul was imprisoned, not because of guilt, but for Christ. They would have been able to personally experience his character, through his suffering and trials, and hear his gracious and loving words. Secondly, it had emboldened others to speak of Christ fearlessly.

Now, as is often the case, with this new-found boldness, people preached Christ with pure intentions; to see the message of life go out. But others preached with mixed intentions. They saw it as a way to elevate themselves and their ministry over Paul's. They wanted to use the new-found opportunities to stick it to Paul and to boast in their own achievements. These were preachers of Christ who wanted Paul to see how their liberty was gaining them more than Paul's limitations. But they could not see that their opportunities had arisen because of Paul's experiences.

So, what was Paul's response? What was Paul's attitude? What ruled Paul's heart in this conflict? His discerning love let him see what really mattered; Christ was being preached.

*"What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is preached; and in this I rejoice, yes, and will rejoice."* Philippians 1:18.

*"Yes, and if I am being poured out as a drink offering on the sacrifice and service of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. For the same reason also be glad and rejoice with me."* Philippians 2:17-18

Paul saw his life as a sacrifice, especially for the church at Philippi. He found joy in his service for them and wanted them to share this sacrificial servant attitude. They should be glad and rejoice with the sacrifice of his life as well as their own. In verse 16, Paul had urged them to hold fast the word of life so that he could have a source of joy in them at the Bema seat of Christ. What would be the source of joy? That there would be fruit for his labour.

This call to sacrificial service was drawn out from the greatest example of sacrificial service; Christ. The mindset found in Christ, in Philippians 2:1-11, is the same mindset that we are to have. In this we find true joy from that kind of discerning and sacrificial love. The love that lifts others up over the self. Paul goes on to give two examples of people who had followed this pattern; Timothy and Epaphroditus, men whose personal sacrifice was an example, a source of joy and an encouragement.

"Finally," in Philippians 3:1 and following, Paul brings these themes together; focusing on what truly matters, despite people's attitudes and behaviours toward you, and a sacrificial attitude. In all things we should "rejoice in the Lord" and for Paul to repeat that idea is a safeguard for your soul. That's right, the ultimate source of joy is found in the Lord not in the circumstances or people around us. This joy is found in seeing what the Lord is doing and can do despite these other things. It is a joy found in the work of the Lord that is being done and the part of that work that He is doing through you.

The challenge is to find joy in the Lord and from what really matters in life. If Paul was seeking the approval from the religious elite he could have had it. If Paul was resting on or seeking praise for his personal achievements, he could have had it. But Paul wouldn't put confidence in the flesh; his own achievements. His confidence was in Christ, the source of his joy. What achievements could Paul rely on? Circumcised the eighth day, so born to good Jewish parents, of the stock of Israel, not a proselyte, a pure blooded Benjamite, a tribe honoured in his day, a Hebrew of Hebrews, a Pharisee, not a liberal scholar, a persecutor of the church and blameless in the adherence to the law. If Paul wanted the approval of man, he could have it.

But Paul wasn't interested in the praise or approval of people, only Christ's; the one who had called and empowered him to the work that was placed before him. The work that Christ had given Paul to do whether great, at times, or "menial".

*"But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord." 1 Corinthians 4:3-4*

No matter what it looked like Paul was accomplishing, whether to others or even to himself, in his day to day life, Paul was rejoicing in the Lord and leaving all praise and approval up to Him.

Now there is great source of anxiety that comes out of these ideas. Just from the examples of achievements listed by Paul, we can see past wrong. Paul's past, as the tormentor of the church, could have brought unbearable guilt and anxiety. But so too could his positive achievements. If we always look to and seek joy and approval from the mighty things done in us in the past, those "great" achievements, we can easily look at times that seem to be quiet, still and full of idleness and become guilty and anxious at what we think we don't have or aren't doing. In a lot of ways, focussing on achievements of the past can easily bring as much anxiety as past failures.

But Paul considers everything he achieved and his failures as nothing when it came to Christ. He laid it all down and flushed it away. That included seeking the approval of man. He joyfully flushed that down the toilet as well. All Paul was seeking in life, the source of his joy, was living righteously through faith; to be doing God's good the right way. All Paul wanted to know and to focus on was Christ, the power of Christ's resurrection, joining Christ in Christ's sufferings, being conformed to Christ's death so that he could attain to Christ's resurrection. Nothing of his past or present achievements were in Paul's sights, only Christ and what he could achieve in Him. This links perfectly with Paul's words earlier in the letter;

*"For I know that this will turn out for my deliverance through your prayer and the supply of the Spirit of Jesus Christ, according to my earnest expectation and hope that in nothing I shall be ashamed, but with all boldness, as always, so now also Christ will be magnified in my body whether by life or by death. For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain." Philippians 1:19-21*

Let me say that in another way. For Paul, his joy was found in seeking after Christ. His focus was not on the flesh, the things of this life, but on seeking to attain to the power of Christ's resurrection, that is, suffering with Christ and being conformed to Christ's death so that he could attain to Christ's resurrection. Now that required a shift in Paul's thinking as it does in ours. The total casting off of our self to embrace the new you in Christ. It's a flushing down the toilet of how you or others might approve or disapprove of you, of how you or others measure success and of how you or others determine "a job worth doing" and "job well done".

Now when it came to these things, Paul says in Philippians 3:12-16. "Not that I have already attained...but I press on". "I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, I press toward the goal for the price of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus".

## Faith through the fire part 6, "Letting 'it' go!"

"Nevertheless, to the degree that we have already attained, let us walk by the same rule, let us be of the same mind".

The idea is self-explanatory. In seeking after conformity to Christ, Paul was not there yet. Paul wasn't finding joy in what could be racked up as achievements in his life but in the journey that God had place him on. It's a joy found in the journey we are taking with our God and Saviour in this life. That's a journey through high times and low times, abundance and lack, great deeds seen by man and many seen by none.

Now it's in the times of great deeds seen by none, which seem to be little deeds in our mind, that often our anxiety grows. But with eyes fixed on Jesus as our Captain and the source of true joy, we see more clearly that no deed great or small goes unseen or unvalued in God's eyes. The great evangelist preaching Christ to thousands, and Paul in a cell with two others, were equal in God's eyes. They were doing, on that day, exactly what they, as sacrificial servants, were called to do.

The key for Paul was reaching forward by forgetting what was behind him. Not fixating on what you did wrong yesterday, or the days and years before, and not boasting or seeking the highs of the "great deeds" long since passed. If we think too much about the past, then it drives us to constantly want to live there. But it's in the present and our future that God is working and our journey lays ahead. Consider these words from Hebrews 11;

*"These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For those who say such things declare plainly that they seek a homeland. And truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for He has prepared a city for them" Hebrews 11:13-16*

If the Patriarchs had fixated on the past, they would have returned to where they had come from. In their floating around, seemingly aimlessly in the land of promise, it would have been easy for them to have anxiously cried out, "oh Lord, what the heck are we doing here?" or "are we even doing anything here?". But, with eyes ablaze and fixed on the future and their journey, they hugged the promise like a long lost relative and accepted the path God had placed them on. In the eyes of men, with man's praise and sense of accomplishment or achievement, these really were "do nothing men". However, in the eyes of God, they are called by His name, "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob".

What are Paul's words in Philippians 3:20-21?

*"For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself."*

Paul's joy in his own sacrifice was not in the past achievements, or present accolades but in reaching forward to what truly matters, that which is ahead. Paul was on a daily journey to be conformed to Christ in every way shape and form; daily suffering, daily death to the old way of life and daily resurrection to the new. In this daily journey Paul found joy, peace and contentment. Never looking to rest as though he had achieved it but always pressing on to the goal placed before him. Not trying to measure his success against others but rejoicing that Christ's message and kingdom was advancing.

So, rejoice in the journey and in the goal. Even when people sought to run him down and elevate themselves over him, Paul rejoiced in the goal and that Christ was being preached. When Paul was being poured out as a sacrifice, he rejoiced in the goal and a good showing at the Bema for himself and those he sacrificed himself for. When Paul thought about his personal achievements, he joyfully pushed them out of his mind to rejoice in the goal of the long journey ahead.

Now we find ourselves back in Philippians 4:2-3, "Church help these two women to get along." One woman pitted against the other. In the red corner we have a fine cook, ready hand for the widows and orphans, beautiful in appearance and powerful in prayer. In the blue corner we have a wife of a rich honourable man, mother of six faithful Godfearing children, always ready to share powerfully the word of God with great wisdom. Or at least we could imagine a similar scenario. Two women, each with their own value to the body of Christ, warring over something. Normally the story follows this sort of path, "she has, and I don't", "she is doing, and I don't think she should", "God is working in her and everyone sees it why not me?" or "Look where God has placed me. Why doesn't she give me the respect I deserve?".

We could spin out so many different scenarios, and no, these sorts of situations are not limited to women. In our hearts we have all had these battles. The battles bore out because of the war that is raging within. The anxiety over what we have or don't have, what we desire and don't get, what we think we deserve, what we think other people deserve, as though we were judge, how we think we should be treated and admired or honoured, and the like, all boil over into some form of open conflict with others.

Paul gives the church and these two ladies, and so us, three things; rejoice in the Lord, be gentle and let it be seen and don't be anxious but pray. Take them in their reverse order for a moment. If I am not anxious then there is no hinderance to me having a quiet, peaceable and gentle demeanour. It also drastically increases by ability to find joy in the Lord and what He is doing with me and my life.

It also runs the other way. If I set myself to cast off and flush away those things that take my eyes off the joy that is found in the Lord and what He is doing with me and my life, then it opens my heart to be peaceable, quiet, and gentle. I'm content and happy with what the Lord is doing, great or small, and that is enough for me. This takes the wind out of anxiety's sails. It stops that ship from sailing you out into the unnecessary, fearful and damaging storms that rise up in your soul. It keeps your eyes fixed on Jesus who calms all these things.

## Faith through the fire part 6, "Letting 'it' go!"

This brings an end to these needless wars with others by focusing not on the person but on what truly matters. Always remembering that this need to cast off and focus forward is the same struggle and conflict that is in them as well. They may have faults that are clearly evident to you, even with one of your eyes blinded by a log, but while trying, with your lack of depth perception, to skilfully pluck the splinter from their eye, remember you have glaringly obvious faults as well.

So, the casting off and focusing forward that Paul is encouraging you to do in yourself is an attitude that you should spread in your hearts to others. Forgive, cast off what their past has done and rejoice in the future that God has for them. If you cannot rejoice in what God can do in them, then you open the door for more anxiety when God does do something.

We can bring this all back to where we started in Philippians 1. Paul was able to rejoice, to be visibly gentle and to have no anxiety, even when people were against his personal ministry, because his joy was found in the Lord and what He was accomplishing, even through the other. Don't let the apparent success or accomplishments of others cause you anxiety. God is doing what He is doing in you and through you. Even if no one else ever sees it, God sees it. He called you to it now let that be enough. Don't let anxiety make war with others but let God's journey for you be enough. Also, just like Paul in this letter, spread this peaceful message with others in the body to help others find peace with each other.