

Series: Finding Joy

Title: Joy in Prayer

Text: Philippians 4:6-7

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Verse 6

Concerning prayer, John Bunyan once said, “There must be a daily imploring of God for daily supplies from him, if we will do our daily business as we should.”¹ The Puritan was well acquainted with prayer, as he spent long hours in praise and intercession during his imprisonments. He was unjustly imprisoned because of his devotion to Bible preaching during the time of the restoration of the monarchy in England. However, he used his time in a cell to write wonderful works like “Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners” and “The Pilgrim’s Progress.” While in prison, he undoubtedly prayed for many things. One subject of prayer was undoubtedly his daughter Mary. She was blind. From prison, he wrote, “My poor blind child. O the thoughts of the hardship she might go under would break my heart to pieces.”² Bunyan knew that prayer was a daily necessity for children of God.

In light of the relational problems at Philippi, Paul called the church to pray. He said, “Don’t worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6). The apostle’s appeal began with a prohibition concerning worry. It is understandable that he would address such an issue, considering the inevitable stress that Euodia and Syntyche’s disagreement had generated within the congregation. In the original language of the New Testament, Paul used an imperative that called for the cessation of an action in progress. One could literally translate his words as saying, “Stop being anxious!”

The word rendered “worry” was one that was used in both positive and negative ways. In a positive sense, it referred to the healthy type of concern one should have for life’s responsibilities and problems. Paul used the term in such a positive fashion earlier in Philippians to speak of Timothy’s care for the church at Philippi — “For I have no one else like-minded who will genuinely care about your interests” (Philippians 2:20).

In a negative sense, the term referred to a type of over-concern or hyper-care for life’s problems. Used in such a way, it referred to an inordinate, life-dominating worry or anxiety. Jesus taught that His disciples are to live free of such concern. The verb for “worry” in Philippians 4:6 appears 19 times in the New Testament. Nearly half of its uses are found within Jesus’ Sermon on the Mount:

Can any of you add one moment to his life span by worrying? And why do you worry about clothes? Observe how the wildflowers of the field grow: They don’t labor or spin thread. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was adorned like one of these. If that’s how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and thrown into the furnace tomorrow, won’t he do much more for you—

¹ Bunyan, John. *Prayer*. (Edinburgh, UK: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1989), 162.

² Bunyan, 145.

you of little faith? So don't worry, saying, "What will we eat?" or "What will we drink?" or "What will we wear?" For the Gentiles eagerly seek all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness, and all these things will be provided for you. Therefore don't worry about tomorrow, because tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own (Matthew 6:27-34).

According to Jesus, inordinate concern about the affairs of life is something that is unbecoming of His followers. However, most know by personal experience that vanquishing anxiety is no small feat. One cannot overcome it through the strength of the flesh. Only the power of God is capable of stilling the raging fears of the human heart.

The church at Philippi surely felt helpless in the face of the stress and anxiety of church conflict. For Paul, prayer was the means of washing away the church's worries. The apostle knew that prayer puts people into touch with the presence, power, provision, and peace of God. Thus, he said, "Don't worry about anything, but in everything, through prayer..." (Philippians 4:6).

In commending prayer, Paul mentioned three broad categories of prayer. The first is seen through his use of the Greek word *proseuché*. The term is translated as "prayer" in most modern translations. It was a compound word that literally meant "to come to" or "to go to."³ The word was used even within pagan religions to depict the act of one approaching a deity. In the New Testament, the word portrayed the act of Christians approaching the Triune God in worship. It conveyed the idea of "going to" the Lord with one's problems, needs, concerns, and burdens. The church at Philippi needed to take the problem between Euodia and Syntyche to God in prayer.

All Christians are called to a lifestyle in which they regularly, if not daily, "go to" God in prayer. Using the same terminology from our text, Paul told the Colossians, "Devote yourselves to prayer; stay alert in it with thanksgiving" (Colossians 4:2). Scripture tells us that the Lord is the God who hears prayers. The Psalmist said, "All humanity will come to you, the one who hears prayer" (Psalm 65:1). All the idols of the Earth are nothing when compared to the Lord. False religions don't offer the privilege of prayer. The Psalmist said, "The idols of the nations are of silver and gold, made by human hands. They have mouths but cannot speak, eyes, but cannot see. They have ears but cannot hear; indeed, there is no breath in their mouths" (Psalm 135:16-17).

It is only in Christ that one has privilege of communication with the Creator. God is a holy God (Isaiah 6:3). None can ascend into His presence apart from His pardon. Sin marks humanity in such a way that intimate fellowship with the holy God is impossible without an act of Divine forgiveness. The Bible teaches that Christ satisfied God's wrath toward sin by perfectly fulfilling the law (Romans 5:19-20) and dying as a scapegoat for transgressions (Romans 5:7-8). Because of Christ, the veil of the Temple was torn in two (Matthew 27:50), symbolizing the access to God his people now enjoy. Scripture enjoins us:

³ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 333.

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens—Jesus the Son of God—let us hold fast to our confession. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in every way as we are, yet without sin. Therefore, let us approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in time of need (Hebrews 4:14-16).

When the pardoned, regenerate believer prays, his or her prayers ascend into the Third Heaven. Such prayers are heard in the presence of the God who dwells in stark, luminous, and glorious light (Revelation 4:2-3). They are poured out like fragrant offerings from bowls by angels before the throne of God (Revelation 5:8). It is for good reason that Paul urged the Philippians in regard to “prayer.”

Paul also mentioned the need for “petition” in praying. The Greek word he used is often rendered “supplication” by modern translations. It referred to a specific request arising from some sort of need.⁴ Paul mentioned how he offered such prayers on behalf of the Philippians earlier in his letter (Philippians 1:4). He also mentioned how he knew the Philippians offered such prayers on his behalf (Philippians 1:19). When writing to Timothy, he indicated that petitions should be a normal part of the church’s prayers: “First of all, then, I urge that petitions, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for everyone” (1 Timothy 2:1). In Philippians 4:6, Paul used a noun that was singular in number to speak of a single petition. Quite possibly, he had the conflict between Euodia and Syntyche in mind. The church needed to pray for that situation.

Paul also called the church to pray prayers of “thanksgiving.” The Greek referred to “an attitude of gratitude” that expressed praise to God.⁵ The word for “thanksgiving” was the word from which we get our word “eucharist.” The term was applied to the Lord’s Supper in past days in order to depict the highest form of gratitude as being reserved for the Lord’s sacrifice for sin.⁶ Paul’s use of the word revealed that thanksgiving was necessary for the church to experience of inner-peace.

Paul’s point was that the Philippians could have experienced a decrease in relational conflicting by simply reflecting on the blessings they had in Christ. The words of the old hymn are true — “When upon life’s billows you are tempest tossed, When you are discouraged, thinking all is lost, Count your many blessings, name them one by one, And it will surprise you what the Lord hath done.”⁷ In his letter to the Philippians, Paul similarly instructed believers to express thanks, saying, “But sexual immorality and any impurity or greed should not even be heard of among you, as is proper for saints. Obscene and foolish talking or crude joking are not suitable, but rather giving thanks” (Ephesians 5:3-4).

⁴ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 457.

⁵ Friberg, Friberg, and Miller, 182.

⁶ Zodhiates, 688.

⁷ Oatman, Johnson. (1897). *Count Your Blessings*.

Last, Paul told the church to “present...requests to God.” The Greek words rendered “supplication” and “requests” in Philippians 4:6 were near synonyms. However, the former word was singular in number and the latter was plural. The plural form of “requests” indicated that the church members at Philippi each individually had multiple needs that were appropriate requests in prayer. Though the singular problem of Euodia and Synthyche’s contention was certainly worthy of prayer (“supplication”), each individual member in the church had a multitude of needs that were also worthy of prayer (“requests”). Paul’s rich use of language revealed that believers can take every need and worry, no matter how big or small, to the throne room of God. John used the same Greek word rendered “requests” to say, “And if we know that he hears whatever we ask, we know that we have what we have asked of him” (1 John 5:15).

Verse 7

In Philippians 4:7, Paul described the result of the types of prayers he outlined in verse 6. He said, “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7). Paul’s conception of peace involved much more than the absence of war. He had the Hebrew concept of “Shalom” in mind. Shalom involved both an absence of conflict and the presence of joyful tranquility. It was the opposite of the “worry” mentioned in verse 6.

According to Paul, “the peace of God” is one that “surpasses all understanding.” The apostle’s words were intended to convey the supernatural nature of the peace God gives. There is a certain type of tranquility that is produced through worldly mechanisms — materialism, sensuality, overindulgence in food, substance abuse, and more. However, the Spirit of God in the soul of man can produce a peace that is otherworldly in nature. Such peace is not based on worldly circumstances or factors. It finds its origin in the promises and presence of God. Thus, man can not create it and man can’t comprehend it. Jesus spoke of such things when He said, “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Don’t let your heart be troubled or fearful” (John 14:27).

In our current passage, Paul taught that prayer was a means of experiencing God’s peace. This is true, since real, Christian prayer is a Holy-Spirit-oriented activity. In Ephesians, Paul told the believers at Ephesus to “Pray at all times in the Spirit” (Ephesians 6:20). Along with Scripture reading and meditation, prayer is one of the most foundational means of grace whereby believers experience the work of God’s Spirit in their lives. Consequently, when they pray, the Spirit works to generate the otherworldly grace of the Lord in their hearts and minds. Paul indicated that the Spirit is the source of the practical experience of Christian peace in Galatians. In his writing to the church at Galatia, he said, “But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. The law is not against such things” (Galatians 5:22-23).

Paul emphasized the power of the peace God gives by describing it as a “guard” for the human soul. The word rendered “guard” was a military word in Paul’s day.⁸ It was often used of a Roman soldier who guarded a strategic location. Such an individual was a skilled soldier in the world’s greatest Army. He was trained to let

⁸ Rogers Jr. and Rogers III, 457.

nothing by his watchful eye. Interestingly, Paul was chained to two elite soldiers as the letter to the Philippians was penned. His arms were shackled to members of the Emperor's Imperial Guard. Perhaps his location prompted him to use the imagery of a Roman soldier to depict the way the peace of God works in a believer's life.

When a believer lives by God's Spirit (Galatians 5:16), the peace of Christ sets up a citadel around the individual's emotions ("hearts") and thoughts ("minds"). The Spirit of Christ actively protects the believer from the enemy's attacks. When one encounters distressing circumstances, the peace of God wards off worry like a skilled Roman soldier would defend a strategic location from an enemy's attack. When problems and pains persist, the peace of God stands guard to keep anxiety and over-concern away.

The Christian's peace is based on the work of Christ. Paul indicated such to be true through the final words in verse 7 — "in Christ Jesus." In Romans 5:1, Paul used the same word from our text to say, "Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Because of justification, believers have positional peace with God. Former hostilities and enmity have been erased (Ephesians 2:3-4). As a result, any believer can have a tranquil confidence that he or she is in a right relationship with God.

Throughout life, however, believers will face challenges from people and problems that threaten such confidence. It is then that believers need to know how to experience and express God's peace. Prayer based on a faith in the work of Jesus can make such peace grow in the human heart and mind.