

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord and saviour Jesus Christ. Amen

Joy in the Lord!

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Philippians 4:4 (ESV)

Pray...

Throughout the letter to the people at Philippi, Paul repeats this request to rejoice in conjunction with his echo, saying that he is joyful despite and in spite of his current circumstances.

Rejoice in the Lord, he says, and all his invitations boil down to this one event: 'The Lord brings us joy!' I want to break down his commands and look at some of the specific ways that God brings us joy. We are going to do this in four points.

1. The Lord brings us joy because he comes to us

The Lord is at hand; Philippians 4:5 (ESV) Paul writes. God is close by. He is not far off or distant from us; he is Immanuel, God with us. He has come to us, as one of us, to live with us and save us. That is the message of John the Baptist also that God is close by and we should prepare ourselves to receive him. It was picked up in the message last week from the prophet Malachi, "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. Malachi 3:1 (ESV)

Here, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Christ, we are reminded of who he is and what he has done for us. He is God and has come to save us. For this, we should rejoice, for the Lord is with us. As he promised through Zephaniah when he said

The Lord your God is in your midst,

a mighty one who will save; Zephaniah 3:17 (ESV)

And through the prophet Isaiah,

Shout, and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion,

for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel." Isaiah 12:6 (ESV)

The one who created us has now come to be with us so that he can save us. He is with us in his word, by His Spirit, at His altar and His font. All these are causes for joy because God is with us. How blessed are we that the God of this universe would humble himself to be with us?

But the claim that 'he is at hand' proclaims his return to judge the living and dead. For this, we rejoice, for in his return, he will bring justice and execute judgment. We will be

released from the oppression of our enemies and vindicated as his people of Joy to join him in everlasting joy.

2. Not only is he present with us, but we also have joy because he saves us.

This is perhaps the most significant cause for joy because, without his act of salvation, his presence would be terrifying, for no one can see God and live. Yet God comes to us, not to condemn but to save us especially from sin, death and the devil, but also from all our enemies.

In John's preaching, we learn about some enemies of the faithful. Firstly, we see that those who think that they are loyal but claim something other than faith in Christ as their qualification might be enemies. 'Do not claim that you have Abraham as your father' This claim on Abraham is a claim of self-righteousness, something other than Christ in which to place their faith. We still see these people; not many claim Abraham as the idol of their righteousness, but instead, we have other claims. I'm acceptable to God because I'm a good person, Australian, hard-working, deserve it, and do the right thing according to society... you get the picture. We might even hear these days that your denominational affiliation or Lutheran ancestry is what save you. All these claims are self-righteous claims that do away with our need for salvation through Christ, and these become enemies of the faithful because their self-righteous claims lead us away from Jesus' claims on us.

Furthermore, John has people come and ask him questions regarding their repentance actions (what shall we do?). Here, we see some who were once enemies. Tax collectors and soldiers, both representatives of the state but enemies of the church. Not because their role is inherently unjust but because they used their position for injustice; in fact, both are intended to bring justice, but instead, in their turning from their sin, John reveals how they were inclined to act; they extort excess funds by unjust means for their own greed.

This highlights the true enemies of the church are those who are unjust and oppressive for whatever reason. Sometimes, the unjust party is the government or their agents as revealed in the gospels and beyond; Herod kills the innocent children, the government outlaws the church and kills those who will not comply (all the apostles, including Paul and 300 years of faithful disciples post Jesus resurrection), the Egyptian government enslaves the Israelites, the kings of Judah and Israel lead their subjects astray to chase after other idols including sacrificing their own children and never let justice prevail in the land and the neighbouring nations even though they are evil are used to bring these nations to justice while their injustice is prolonged.

Anyone who perpetuates injustice is the enemy of the faithful, but God promises us rescue and salvation from our enemies as he promised through Zephaniah

Behold, at that time I will deal
with all your oppressors.
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown all over the earth. Zephaniah 3:19 (ESV)

God promises to save all those who are downtrodden and treated unjustly, not just from their earthly enemies but from their eternal enemies, so that they can be joyful with him. God's saving acts bring us joy; his forgiveness gives Joy because forgiveness is freedom, therefore

3. We can rejoice in repentance

When we hear John preaching, it doesn't immediately elicit joy.

"You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?

Every tree, therefore, that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire."

His winnowing fork is in his hand to clear his threshing floor and to gather the wheat into his barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire." Luke 3:7, 9, 17 (ESV)

Repentance is closely linked with forgiveness, so even though these sound like harsh words of judgment (and they are), they are accompanied by John's baptism, which was for repentance and forgiveness of sins. Because repentance is linked to forgiveness and we already know that Jesus Christ, true God and true man, brings that forgiveness to us by his presence and suffering on the cross, we can freely repent and confess our sins, knowing that he is faithful and forgives those who trust in him. Repentance can then also bring us joy; while it might be painful to analyse our lives and see how deep our sin runs, right to our corrupt hearts, it is freedom to know that Christ has died and risen for all our sins and has set us free by his forgiveness.

Here, we are also free from the guilt and shame of sin. When we look at our lives and are repulsed by our actions and traumatised that 'I could act in that way', Jesus says, 'Your sins are forgiven.' We can rest in his proclamation so that his grace dwarfs our guilt and shame.

When we sin against one another, we can confess our sins and share God's forgiveness with each other. In fact, this is the basis of our Christian connection and unity: God has forgiven us, and we are forgiving others. If we refuse to forgive or refuse to confess, we deny that we are sinners and that God has saved us. We put ourselves outside of Christ and his unity.

4. Finally, there is joy in suffering –

When Paul writes this letter he is in prison, probably in Rome awaiting his death. But God's love and joy has put even that suffering into perspective, so much so that Paul treats his imprisonment for Christ as a badge of honour. He takes joy even in his

suffering for Christ. **‘Even if I am to be poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad and rejoice with you all. Likewise you also should be glad and rejoice with me.’** Philippians 2:17–18 (ESV)

We, too, can rejoice in our sufferings for the sake of Christ. Because suffering is not the final word, even if our enemies should triumph in this world, Christ has triumphed over death and removed its sting for those that are in him. Suffering is not cause for anxiety, but instead, it is cause for trust and peace because we know that nothing in heaven or earth can separate us from this love. Indeed, it should prompt us to pray for protection from our enemies, for their reformation by faith and repentance, and for them to join us in God's good works, but we should not fear their persecution over the gift of eternal life that our loving God has given to us. For suffering is a mark of the church and a gift from God that should bring us joy.

The litany draws this out beautifully.

To forgive our enemies, persecutors, and slanderers, and to turn their hearts;

Paul dearly loved the congregation at Philippi because they shared their faith in the Lord with him, joined in serving the Lord with him, and were united with him on account of Jesus Christ, their saviour. He repeatedly reminded them of what ‘the Lord’ had done for him and for them, their commonality in sin and salvation through Christ and his work on the cross.

We, to are invited, commanded, to rejoice in the Lord,

for his presence with us,

for saving us,

for bringing us to repentance,

Even in our suffering, we rejoice in all that God has done for us.

So that we are gentle and reasonable, without anxiety for other things, always looking to him with prayers and requests and living in his peace.

Amen

Rejoice in the Lord always; again, I will say, rejoice. Philippians 4:4 (ESV)

Amen