

Rejoice in the Lord – Philippians 4:4-9

Lots of Different Emotions

I don't know how you have been feeling, but I have been surprised by all the different emotions I've been feeling over these past few weeks. The constantly changing situation, with new laws and expectations being created every couple of days. The radical change of nearly everything we do in such a short amount of time. Some have lost jobs, even careers, overnight and now have nothing to do, others are so busy with work, home-schooling, and life that they have no time to rest and relax. The loss of relationship with those you care about because of physical distancing. The worry about getting sick in anyway and not being able to have visitors if you have to go to hospital. Weddings and funerals will be so small that they hardly amount to much and so you cannot share your joy or grief with those who love you most. Suddenly, feelings of anxiety and insecurity have become very common.

I know for myself, that I felt an incredible amount of stress trying to put something together for online church which would be good, helpful, and would work. But then, I have also felt happy when I have achieved something, grief over not being able to be with extended family and friends, joy when I see people saying hello to each other after church online, sadness that I can't physically be with those people, excited about trying something new with church, and fearful about COVID-19 and that it might infect friends and loved ones. A big worry for me is the possibility of conducting lots of funerals and pastoring people through this strange time when they might feel even more isolated, because of the physical distancing laws.

One of the surprising emotions for me was anger. A couple of times, I have just woken up in a very angry mood. Nothing in particular has triggered it. I was just that way when I woke up. One morning, I had to apologise to nearly everyone I spoke to. Before we even talked, I said I was sorry because I was feeling very angry that day. I tried to not let it affect my conversations with people, but I was still surprised by how strong this emotion was and that it just appeared without warning. Other people have told me similar stories about suddenly needing to cry, but without any particular reason. Others have told me about sudden moments of worry and anxiety. It is a strange time, and even our emotions are acting in strange ways. So, as Christian people, how are we to understand these emotions? How are we supposed to feel as we live through this COVID-19 threat? Let us have a look at what Paul says in...

Rejoice

Philippians 4:4 *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*¹

It is easy to tell people to rejoice when there is something to be joyful for, but it is not that easy to always be rejoicing, especially when you are facing hardships. We must remember that Paul was writing this letter to the Philippians from a prison cell.² We also should remember that when Paul first came to Philippi, he was accused of causing an uproar. He was then stripped, beaten, and thrown into prison.³ The church in Philippi

¹ The Bible verses are all from the NIV

² Philippians 1:7-14.

³ Acts 16:11-40

knew about persecution and some of them may have lived in fear of their lives.⁴ So, how could Paul tell them to always be rejoicing? The key here is to understand what they were to rejoice in. You see, Paul wasn't just telling them to have a positive attitude, and to always think happy thoughts. He was telling them to rejoice *in the Lord!* Now, you only have to go back to chapter 3 of Philippians to see what he meant by that. In Philippians 3:4-6, Paul had been saying he used to be an important and impressive Pharisee. From a Jewish point of view, he had impressive credentials and he originally thought that they would make him look good in the eyes of God and people. But he then went on to say...

Philippians 3:7-9 *But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.⁸ What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ-- the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.*

Paul knew that if he trusted in his own righteousness, his own goodness, then he would face God's judgement and an eternity in hell. But by trusting in Christ's righteousness then he could be saved from judgement and know the power of the resurrection from the dead through Jesus. The reason Paul encouraged people to rejoice was because that joy was found in Jesus who would give them life beyond the grave, resurrected life, eternal life with God. Paul wasn't saying, "Rejoice in the Lord and he will save you from persecution." No, he was saying, "Rejoice in the Lord despite persecution." People have faced death and died for Jesus, but there is a certain type of joy that pushes through the pain of persecution, because Christians know that they have life beyond that persecution.

We too can rejoice in the Lord despite the threat of unemployment, financial ruin, physical distancing, and even the threat of a deadly virus, because even if the worst happens and we die, we know that we will be resurrected to eternal life where viruses, sickness and death will no longer be a problem for us. It sounds strange, but knowing this can bring us a certain type of joy, which can only be found in Jesus, and it changes the way you live.

Considerate, Gracious and Gentle

Philippians 4:5 *Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.*

People may have been persecuting the Philippian Christians, but the Philippian Christians were told to be considerate, gracious, and gentle to other people. It was not for Christians to seek revenge, but to show the same graciousness that Christ had shown them.

At this time, when our emotions are all over the place, we need to be considerate, gracious, and gentle with each other. If you are aware that you are feeling angry, scared, frustrated, tired, annoyed, lonely, anxious, or worried (just to name a few emotions) and you can sense that those feelings are coming through to other people, try warning others about how you have been feeling or possibly apologise and say that you are trying to not let it affect your conversation or relationship. I guess I am trying to say, "Be considerate of others when

⁴ Philippians 2:25-30

you are feeling this way.” Many of us have been confused by the number emotions we have been feeling and so we can understand where others are coming from when they say they are feeling a certain way.

If someone has been rude or spoken harshly to you, please be gentle and gracious, as they might not be able to understand what is happening emotionally to them. You might need to show a heart of forgiveness.

Don't be Anxious

Philippians 4:6-7 Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, 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.

I have been feeling all kinds of emotions lately, what if anxiety is one of them? It is not all that easy to just stop feeling anxious. And what about people who are clinically diagnosed with anxiety, are they disobeying God by having those feelings which they are not able to control? Well, the first thing to say is that I do not think that Paul was telling people with clinical anxiety to “just get over it”. I also don't think that Paul was saying that Christians should never feel anxious or worried. In fact, Paul spoke about how anxious he was regarding Epaphroditus' health and how the Philippians were worried about him...

Philippians 2:25-28 But I think it is necessary to send back to you Epaphroditus, my brother, co-worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger, whom you sent to take care of my needs. ²⁶ For he longs for all of you and is distressed because you heard he was ill. ²⁷ Indeed he was ill, and almost died. But God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, to spare me sorrow upon sorrow. ²⁸ Therefore I am all the more eager to send him, so that when you see him again you may be glad and I may have less anxiety.

Paul had been worried about Epaphroditus and even more worried about the thought that he might die when he was supposed to be looking after Paul. Paul knew what anxiety was and he knew that the Philippians were anxious about Epaphroditus and Paul. So, when he says, “Do not be anxious about anything”, he was not saying it was wrong to feel anxious, he was saying that when you feel anxious then you should take those feelings of anxiety to God in prayer. Feelings of anxiety can often be self-absorbing. All our energy gets used up in worrying about what we can and cannot do about the anxious situation we are in. It is often about a loss of control which causes insecurity and anxiety. But by reaching out to God in prayer, handing over those worries we have over to God in prayer, we can be released from our anxieties by trusting in the fact that God is in control.

Your anxieties may well be coming from all the changes we have had to go through so quickly. I also think that lots of those things we find security in have suddenly become unstable, and we don't have control, and that causes anxiety. Worries about health, work, food, school, home, money, isolation, possible domestic violence, lack of exercise, and of course, the virus itself, can be a great cause of anxiety because we don't have the same control as we used to have over those things. That is what is so good about trusting in Jesus. He is in control of all things, even if we do not like his control, he is still in control. More than that, we can rejoice in the Lord because Jesus has our eternal security in control. Jesus' resurrection means that death is not our master, death does not have the final say. Jesus has the final say on all things and by handing all things over to him we can find both peace and joy, which will cut through our anxiety, and help us when we are most worried.

Mindfulness

So, once we have handed over our anxieties to Jesus, and found the peace of God, what are we supposed to concentrate on then? The other day, Sebastian was starting his first home-school lesson for the day and it was about mindfulness. Sebastian had to turn on a Youtube video, then sit back, close his eyes and listen to what the person narrating the video was saying. It was like a meditation, filled with telling yourself affirming things and apparently it is part of the Positive Psychology course Sebastian is being taught. There is good in learning about your strengths and affirming some of the good things in your life, but Paul's version of mindfulness is not to look for the good in yourself, for we are all sinful people, but to think about the good things of God.

***Philippians 4:8-9** Finally, brothers and sisters, 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.*

People sometimes think that Christians focus too much on the negative – don't lie, don't commit adultery, don't hate, etc. It is true that we are supposed to be mindful of those things, but we are supposed to hand those things over to God by repenting of them and turning to the good things of God. Paul had taught them to be mindful of the positive and the most positive things are not necessarily found in yourself. Godly character is found in God and those are the kinds of things we are supposed to be thinking of and putting into practice. Imagine if we are able to put into practice things that are true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, or praiseworthy in these times of COVID-19. I think those things would involve generosity as we share what we have with others rather than hoarding everything for ourselves. I think it would be showing gentleness, grace and kindness to those who are finding their emotions are getting beyond their control. I think it would be reaching out and connecting in a safe way so that we do not accidentally spread COVID-19 but still spread real love and care. I think it would be recognising the anxieties that some of us are feeling and bringing those anxieties regularly to God in prayer. It may even be that we can help ease those anxieties by helping a person if we can, listening to their worries and even praying with them, even if those prayers happen over the phone.

Conclusion

Right now, our world is being turned upside down very quickly and we will feel unstable, insecure, and anxious. You may have felt all kinds of different emotions. But the Lord is near. He is close to us. We can know his peace and we can still rejoice in the Lord in spite of all that is happening being mindful of God's goodness to us and how we can share that goodness with others.