

Canberra Baptist Church

9.00 & 10.30am, Sun 15 October 2017

Joy and Peace

Scripture

Philippians 4:1-9 and also Isaiah 25:1-9 (NRSV)

Introduction

When did you have your last check-up? Regular check-ups are important. So let me give you a quick one now – a simple one; just two questions.

1. Are you happy? Would you say joy is something you experience
hardly ever ----- sometimes ----- half the time (50/50) ----- frequently ----- most of the time?
2. What about peace? Would you say peace is something you experience
hardly ever ----- sometimes ----- half the time (50/50) ----- frequently ----- most of the time?

Whatever your results, I'm pretty sure you'd all like more of both.

Today's passage has pointers for us on how to have both more joy and more peace. It's Philippians 4:1-9, written by Paul to people he obviously cared for deeply. The opening verse makes that pretty clear.

"Therefore, my beloved brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved." (4:1)

Joy/rejoicing and peace are two of the key themes of this passage and, in fact, two of the key themes of the whole letter. Going on what Paul says in this letter, I think he would have answered "*most of the time*" to both questions in the check-up.

Several times he says "*I rejoice*".

In chapter 1 he says he rejoices that Christ is being proclaimed, even though it is at his expense, and continues on to add: "*Yes, and I will continue to rejoice.*" (1:18)

In chapter 2 he writes: "*I am glad and rejoice with all of you.*" (2:17)

And in chapter 4 we have: "*I rejoice in the Lord greatly.*" (4:10)

And in several places in this letter Paul says things that indicate his peace, such as:

1:2 "*For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain.*"

4:11 "*I have learned to be content with whatever I have.*"

4:12 "*I have learned the secret of having plenty and being in need.*"

4:13 "*I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied.*"

"I am fully satisfied." They are the words of someone who has a great measure of peace.

What I find remarkable about the joy and peace expressed throughout this letter is that Paul was in prison when he wrote it, facing trial and the prospect of execution for preaching the Gospel. What we have in today's passage may sound somewhat simplistic, trite or unrealistic at first. But when you consider Paul's circumstances and all he has been through and all he is currently going through, then what he says can't be written off as Pollyanna-ish platitudes. Here is deep and helpful truth that has been forged on the anvil of horrible personal experiences.

Let's look then at what Paul says about joy and peace that might help us to move up towards his end of those check-up scales. He talks about 2 main things that can rob of us of joy and peace.

The first is **disputes or disunity**. The second is **worry**.

1. Disputes/Disunity

Two of the women in the church, Euodia and Syntyche, were fighting with each other. Paul doesn't say what the dispute was about or apportion blame, but he is clearly concerned for them and the church. They were hard-working and valuable co-workers with him in the Gospel, presumably with ongoing leadership and influence in the church.

Paul gives 2 instructions in relation to this dispute.

(1.1) He urges them *"to be of the same mind in the Lord"*. (4:2)

That's the same expression as back in chapter 2 where he says to all in the church:

"be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind" (2:2) and

"let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus" (2:5)

He's not saying that they can't have different views or opinions. But he *is* saying they mustn't be selfish or full of pride, but self-giving and humble, like Christ.

And they are to display gentleness. (4:5)

(1.2) Paul's other instruction is to provide help for them.

"Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel..." (4:3)

We don't know who the *"loyal companion"* was, but given that this letter would have been read out in the church, publicly, Paul was ensuring that help would be given to the women.

This situation reminds me of a similarly unfortunate one that I faced in a previous church. Two influential women in the church had a falling-out over the Sunday School ministry. Their husbands were eventually dragged into it as well. For the sake of all involved and for the sake of the Sunday School and indeed the church as a whole, it clearly needed to be resolved. I'm somewhat of a conflict-avoider but eventually I called the two couples together with the aim of mediation. However, the women declined to acknowledge they had a problem or to discuss it and the process quickly ground to a halt. Not long afterwards, both families left the church, leaving behind many confused and grieving people. I share that as an example of the harm that unresolved division and disunity can cause.

Disputes/disunity can rob us of joy and peace.

2. Paul also indicates that worry can rob us of joy and peace.

Tuesday (10 October) was World Mental Health Day as proclaimed by the World Health Organisation and the past week has been Mental Health Week. Anxiety seemed to be somewhat of a focus this year.

In one video clip I saw, Associate Professor Rocco Crino of Charles Sturt University said:

"About 14% of the population in any 12-month period will have a diagnosable anxiety disorder – that's without specific phobias."

That's a lot of anxiety robbing a lot of people of joy and peace.

Let's see what Paul says.

He has 2 instructions or solutions for worry. In proffering them he picks up and develops some of Jesus' teaching from the Sermon on the Mount. We had the reading last Sunday (Matthew 6:25-33) and Belinda preached on it. Where Jesus says not to worry, drawing attention to the way God feeds the birds of the air and clothes the lilies of the field.

(2.1) Paul first instruction is to pray.

"Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." (4:6)

Paul is very comprehensive here – don't worry about anything, but pray about everything. And he uses 4 different words for prayer – general prayer, supplication, thanksgiving and requests. As we bring our concerns and worries to God, Paul says,

"The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." (4:7)

Paul uses a military metaphor here. There was a Roman garrison at Philippi, so the Philippians would have been very familiar with the sight of the Roman sentry maintaining his watch and providing protection.

John Bunyan employs a similar metaphor in one of his allegorical books¹. Mr God's-Peace is appointed to patrol the town of Mansoul. As long as Mr God's-Peace maintained his office then *"nothing was to be found but harmony, happiness, joy and health"*. But when Prince Emmanuel was grieved by Mansoul and left the town, Mr God's-Peace laid down his commission and departed too.

Bunyan was pointing out that the peace of God comes through or in Christ Jesus, to use that last, very important phrase in v7 in our NRSV Bibles.

But I particularly like Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of v7 in the Message Bible.

"Before you know it, a sense of God's wholeness, everything coming together for good, will come and settle you down. It's wonderful what happens when Christ displaces worry at the centre of your life."

(2.2) Paul's second instruction or solution related to worry is to think appropriately or redirect thinking. Instead of filling our minds with anxious thoughts, fill them with thoughts of things that are true, honourable, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy.

As you know, we are in the process of articulating new church goals. One of the draft goals that has come from the various church gatherings is *"Life-long Christian formation and development"*. One alternative way of expressing that goal that has been suggested is: *"walking humbly with God – reverently, thoughtfully and prayerfully."* I like that and I think it pretty well sums up what I've been sharing with you from this passage this morning.

Conclusion

But before I finish, let me just say that following the instructions in today's passage doesn't automatically and instantaneously bring unwavering joy and peace. We still live in a fallen world and our walk will at times be difficult and challenging. But our other reading today, from Isaiah 25, beautifully describes the time we all look forward to when there will be perfect joy and peace – when we will be off the scale for joy and peace for eternity. I close by repeating some of those descriptions from our earlier reading from Is. 25.

"The LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food." (v6a)

"He will swallow up death forever." (v7a)

"Then the LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces." (v8a)

"It will be said on that day, Lo this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation." (v9)

Notes

1. John Bunyan, *"The Holy War Made by King Shaddai Upon Diabolus, to Regain the Metropolis of the World, Or, The Losing and Taking Again of the Town of Mansoul"*, 1682. Cited in Ralph Martin's commentary on Philippians in the Tyndale series.