

*From Days Of Old: The Lord Is Near*  
*By Jason Huff*  
*December 11, 2016*  
*Psalm 126:1-6; Zephaniah 3:14-20; Philippians 4:4-7*

Our final Scripture reading today is Philippians 4:4-7. This is the Word of the Lord. “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Does anybody remember when Christmas specials were Christmas specials? We watched *Hairspray* this week, which was very well done, but *Hairspray* doesn't exactly say Christmas to me. NBC has made a habit of these musicals during December – but it's not like *The Sound of Music*, *The Wiz*, or *Peter Pan* are exactly Christmas material either. Doing a little bit of research, it seems that most of the Christmas specials we all know and love were made over twenty years ago, in a time when television was a little more friendly to the holiday.

But as I was thinking about it this week, it struck me that the best-known, most beloved Christmas specials and films are not necessarily the ones full of happy songs and cuddly animals. The three I always think of are *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, *A Christmas Carol*, and *It's A Wonderful Life*. The one thing that all of those specials have in common is a serious sense of the blues. They are about joy lost and whether or not it can be found again.

In *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, Charlie (who's the eternal optimist in the face of all his failures) is dismayed by his own lack of Christmas spirit. It's all commercialized, he says. Can anybody tell me the true meaning of Christmas, he cries out. And his friend Linus tells him – it's about the Savior of the world lying in a manger.

If Charlie Brown were ever to grow up, he might become George Bailey from *It's A Wonderful Life*, the guy who wonders if life is worth living when he always does the moral thing but never ever gets ahead – who sees his whole life as a failure. It takes divine intervention in the form of a junior angel that shows George the difference his life has made.

And the bad guy in *It's A Wonderful Life*, Mr. Potter, is simply another version of Ebenezer Scrooge. Scrooge was once a joyful, happy man who lets his love of money corrupt him and take away his happiness. Once again, through divine intervention, Scrooge is shown the error of his ways, the road to repentance and joy in living in Christian virtue.

Today's passage is not a common one at Christmastime; I chose it because it was in a collection of readings for Christmas that I liked, and I thought, “They must know what they're doing!” When Paul is writing, Jesus' death and resurrection are twenty, maybe even thirty years in the past. It's been a long time since the manger.

But what I love about this passage is that it gives us not only encouragement on how to live in a way that honors the Lord, it helps us through the doldrums a lot of us face at Christmastime. We want to have joy; we want to celebrate. But the holidays often come with a lot of hardship. Sometimes it's difficult to remember loved ones who are gone or Christmases past that didn't go like we wanted. And sometimes our joy is stolen by the busyness of the season. There are far too many things to do in the hours of the day we have. We wind up reaching Christmas and instead of being excited, we're exhausted. How do we move beyond that? Paul gives us the answer here in his final words to the church in Philippi.

Here's the lynchpin upon which the rest of the passage hangs: *the Lord is near*. All the good things that Paul encourages are made possible by this one truth. The Lord is near. In the Old Testament, we read that the Lord is near to those who call on Him (Psalm 145) and to the brokenhearted (Psalm 34). But sometimes that nearness is frightening – when God draws near to the Israelites after the Exodus from Egypt, the display on the mountain is so spectacular that they send Moses up to the mountain to intercede for them – they're afraid they'll die if they come any closer to God. In Jeremiah 23, the Lord's nearness is a fearful thing, supposed to convict the wicked to repent and become godly.

God has never ever been up in heaven far away from everything going on down here. In that same passage from Jeremiah, God says that His presence “fills heaven and earth.” Yet before the coming of Jesus, real intimacy with God is hard to imagine. God is to be respected, loved, worshipped, and feared, but He is still difficult to relate to. He is so mighty in power, so awesome in glory, so powerful beyond description, that drawing near to Him is hard to imagine.

God has an answer to that problem of closeness and intimacy with His people, and the answer is Jesus. In Jesus, God makes Himself known to us in a way we can grasp. As an infant, as a child, then as a man, we relate to Him in a deeply personal way. In Jesus, God becomes like us in every way but sin. He is near to us, as close as any human can be.

And after Jesus' death and resurrection, the Holy Spirit is sent to every believer. Every true Christian throughout the ages has had the gift of the Holy Spirit living inside of them. That includes every believer here and at Bethel, every person you've ever known with a real, living, and active faith in Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit is the way that Jesus comes to be with us and communicate with us even now. Because of the way God is Triune, when we have the Holy Spirit, we have Jesus with us all the time. Through the Holy Spirit, we have the wisdom, power, and insight of Jesus available to us.

This Christmas, when we look in the manger, what we should see if God gives us the insight is that the Christ child now lives in us. He is closer to us than we can even comprehend. As we turn to Him, He challenges and changes and directs our hearts and actions. If you are depressed or stressed this Christmas, you don't have to look for Jesus. He has already come to us. If you believe He has come to rescue from your sins and you want to follow Him faithfully, He lives within you. And if you haven't come to faith, if you haven't trusted in Him, know that He is just a breath away. Don't miss your opportunity to know His eternal love and grace and mercy.

That leads us to the first of Paul's exhortations: *rejoice in the Lord always*. He says it again just to make sure we get it – *rejoice!* Rejoice isn't a word we use every day, but it simply means, "be glad!" Taken in the context of Paul saying to be anxious about nothing, it could be said that Paul was the first person ever to say, "Don't worry; be happy!"

But we have to pay close attention to the wording Paul uses. Rejoice in the Lord always. That makes a huge difference. And let's think about the context a bit. Paul doesn't write in a joyful time for Christians. Most of the people who first heard this letter – probably over half – were slaves. It could be pretty awful, especially if you were the slave of a wicked, unscrupulous, or unmerciful master. And Paul writes Philippians from prison, not quite sure if he will be released or if he will be executed for spreading the good news of Jesus.

None of them had any good earthly reason to be happy. But they are! In fact, at the end of his letter, Paul acknowledges a substantial gift the Philippians had sent to him – Paul says that they gave enough that they "participated in his sufferings" through it. They gave sacrificially to make sure Paul was taken care of in prison – since in ancient Roman prisons, prisoners had to make arrangements for their own food, or they would starve to death.

Here's the whole point: we can rejoice in the Lord. That's where true, lasting happiness comes from. If your joy comes from anything else, it's going to fail you. You may love your job; what happens when you lose that job, or get too old for that job? You may find happiness with your family; what happens when they grow up and move out? You may think things are good because you like your house, your car, your TV, your computer, your hobbies. What's left when those things are gone? We thank God for all of those things, but they aren't cause to rejoice.

Paul doesn't ask us to be happy because of external circumstances because his external circumstances were pretty lousy! He tells us to rejoice because of the Lord. We find hope in the Lord, peace in the Lord, mercy and grace in the Lord. The very faith that saves us comes from the Lord's hand. Paul rejoiced while held in chains because he knew that God was with him. In that lonely prison, God was there. God squeezed through the bars of the cell and sat with him. The Holy Spirit lived right there in that prison with him.

So find joy this Christmas, but don't look to find it in stringing more Christmas lights or attending more Christmas parties or listening longer to the Christmas station. That's not where you'll find your joy. But if you look for joy in the Lord, if you seek Him through the Scripture and prayer, if you serve Him by helping others, you will find that joy, and you will truly rejoice in the Lord always.

Paul's next exhortation is to *let your gentleness be known to all*. This one is a bit harder. What does it mean, "your gentleness"? The Greek word is very hard to translate into a single English term. In other translations, it's "reasonableness," "being considerate," "gentle spirit," and "good sense." Does this mean being a milquetoast, someone who can be pushed around, someone who puts up with abuse?

No. But it does mean there is something different about people who know the Lord is near. Ancient Roman society was built on “taking” things. The ideal man in Roman society knew what he wanted and let no one stop him. If he wanted a woman, he took her; if he wanted property, he took it; if he wanted power, he took it. Your slaves, your wives and concubines, the troops under your command, they were all things to be used as you saw fit. You took without mercy and without apology. Some acts we consider reprehensible, that we put people in jail for years and years for committing, weren’t a big deal to the Romans. A man showed no weakness, dealt with pain and sorrow without emotion, and showed kindness only to those closest to him – because kindness could be used against him.

Paul, teaching us Jesus’ ways, shows us a radically different way of life. If the Son of God has come, if Jesus is “God with us,” if through His life, death, and resurrection God is now permanently and always near to believers through the Holy Spirit, a new way of doing things is in order. It’s a way of life that radically conflicted with the Roman worldview. Showing kindness and thoughtfulness to all; being considerate of others; showing respect for people who disagree with you; showing compassion for the less fortunate – all of these things made you look like a crazy person to the average Roman citizen. But this new way of life was the way of Jesus, who showed the most compassion to the people you’d least expect – tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners who wanted to change their ways. He gave His life to the people who could give Him nothing in return, and He gave His life for them as well.

Two thousand years later, showing your gentleness to all is still just as shocking. People are mean! You get complemented if your kids are merely polite. We’re used to calling a company and getting a friendly person on the phone who isn’t actually going to do anything for us. If we live this out, if we show genuine warmth and love to other people, especially to those from whom we want nothing, people will notice. Because it ultimately won’t be our old selves shining through; it will be Christ alive in us, near to us, near to them. Paul doesn’t tell us to live this way in order even to win people to Jesus. It’s because this is the way of Jesus. As imitators of Jesus, we can live out His kindness.

Paul’s third call in this passage is, “*Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.*” Whew...this is a hard one. I’m anxious about Christmas two weeks from now. What are Christmas Eve and Christmas Day services going to look like? Is the snow going to hold off for our travel plans? How can I get everything done I need to get done? Am I going to get the Christmas lights up? And those are just the holiday anxieties, not the everyday ones! And these are petty anxieties in comparison to the real ones out there – where is my next meal coming from? Where will I live when I’m out of rent money? What will my friends do when they find out I believe the Bible is true and really take Jesus at His word?

But there’s a reason we don’t have to be anxious about anything. The Lord is near. He came for us to release us from the stress of this world. We cannot change the world by worrying. We can change it by praying. God knows all that is to come, yet in His marvelous plan He fully accounts for our prayers and answers them according to His good and perfect will. And you know what? Even if my prayers are not answered the way I want, I know they are answered the way that is best for me. I do not need to be anxious because God has it under control.

And when we pray, we know that God is near. Look, if you believe in Santa Claus, you have to write a letter and send it all the way to the North Pole! And apparently, if you do write to him and he's not sure how you're going to act, he sends an elf on the shelf to keep an eye on you to see if you should be on the naughty list. That's creepy! The Holy Spirit lives in us, so we don't have to go anywhere to talk to Him. We certainly don't have to rely on the United States Postal Service. And despite what some people think, He is not watching us just to zap us for our wrongdoing. He already knows every sin we will commit against Him. He comes near to us because He is a relational God who wants to talk to us and is more than willing to listen to us.

So, as Paul says, pray and petition the Lord. Do it for everything. Don't just come with requests for the sick. Don't stop at prayers for the youth group trip or the church. Pray for it all. Come with thanksgiving for all the blessings you've already seen, and come with anticipation for all He'll do in response to our prayers. He is near. He can handle it all. Nothing is too small for the Lord. There's a reason that the first person of the Trinity wants us to call Him our Father. He cares for us as His children. He wants us to come to Him about the details of life. Just as a father doesn't ignore a request from his child because it's too simple, He does not ignore us. He delights in us. Come to Him with your whole life, both the great and the small, and He will hear.

Finally, Paul gives us a promise. As we are glad in God, as we let the Lord's gentleness shine through, as we pray and give our anxieties to God," *the peace of God*, which transcends all understanding, *will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*" The word "guard" here is a military term. It's about well-fortified stronghold. God puts a hedge of peace around the hearts of His people in Christ Jesus, protecting the depths of who we are.

Living in a godly way is hard. It is tough to do what is right instead of what feels good, sounds good, what appeals to our eyes and ears. It's hard not only to deny our sinful natures, but to take the comments of those who just don't get it, who think we're nuts, who want to call godliness immoral and say that when they sin, they're on "the right side of history." It's painful to know that even some of our closest family and friends consider themselves on the other side.

The only way to peace – the only way to be good with the world being against our faithfulness and our morality – is for God to give it to us. We won't find peace in presents. We won't find it in hobbies, in good homes or good food. We won't find peace merely in the absence of conflict. The peace we need is the peace that came to us two thousand years ago. We need the peace of God. If we stand on the promises of Jesus, our hearts will be guarded.

Will our feelings get hurt? Yes. Will we suffer the loss of some people who no longer want to be our friends? Yes. But our hearts are guarded. The peace God gives is knowing that we are right with Him, knowing that we are no longer at war with Him. Troubles and pain will come, but they cannot destroy what we have in Jesus. Our hearts and minds are protected. As Psalm 56 says, "In God I trust; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

Friends, know that the Lord is near. Live in joy. Live in righteousness. Live in gentleness. Live as people of prayer and thanksgiving. And God will protect you and give you His eternal peace. This Christmas, know all of this is possible through the child-king who has come to save you.