

Why Pray When You Can Worry

by Ron R. Ritchie

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice Let your forbearing spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but In everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, shall guard your hearts and minds In Christ Jesus.

In order for you to enjoy fully the richness of this passage. written some twenty centuries ago by the apostle Paul, allow me to take you behind the curtain and explain the events which set the stage for this great statement. These words are full of instruction, wisdom, truth and encouragement which not only affected his immediate readers, but can have a profound influence on our lives today and every day for the rest of our spiritual walk through this world.

All circumstances work toward good

In A.D. 61 Paul was sitting in a Roman prison where he was chained to a guard. He had wound up in this predicament as an eventual result of his refusal to heed certain warnings from his brothers. He had felt compelled to go back to Jerusalem and preach the Word, and he had done so despite being warned against it. When he arrived in town he went into the Temple to preach. Some Jews from Asia Minor started to hassle him. They said that he was speaking against the Jewish people, against the Law, and against the Temple. They accused Paul of teaching that some new program had replaced the old. Paul made it even worse, from their point of view, by bringing some Greeks into the very Temple itself, thus defiling the Temple. There was a disturbance, a small riot. The Roman commander moved in, arrested Paul, and placed him in a jail cell.

While he was there Paul's nephew discovered that some forty Jews were plotting to assassinate his uncle. They had pledged themselves not to eat or drink until they had killed him. The Roman commander was alerted and assembled 470 men to convoy Paul out of town by night. They moved him all the way to the seacoast garrison city of Caesarea and held him in custody there. While he was in Caesarea he met Felix, the governor, and talked to him about the Lord Jesus Christ. Then he met Agrippa 11, the king who said, "Paul, you have almost persuaded me to become a Christian." Through a series of appeals Paul was allowed to go to Rome to appeal directly to Caesar. On his way to Rome there was a shipwreck and he ended up for the winter at Malta where he had a tremendous ministry. In the spring of that year he arrived in Rome and was placed under house arrest.

I thank my God for every remembrance of you

Yet, in spite of these difficulties, he writes to these people in Philippi (chapter 1, verse 3), "I thank my God for every remembrance of you." "I thank God that you're the type of people up these in Philippi who have been supporting me with finances and with your prayers. And I would like to send a thank-you note with Epaphroditus, thanking you for backing me. Thank you for your lives and for being a constant source of encouragement." And so he starts to write this letter to them.

But I am sure that he also thought back some ten years to A.D. 51 when he first stood in Troas, just inside Asia Minor. He had intended to move into Asia Minor and have a ministry there. But he received a vision of a man beckoning him and saying, "Come over to Macedonia and teach us, help us." He understood that this was of the Holy Spirit and so he obeyed and he stepped into Europe. He came to the city of Philippi and went down by the river. (When several of us were in the Philippines recently we saw that everything happens at the river. The people meet at the river, they wash their clothes and their animals and their bodies there, they socialize and have a tremendous time of fellowship.) So Paul went down by the river, where he met a woman named Lydia. He talked to her and was amazed, for her heart had already been prepared by God and she and her family came to know Jesus Christ.

A little later while Paul was in the town (he is remembering these things and saying, "I'm thanking my God for every remembrance"), a woman possessed by a demon was following him, harrasing him. The two men who owned her were using her to tell fortunes for financial gain. Finally Paul turned to her and cast out the demon. The men grabbed Paul and Silas, dragged them before the magistrates of the city on a trumped-up charge, threw them into the lower prison, the dungeon. and locked their feet in stocks. Paul and Silas started singing and praying, and it was such a good concert that they brought down the house! There was an earthquake, the doors were thrown open, everyone's chains fell off, and the Philippian jailer ran in and said, "What must I do to be saved?" From that experience this man and his family came to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Then Paul moved about this city for awhile, taught and encouraged the new believers, and finally went on his way, leaving Luke and Timothy to carry on.

The greater progress of the Gospel

Now he is sitting in another jail, saying, "I thank God for every remembrance of you. For you see, as I sit here, some things are happening, some exciting things that you would never expect! I am locked up, chained to a guard, but I praise God for every remembrance of you, and for your spiritual growth." I want to encourage you, he says in verses 12 through 14 of chapter 1, by letting you know, "that my circumstances have turned out for the greater progress of the gospel, so that my imprisonment in the cause of Christ has become well-known throughout the whole praetorian guard." (Some 10,000 hand-picked men who surrounded Caesar as his personal guard knew why Paul was in prison and had heard the gospel.) "And I want you to know that most of the brethren, trusting in the Lord because of my imprisonment, have far more courage to speak the word of God without fear." This is what is happening because he is locked up. Then in verse 19 Paul writes, confidently, "For I know that this shall turn out for my deliverance through your prayers and the provision of the Spirit of Jesus Christ."

What is really happening here? What is the cause of such a positive outlook and attitude? I believe the key is that Paul was able to look far beyond the immediate confining circumstances. He was able, through the Spirit of God, to interpret beyond the immediate. He could see that because he was in prison so many more things were happening. The gospel was moving forward. And he said, "Rejoice! I want you to rejoice. Good things are happening." I realize that many of us at times are weary, like Paul, that we get lonely at times and don't realize what is going on, that there are things which happen to us that we are confused about. And yet, in spite of all these things—the shipwreck, the prison, the trumped-up charges, all these things laid on Paul's back, he is able to say, "Listen, it's all right, it's okay. All is well."

I think if you study the whole book you can see the secret and the source of Paul's attitude. It comes in four ways. He says in chapter 1, "Jesus Christ is my life." (I had the joy just two weeks ago of calling up a brother in Christ. I asked him how he was doing spiritually and he said, "Well, I finally came to realize that the only important thing in life is Jesus Christ, and Jesus Christ, I now realize, is my life.") In chapter 2 Paul says, "Jesus Christ is my example"; in chapter 3 he says, "Jesus Christ is my confidence"; And in chapter 4, this little thank-you note, he says, "Jesus Christ is my strength."

The secret of the rest that Paul was enjoying he found in Jesus Christ. He was Paul's very life. He began this letter by saying, "I'm not a bondservant of Caesar or Rome; I'm a bondservant of Jesus Christ. I'm not locked in because Caesar locked me in. I'm not locked in by fear and anxiety and depression, by frustration or any other circumstance. I'm here because Jesus Christ wants me here, because he wants to spread the gospel into Europe. And he is doing it now because I'm confined." So Paul has the thrill of saying, "Rejoice in the Lord. Rejoice in the Lord, not in my strength nor my positive attitude, not in my cleverness, but rejoice in Jesus Christ. Realize who he is! Realize who you are! Put the two together and come out saying, 'Well, praise the Lord! Rejoice!'"

He goes on to say, "I want you to do this always." You know, sometimes our students embarrass us older folks. Something happens to one of them— the car breaks down, or they lose some money, or get sick— do you know what they do? They go around saying, "Praise the Lord!" When something else happens to them and you say, "How are you?" they say, "Praising the Lord." They're praising the Lord always, about all things, all the time, everywhere. Many of them have really learned the secret of walking with Jesus Christ.

Then Paul says, "Again I will say, rejoice!" I think he is trying to make a point: he wants you to rejoice! "Again I say it, rejoice! Let your forbearing spirit be known to all men." "Forbearing spirit" means "sweet reasonableness." "You people who live in Philippi, let your sweet reasonableness, which comes from the very character of God, permeate like perfume through your community. Let men and women see you as God wants them to see you. I want you to let it be known to all men."

Check your passport

Then Paul tosses in this thought: "The Lord is near." Immediately it occurs to us that he is referring to the Second Coming. Jesus Christ is coming again, and so he encourages them that they are not locked into their society, that this is not all there is. You know that song we've been hearing this past year, "If that's all there is, then let's break out the booze and dance." And really, without Jesus Christ, that is where you end up. You just give up, you simply throw up your hands in despair. If this is all there is to life, let's eat, drink, and be merry; for tomorrow we die. But Paul says, "No! No, you're not locked into this society and into the pressures of this world forever; the Lord is coming back! Lift up your eyes, he is near. He is coming again, so don't get bound up here." It is significant that in chapter 3 he reminded them that their citizenship is in heaven. What he is saying is, "If you're down, if you're depressed, if you think the circumstances around you are pushing in on you, then check your passport! Look at your passport and find out where you're from. You are not from this world; your citizenship is in heaven. You are ambassadors for Jesus Christ in this world, that's all, and not permanent citizens. The Lord is near."

Stop worrying!

Next Paul shares with his brothers this tremendous exhortation: "Be anxious for nothing!" Not one thing, nothing! Don't be uptight about anything. "Stop being anxious," is the way it should read. It is an imperative: "Stop it!" "My brothers and sisters who live in Philippi, you are so used to worrying! People know about you and your worries. I want you to stop it now, and I want you to stop it for the future."

What is anxiety? What is that feeling that comes upon us called anxiety? Well, it is the distress or uneasiness of mind caused by an apprehension of danger or misfortune. Psychiatrists and psychologists are convinced that anxiety causes most mental illness. In doing some research I was interested to come upon a note in an exhaustive dictionary. It seems that in the early days of this country the brothers and sisters, when they held the tent meetings on the sawdust trail, realized what type of people would come to those meetings, and so they provided an "anxiety bench" up front. All those who came into the meeting filled with anxiety could come to the bench and know that there would be men and women there to meet them with spiritual help. I wonder, if we were to name one of our benches the "anxiety bench", who would come forward and sit in it? I think that from time to time, if we were honest, all of us would sit there.

But Paul says, "I want you to be anxious for nothing. Don't build the bench!" He is trying to encourage his brothers and sisters. He says, "I know where you live. I know what is happening to you politically. I know of the pagan worship that swirls around your homes. I know it's a difficult time to raise children. But I want you to stop being anxious! I want you to rest." He says, "I have the right as a brother in Christ to say this to you: Look at where I am- I'm in prison. Look at the new believers because of my imprisonment. Look at what has happened to me spiritually- did you ever think of that? Look at the time I have to write, to pray, to witness to these guards, to rejoice. Do you think all this happened to me because I sat down and worried about it? No, not at all. So regardless of your circumstances," Paul says, "I want you to see your life from God's vantage point, not yours. I want you to depend upon him."

I think, too, that Paul must have been thinking through Jesus' words: "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will hold to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and riches. For this reason I say to you, stop being anxious for your life as to what you shall eat, or what you shall drink; nor for your body, as to what you shall put on. Is not life more than food, and the body than clothing?" Jesus also said, "And which of you by being anxious can add 18 inches to his life's span?" You won't prove a thing by worrying about it! He concluded. "Therefore do not be anxious for tomorrow; for tomorrow will worry about itself." So I am sure that Paul was rehearsing and reviewing these words of Christ,

taking the same attitude, and encouraging his brothers and sisters in Philippi who were so concerned about him.

And remember the occasion when the Lord went to see Mary and Martha in their home. While he was there Martha was very upset about Mary. It seems that as soon as Jesus came in Mary went over and sat at his feet. Martha was busy in the kitchen and she came out and said to Jesus, "Would you tell Mary to come out here and help? We'll never get any supper prepared unless she does!" And the Lord, in his beautiful way, said to her, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and bothered about so many things; but only a few things are necessary, really only one: for Mary has chosen the good part, which shall not be taken away from here." And what was the good part? The good part was that Mary sat at Jesus' feet and listened to his words.

My, we get so busy! We get so caught up in activity. We get bothered about so many small things that we forget to come and sit at the feet of Jesus, who will unlock our lives and show us how to really live. Remember what Peter said:

Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time, casting all your anxiety upon Him, because He cares for you. (I Peter 5:6,7)

You see, when you and I become anxious, uptight, worried, fearful, we start to violate a key spiritual principle. When we worry we are really saying to God, "God, I'm the master of my fate. I'm able to interpret what is happening to me." When we worry we become the center of the universe. We know all, see all, and can interpret all. When we worry we deny the present power of our Lord Jesus Christ. When you and I worry we violate the understanding of a personal relationship between a Father and his spiritual children. Our worrying blocks God from bringing blessings out of difficult situations. And so our anxiety violates the very basis and foundation of our faith: Jesus Christ as Lord. We are challenging that title. We are saying, "You are Lord, except that I want to worry about this particular area. And if it doesn't work out I'll come to you then." He says, "Be anxious for nothing."

When we worry we are doing something which is contrary to God's will. And anything that is contrary to God's will is sin. Paul is saying, "Stop sinning!" The reason he says to stop sinning is that he wants us to realize that we have been redeemed. We are brand-new creations. We have a new ability to see life as it really is. We have Christ's resurrection power within us. We have wisdom that comes from God. We don't have to be locked in again to the old world's philosophies. We do not have to depend on the world to interpret life for us. We are free men and free women in Christ Jesus, and we can come to him in prayer! And that is what Paul says:

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.

"Listen," says Paul, "I have a better way of living to present to you! I want to stop you from depending on your own resources and point you to a new, outside resource which will set you free in Christ. It is prayer." Prayer is a vehicle by which you and I can come by faith into the very presence of God our Creator, and can carry to him, verbally or non-verbally, our innermost praises, needs, and hopes, with an attitude of thanksgiving, knowing that he is a God who hears and answers our prayers, always.

By coming to God in this way we become aware of our own helplessness. We say to God, "Where else is there to go? We have to come to you." And Paul wanted his brothers and sisters to carry every single circumstance, negative or positive, every need, every hope, every praise into his presence. In order to be anxious for nothing you need to be praying for everything. So take your requests to God... not to your friends. Did you ever notice how quickly we run to friends? We can pick up that telephone so quickly and call a friend and say, "I'm really worried about something. Let me tell you about it." And all that time we could have been going in prayer to God, who hears us. A tragic mistake of most of us, myself included, is that we worry about everything and pray about nothing.

Turn in your key

As a father of children I am intrigued by the fact that I have heard many parents say, in one form or another, after their children have gotten in trouble, "Where have we failed?" I'd like to challenge that notion. When I was in jail after a fist fight I didn't sit there and say, "I know that I'm here because my parents failed me. They really failed me! I would never have been here had they not simply dropped the ball in my life." It never occurred to me that my parents failed me. I was sitting in that prison cell because I started a fight and I fully realized that I was responsible. But so many times we are prone to lay that heavy, "Where- have- we- failed?" trip on our kids because we forget a basic principle: they have a free will, and they are free to use it any time they want. And we're shocked when they use it! Do you know why?

I started to think through why it is that I get upset when my son expresses his free will. And I saw that, without realizing it, I am a victim of society and its thought. I have a set of keys here which includes a key to my Fiat 850. Every morning I come out and push that key in and turn it and the engine starts right up. I put the transmission in reverse and back out of the driveway. I move forward to the stop sign and put on the brakes and the car stops instantly, Then I drive to the next stop sign, gear down, push on the brakes again, and stop. Then I head for the freeway and I notice that as I start pressing my foot on the accelerator the car picks up speed and I can quickly go as high as 70 miles an hour or so. Later I come home, pull into the driveway, and turn off my key. I pull on the brakes and turn the steering wheel and it locks. Like most men who enjoy automobiles I take the key and turn around to look at the car and I say, "You know what? I'm in control of that automobile. That automobile isn't going anywhere tonight unless I come out and put that key in there! And if it's hit or stolen I have insurance policies that will cover all that." And as I look at my little Fiat I appreciate it so much because I have a deep sense of control. I walk into the house with my tremendous sense of control and see my two sons hassling my wife, my wife all upset, my sons going back and forth at each other, and I reach for my keys and say, "All right! Turn it off!" And no one listens! And I cry out in despair, "Where have I failed? "

You see, that is destroying us! We think that we have the key to our family, and we fail to realize that we don't have any key or control at all. When I took my two sons and dedicated them to Christ I was sincere. I said, "God, these are gifts from you, and I thank you for them. I'm going to offer them food, shelter, and clothing, discipline, and spiritual guidance, under your influence and power. But beyond that, God, help me. I have no control over them." And it shocks us. doesn't it. when we can spank them, discipline them, lecture them. put them in their room, tell them to stay there without supper, only to find out later that they're playing baseball down the block because they went out the window. We have no ultimate control over our children. We have to go to prayer. We have to pray for everything, every thing, every person we're involved with. we have to go to God. It sounds so simple, doesn't it? But it works. And it's so rewarding!

Peace or pieces?

And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension,
shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

When Paul speaks of the peace of God he is talking about a personal God. In the Greek here the idea if peace is that of a state of rest, as opposed to war. The word has its roots in the beautiful Hebrew word "Shalom". Shalom means "well-being". In one form it conveys the idea of an abundance of material things. It is also used of one who enjoys bodily health, who is satisfied, of a nation experiencing prosperity, and it implies a stability of relationships. "And the shalom of God... shall guard your hearts and minds." In Psalms 85 the Psalmist writes, "He will speak peace to his people... that glory may dwell in our land. Mercy and truth are met together; righteousness and peace have kissed each other." In a warning passage (Isaiah 48) Isaiah writes: "If Israel had listened to Jehovah, peace would have rolled down like a river, and righteousness like the waves of the sea." If only Israel had listened to Jehovah! Paul is saying, "Listen! Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer [the word he uses for prayer here implies the idea of seeing God's worth] and supplication, with thanksgiving, bring your needs before him. And you will have peace."

The peace that Paul is talking about is the peace that Jesus Christ offers. Remember that when Jesus Christ was approaching his leave-taking he said, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you." When Christ was speaking those words in the upper room in Jerusalem he was

surrounded by a society ruled by the government of Rome. But the Lord said, "I'm not leaving you that kind of peace and security; that is not secure enough! I don't want you to get locked into that kind of peace. Trust me. I have peace that passes all understanding."

It's interesting, isn't it, that we can't understand it, but that we are told to enjoy it. It leaves us speechless, but at rest. "Can't you understand the peace of God?" "No!" "Are you enjoying it?" "yes!" "Why?" "Because I've learned to pray."

God will place a guard at the door of your intellect and your emotions. If you're not praying, you don't get a guard. If you are praying, the peace of God guards your hearts and your minds. The idea is that of having a fort with guards all around it. Enemies are waging war against your fort, but inside you are living as though nothing is happening, as though peace prevails. You are living your daily life in the confidence of the protection of the guards. Our guard is God, and his peace, his character, shall guard our hearts and minds.

I am sure that it is difficult to believe that such an incredible healing, the healing of mind and heart, can actually take place right now. But Paul assures us that it can, because he is talking about praying to a personal God with whom we are to be in communion at this moment in history. You see, at this very moment Jesus Christ knows that we are in Palo Alto. He is a God of history. He knows exactly what time it is. And Paul is sharing with us the key to wholeness. It is found in prayer. In praying to this living God. The fact that our Lord is willing to replace our anxious hearts with peace is beyond our capacity to understand it is simply another gift of his. It is one more example of his loving care and his tender mercy and his overwhelming grace.

Now, as much as it delights us that all this peace can be ours by praying, it goes beyond that. It goes into the very life that we live in the community. We are to be salt and light in that community. And we forget, many times, how hostile and uptight men are within themselves, how angry they are, and how they talk about peace all the time but they never attain it. So believe me, if they see you living a life filled with peace, under the same pressure they are experiencing, they will spot it immediately, because they know what they want but they can't seem to obtain it. And while God's peace guards our hearts and our minds our neighbors will be affected, and they will want to know: Where does that peace come from? And at this point we will have an opportunity to introduce them to the Prince of Peace, our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

I want to encourage you to take God at his word this morning. I want you to go to him by faith, and you will find that he can do more than you could ask or think. So when men jest and speak loosely of prayer, and you hear them say, "Why pray when you can worry?" you can come right back to them with the full confidence of a Living God within your life, and say, "Listen, friend, why worry when you can pray?"

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Ron R. Ritchie
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[Back to Index Page](#)

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