

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Heavenly Father through Jesus Christ, our Lord, our Savior. Amen.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I wish that we could meet together in person to worship our Triune God as we do every Sunday; but that's just not possible at this time. So my prayer is and will remain: God be with you till we meet again.

However, we do have the opportunity to worship our God and to find comfort and encouragement, to find peace and joy, and to find truth in God's Word as we always do. So we give our attention to God's Word from a section of scripture that is not usually chosen for this Fourth Sunday in Lent, but it is one of my favorite sections of Scripture. It's a portion of Scripture that I go back to again and again. I pray that you will find it comforting, encouraging and uplifting during these trying and difficult times.

The section of Scripture for our consideration is Philippians 4:4-9.

⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵ Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶ Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, 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.

⁸ Finally, brothers, 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.

The Apostle Paul knew about hard and difficult times and yet in his letter to the church in Philippi, his letter of Philippians, he urges them again and again to rejoice. That is how the Apostle Paul starts this section of Scripture. He says, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I'll say it again rejoice."

"Rejoice," he says because outward circumstances though hard and difficult, outward circumstances though dark and somewhat scary should not change the condition or determine the condition of the believer's heart. He isn't saying anything about the outward circumstances not being true. He isn't denying the hardship.

The apostle knew what it was like to have trial and trouble. He knew what it was like to be wondering what will happen in the future and uncertain what news tomorrow might bring. But outward circumstances should not and do not determine the condition of a believer's heart.

What does determine the condition of a believer's heart? The Apostle Paul says it is the Lord. Because the Lord is near rejoice. Rejoice in the Lord always. While things around us might be changing from day to day and sometimes several times during the day, going from bad to worse and then somehow finding a way to become even worse the next day, one thing doesn't change. So we go back to the unchangeable, the unshakable, the rock-solid foundation of God's Word. We go back to those gospel assurances that our God gives us so that in trying and difficult times the condition of our hearts might be determined by this fact: the Lord is near.

The Lord has made my heart the Lord and he has made your heart his throne. Because the Lord is near, rejoice in the Lord always. I'll say it again rejoice. The fact that Jesus assures us that nothing

nothing at all can separate us from his love; the fact that Jesus assures us that our sins are forgiven and that there is now no more punishment or condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus; the fact that Jesus says I will work out everything for your good, for the good of those who've been called according to his purpose - that unshakable truth planted deep in our heart - allows us to rejoice.

Rejoice in the Lord always. I'll say it again rejoice let your gentleness be evident to all. As these days go by you probably have less and less opportunity to interact with a large number of people. In fact, many of you are probably just interacting with your family as you work from home. I pray as we live under these very stressful conditions that God would help us to be gentle with one another. What do I mean by gentleness - your sweet reasonable, your big-heartedness.

I pray that God would help us to evidence that to our family. As we interact with our family members, we don't blow up with them. As we interact with them our sweetness and reasonableness, our gentleness shines forth. It's a big heart for them and for their needs in these trying times. Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

The Lord is near. The Lord Jesus who said never will I leave you never will I forsake you. The Lord Jesus who says wherever two or three are gathered together there I will be with them. And even if you're all by yourself in front of your phone or computer screen right now your Savior Jesus is with you. He will never leave. He will never forsake you. He will never forget you. He will never fail you.

The Lord is near. A couple of days ago my wife was reminding us of something that happened when she was little. Kristina was saying that when she was little her father would often remind her that the Lord is here as she gathered together with others to worship Him in church. She never saw Jesus. That could be frustrating when you're little and it can be frustrating right now when you look around and wonder where is Jesus in all this mess.

Jesus is right there beside you strengthening you through his word. Jesus is right there with you, as you heard on Wednesday we have a high priest in Jesus who is able to empathize with us because he was tempted in every way just as we are yet was without sin. Take comfort in the fact that the Lord is near. Because the Lord is near the Apostle Paul says "Do not be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and petition with thanksgiving present your requests to God."

This is so very fitting at this time as everyone is going through some circumstances that would lead many to be very anxious. But God tells us we do not need to be anxious, we do not need to worry. Yes, be safe. Yes, listen to the advice and the guidance of health officials. Yes, follow the government's instructions. But, no, don't be afraid. No, don't be anxious. No, don't be overwhelmed with worry and fear? Why? Because God speaks. God says don't be anxious about anything but in everything by prayer and petition present your requests to God.

With thanksgiving present your requests to God. And that's why we do not fear, that's why we do not worry. Worry cannot help us, but God who hears our prayers and God who answers our prayers can help us and does. Therefore, we present our requests our prayers to God we pray that God would keep us safe. We pray that God would be with our family and friends. We pray that God would keep our loved ones here at church safe too. We pray that God would be with our communities and with all the communities throughout the world. We pray and we present our requests to our God and we do so with thanksgiving.

We are eternally thankful that God has demonstrated his great love for us in Christ Jesus. We are thankful that God has preserved us in days gone by. Be thankful for he promises that he will watch over us, our coming and going both now and forever. Be thankful and with thanksgiving come before God.

Lay hold of his great love, his great power, at work daily for us. Instead of fear, let us pray. Instead of worry, let's speak to God. Instead of anxiety, let us find comfort in how and what our God speaks to us. That's my comfort in this world.

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 minds in Christ Jesus. Peace is what we need isn't it, now more than ever, although we need it always. We always need that peace of our God to guard our hearts and our minds. May God fill us with his peace, a peace that transcends all understanding, a peace to guard and keep us now and always.

The peace of God was accomplished because our Savior, the Prince of Peace died for us. Our Savior, the Prince of Peace, gave up his life on the cross for you and me so that sinners and a holy God be restored to peace. The peace of God which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

Paul finishes with these words he says, "Finally, brothers, 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. Whatever you have learned or received or heard for me or seen in me, put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

I don't know about you but I've been doing a lot of refreshing of the news feed on my phone recently. I've gone back again and again to the government sites. As I do that I wonder, am I going there perhaps too frequently. I'm not saying it's wrong to do it. It's probably a good thing. It's a wise thing to see what new developments there are. But I pray as we have to spend time apart that you would fill your hearts and minds with these things that the Apostle Paul is speaking about, with these things that really come from God and His Word and nowhere else.

How do you take the air out of a bottle? Someone once told me that the best way to take the air out of the bottle or make sure that there's no air in a bottle is to fill that bottle up with water so that there's no room for the air. May you and I be filled with these thoughts that are admirable, these thoughts that are excellent, with these thoughts are that pure and true and noble and right, these things that are excellent and praiseworthy.

May we be filled with God's Word so that anxiety and fear and worry, so that doubt and dismay and hopelessness might be driven far off and find no room in our hearts. Think about such things. Whatever you've learned or received or heard from me - or seen in me - put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you. That God of peace is indeed with us. Jesus who said to his disciples "Peace be with you," also says to you and to me, "Peace be with you." The God of peace will be with us always and so have no fear little flock. Have no fear for your safety for the Good Shepherd promises that goodness and mercy will follow us all the days of our life and we will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.

Until we can meet again in God's house, I pray that the God of peace be with you.