

“Eternal Glory”

Philippians 4:6-8 & Revelation 21:1-6

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Prayer for Understanding Holy Spirit thank you for giving us life. Guide us in truth, enlighten us and set our hearts ablaze so every moment of our lives can be illumined with your amazing grace, steadfast love and abundant life. Amen.

A reading from the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Philippians: **Philippians 4:6-8 NLT “Do not worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need and thank God for all God has done. Then you will experience God’s peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. God’s peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. And now, dear siblings, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise.”**

The power of positive thinking is a wonderful thing. Positive thoughts can help us achieve and excel in almost every aspect of life. Athletic performance is enhanced when an athlete visualizes their movements. Positive affirmations boost accomplishments. Positive thoughts create energy to get things done. Positive statements for others deepen relationships. Positive encouragement boost productivity. Walk into almost any bookstore and you will find an abundance of self-help books with a few easy steps coupled with positive thinking that will make you successful and happy.

The Apostle Paul is talking about much more than positive thinking in our scripture today. The entire letter of Philippians urges us to rejoice because of our union with Jesus. Our own positive thoughts, our own power is finite, limited. We often run into circumstances that we cannot control or navigate through on our own. When we find ourselves in these insurmountable predicaments, we are not to worry or be anxious, because we have a relationship with Jesus; and, God is love, God is all powerful, and God will rescue us, redeem, perfect, and glorify us in God’s perfect timing which often seems painfully slow to us.

The Apostle Paul knew that positive thinking would not change most of his circumstances. Yet because of his union with God, he refused to let fear, hatred, and self-pity dominate his thoughts. Paul was always looking through the ugliness of life to the glory God is guiding us to discover.

Paul’s advice to us is to be anxious in nothing, prayerful in everything, and thankful in anything, because God is with you. I suspect that Paul was a realist. He survived several shipwrecks. He was not anxious, because he knew that the very worst that could happen would be his death which would mean he would enjoy a glorious resurrection with Jesus for eternity. Yet, he wanted to live, so he was thinking about how he could swim to shore, what could he grasp onto that would float. So, the positive thinking here is choosing not to dwell on the magnitude of the storm, not to imagine all the negative outcomes, instead to think about how he can survive, how he can make it through. However, if every effort to live is engulfed by the ugly storm, Paul knew he still would be fine for ultimately he will be in heaven.

Be anxious in nothing, prayerful in everything. I suspect Paul was not praying for the storm to suddenly stop or for the boat to suddenly fly. Paul was likely praying that somehow God would show him a way to survive the disaster. Paul was likely praying for family, friends, churches, and his shipmates. Paul was praying for peace in the midst of the chaos, for confidence that God will see him through, for unwavering hope in the promises of God.

Be anxious in nothing, prayerful in everything, and thankful in anything. Paul was likely thinking about a long list of thanksgivings: for people who loved him, the opportunity to serve God, his life, the blessings of God he enjoyed, the resurrection, and the promise of eternal life and on and on. Being non-anxious, prayerful, and thankful gave Paul peace and joy.

Paul knows all of us will face ugliness, so the Apostle Paul wrote the letter of Philippians to help us get through the ugliness to God’s glory. Paul wrote Philippians after acquiring a life of wisdom from enduring numerous shipwrecks, beatings, imprisonments, betrayals, failures, mockings, loneliness, homelessness, hunger, and persecutions.

Paul says, **"Rejoice in the Lord always!"** Paul's not talking about superficial joy, denial joy, look on the bright side joy. Paul is talking about God's joy that undergirds everything. God's joy that gives us strength when everything falls apart. God's joy that holds us up when we cannot hold ourselves up. God's joy that carries us through when we cannot walk by ourselves. God's joy that is still there, deep down, when we are weeping. God's joy that assures us that in the midst of the dark that we will get through it, that some good can come out of it somehow. That God can bring us through the ugliness to the glory on the other side. Rejoice, Paul says. Rejoice, even in the midst of sorrow, struggle and ugliness. Rejoice and God will give you peace in the midst of chaos, hope in the midst of despair, for God is with us and the future is bright and beautiful, even if we cannot see it from here.

Paul wrote rejoice even when everything's going wrong, rejoice when you are in pain, rejoice when nothing makes sense, from a death row prison cell. Paul's strength comes from knowing God is with him, from the love of the Philippians and believers, from knowing that love never ends, that the love Jesus shared and gave him, the love he shared and gave to others will be past on and on for love is eternal and always growing exponentially. Paul rejoices, even in the face of death for he knows nothing not even death can separate him from God's love. He knows that not even the ugliness of death can eclipse God's glory that awaits him on the other side. Paul knows that the Good News of Jesus will go on and on until everyone and everything is forgiven, redeemed, perfected, and glorified. Paul probably wrote with his face chapped with tears, with his heart breaking, stand firm in the Lord. As his executioners were coming down the hall, Paul closed the letter: **"Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit."**

In other words, remember that you are God's beloved child, that God is always with you and God will get you through. This is much more than just the power of positive thinking. This is much more than trying to suck it up and get through on your own. This is much more than trying to find a bright facet.

Do you think it would have helped Jesus when he was sweating blood in the Garden of Gethsemane, hoping that God would spare his life, hoping he would not have to be beaten, mocked, spit upon, betrayed, and crucified if one of the disciples would have said, look at the bright side? Do you think it would have helped Jesus when he was near death hanging on the cross and cried out, **"My God my God why have you forsaken me,"** if someone said think positive thoughts, trust your own power, set some goals, visualize your dream?

Or do you think it would have been helpful for someone to remind Jesus in those moments, when he felt and thought only from his human nature, to reassure Jesus that God is with you, God loves you, God will save you.

Is the root of anxiety found in Jesus' words on the cross, my God my God why have you forsaken me? We fear we are alone? We fear we are not loved? We fear our circumstances so we worry, become anxious, and are overcome with ugliness.

Fredrick Buechner says "anxiety" in theological terms is "estrangement." It is a perceived distance from God, a perception that God has forsaken us and since this happened to Jesus, you can be almost certain it will happen to you, probably several times. Anxiety is fueled by a world that keeps trying to explain God away. When we are anxious, Buechner invites us to listen for God's voice writing, "I suspect that maybe God speaks to us most clearly through God's silence, God's perceived absence, so that we know God best through our missing God. This is the context of the Apostle Paul's words as God was silent as he was martyred.

Buechner invites us to love. Prayer is listening to the silence and God's voice. Prayer molds us and fills us with the peace of the loving Holy Spirit enabling us to love, enabling us to press on towards the goal, enabling us to look past the ugliness seeing the glory of a loving redeemed world. Enabling us to love even in the midst of total ugliness, that is what Jesus did on the cross. Jesus' love for all of us enabled him to endure the crucifixion, enabled God to work through him so on the cross all wrongs were made right, all ugliness made glorious so one day every tear will be wiped away, so one day all people can enjoy the majesty of heaven.

This is why we rejoice in the Lord. However, rejoicing is not a life of blissful happiness. Sometimes life is ugly. Recall Jesus' life. In the temple, Jesus lost his temper, scared everybody, turned over tables, threw stuff around. At the graveside of his friend, Lazarus, Jesus did not say, "No crying, he is with God, do not grieve I will raise him from the dead." Scripture says at the grave, Jesus wept and grieved for his friend. When Jesus crested the hill and saw Jerusalem, the place of unending violence and bloodshed and the city that kills

prophets, Jesus wept again likely wondering how a glorious creation become so ugly, how can humans turn limitless, perfect love into hate, fear, anxiety and worry.

Although Jesus was often not happy for Jesus felt pain deeply, discouragement, fear and abandonment, Jesus got really mad; yet, Jesus was full of joy and love for he knew God is with us, that God is working to transform all ugliness into glory.

Theologian John Carmody on his death bed wrote, "Well or ill, but especially ill, you are part of something much greater. You did not make yourself, and you cannot raise yourself. But what you cannot do, God can. All things are possible with God ... So, let nothing disturb you. Let nothing surprise you. The splendor in your death, as in your life, has yet to be revealed. In the morning thank God for it. In your evening, say, 'So be it.'"

There is plenty of ugliness in our minds, hearts, and the world. Some say the opposite of love is hate. Others say the opposite of love is fear. We live in a world that magnifies and propagates fear. Fear of terrorism so do not befriend a Muslim. Fear of crime, so spend your money on security rather than on food, shelter, and health care for the desperate. Fear of scarcity, so hoard stuff rather than sharing the abundance we have received. Fear of a failing economy, so hold onto your money rather than helping another. Fear builds walls, barriers, and division.

Fear often isolates us, robbing us of loving relationships. The Apostle Paul's advice, use your mind. Do not be overcome by anxious, worryful, fearful thoughts. Do not let fear hinder your love of anyone. Most of our worries never happen. What is the worst that can happen? You will physically die then you will enjoy eternal resurrection. Is the chance that you may get hurt worth curbing your love so your daily life is less joyful?

Ron Rose wrote, "What do you do when faced with ugliness? You can run; run as fast as you can. Deny reality and escape to fantasyland. You can condemn the ugliness and talk constantly about how bad it is and how sad it is that we live in the middle of such disgust. Or you can become an agent of transformation."

Hockey star Wayne Gretzky said, "Is anxiety over things you cannot control holding you back from fully participating in life? You miss 100 percent of the shots you never take."

Paul said think about what is true. The truth is there is nothing you can do to make God love you any less. There is no ugliness, no fear, no failure, no sin that can diminish the eternal glory that awaits you in heaven. No matter how hard you try you cannot mess anything up to the point that God is unable to redeem it. Pain, grief, sorrow, problems, mistakes and every form of ugliness is all temporary. Love is eternal. So let the fear go and live each moment to the fullest, rejoicing in the Lord.

Be anxious in nothing, prayerful in everything, thankful in anything, rejoice for God is with you, loves you and God will ultimately unite you in wonderful eternal harmony with all the saints. Amen

A reading from Revelation. Revelation 21:1-6 NLT **“I saw Heaven and earth new-created. Gone the first Heaven, gone the first earth, gone the sea. I saw Holy Jerusalem, new-created, descending resplendent out of Heaven, as ready for God as a bride for her husband. I heard a voice thunder from the Throne: “Look! Look! God has moved into the neighborhood, making God’s home with humanity! They are God’s people, God is their God. God will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death is gone for good—tears gone, crying gone, pain gone—all the first order of things gone.” The Enthroned continued, “Look! I’m making everything new. Write it all down—each word dependable and accurate.” Then God said, “It has happened. I’m A to Z. I’m the Beginning, I’m the Conclusion. From Water-of-Life Well I give freely to the thirsty.”**