

# **Finding God's Peace in Tumultuous Times: A Pandemic Devotional from the New Testament Book of Philippians Philippians 4:1-7**

**Devotional 8**

**May 15, 2020**

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Staying in. During the worst of the pandemic, where have you been staying? Most of us are in our houses. Many are working from home and doing everything they do – all at home. Many of us have been staying in.

When you are in your home you there are things you can do and things you can't do. You can't play golf in your home for example. The way we do things in our home may be different. Most of us can buy groceries in our home, by ordering them online for delivery, but we can't actually physically shop for them in our home.



Many of us have been living most of the time each day in our homes. We work, pray, play games, talk on the phone, eat, make zoom calls, watch TV, read a book, work on a project, exercise, make music or play music and so on, all done from in our home.

And when we are staying in, it effects the way we do things. We can be relaxed, dress very causally and comfortably. (It was reported recently that pajama sales are skyrocketing during this pandemic.) At home we can be ourselves -- no need to put on a front for the world. In our homes we are protected from the weather and the storms. In our homes we are comfortable, we have things we have chosen to be there, things that bring us joy and remind us of family and fond memories.

In the classic section of Philippians for this session, Paul is likewise encouraging us to stay in, although it is in a different way.

He offers some final exhortations as the letter is drawing to a close. These commands are simple to understand but often very difficult to put into practice. Remember the context; the Philippians are experiencing conflict (in verses 2-3 of chapter 4 Paul specifically pleads with people by name to resolve the conflict or to help resolve it.) As we have noted, the Philippians are also experiencing some turmoil, most likely early persecution from the Roman citizens around them. These are not easy times for the Philippian Christians. And to these in those difficult circumstances, Paul commands them to do three simple things: rejoice, do not be anxious and pray.

How are you at rejoicing when times are hard? How are you at not worrying when a perilous and tumultuous situation is at hand? Prayer may be our first response in a crisis, but we are not usually rejoicing in crisis and it is all too easy to worry when the potential of trouble is at hand.

It has been said those who worry aren't being pessimistic, just realistic. To not worry, some contend, is to not deal with reality. Is that what Paul is encouraging here: escaping reality? It reminds me of the song popular in the 80s – "Don't Worry, Be Happy." The carefree style of the music complimented the words: "In this life you have some trouble. When you worry you make it double. Don't worry. Be Happy." Is that what Paul is saying here: just don't worry; be happy?



It is interesting to note that joy is commanded. Paul says, “Rejoice!” That is a present tense verb in the Greek indicating on-going and repeated action. “Be joyful and keep on rejoicing,” we might translate. How are the Philippians supposed to do that? How are we? Is Paul saying ignore your feelings?

In our modern era, we would be quick to point out that feelings are God-given, and not necessarily right or wrong. It is what we do with the feelings that can lead us into right or wrong – closer to God or away from Him. I don’t think that Paul is telling the Philippians to ignore their feelings and put on a happy face.

More difficult is following the command not to worry. Jesus commanded us not to worry as well (see Matthew chapter 6:25-34, for example.) Do not worry – easier said than done. How are we supposed to do that – when there is a real possibility of disaster and trouble at hand?

The key is found in a phrase that Paul repeats four times and then emphasizes in a different way a fifth time in these seven verses. Your translation may or may not bring this out. But underlying this entire section, the commands and the promise that follows, Paul is saying over and over again a qualifying phrase. Literally, with the exact same Greek words, he writes over and over again: “In the Lord.”

In verse one Paul says, “Stand firm in the Lord.” In verse two he writes, “Agree, in the Lord.” In verse 4 he writes, “Rejoice, in the Lord.” And in verse 7 he promises that those who do these things will have their hearts and their minds “guarded, in Christ Jesus.” And then in verse 5 he accentuates the point he is making: “The Lord is near.”

Paul is encouraging Christians to “stay inside” just as we have been staying in our homes during the pandemic. But Paul is not writing about houses, he is writing about staying in the Lord. Christians are to conduct their affairs in life, enclosed within the Lord. Just as there are certain things you can’t do in your house – there are certain things you won’t do if you are consciously seeking to live “in the Lord”. Just as a house protects the inhabitants, so too those who live out life “in the Lord” will be aware of His protection and discover the blessings of His peace.

Joy is not found in putting a happy face on a bad situation. Joy is found in the Lord. Because when we are dwelling in the Lord, we have assurance of His love and we are therefore confident of the ultimate outcome. Peace is not found by telling yourself not to worry. Peace, true, wholesome, nourishing peace is found in the Lord. As we pray, as we seek Him with us, as we remember His nearness, we find peace, because we know He loves us and holds all things in His hands.

The key to obeying these simple but difficult commands (to rejoice and not worry), is found by adopting a mindset, a lifestyle, an attitude, a conscious and deliberate effort to be connected to the Lord. It is found by staying inside Him, whether we are physically at home or out and about. As Paul said in Acts 17:28 to the Athenians, “In Him (God) we live and move and have our being.” In the Lord, we can find joy and peace.

The reason Paul can command these things is because they are deeper than mere spontaneous feelings. These are states of being that grow when we are connected to the Lord, when we remember the truth of the statement in verse 5: “The Lord is near”. When we live with that awareness of God’s Presence grounding our souls, we will have increasing joy and peace.

In this season in which fear and turmoil abound, we need God’s peace more than ever. As we are staying in more, we might allow these verses to remind us of Paul’s exhortation to stay in the Lord and find there the increasing ability to rejoice, not worry and pray.

**Read, Reflect and Apply\*\*** – Begin today putting yourself in the presence of God. Remember He is near. Pray, read and reflect “in the Lord”. You might even visualize the Lord, Jesus sitting next to you right now.

\*\*Questions preceded by two asterisks indicate application relevant to your life.

**Read Philippians 4:1-7 and then consider these questions.**

This passage offers a series of commands, final exhortations and then a promise.

\*What are the commands? Make a list.

### **Verse 1**

#### **Standing Firm in the Lord**

In verse one, Paul literally says, “Stand firm in the Lord.”

Take each part of that phrase.

\*What might it mean to stand firm? Stand firm how?

\*What does it mean to do that in the Lord? What are other ways to take a stand that are not in the Lord?

\*This verse is a bridge verse. It connects chapter three with what is to follow. “Therefore,” writes Paul. What is he referring to?

\*Note once again how he refers to the Philippians, the tenderness of the relationship. What does he add this time and what do you think it means?

\*\*How can we practically help and encourage one another to “stand firm in the Lord”?

\*\*Are there areas of your life that feel more like shifting sand than firm ground right now? What might it mean for you to stand firm in the Lord amidst that?

\*\*Who has been a beloved encourager to you in your faith? Might you thank God for them today. Might you thank that person or persons today?

\*\*Who might you be such a beloved encourager for? Who are you aware of that needs to hear that call to hold on and “stand firm” right now?

### **Verses 2-3**

#### **An Appeal for Unity**

It is striking that Paul refers to so many people by name here.

\*How does he describe each of them?

\*What difference might it make to seek unity “in the Lord” as opposed to other ways? How does that make this different, deeper, than merely putting a happy face on the surface?

Unity has been a theme Paul has been most concerned about in this epistle.

\*Who is God putting on your heart that you need to be reconciled with? What is your next step?

## Verses 4-7

### The Promise That Peace Will Guard the Heart through Joy and Prayer

\*How can the Philippians rejoice when things are in such a troubled state? Is Paul commanding them to “feel” joyful? Why or why not?

\*As you think back over this letter, Paul has talked about joy several times. How has Paul demonstrated finding joy in the Lord in his own life?

\*\*How dependent on outward circumstances is your joy? How could we encourage one another, how might you find more “joy in the Lord”?

The word “gentleness” or “reasonableness” actually means to be gently forbearing with others. It means that even those with whom you disagree or with whom you are in conflict – toward them you are gentle and forbearing.

\*To whom are the Philippians to be gently forbearing toward?

\*\*What would this look like if most of the people in our world were this way with one another? Why don’t we see this more often? What examples do you see in this pandemic right now (either positive or negative ones)?

There are two ways of understanding that the Lord is near. Either it is that He is soon to return to earth or that He is near, as in the current moment, present through the Holy Spirit.

\*Which do you think he means?

Gordon Fee in the IVP NTC says:

*“The sudden appearance of an indicative (the Lord is near) is as surprising as its intent is obscure. Does Paul intend “Rejoice in the Lord always; and let your gentleness be evident to all, for the [coming of] the Lord is near”? Or “Because the Lord is [always] near, do not be anxious about anything”? Or does he intend a bit of both, perhaps something as close to intentional double-entendre as one finds in the apostle?*

*On the one hand, this looks very much like another instance of intertextuality, purposely echoing Psalm 145:18, “The LORD is near to all who call on him.” In this case it introduces verses 6-7 as an expression of realized eschatology: “Because the Lord is ever present, do not be anxious but pray.” On the other hand (or perhaps at the same time), it also echoes the apocalyptic language of Zephaniah 1:7 and 14 (“the day of the LORD is near”), picked up by Paul in Romans 13:12, and found in James 5:8, regarding the coming of the Lord.”*

\*What do you think it means not to worry? Does that mean ignoring facts and circumstances? Does that mean ignoring anxious feelings? What does it mean?

\*What does Paul urge them to do as the counter to worry?

\*\*In what ways have you experienced prayer and thanksgiving helping you be less anxious? How can you remind yourself to do this when the feelings come on?

\*\*How can we encourage each other?

\*When are they to pray? How are they to pray?

\*There is a huge promise here. What is it?

The word “guard” literally is a soldier who stands guard, which would be especially meaningful to those living in a staunchly Roman colony with many retired military soldiers resident there.

\*Who is the guard? What does that word mean in the Bible? How is this meaning different than we often think of them in English today?

\*What is being guarded? What do those words mean in the Bible? How are they different than we often think of them in English today?

\*What do you think Paul means that God’s peace passing understanding?

\*\*How have you known that peace? Where in your life do you need that peace right now?

\*\*How regular are you in praying to God about all the things of your life? Can you believe that the promise here is for you if you will but pray faithfully, believing that the Lord is near?

\*\*How might your life look different if you did this in all circumstances?

### **Closing Application and Prayer**

\*\*These words could not be more relevant to us, as we are, experiencing anxious times about a pandemic and our economy. The promise is clear. The commands are clear. The key is found in placing oneself in the Lord. Take a moment to put yourself in the Presence of the Lord. Close in praying asking Him to show you how.