

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.” We conclude our sermon series on the Epistle of Joy with a sermon on Joy. Now the irony is that often there’s nothing more depressing than a sermon on joy. We might think to ourselves: “Great, I don’t feel joy, and now you’re going to make me feel guilty about it!”

However, I think part of this is having a proper understanding of what joy is. Joy and courage often fit hand in glove. Yes, courage is grace under pressure, but joy often follows in the least expected circumstances.

Throughout our sermon series, we have been hammering similar points home. Philippians 1 taught us that Paul could have joy and courage, even in prison, because He was encouraged by the hope of Jesus’ resurrection. Philippians 2 taught us that like a lump of metal going through a blast furnace and then into a mold, that resurrection joy is only experienced through suffering as we follow in the footsteps of Christ. Philippians 3 further emphasized that point in that suffering may look like God chiseling away things that are unnecessary to further make us into the image of His Son. We used the image of Michealangelo shaving away all the marble until he found David underneath.

Today, continuing with this sculpture analogy, we are going to take a look at the material God is working with. In other words, what are Christians made of? What are the ingredients in the joyous life? What are the habits we can get into to exhibit grace under pressure?

Augustine writes concerning the horrors of the Fall of Rome. Both Christians and pagans befell the same hardships and calamities. What makes them different? He writes, “And thus it is that in the same affliction, the wicked detest God and blaspheme, while the good pray and praise. So material a difference does it make, not what ills are suffered, but what kind of man suffers them. For, stirred up with the same movement, mud exhales a horrible stench, and ointment emits a fragrant odor” (City of God Book 1, Chapter 8).

The same suffering can befall two different people, but what a difference it can make because of what they’re made of. Under pressure do you show grace or impatience?

It all circles around to the beginning of the series, the hope of the second coming of Christ and the subsequent resurrection from the dead fortified Paul even in prison. **BECAUSE THE LORD IS AT HAND, CHRISTIANS ARE JOY AND COURAGE.**

First, I. The Lord is at hand. Paul continues, **“Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand;”** Throughout all of Paul’s trials, he was convinced that the return of Jesus was imminent. Jesus’ ministry was one of heralding a new kingdom. A kingdom of joy. A kingdom where all things were right and perfect. Jesus’ showed us this through His earthly ministry, and this

ministry culminated in His death wherein He took on all our sins to the cross to forgive them. His resurrection demonstrated that the devil, sin, and death have no power in this new kingdom. Yet at His Ascension He left one thing undone: evil has not fully been vanquished, death still rears its ugly head, and Satan still runs rampant in this world around us. Paul, like me and you, await Christ's second coming, wherein these three forces of evil will be finally removed and we will live in a world without evil: without death, without sin, and without the devil.

And this is Paul's joy: that the Lord is near. Not only is Christ's second coming about to happen, Christ was near to Paul through the Word and Sacrament. For Paul, Christ was not far away up in heaven, but Jesus was with him that jail cell. He was with Paul through the Word of the Bible, through the presence of fellow Christians, and through His body and blood delivered in the bread and wine of communion.

We too rejoice because the Lord is at hand. Yes, it has been centuries since Paul wrote these words and still Christ has not returned, but that just means His return is that many centuries closer. Today could be the last day before Christ returns to make all things right! We too rejoice because we gather here and we know Christ is with us as we read His Word and pray, and we know He touches us as we partake of His body and blood of communion later in this service.

The Lord is at hand, and it is He who strengthens you. You can do all things when the Lord is at hand. So keep Him close, and keep His promises even closer! This is how we as Christians are joy and courage as well as grace under pressure. The Lord is reforming us to be made of the same stuff as Him.

From the promise of the Lord being at hand, three points flow: II. We courageously rejoice because God hears our prayers. **“do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”** Christians are made out of prayer. One of the signs of emotional disorder in children is that they don't cry out for help to their parents because they don't expect help. Sadly, some children have been abused by parents and the kids learn the parents won't help, or they'll make things worse.

Our prayer life says a lot about our health as Christians. When we call out to the Lord, do we expect help? Sadly, some of us have been mistreated by religion and we've been taught that prayer is like putting a coin into a vending machine. We ask for something, and if we don't get it, it means we didn't pay enough, so we just have to put in more coins. When the soda doesn't come out of the machine, we grow discouraged and assume the machine is broken.

There's nothing wrong on God's end. God promises to hear us when we pray, and He delights to hear our problems, to answer prayers, and to carry our burdens and worries. As we grow, we understand that Jesus always has the best in

store for us, and sometimes the best means saying no to some prayers in the meantime.

In early August, a Texan Christian was mowing her lawn and a venomous snake fell from the sky and landed on her arm. A hawk dropped lunch and then swooped down to get the snake back. Although she was scratched by the hawk, miraculously the snake didn't bite her. What did she say when the snake fell on her? The quick prayer, "Help me, Jesus!"

"but in everything by prayer and supplication... let your requests be made known to God." God gives us the promise He'll hear us, and He wants us to have the reflex to pray to Him in all circumstances. He even hears prayers as simple as "Help me, Jesus!"

Second, III. We courageously rejoice because thanksgiving opens our eyes. Christians are made of thanksgiving. As we pray, we are encouraged to give thanks. It is through these prayers that **"... peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."**

The Kingdom of God is already here in many ways: big and small. All that is good is a sneak peak into the eternal, perfect good waiting for us at the second coming of Christ. Gratitude and thanksgiving helps us see and name those things that are good from God Himself.

I know life is busy, but take time to do an inventory of the people, the places, the things, and the skills that you have without which life would be harder. As we thank God for those things, it fills us with joy, and it gives us courage to endure hardship.

Third, IV. We courageously rejoice because we take stock of the Good. Paul has a list, **"Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things."** Christians are made of good things. Like the Augustine quote from earlier in the sermon, as the Lord works in our lives through Word and Sacrament to transform lives, as suffering occurs, we emit a fragrant odor of an ointment rather than a smelly odor of mud.

It's not that we are to just think of these things, the word in Greek is the same word from which we get logistics. Take account, calculate, reason, inventory these Good things. This is where joy lies. As we get to know the stories of heroes in Scripture. As we familiarize ourselves with stories of other Christians who lived lives worthy of the Gospel. As we set our eyes upon Jesus who is true, honorable, just—all of those things—As we do these things, we can't help but have joy and courage as these good things transform us.

BECAUSE THE LORD IS AT HAND, CHRISTIANS ARE JOY AND COURAGE. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice." The Lord is

at hand. Your past is forgiven. Your Savior Jesus is near. He is coming to make all things right even as He works through Word and Sacrament to start the remodeling project in your heart one step at a time.