

The Bookends of Philippians 4:4-8

An Expansion of Sam McVay's Sermon,
"Replacing a Mind of Anxiety with a Mind of Peace"
From Dr. Brock McKay in an E-mail to Sam

Got some push from the Lord about that Phil 4 passage. The NASB bolds the numerals for the sections in a chapter, as a means of identifying sections or "paragraphs", if you will. This makes for portions of scripture that hang together to complete a thought or argument or concept.

When we look at the NASB divisions of chapter 4, verse 4 is in bold, as is verse 8. That means the editors saw vs 4-7 as one section, vs 8 starting another. What i felt like the Lord was pointing to was that the bookends for those powerful verses of 5, 6, and 7, which were the focus of the teaching on Sunday, are verses 4 (Rejoice in the Lord always, again i say rejoice) and verse 8 (Finally, brethren, whatever is true...honorable...right...pure...lovely...of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.) The huge deal here is that if we are anxious, and fearful, then it is likely going to be about either a future possibility (worry and anxiety are usually about future possibilities, NOT probabilities) or about a current situation. The normal thing for us as human beings is to focus on the things we see--what is in front of us. For, as humans, we walk by sight and not by faith.

But Paul, in this marvelous passage, exhorts us to be anxious for NOTHING, over NOTHING, in any situation, NO ANXIETY; instead, we are to by prayer and supplication make our requests known to God. Now, here is part of the big stuff. The bookends and this anchor in the middle of all this are rejoice...with thanksgiving...dwell on the right, true, good, pure, etc.

There is a really important reason that Paul does this. Because we as humans are likely to focus on the situation and our circumstance, we will believe that the situation is the context in which our lives are placed at that particular moment. Or, if it is worry, which is a projection of a fear into the future, that situation will soon be or will become the context which our lives will be placed in. While it is what we perceive and usually what we feel, it is NOT the truth. The reason Paul opens this whole section with rejoicing, then with thanksgiving, then focusing on the right, good and honorable is because these three areas of thought, of reality, of truth are the CONTEXT in which whatever our worry or fear or situation is, is taking place. What we rejoice about, what we offer with thanksgiving and what we dwell on that is pure, right, true, honorable are the true context in which our lives unfold, always.

It is incredibly easy for us to let our situation dictate reality, to believe that our situation dictates our reality. It never does, though we can believe it so, especially if what accompanies the situation is our fears and anxieties and worries. To do so means we fall prey to what the evil one would like us to believe, that, somehow, it is NOT Him in whom we live and move and have our being. And here is where the exhortation takes on such significance.

From a psychological perspective, it is a functional "law" that we will FEEL the way we THINK. Then, when we are unguarded and believe our feelings to be a true reflection of reality (because while often they are accurate and true and do reflect reality--e.g. that the Father really loves me as me, as who i am, just as I am; at other times, like Paul is addressing, our feelings are not accurate, however strong they might be), those feelings generate thoughts which correspond to them--more thoughts that my feelings are true and new thoughts of distress and disaster are generated (because, like our heavenly Father, we are also very creative), based upon those feelings. The cycle of distress is engendered.....thoughts (this situation is out of control and i am going to get fired/in big trouble/arrested/damned to hell) generate feelings (i feel threatened, unclean, unforgivable, abandoned, unlovable, etc) which generate more thoughts (wow, i am so far from God, He'll never be able to bring me back; is this what is meant by blaspheming the Holy Spirit? I didn't listen to Him and now i am in for it) which generate more feelings (i am lost, done for, separated from His love, He will never love me again, my Christian life is over,) and the negative thoughts and feelings smush together and become my new emotional and thinking reality. It is

how we function as people and it is critical that we understand this process; otherwise, we will miss out on what Paul is really saying to us in this powerful passage.

Remember the bookends and the anchor: rejoicing and dwelling on the good/true/honorable/etc form the bookends. The Anchor in the middle is thanksgiving. All form the context of truth in which our lives happen.

By rejoicing AT ALL TIMES (vs 4), we are reminding ourselves that He is victorious, that He has not abandoned us, that He will never leave us or forsake us, and we rejoice at His character and nature. These rejoicings are truth and they serve to do several things. They remind us of the truth, they fight against the worries and anxieties and fears, they reorient our thinking and they serve to provide a truthful context for whatever is either happening in our lives or a truthful context for what we fear might happen in our lives in the future (recall that anxieties are usually about something bad in the future). Rejoice has its roots in joy and the truthful nature of Who He is reminds us of the joy we have in Him, being rightfully connected and rightfully related to Him.

The thanksgiving (vs 6) reminds us of the many blessings--the "I am blessed"--that are factual and the true reality in whatever we might be fearful of and whatever our situation is. Thanksgiving is always going to be the voicing of what He has done in our lives, about how faithful He has been to us in the past horrors and situations, just as the psalmists would recount His faithfulness to the Hebrews throughout their history (the Red Sea, manna, water from the Rock, bringing them into the promised land, Jericho, etc). Thanksgiving also reminds us that it is about a relationship with Him, that He initiated and He is faithful to uphold (though we are faithless, He remains faithful), that no matter what the situation or the fear might be, the process of our lives is always about RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM. Isn't that what Tiffany's teaching/truth/sermon/prophetic exhortation SHOUTED OUT LOUD to us two Sunday's ago? No matter what the situation, it is always about relationship with Him. It was for Jesus in the Garden. Why would it be any different for any of us. So, we give thanks for...(you get to fill in the blanks here, which will take a lifetime and more to exhaust).

So, thanksgiving reorients our thinking, in the midst of the prayers and supplications: "Oh Lord, remove this junk and crapola from me, fix this situation, don't let me fall away, and thank You that You have always been faithful, You have never left me in the past and You will always be with me and You will be with me in the midst of this situation" or "You will be with me if that horrible situation ever actually did happen to me in the future, so i don't need to worry. Thank you for being as close as the air, for giving me Your Holy Spirit, for including me in Your family, for making me a Son/Daughter of God, for seating me with Your Son in the heavenlies, at Your very right hand...." The thanksgiving reminds us of the truth, of reality as it really is and not the distortion that our fears will trick us into thinking.

And the focusing of our thoughts and the feelings that subsequently arise when we look at, zero in on, dwell on, stay connected with, focus in on, concentrate on, attend to, remind ourselves of the things that are true...honorable...right... ..pure....lovely... of good repute... any excellence....anything worthy of praise....--and note, Paul did not just say one thing to focus on but a whole host of aspects of God's goodness to focus on; there just is simply no end to the things that we can fill our thinking with and thus, fill our hearts with. And, what is of excellence and good repute and is true and is pure love on his part is that no matter what might befall us, He is faithful and just to not let us be tried beyond what we are able to manage and we are also assured that He makes all things work together for our blessings, for our good, for our betterment, for His work in our lives.....

This is not in any way simply positive thinking. There is no such thing as Christian positive thinking. There is, however, what Paul is suggesting here, loudly and clearly, that we have a choice to make about what we want to keep in focus. If we let ourselves just go with whatever comes up, uncritically or without care, we will be susceptible to the fears and distortions of our human nature and of our situations and what we might fear about them.

Paul places this wonderful process of prayer and supplication, anchored by thanksgiving, all done between consistent rejoicing and a concerted willingness to look at those truthful, enlightening and uplifting things of the pure, right, good, true, honorable and more, all connected with God Himself, with life in His Son, in living amongst a vibrant body of His followers, as part of the worldwide body of Christ Jesus, of being loved by God, of being in His image and of being considered valuable enough for Christ Jesus to die for us and to indwell us and to give us a role in the reclamation of the planet and the restoration of His kingdom, now and forever.

Just a little elaboration on this incredible passage of Paul to the Philippians. What a powerful, deeply moving, life-changing message. Rejoice, my brothers and sisters, give deeply felt thanks, and think on the good and pure and true, for He is completely worthy of all praise and honor at all times.

And thus, His peace.

Brock