

# Reflections on Finding Peace in the Threatening Uncertainties of Life

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Theme: Joy, peace, and contentment are available even in the threatening uncertainties of life if we trust in the goodness of God.

Text: Philippians 4:4-13

Sitting in this director's chair this morning represents two things: 1. Instead of standing behind a traditional pulpit to preach, I simply want to share with you some real time discoveries out of a recent and ongoing life situation. In other words, this message will be far more autobiographical than most. 2. Secondly, sitting in this chair represents the result of the consequences of this recent life situation. As many of you know on Friday, June 13, yes, Friday the 13<sup>th</sup>, I had a surgery known as a "radical prostatectomy", the removal of the prostate gland because of prostate cancer. You really don't want to have any surgery with the word "radical" in it, as I am sure many of you, male or female, can testify. On April 30<sup>th</sup> I joined the unenviable club of those who heard from their doctor, "You have cancer."

Upfront let me say, the outcome from the surgery has been largely positive. No cancer was found in my lymph nodes, and other surrounding tissue, yet there is some ongoing uncertainty as to whether they were able to get all the cancer. This means that later this fall I will require further treatment, most likely in the form of radiation. Yet we remain very hopeful that this cancer can be eradicated.

I want to take you back to the six weeks between my hearing, "You have prostate cancer" to the time of my surgery on June 13<sup>th</sup>. This is the greatest threatening uncertainty that I have faced thus far in my life. My prayer is that my journey in the midst of my greatest faith challenge to date will be helpful for any threatening uncertainties you may be facing: whether that is scary financial circumstances, relational breakdowns, frightening health challenges, concerns for your children's welfare, etc.

I want to share some of my journey in the context of a wonderful Scripture, Philippians 4:4-13, which served as anchoring text for me during this time, even as I bring in some other Scriptures to which I turned that further illumine this portion of Paul's letter to the Philippians.

## **Read Philippians 4:4-13**

Paul begins this section with the key word that marks the theme of the book of Philippians. Sixteen times Paul uses the word "joy" or "rejoice" in four short chapters. This is why Philippians is called the book of joy. He begins this section with the exhortation, "**Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice**"

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(Phil. 4:4) Paul seems to indicate that joy can be an ever present quality of the Christian life. It is second in importance only to the characteristic of love in Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit. In Galatians 5:22-23 Paul writes, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, etc." The by-product of a spirit-filled life is joy. We will note in this passage that Paul links together joy, peace, and contentment, all of which supersede any particular circumstance of life. More about these qualities in a moment.

Paul, though, immediately turns to what can rob us of joy, peace, and contentment; its opposite—anxiety. Paul picks it up in v. 6. "Do not be anxious about anything..." Anxiety, fear, or worry is the greatest enemy of joy, peace, and contentment. .

I have not come across any better description of anxiety than in C. S. Lewis's, The Screwtape Letters. The Screwtape Letters are fictional letters written from Screwtape to his nephew Wormwood, all from the devil's perspective. Screwtape has risen up the ranks of the demonic echelon in his ability to undermine the faith of believers in Christ, whom he refers to as the Enemy. He is giving advice to Wormwood, his nephew, who has received his first assignment to scuttle the faith of a new believer in Christ. Here is Screwtape's advice regarding anxiety,

"My dear Wormwood, I am delighted to hear that your patient's age and profession make it possible, by my no means certain, that he will be called up for military service. We want him to be in maximum uncertainty, so that his mind will be filled with contradictory pictures of the future, every one of which arouses hope or fear. There is nothing like suspense and anxiety for barricading a human's mind against the Enemy. He wants men to be concerned about what they do; our business is to keep them thinking about what will happen to them."

Anxiety: worry over what will happen. Contradictory pictures of the future. The heart and emotions are bouncing back and forth between hope: everything is going to be OK; and fear: It will all be a disaster. I confess that this was my experience during this six-week period more than I would like to admit.

There were times when I was riddled with anxiety during this waiting period. The initial pathology reports of the biopsy determined that I had a very aggressive form of prostate cancer. There is a measurement called the Gleason scale that indicates the rapidity and wildness of growth of cancer. I had a score of 9 on a scale of 10, indicating a highly virulent form. When I mentioned this Gleason score to knowledgeable people, they couldn't hide the fear I saw in their eyes. It was transferred to me, "Oh my gosh, this must be bad."

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Yet, the worst anxiety inducers came from doctors, making casual, throw-away comments. I am sure none of you have had that experience. These comments gave fuel to the imagination to go to the darkest places. Let me mention a few, though, I know none of our doctors here would ever make such remarks. One of my doctors, thinking, I assume, that he was comforting me, said, "You know, ten years ago if someone had been diagnosed with a Gleason score of 9, I would have given them a 25%, no more likely a 10% chance of survival." For some reason, I did not find that reassuring. He did go on to say that now catching this earlier through biopsies has improved those chances greatly. Another casual comment came from my primary care physician. I had some undefined spots on my ribs that showed up on one of my many pre-surgical tests, called a nuclear medicine bone scan. With a cursory reading of the report he said, "Yes, one of places that prostate cancer is known to metastasize is to the bone." One more uncertainty to contemplate. This was later dismissed by a more knowledgeable doctor as something other than cancer. When I met with the resident prior to meeting with my surgeon, he referred to my Gleason 9 score in highly unprofessional terms. He called it a "bad actor".

Anxiety. There were times in my darker moments that I allowed my mind to imagine the worst. On May 16th I wrote in my journal, "The worst time is in the middle of the night when I am alone with my own thoughts. I can imagine the worst all too easily." Another entry, "Father, I hear noise in my head and heart. There is an underlying anxiety about what will be found, what will be next. I find anxiety makes it hard for me to focus. It is very self-focused. It pulls me away from others. I want to cocoon." Overcoming fear and anxiety has been a discipleship issue for me in my following Jesus. In other of life's uncertainties I have had difficulty just trusting Christ for His good for the future. I thought that I had been substantially healed of this through a breakthrough experience of the love of God some 20 years ago, but as I came to find out, I had never faced the threat of death before. This was a new level of threat that would make me face fear and anxiety at a much more challenging level.

When anxiety had for some time the upper hand, I was very aware that my emotions were telling me that this was a "no confidence" vote in God's provision. Fear is the opposite of love. The apostle John in his first epistle tells us that "perfect love casts out all fear." Would or could I allow myself to be fully embraced by the love of God in the midst of this uncertainty?

Fortunately, these periods of fear and anxiety were neither dominant nor consistent. Since I was living Philippians 4:4-13, I was attempting to apply two key admonitions that we find in verses 6-9.

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**1. Embrace a trial with thanksgiving.** Paul says, “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 your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Phil. 4:6-7) I have often wondered about the importance of that little preposition phrase “**with thanksgiving**” to the meaning of this verse. It seems to me that it is the key to unlocking its meaning and the way to peace.

The Scripture instructs us to face life’s threatening uncertainties with gratitude. This is quite counterintuitive. Embrace those situations or circumstances in life that appear to threaten our well being? What? One of the Scriptures I kept going to say this same thing in a little different way. James, the brother of Jesus, writes in his letter in 1:2: “**Consider it pure joy, my brethren, whenever you face trials of many kinds.**” Excuse me. Welcome trials with joy. Why? “**Because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.**” In other words, accept life’s difficulties for this is the way that the Lord shows his provision and that our trust can be completed as we watch the Lord make His presence known to us. In other words, stake your life on the belief that God is good all the time. The fundamental reality that serves as the foundation for all of our belief is captured by Dallas Willard, “**Because the Lord, who not only loves but is Love, is so great, I live beyond harm in his hands; and there is nothing that can happen to me that will not turn out for my good. Nothing.**” Even death.

Paul and James speak of peace and joy in the midst of life’s anxieties. This is an appropriate time to make the distinction between joy and happiness. Happiness is apparently what we seek in this life and what parents say regarding their children, “**I just want them to be happy.**” Happiness has at its root, “hap” or happening. Happiness is something that happens to us. Happiness occurs when things are going our way. If things work out circumstantially for us, then we can ride the crest of the wave. The by-product is happiness.

But both Paul and James are writing of something far deeper than happiness. Happiness is very fragile, because there will be times when the circumstances of life turn against us, and knock the pins of happiness out from under us. We need to be held by something deeper than life working out for us. Calvin Miller draws the distinction between happiness and joy, “**Happiness is the buoyant emotion that results from the momentary plateaus of well-being that characterize our lives. On the other hand, joy is bedrock stuff. Joy is a confidence that operates irrespective of our moods. Joy is the certainty that all is well, however we feel.**”

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When we “consider it pure joy” or pray in the midst of life’s anxieties “with thanksgiving”, we are saying that the God who loves us has not ceased to be the Lord of the universe, but has everything under control. None of what we are facing is a surprise to him. On that same day that I wrote about my fear cropping up in the middle of the night, I also wrote, “Underneath it all, there has been a peace and presence that says—beyond the circumstance you are present—your companionship is what counts—you are with me, Lily, Aimee, Adam, Claire, Christ Church. Perfect love casts out fear. When the future in human terms is murky, uncertain, when there is a gap between now and then, between present uncertainty and surgery, we need to be held by a deeper presence, “Through the love of God our Savior all will be well.”

The result of our embracing the circumstances “with thanksgiving” as an act of trust in the face of uncertain future, is that the Lord himself will stand as a guard, a sentry over our hearts and provide a peace that goes beyond human comprehension. It is a peace that comes from beyond this world.

Catherine Marshall illustrates peace in the midst of turmoil through the entries in an art contest. An artist association announced a contest to simply depict “peace.” There were the predictable portrayals of lush pastoral scenes, placid lakes, a sleeping puppy curled up by a cozy fireplace. But the painting that won the contest portrayed a raging thunderstorm. Lighting zigzagged across the sky and trees bent under the lashing storm. In the center the artist had painted a bird’s nest in the crotch of the gigantic tree. A mother bird spread her wings over her little brood waiting serenely and unruffled for the storm to pass. Attached was the simple caption, “Peace.” We stand under the “protective custody” of the very God who gave his life for us and ultimately secured our future in his presence forever.

**2. Choose to set your minds on higher thoughts.** Paul goes in v. 8-9 to speak of the role of the mind in the midst of life’s uncertainty. “Finally, brothers and sisters, 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.”

We have a choice as to where we let our minds go, on where we allow our thoughts to dwell. I would find my mind drifting to the worst case scenario. But then I would say to myself, “I don’t need to go there.” Stop it. Place your thoughts on the comfort of God’s companionship. This is a very rational thing to do.

I found myself drawn to Jesus’ very reasoned approach to dealing with anxiety in Matthew 6:25: “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life.” In

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this context he is talking about people fretting over the necessities of life such as what you will eat or drink, whether you will have clothes to wear. He says that if the Lord takes care of the creatures in nature, how much more will He take care of us. Then Jesus makes a rather matter of fact statement. What good does worry accomplish? **"Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" (Matt. 6: 27)** All it does is drain your energy away from good pursuits; it saps your strength and it doesn't allow you to anticipate God's loving provision. I don't know why exactly, but I always chuckle when I read these concluding words of Jesus. Is this a bit of Jesus' humor, **"Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own"** (Matt. 6:34). Hey, don't get ahead of yourself and drags tomorrow's problems into today. Don't imagine what could be or what might happen tomorrow, when you have the reality of today to deal with. Isn't that enough for you? Mark Twain has the best commentary on this verse, when he said in his old age, **"I have known a great many troubles, but most of them never happened."**

Or as they say in recovery programs, **"One day at a time."** Today is all that you have. I begin each day now with a verse that has a lot more meaning that it did a few weeks ago. **"This is the day that the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it."** We have no idea what tomorrow will bring. Stay here.

Then finally, Paul concludes this section of Scripture in verses 10-13 with an affirmation that brings joy, peace, and contentment together. Paul says that he has learned a secret, the secret of contentment. He makes it clear that contentment transcends circumstance. He is not speaking here of happiness, which is dependent upon life working out as we desire. He is speaking of something far deeper. What is the secret that he has discovered? Hear these words again, **"I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned the secret of being content whatever the circumstances.** [Most likely Paul is writing under house arrest from Rome being chained night and day to a member of Caesar's elite, known as the Praetorian Guard. His circumstances were not those that he has wished for himself, I am sure.] **I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want."** (Phil. 4:10-12). What makes this such an authentic word is that Paul is currently in a circumstance of "hunger and want." He is not riding high by the world's standards.

What is Paul's secret of contentment?

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I think it is two-fold. **First, Paul had settled his future.** He knew where his life was headed and frankly he longed to get there. He had come to know Jesus Christ in such a way that he wanted nothing more than to see Jesus face to face. **"For me to live is Christ and to die is gain."** In II Timothy, Paul's last letter, he is keenly aware that this earthly life is drawing to a close. His executioner awaits. But for Paul this was almost welcome. He wrote in II Timothy 4:6 and 8: **"For I am already being poured out like a drink offering, and the time has come for my departure...Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing."** Don't you sense Paul just salivating over the opportunity to be in the presence of the one he has loved and longed for in this life?

One of the directions my thoughts went during this six-week period was—am I ready? Was I holding on to this life so tenaciously that I did not truly want, yet, to be in the presence of the Lord? I have much to live for—a wife I love, a new grandchild, a ministry with much more to do. Yet, I had to face the fact, that I could be facing the end. People would say to me, **"You have faithfully served the Lord all these years; He will certainly protect you through this time."** The assumption was that God favors his faithful servants. I would quickly dismiss those nice comments in my mind, because I know of many faithful servants of God who are struck down in a very untimely fashion. There is nothing special about me that I should be preserved. I never once said during this period, **"Lord, why me?"** It was more, **"why not me?"**

I would then turn to what I consider the most comforting words ever spoken. Jesus said to his disciples in the upper room after he announced his impending departure, **"Do not let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you, I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you may be where I am"** (John 14:1-3). Jesus is saying, **"I got it all covered. I am going ahead to get it all ready, a place for you. I am removing the danger by bearing your sin. And when it comes your time, I am the first one you will meet and I will escort you to the place I have prepared and will then stay with you there forever."**

To the apostle Paul, this reality of future hope had greater substance than anything in this life could hold. Paul saw this life as the *shadowland*. We hold on to this life because we, frankly, have the best that this life has to offer. We grip it tight. But Paul writes in II Corinthians 4:18: **"So we fix our eyes not on what is seen (here and now), but what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary; but what is unseen is eternal."** This was the question, I had to face in my quiet

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moments: "Do I truly believe that I will be with Jesus (He will come again and take me to himself, and be with me forever) in a world where there will be no more death, or mourning or crying or pain?" I believe, Lord, help my unbelief.

So the first part of Paul's secret of contentment was that he longed for the time when he would receive his reward in the presence of the One He loved throughout this life.

Secondly, Paul was content because there were **no barriers to the present companionship of Christ in his life**. There was one constant in Paul's life that no circumstance could change. He lived in the abiding presence of the love of God. Jail cell walls could not keep the love of God away from him. Hunger or some other deprivation, made no difference to him. He believed in Jesus' promise, "I will be with you always till the end of the age."

As someone has said, "There is nothing like the threat of death to focus the mind." Just the day before my surgery I was reading through John 14 again. I came to these words of Jesus to his disciples in John 14:16, "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counselor (Helper, one who comes alongside to help, comforter, the Holy Spirit) to be with you forever." The word "forever" jumped right off the page. There was a peace and comfort in that promise that guided me right into the morning of the surgery. This perhaps should have been the most anxious moment, for only surgery would reveal the extent of the cancer in my body. Yet, on the morning of Friday, the 13<sup>th</sup>, I had a buoyant spirit as I approached the time when the truth would be known. It was the sense that I had a companion abiding in me as I went to face this uncertainty. It was also a presence I know was also the product of the Christian community lifting me in prayer as evidenced in the verbal well wishes as well as the many written notes and prayers. The Scripture says that "God inhabits the praises of his people" and I would add their petitions as well. All I can say is, "I have been privileged to be the recipient of your prayer and love and have been carried by them."

I cannot stand before you this morning and say I faced this life threatening uncertainty with unwavering victory in Jesus. I had my dark moments when my body was riddled with anxiety. Yet, I can also say that I was sustained by the truths and realities that I have highlighted this morning.

1. We can embrace life's uncertainties with thanksgiving and count them pure joy, because God is good all the time.
2. We have a choice where we allow our imaginations to go. Stay in the present. Don't bring tomorrow's troubles into today.

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We can have contentment ...

3. If we are secure about our future home with Christ. If the future is secure, we can face anything now.

4. If we have One who has taken up residence in us, the Holy Spirit, the spirit of Jesus, who has promised to never leave us or forsake. We are God's beloved children. If I know I am loved forever, I can face anything with a sense of peace and joy.

These are the truths that have come into greater focus for me.

C. S. Lewis entitled his autobiography, which contained the story of his conversion, *Surprised by Joy*. Before coming to Christ, he had momentary glimpses of joy in nature, literature, and relationships, but these were all fleeting. Yet it was this longing for joy that spurred his search. He said he was surprised by joy, because he discovered that it was not joy that he longed for, but the person in whom joy was found. He said that once he came to faith in Christ, he lost interest in joy. He discovered that joy was simply the effect of knowing the person of Jesus Christ. This joy in Jesus is what I long for even more, even as I face a continuing uncertainty.