

Isaiah 25:6-9 Philippians 4:4-9
Joy and rejoicing
October 11, 2026

"Rejoice always, and oh, by the way, don't worry about anything." These words, Paul offers to the Philippians, to all Christians. He writes them from his prison cell, the cell into which he has been tossed, yet again, because he refuses to stop preaching and teaching about Jesus. One has to wonder, "what's that all about?" How can Paul, presuming him to be in his right mind, tell people to rejoice always, to worry about nothing, ever - when he, himself, is imprisoned unfairly, unjustly?

Someone has described this passage as one that belongs in the category of "scripture I understand perfectly but still have trouble living."

On a different level, many of us are in Paul's situation. No, none of us is in an actual prison. However, for a variety of reasons, some of us feel the isolation of prison, even in the crowd-filled malls. Some of us know that life has handed us trials that we do not deserve, struggles that are unfair, sorrows that cover our hearts with an unrelenting darkness. To everything else with which we are trying to cope, add pressure - pressure to be cheerful.

Sometimes I can't manage cheerful - not even on my best "suck it up and put on a happy face" day. So what am I to do? How do I cope with the people around me, much less the great teachings of Paul?

I work at remembering that there is an ocean of difference between "rejoicing always" and acting peppy and perky. With untold relief, I remind myself that Paul didn't coin the phrase, "Don't worry, be happy," - the buzzword, bumper sticker of the 90's.

From his confinement in prison, Paul encouraged his friends in Philippi to discover, not a quick-fix, superficial approach to life and life's struggles and problems. Paul demonstrated a quality of life. His words had little to do with "feeling good." Rather he talked about receiving from God the strength and courage and hope to persevere through the hurts and sorrows, the failures and stresses that life hands us.

Do you remember the comic strip, "The Far Side?" I confess I didn't always get or appreciate the message of this cartoon. But there was one, a few years ago, that really struck home. Gary Larson set this one in hell. The picture shows the souls of the damned labouring in agony which two demonic figures look on. But something is amiss. There is, in the picture, a man, pushing a wheelbarrow, whistling happily to himself. The demonic figure with the pitchfork turns to his companion and says, "You know, we're just not reaching that guy."

Even the torments of hell were not enough to bring that guy down. Why? Some would say he was too clueless to realize his misery. I think that the message is that it has to do with faith - that in Christ, we can find the strength and courage and hope and peace to go on - regardless of our circumstances, regardless of what life hands us - even go on with a sense of joy, with rejoicing.

After Paul tells us to rejoice and to worry about nothing, he offers the reason he believes this to be possible. "The Lord is near." God is about to act. God is not yet finished - in my own



individual, personal life or in the world, in the global community. "The Lord is near."

When life threatens to crush the joy and hope, the peace and love out of me, I work at remembering. I remember the stories of my faith ancestors - Abraham and Sarah, Moses and the Hebrews and the wilderness, Ruth and Naomi ... I remember the words of the Prophets - their tirades filled with warning and judgment; their unfaltering faith in God's presence, in God's promises that "there will come a day." One of my favourite pictures is drawn by the words of Malachi, "The day is coming when ... my saving power will rise on you like the sun and bring healing ... You will be as free and happy as calves let out of a stall."

I work at remembering the times in my life - some small and seemingly insignificant, some profoundly larger - times when I thought, "wow, that was lucky" or "what a neat coincidence". And, in the remembering, I realize again, that there are no coincidences, that this world is not at the mercy and whim of luck.

I seek out others who can and will recall for me how God has intervened in their lives, how God has drawn near ... And even when I cannot "feel" any hope, "see" anything resembling light, I hold on - because others before me, others around me, even me in former days all tell me that the Lord is always near; that the Lord is about to act; that God is by no means finished yet. And sometimes, just sometimes, we can be the one who helps another see light and feel hope when their days are the darkest.