Joy and Peace Under Pressure
Philippians 4:1-9

So we're into the last leg of this letter. And we know from what Paul says here and elsewhere that the Christians he's writing to are struggling. In chapter 1 he writes, 'For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake' (1:29). And one way that suffering was showing was financially. When he's talking to the church at Corinth about the Philippians he describes 'their extreme poverty' (8:2). The fact that they're now Christians and refuse to swear by Caesar or the Roman gods means that business and trade are going to be increasingly shut to them. It's growing harder and harder to make a living.

So these guys are living under pressure. And you know from your own experience what living under pressure can do. You're stressed, you feel overwhelmed, there is this situation in your life that you are struggling to keep on top of, and it's all having this negative impact.

Your relationships suffer, because you start taking your stress out on others, even those you love; you lose your sense of inner peace and poise as you struggle to keep anxiety and fear at bay; and because life is not good for you, you can become resentful or cynical about good stuff in other's lives.

And that seems to be what's happening for these guys. Under the pressure of persecution, their relationships are suffering, they are anxious about the future, and perhaps not surprisingly they are becoming increasingly suspicious about the world around them.

And so Paul has been encouraging them and us to see all of life through the lens of the gospel. That what God has done and is doing in and through Jesus should be the thing that shapes and defines how we see life and live through trials. And as he draws the letter to a close he wants them to see how they can know unity in place of division; joy and peace in place of anxiety; and grace in place of cynicism.

Unity in Place of Division
Now, imagine that you were sat in church in Philippi, listening to this letter being read. And you know that there are some growing relational tensions within the church. And you've heard Paul express his desire that this little church be marked by 'standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel' (1:27). And you've heard him urging you to be 'of the same mind… being in full accord and of one mind' (2:2). That rather than each of you insisting on your own way 'in humility [you] count others more significant than yourselves' (2:3). That by allowing the way that Christ has treated you sink deep into your heart it should transform the way you think of and treat those sat around you.

And you've got all of this going around your head, thinking what it means for your relationships, when suddenly Paul says in v2: 'I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord.'

And you think, 'whoa!' because these two ladies are also sat there, maybe they're on opposite sides of the room, or at least sat at opposite ends of the pew. And suddenly everyone's looking at them.

Now imagine that had been you, that you were in this conflict situation, and it was your name and the person you're fighting with which gets called out. I mean, you'd be sat there squirming wouldn't you? And all Paul's previous teaching is now poured into this one conflict, because it's in the nitty-gritty of our relationships under strain, between us and our wives or husbands, or us and friends or family members, that the Christian faith needs to be worked out.

Now Paul doesn't tell us what their conflict was about, but the fact he calls them out in such a public way suggests that maybe it's *this* relationship breakdown that's at the heart of some of the wider relational difficulties in the church. And maybe people are taking sides, and some are sympathetic to Euodia and others to Syntyche. We don't know.

But, what we do know, firstly, is that whilst others might have been taking sides, Paul doesn't. He loves both of these ladies, and he says 'I entreat Euodia *and I entreat Syntyche*'… both of you… to agree in the Lord. Euodia, it's not Syntyche's job to heal this rift. Syntyche, it's not Euodia's job to move first. Mending this relationship is both of your responsibilities.

And sometimes we need to hear that don't we? I'm willing to apologise, but only if she does first. I'm willing to do my bit, but he's got to prove he's going to change first. But Paul tells each of these ladies, 'ladies, you've both got to make the first move. You can't wait for the other. It is each of your responsibility to be reconciled.'

Now of course you have no control over how the other person is going to respond do you? Euodia might hear this and think, 'ok, I'll do it, I'm going to get up and walk across the aisle', but find that Syntyche isn't willing to do the same. So you can't respond for the other. But you do have responsibility for how you respond. It's why Paul writes to the church at Rome and says, 'If possible, *so far as it depends on you*, live peaceably with all' (Rom 12:18). And because of the way Jesus has treated us, because he forgave us when we didn't deserve it, so we can go to him for the strength, and willingness and resources to forgive and be reconciled even when the other doesn't budge.

Secondly, Paul warmly affirms these ladies. He doesn't lay into them, he doesn't see them as his or the church's enemies. He describes them in v3 as women 'who have labored side by side with me in the gospel.' So these aren't just a couple of gossiping, backbiting old ladies who he's trying to slap down. They're his co-workers, they're probably leading ladies in the church. But this wedge has come between them.

And so he wants them to see that, far from being enemies, they're on the same team, and that in the gospel there is this call, but it's not a call to arms, it's not a call to fight each other, but to come across to the king's side, and put down our

arms and our hostility to one another. That as we allow how Jesus has treated us to transform the way we think, that he gave up his privileges and rights and sacrificed himself for us, then rather than insisting on our own way, or being prepared to sacrifice *others* to get *our* own way, instead we'll sacrifice *ourselves* and give *ourselves* for others, and put their interests ahead of our own.

And just imagine how such an attitude could transform strained relationships: between those two ladies, or between husband and wife, or estranged friends. And when it comes to churches, did you see how Paul says in v3 that *both* these ladies have their names 'in the book of life.' You see the danger is that when we differ with someone over some point that we think is important, we go to war over it. But there aren't going to be any divisions and factions in heaven. God counts both of these women, and the brother or sister I'm prepared to go to war with, among his people. And that should bring a hefty dose of humility to our arguments, shouldn't it.

So Paul urges them both to be reconciled, and he affirms them both.

But then he does one more thing. He asks the church to get involved in their reconciliation. Verse 3: 'Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women.' You see, there is a kind of discord that can poison the whole well, and it is too important for a church to turn a blind eye to. And so Paul wants this unnamed third person, this 'true companion' or loyal yokefellow, to get involved with these ladies and help bring them together.

And sometimes it takes that doesn't it? You've got this relationship that is breaking down, and the two of you are in danger of just talking past each other. And sometimes we need someone else to step in and help reconcile.

Now, why doesn't Paul just write the name of the person he wants to help these two ladies sort their issues? Well, maybe he does. Maybe the word translated 'companion' or 'yokefellow' was the person's actual name, so there was a guy sat there called Syzygus, and some of our translations translate it like that. Or maybe Paul had in mind Epaphroditus, the man who the Philippians had sent to Paul and who now carried this letter back. But just imagine again that you are sat there that Sunday morning, listening to this being read. And these two ladies are feeling the weight of the challenge of reconciliation ahead of them. And you're glad its not *you* who's been singled out. And then you hear Paul say, 'yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women.' And you think, 'who's he talking about?', and you look around you, and you see that everyone is doing the same. And you think, 'surely he can't mean me?' Yes you. What me? Yes, you, true companion, you help them. Don't add fuel to the fire. Don't take sides. Don't stir it up. Don't gossip. Rather, help them.

And maybe Paul keeps it anonymous so that we can all write our names in there, because as we saw a few weeks back, if unity begins with you, then it is all of our responsibility, to make reconciliation and not division, the mark of Jesus' church.

But if external pressure can damage our relationships, it can also take a toll on our inner lives.

Joy and Peace in Place of Anxiety.
And Paul wants to speak to the heart of everyone who is in danger of being consumed by external pressures. Because instead of feeling overwhelmed by circumstances, Paul encourages us to do three things: to rejoice, to be reasonable, and to pray.

Let's look at the first one: **rejoice**. Verse 4: 'rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice.' Now, if you've been counting, that's the second time that Paul has encouraged, you could even say *commanded,* his friends to rejoice. So why does he feel the need to repeat himself, and twice in this one sentence?

And the answer is that when our backs are against the wall, and our worlds are falling apart, and things are spinning out of control, if we just heard it once we'd be tempted to respond: 'are you serious? Do you have any idea what I am facing right now, what this stuff is doing to me, and you want me to rejoice?' And so Paul repeats himself, 'yes, even in what you are facing you can know real and genuine joy instead of anxiety.'

And the reason you can do that is because it is rejoicing, v4, 'in the Lord', and not in your circumstances. You see, if our joy and inner well being is dependent on our circumstances, and when life is good we feel good, then finding joy in times of trial and difficulty is going to be nigh on impossible, because our joy is going to go up and down with our changing circumstances. But if our joy is based on God who never changes, then we have reason to rejoice even when life stinks.

You see, even though the Christian life is a call to die to ourselves, and to take up our cross, and to sacrifice ourselves for others, it's not a funeral procession is it? And so both our lives and our worship can be, and should be marked by joy. Because it's joy in God and God is good, and the gospel is good, and Christ is risen, and satan is vanquished, and death is defeated, and sin is paid for, and shameful pasts are wiped away, and guilt is gone, and our futures are secure, whatever our present circumstances say. And so Paul can say that rejoicing is *always* possible, because God is always faithful, and he always loves you, and he is always turning what others mean for bad for your good.

But the second thing he encourages them to do is to **be reasonable**. Verse 5: 'Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.'

Now, I don't know about you, but being reasonable doesn't exactly sound sexy does it? I mean, 'he's very *reasonable*.' I don't think I've ever heard anyone say, 'when I grow up I want to be really reasonable.' We tend to favour strongly held opinion, don't we? 'He's passionate, a real warrior for the truth.' And Paul says, 'hey be reasonable, don't be a headbanger. Don't think you need to go to war with everyone. Have a forebearing spirit, learn to see other's points of view, don't retaliate, don't respond in kind when you're treated badly.'

But ask yourself, why does Paul slip that in here, when he's dealing with how these Philippians and you and I can handle the hard times? Be reasonable? Well firstly, of course, because it's crucial for maintaining a united community under pressure, but secondly because of what being the opposite of reasonable does to your own heart.

You see if you are given to fighting, or insisting on your own way, or insisting that you are always right, then whilst there is that moment of feeling really good and clever about yourself, that moment of pleasure when you cut someone down to size, it inevitably has this corrosive, destructive effect on your inner peace and poise, doesn't it.

I read an article recently entitled, Ten Traits of Joyous Pastors. I won't tell you how I scored, but number 6 was, '*They avoid petty arguments*. You won't find these pastors in arguments on blogs or other social media. And you won't find them arguing with people in person over non-essential matters.' In other words, the happy pastor is the guy who isn't always picking a fight. In Paul's words, he's reasonable.

And the reason that all of us can have that kind of disposition even when you feel under pressure from others or circumstances, Paul says, is, v5: 'The Lord is at hand.' And the Bible says that you can leave vengeance in His hands. You don't need to fight every battle, he'll do it for you, and he's at hand. And besides, this argument that you are tempted to get all hot under the collar over is not going to feature in eternity, and the Lord's at hand. Plus, there's a day coming when you're going to have to give an account before the Lord for every careless word and every wrong attitude. And the Lord's at hand.

So rejoice and let your reasonableness, even under pressure, be evident to all. But thirdly, **pray**. Verse 6: 'do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.'

Now, these Philippians had plenty of reason to be anxious, didn't they? Enemies without, divisions within. And you and I get anxious when some external thing unsettles and disturbs our inner sense of peace and poise, and we realize that we can't fix or sort it. We're out of our depth, we feel at the mercy of events. And we want that sense of inner wellbeing back, but this situation is bearing down on us and we feel the anxiety rising.

And so when life's like that, we need someway of restoring calm to our hearts. And Paul says it's prayer. Jesus said you don't need to be anxious about the stuff of life, because you have a Heavenly Father who loves you and cares for you. And when you face this situation that is out of your control, peace can begin to be restored as you entrust that situation, through prayer, into the hands of the God who loves you.

But then Paul says there's also supplication. Yes, you entrust yourself and your situation to God, but it's also ok to ask Him to change things: 'Father this

situation is out of my control, I entrust it to you, and if it's possible, please change it, but your will be done.'

And then, Paul says, there's thanksgiving: that whatever happens, 'Heavenly father, I thank you that you love me so much that Christ died for me, I thank you that you are in absolute sovereign control of my life, I thank you that nothing can happen to me without your loving, fatherly purpose, and that you promise to work all things together for my good.'

And so, rather than let these external pressures turn us inward and provoke us to anxiety, and inner and outer discord, they can turn us to prayer. And as we do that, Paul says in v7, 'the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.'

You see, peace that makes sense, peace that's understandable, is feeling good in the inside when everything on the outside is good and sorted and working in your favour. But there is a peace that God gives that surpasses understanding, that calms your heart and restores that sense of inner wholeness and wellbeing, even whilst the storm of circumstances rages around you. Because you know that someone greater than your circumstances loves you and is in total control.

And Paul says this kind of peace, Jesus' peace, *guards* your heart and mind. Now imagine you've been having trouble with one of your neighbours. I know that's difficult to imagine in Switzerland. But imagine your neghbour, a small, weasely, narrow-eyed little man, has been making vague threats against you, and dropping hints of what he might do to you or your property, and its all rather unsettling. And you mention it to a friend, who just happens to be a Colonel in the Special Forces at the nearby barracks. And that night he comes with a whole load of his friends, fully armed, and they encamp around your property, and they make it very clear to your neighbour who he'll be messing with, and that they won't be going anywhere. And all this fire-power, all this security has come over to your side. The little weasel is still out there, but something far greater is guarding you.

And through prayer, and supplication and thanksgiving, the peace of God comes to your side, and guards your heart, it encamps around you, it throws a protective shield over you, and even though the situation that stalks you is still out there, it restores that inner sense of peace and poise and wellbeing.

But there's one last area Paul tackles. And we'll deal with this just briefly. Because if trials and difficulties can damage relationships and disturb inner peace, they can also adversely affect how you respond to good stuff going on around you.

Grace in Place of Cynicism

You see, when good things aren't happening to you, when it seems that others are being blessed and their prayers are being answered and yours aren't, it's really easy to begin to respond negatively, on the inside, to good stuff that you see going on in others' lives. And whilst you may never express it, before long

you can become a bit cynical, and this hard edge can develop, because things aren't working out for you.

Or take the Philippians' situation. They're facing this external pressure, they're under attack, they're feeling besieged, and in that situation it's easy to begin to view the world outside with growing suspicion. That even good things, God's common grace in the surrounding culture, is viewed with cynicism, and there's no beauty out there.

And so to people for whom life is hard, Paul says in v8, 'finally, brothers, *whatever* is true, *whatever* is honourable, *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.' Don't retreat into yourselves, instead, keep your eyes open to all the good stuff that will inspire you to worship. Keep your eyes open to all the good stuff, all the evidences of God's grace around you that will increase your joy and give fuel to thanksgiving, even when it's happening in the lives of others. Think about this stuff, ponder on it, and let it slay the temptation to cynicism.

But, whilst there is all this good stuff to be thankful for, ultimately something else has got to shape the way we see and respond to the world and live in it. Something else has got to define what's good and beautiful and honourable and pure. Verse 9, 'what you have learned and received and heard and seen in me – practice *these* things, and the God of peace will be with you.' You see, ultimately it is the Gospel, the good news of God's grace to us in Jesus, that God would so love us that his Son would die for us, the message that was passed on to us by Paul and the apostles through the Scriptures, it's that that's got to mold and shape and change us.

And as it does, Paul says, the God of peace will be with you, even in the midst of the storm.