

## Prayer

Great and glorious Lord, Creator of all and Master of the Universe, grant to each of us who honour You as Lord to turn to You each day to be forgiven for our sin, and therefore live our lives as people who are forgiven and free. Draw us daily to this saving, healing and redeeming grace, we pray. AMEN

## Prayer Suggestions

### Prayer ideas

*Find a time and a place to be silent, and submit yourself to God and to His plans for your future*

### On-going prayers

- **Pray for young people in church** *Pray that God will use the young people in your church as a witness to others in the neighbourhood*
- *Pray for those who work in the sweatshops of Asia making the goods we buy*
- *Give thanks to God for His compassion and healing power*

## Meditation

Do you have to be a gardener to appreciate a garden?  
Do you have to be an astronaut to see the depths of space?  
Do you have to be a parent to understand a child?  
Do you have to be a lover to experience passion?

The Lord has made us each to reach beyond ourselves,  
To feel what others feel, to see what others see.  
Our spirit is enlivened with this empathy which reaches out  
Beyond ourselves to receive the touch of others.

We are like this because God Himself is like this too;  
It is His very nature to reach beyond His goodness  
And touch our fallen world, to offer His forgiveness,  
To receive our cry of help, and save us, though He need not.

Out of empathy, He longs to complete His plan and save us;  
For He loves us, and in His good time, He will, because He can.

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## Bible passage - Philippians 4:1-7

<sup>1</sup> Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and greatly miss, my joy and crown; my dear friends, do stand firm in the Lord like this.

<sup>2</sup> I plead with Euodia and Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. <sup>3</sup> Yes, and I also ask you, loyal Sydsygus, to help them, for they have worked hard alongside me in the work of the Gospel, as well as Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life.

<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always; I will say it again, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup> Let your considerate nature be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Be worried about nothing, but in everything, make your requests known to God through prayer and petition with thanksgiving.

<sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

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# Bible Study

## Review

At the end of a powerful letter to his dear friends in Philippi, Paul gave them the most heart-warming encouragement. Chapter four splits into three sections (4:1-7, 8-14, 15-23) of which this is the first, each one offering approval to the young church which had faced so much pressure from false teachers, and each one sounding a note of joy and thanksgiving. The first of these, our passage today, is an amazingly crisp and condensed collection of sayings which offers advice with words that are very well known, for example 'Rejoice in the Lord, always, I will say it again, rejoice!' (4:4), and the last verse is one of the great prayers of blessing which come from Paul's letters. It focuses on the 'peace of God', and it has been used for centuries throughout the Church.

Having focussed his letter on the difficult issue of false teaching and circumcision within the church (see 3:1ff and my notes on this), Paul had already dealt with this positively by giving his personal testimony. All this was a powerful incentive to those at Philippi who were there when the church was founded and Paul was with them (Acts 16:10ff), to recall the Gospel as it was first preached and put the disputes they were encountering into a Gospel perspective. Paul encouraged his friends to 'stand firm'. Verse 1 makes it very clear that Paul was speaking to people he held in high esteem and affection, not because they were people he happened to like, but because they had been pioneers in the Gospel. If you have shared with others in some successful work of your church, which the Lord has used for the proclamation of the Gospel, then you will know something of Paul's feelings here.

But encouragement is more than 'patting each other on the back'. By directly addressing an important issue of conflict amongst two church members (4:2), Paul offered his friends yet more practical encouragement. He pleaded with two disputing women, Euodia and Syntyche, to agree with each other with the help of another church member, Sydsygus, Paul worked to prevent the kind of disagreements and division that all too often cause rancour within the church. Instead of walking around the issue 'on egg shells', Paul brought it into the open, probably to the great relief of other anxious fellow Christians who looked on in despair. Yes, for the fellowship at Philippi, Paul's handling of this dispute was probably a great encouragement!

The words 'Rejoice in the Lord always ...' are positively challenging, coming as they do after Paul's dealing with various forms of trouble at Philippi. How sad that too many people turn their back on this great treasure of scripture, saying that it is impossible for us to rejoice in every circumstance of life! Some say that we cannot be expected to rejoice when evil is at hand, for example. But if we say that, then we have forgotten the Gospel! For, if at the heart of our faith, we are given permission by the Lord God Almighty to rejoice at the appalling death of His Son because He has thereby saved us from our sins, then there are no circumstances in which we, ourselves, cannot find reason to rejoice! Indeed, if we fail to do so, we allow Satan to win the battle for our hearts and minds. Our faith is a faith of victory and not defeat. Certainly there are terrible things which happen in this world to people which can in no way be condoned, but rising above the terrors of this world is not to condone evil but to destroy it!

If we can claim this victory in Christ and are joyful in all circumstances, then we can know 'the peace of God which passes all understanding ...' and it is indeed a supreme gift of God which protects us in the midst of the troubled world in which we live.

### **Going Deeper**

The Bible study goes deeper to look at these issues:

- Standing firm
- Dealing with disputes
- Rejoicing
- Praying
- Being at peace

## Going Deeper

There is so much for us to find within this text, we are spoilt for its riches. The issue of disputes in the church never goes away, but despite this, Paul offers advice about standing firm in the Lord, rejoicing, praying and being at peace. Each passage is a treasure of the New Testament.

### ***Standing firm***

Paul often used imagery from every day life, just as we do, and just as Jesus did so notably in His teaching (the 'lost sheep' – Luke 15:4; the parable of the 'sower' – Matt 13). By asking the Philippian church to 'stand firm' (4:1), Paul used a word that was straight from the handbook of Roman army manoeuvres. Yes, of course it was used in common speech, but the ever present Roman army was highly influential in all walks of life. It was famous for inheriting from the previous Greek Empire and army the quality of spirited and stoic devotion that made a man stand by his post under all conditions. This was therefore no casual remark by Paul.

Paul celebrated his friendship with the Philippians with an eloquent sequence of address (4:1), calling the church 'my brothers and sisters whom I love and greatly miss'; then adding to that religious familial affection, the title of 'my joy and crown'. Some think this refers to 'the crown of life' (Rev 2:10) that awaited Paul at the end of his life in the service of the Gospel, but the word Paul used was different. It meant a brightly coloured wreath or garland given to an honoured friend when they arrived for a party celebration, and I do not think we need look elsewhere for what this means. It is as if Paul wanted to celebrate the defeat of the enemy in the ranks of the Philippian Church, and although they still had yet to receive the letter, the very writing of it was the start of a spiritual process of defeat for those who were troubling the church. The party had begun!

### ***Dealing with disputes***

In this spirit, Paul immediately sought to address a dispute he had been told about between two women; Euodia and Syntyche (4:2). Paul considered this as being as damaging to the church as circumcision (3:1ff), and he knew full well that disharmony between Christians was the start of trouble. It was a chance for Satan to trap the people he loved, so he therefore sought to end it. There is uncertainty as to whether Paul was asking a specific person called Sydsygyus to assist in this dispute, or a 'fellow-worker' (which is what the name means). This does not matter, and I prefer the former because it fits the story. What Paul set before all of them was the example of the work these two women had previously done together for the Gospel (4:3); for if that could not be the cause of peace between them, then nothing could be.

It is tragic that most church congregations hide either unspoken, semi-secret disputes or ill-will between people, and that they are content to give the appearance of upright faith, holding office and praising God within their divided fellowship. Such people are content to ignore the spiritual damage their holding on to such pain does to the life and witness of the church, in the belief that this is the right thing to do. It is not. It is the job of church leadership to bring these matters into the open before God and His people, as Paul did here.

In verse 3, a 'book of life' is mentioned, which is the only place outside the Revelation of John that the term appears (Rev 3:5, 13:8 etc.). In every Roman colony such as Philippi, the magistrates kept a register of the names of all the citizens of Rome, for legal purposes. Paul had just previously mentioned the issue of citizenship (3:20), so taken as a whole, this was a strong reminder to dissenting church members of their ultimate allegiance.

### ***Rejoicing***

Paul's call to 'rejoice in the Lord' is clearly linked in this scripture to the victorious nature of the Gospel which overcomes squabbling and strife (3:1ff, 4:2), suffering (3:10), dissention (3:15), and the enemies of Christ (3:18ff). Although there are times when each of us may not feel anything like 'rejoicing', at the heart of the Gospel we live is the love of the Lord which draws us back to this place of joy. Some believe that in common with 1 Thessalonians 5:16, this call of Paul to rejoice is little more than a 'farewell' greeting, but that is to treat Paul's words casually, for he repeats them purposefully (4:4 'I will say it again ...'), and mere 'signing off' is as yet, several paragraphs away!

Paul links this rejoicing with a proclamation to the church to 'let your considerate nature be known ...'. The Greek word here means that generous quality of spirit which stands back from pursuing self interest, whether this is something to do with the letter of the law, or justice, or rights, or of personal satisfaction. It is an interesting scriptural characteristic worthy of more attention than it is given. For if we were all to take this self-effacing quality to heart, then many of the trials and disputes that bedevil us in the church would simply not happen. It is worth thinking about. Also, if we embrace this, then we will find it much easier to rejoice!

### ***Praying***

Calling on the Philippians to respect the on-going faith of the Church of God that 'the Lord is near' (4:5), Paul continued his advice by picking up a theme which was central to the teaching of Jesus; stop worrying and trust the Lord. If you look at verse 6 and compare it with Matthew 6:34 and 7:7 ('do not worry about tomorrow ... seek and you shall find ...'), you would be forgiven for believing that Paul had some early version of one of our written Gospels before him as he wrote. If not his, then he was at least connecting with a well known saying of Jesus before it was ever written down. It is rare for Paul to do this, but the cross referencing helps us to accept the importance of what is said.

Four words are used in Paul's suggested guidance for prayer (4:6), and it may be helpful to know them in details, as they can give a useful structure for prayer. The first word is a general word for prayer (Greek; 'proseuke'). The second word (Greek; 'de'esis') is more specifically to do with personal needs, in other words, it means a prayer of petition. The third word, 'ask', (as in 'make your requests ...' 4:6) highlights the attitude of seeking and asking (Greek; 'aitemata' – reflecting Jesus' words 'ask, and it will be given you ...' – Matt 7:7). The last word is thanksgiving (Greek; 'eucharistia') which reflects an attitude not so much of rejoicing in general but of joy directed towards the Lord and all he has done for us. Every time scripture uses these words we can learn something more about prayer, which is our privilege of communication with God, in Christ Jesus.

### ***Being at peace***

The final blessing Paul gave to the Philippians is a well remembered treasure of scripture; a verse that is remembered even today at a time when few people memorise scripture. This peace is not peace with God, such as the peace that Paul spoke of when talking about the gift of saving grace (Romans 5:1) which brings peace to the broken human spirit, neither is it peace from God, the sense of tranquillity that can come from our doing what is right, or by prayer leaving a problem or need at the foot of the Cross for the redeeming work of the Saviour. The peace of God is God's gift of His own nature and self, that is, His Spirit, implanted within us, which guards our 'hearts and minds'.

Would that all people who prayed this prayer knew that by so doing, they were asking God to come into them by His Spirit and take control! In the Bible, the 'heart' is the seat of the will, the 'mind' is the seat of thinking and knowledge, and it is interesting that these two are identified as in need of God's protection when we are at peace (4:7). Many in the church regard the emotions as the difficult part of the human 'psyche' which is in most need of protection in religious matters, following the eighteenth century Bishop of Bristol who rounded on John Wesley and condemned the 'unbridled enthusiasm' of his followers as being 'thoroughly irreligious'!

I suggest that if we followed the advice of Paul in this letter, striven against evil and wrongdoing, stood firm in faith, persisted in the work of the Gospel, continued to 'rejoice in the Lord' and brought our needs through prayer to Him with thanksgiving in our hearts, then the peace of God is God's gift of Himself to us. That is truly beyond human understanding.

## Application

There are a number of places within the text where this scripture begs our attention. It asks us to apply what we read to our own lives and our own church setting. In what matters of the Gospel do we need, individually or collectively to 'stand firm'? Perhaps the whole Church of God today needs to rediscover its unity in 'standing firm' not on any agenda provided by the world, such as prejudice, gay rights or medical ethics, but on its right to proclaim the Gospel of Jesus as 'true' in a world which is seeking religious compromise as an international political expediency.

None of us is exempt from the challenge this text brings us about handling disputes within the body of Christ; yet I ask you, if there were some issue to be resolved at your church, would anyone think of this text as offering guidance? There are a number of scripture texts that may help, but this one is close to the reality of much that boils beneath the surface of many a congregation.

For many people, the phrase 'rejoice in the Lord always' is a sufficient test of their faith, and once said, the words seem to stay in the mind. If we will allow Him, the Spirit will take these words and prompt us according to the circumstances of our lives. Then, the recollection of them may be a blessing and an invitation not simply to be overtly happy, but to discover that in the midst of even difficult things, we can find the heart and spirit to rejoice through Christ, and so begin to find peace.

Yet is the great gift of the peace of God that stands out at the end of this passage. So many people ask for it; so many people long for it, so many people say the words in church and out of it. My prayer is that you are one of those people for whom it is a reality, because you have allowed the Holy Spirit to make it true, throughout your life.

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## Discipleship

### ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. In your opinion, are disputes in church ever really resolved? Or do people hang on to them forever?
2. To what extent is it possible to demonstrate to the world the qualities of faith exemplified in this text, such as rejoicing in all circumstances? What does the world make of them?

3. Reflect quietly for a little and then share by recalling those times in your life when the peace of God has come to you with power.

### **Personal comments by author**

*Because of its very nature, there are many issues about Christian lifestyle mentioned in this text. It offers a variety of personal challenges that are deep and testing. It is certainly my experience that we can never fully meet our objectives, but if we fail to try, then our faith has given up. Surely, we owe it to our Lord and to ourselves to rise above the evils of this world and aspire to higher things, and do so unashamedly.*

### **Ideas for exploring discipleship**

- *Take one of the well known texts in this passage and consider it as a 'lifestyle' or 'discipleship' challenge and follow this through the coming week.*
- *Pray and ask the Lord to help you with what it means to have a 'considerate nature' (4:5). What does this mean to you, and what should it mean to you? Seek the Lord's help to find a way to show this godly quality.*

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## **Final Prayer**

I love You, Lord. Even when I am uncertain or troubled, even when I feel ill or in distress, and even when I have been hurt by someone I love. Your love is the power of the universe and it shines as fiercely as the sun. Lord Jesus, may it shine in and through me now. AMEN

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