

Unbroken Joy - Practice the Presence of God Through Prayer

Philippians 4:6-7 | Sunday, November 1, 2015 | By Brian Brookins

UNBROKEN JOY PRACTICE THE PRESENCE OF GOD THROUGH PRAYER Philippians 4:6-7

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Last week in our study on gentleness we noted that underneath the call for us to be reasonable, to be gentle, to be moderate in our relationships -- underneath that command is a truth that is the source of that character quality, and that is the knowledge that Jesus Christ is near. He is near in the sense that he will appear again. He will literally, visibly come again, and we are to live with the knowledge that that is upon us, and that God will sort everything out in that moment in the final judgment. But there is another way in which that informs our thinking, molds our character, and impacts us -- and that is that Jesus is near right now. Though we look forward to his return, he is present here with us, and his Spirit lives within us.

One of my favorite Christian songs right now is "Holy Spirit" by Francesca Battistelli. It goes like this:

There's nothing worth more
That could ever come close
No thing can compare
You're our living hope
Your presence, Lord

I've tasted and seen
Of the sweetest of loves
Where my heart becomes free
And my shame is undone
Your presence, Lord

Holy Spirit, you are welcome here
Come flood this place and fill the atmosphere
Your glory, God, is what our hearts long for
To be overcome by your presence, Lord,
Your presence, Lord

There's nothing worth more
that could ever come close
No thing can compare
You are our living hope
Your presence, Lord

Unbroken Joy - Practice the Presence of God Through Prayer

Philippians 4:6-7 | Sunday, November 1, 2015 | By Brian Brookins

I've tasted and seen
Of the sweetest of loves
Where my heart becomes free
And my shame is undone
Your presence, Lord

Let us become more aware of your presence
Let us experience the glory of your goodness

I was moved today in the worship as Adam led us in songs that identified this theme that has been a part of our teaching -- the presence of God. Oh, that we would be more aware of the presence of God. But how - what does it really mean? How do I experience the presence of God?

I understand that that knowledge can encourage me in gentleness. I understand the importance. We have looked at the disciplines of joy, prayer, thanksgiving, and how together they lead us towards peace with an awareness of the presence of God. But what is it that I do?

The answer, in part, is found in today's text. We practice the presence of God through prayer. Prayer is essential for us in experiencing the presence of God. So, today we are going to look at the three things that this text tells us to do, and I will hopefully be able to make for you the connections to the whole idea of experiencing the presence of God.

Before I begin with #1, let's go back a couple of verses, where we see Paul laying in this triad of joy, prayer, and thanksgiving. He begins in verse 4: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand..." And then today's text, which begins: "...do not be anxious." I call your attention to these two verses because there are two doctrines, two ideas that undergird our study.

- One is that joy is found in the Lord. We rejoice in the Lord.
- The other is that the Lord is at hand. The Lord is near.

Joy and peace are found in Jesus Christ. This is a part of our salvation. We are brought into a right relationship with God because Jesus Christ has paid the penalty of our sin. This is a gift. It is freely given. Because it is freely given and we do not earn it, we receive it by faith, and it is ours for all of eternity, there is a security, a peace, with the knowledge that this is not dependent upon our performance. Then, this liberates us out of that truth, out of that glorious good news, into a life that is quite different, that is holy unto the Lord and growing more holy every day -- that we call the gospel. The presence of the Lord is experienced because of the work of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul then tells us:

Unbroken Joy - Practice the Presence of God Through Prayer

Philippians 4:6-7 | Sunday, November 1, 2015 | By Brian Brookins

1. You will find this so easy to do: Do not be anxious about anything. Obviously, I am being sarcastic. We want to not be anxious about anything, and it seems rather bold of Paul to command it. We have here in these two verses a contrast, a contrast between anxiety and peace.

As many of you know, recently I went through a period where I experienced tremendous back pain and hip pain and nerve pain in my leg and ended up in the hospital for several days. The most difficult thing about it was that I just could not get comfortable. I wasn't comfortable standing. I wasn't comfortable sitting. I wasn't comfortable lying down. Then I would get tense, and then I would get more uncomfortable.

In a sense, that is what anxiety is like. We are trying to tell our souls to just relax, and the more we tell our souls to relax, the more tense we become. We just can't find a position where our hearts are at rest. We know that this is not healthy. We know it's not wise. We know it's not godly, and yet in reality it is a struggle.

Then there is this one word, this conjunction, this transition: the word "but." Thank God that that's there. Thank God that there is much that follows and that Paul just doesn't leave us with that command. What follows, in part, is a very powerful promise. He moves us from anxiety to the promise of peace.

We will make a couple of quick observations about this promise. The first one is the peace which is promised is the peace of God. It is not a natural peace. It is not a peace that is human but rather it is God himself and his presence bringing us peace. The second observation would be this: This peace is without limit. It is unmeasured, boundless peace. It is so great that we would never consider it. It is beyond, really, our natural ability to comprehend.

All of that provokes for me the question, "Well then, how does that happen? Is it just a mystical thing where I am at peace, or is it that as I pray, my circumstances are all changed to be what I want them to be so that I am not anxious?" Well, that would be wonderful, right? It would be wonderful to always have all of my prayers answered in the form I want them answered, so that I would never be anxious. We know that that's not true, not in the comprehensive way. It is true in part. We bring our concerns before God, and often he does change the world around us. He answers prayer and circumstances sometimes are dramatically changed. That's one option.

Unbroken Joy - Practice the Presence of God Through Prayer

Philippians 4:6-7 | Sunday, November 1, 2015 | By Brian Brookins

The second option is that God doesn't change the circumstances, but he changes me. He changes me to not be anxious about those circumstances. Now, which would you prefer? Maybe we should have a little show of hands? I don't think that would be helpful. I think that if most of us were honest, we would say, "Lord, I want to grow, but for now could you just change the circumstances?"

Well, I think the first observation is that both of these things are true, and yet neither of them go deep enough. The emphasis of Paul here is not just, "I'm going to work in your circumstances." I think that's there, but that's not deep enough. "I am going to work in you" - I think that is there, but again, it's not deep enough. His idea is this: God himself is present, and God is doing something that is so far beyond you, which you and I have not even thought about.

God -- this is a news flash for us - God has an agenda! And his agenda is more important than my agenda! He is God, and the awareness of his presence brings a reality that says, "God, I am concerned about this person or this relationship or this need. What are you going to do about this? What are you going to do in me?" But more than that, there is a reality that you have taught me to pray: "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven."

The reality of heaven entering into the reality of earth is so profound. The peace that God promises is the peace that God is doing something far beyond anything we are even considering. The contrast points to not merely an exchange of anxiety for peace, but an exchange of kingdoms, from yours to God's -- and the knowledge that God is with you not merely for your comfort. God does certainly comfort us, but for his glory, his kingdom. #1 - Do not be anxious about anything. God is at work. God is bringing his kingdom. He is meeting needs. He is growing you, but more than that, he is bringing his kingdom.

2. Pray about everything. "Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication... let your requests be made known to God." There is here a similarity to the idea that is recorded in 1 Thessalonians 5. Do you remember these three verses that we looked at back a couple of weeks ago? In 1 Thessalonians 5 we have these three verses: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you." Do you remember that these verses carry the idea that these activities of rejoicing or joy, prayer, and thanksgiving are comprehensive? They are spiritual

Unbroken Joy – Practice the Presence of God Through Prayer

Philippians 4:6-7 | Sunday, November 1, 2015 | By Brian Brookins

disciplines that are to define our lives and our piety -- that is, our devotion to God is to be expressed through these activities. Again, notice: rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances.

The same three ideas are now found in a little different form in Philippians. This is going to help you. This is going to help you. THIS IS REALLY GOING TO HELP YOU! I'm just going to stop and pray for God to raise the dead so that this will help you. It's not an insult. I don't mean it in an ugly way. God, stir our hearts with these truths.

See, we hear, "pray without ceasing," and we think, "What does that mean? How do I even do that?" Philippians 4 gives an explanation where you might interpret it this way: Pray about every circumstance in your life. Pray about everything that is happening to you as it happens to you. Everything that takes your heart in a certain way, everything that you think about or that captures your mind or tempts you to be anxious – have an ongoing conversation with God about the things of life.

Now, that is amazing, because if we stop and really think about the anxiety-producing factors of our lives, we will often notice that we try to solve those in a number of ways before we eventually get around to praying about them. And we pray about them after we have exhausted all of our possibilities. Scripture is saying, "No, no, no, no – wait. Pray. The moment that anxious thought enters in, give it to God in prayer."

Here is just a quick observation about the text itself. There are three words that are used to describe prayer. The first word is translated "prayer." It is a general word referring to all kinds of prayer. It can be interpreted "petitions," but it often is used simply in a general way to describe worship, praise, and prayer.

The second word is translated "supplication." It means to bring your urgent and specific requests before God. So, he starts with a very general word that could be interpreted "prayer" or "worship." The second one is: I have this urgent request. It's the word used in Chapter One, when Paul tells us he is in prison and people are praying for him to be released. It is an urgent need that is being brought before God.

The third word is a word which means "bring all of your requests." I don't know that Paul is intending for us to dissect each word too strictly. In some ways they are synonyms. They are interchangeable. He is describing for us a life where we are in communion with God. This is very big. Remember, we are talking about connecting prayer to the idea of the presence of God. Paul is saying to us, "Pray about everything. Walk with God, in

Unbroken Joy - Practice the Presence of God Through Prayer

Philippians 4:6-7 | Sunday, November 1, 2015 | By Brian Brookins

communion with God, worshipping him as you do, taking everything to him in prayer.” The idea here is that it points us back to the real problem of our worry, which is our independence from God. Pray about everything.

3. The third thing we are told to do is: We are told to do this with thanksgiving. Now, this is a helpful point as we are already very close now to Thanksgiving, as November begins today. This reinforces the whole idea that we are talking with God, in communion with God, in worship with God, making all of our requests before God. It is not just about getting over worry. It's not just about getting our problems solved, but it's about walking with God. This is helpful for us in a variety of ways. It is about overcoming worry, but it is about something much more dramatic - it is about our separation from God, and practically living in communion with him and in dependence upon him.

Romans 1 gives us a thorough explanation of sin. It tells us about its roots and about its universal character, that we have all sinned. Verses 21 through 23 are worth a look here because of what they tell us about failing to give thanks. Romans 1:21-23:

For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. Claiming to be wise, they became fools, and exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Paul gives the longest explanation of sin found in the New Testament, almost three chapters long. As he begins that, he tells us: Here is what happens when we sin. At the root of sin is an exchange. It is an exchange of worshipping God. Instead of worshipping God, it is worshipping things that are made. Jesus teaches us, and we won't go there, but in Matthew 6 he says that that is what is really at the root of worry and anxiety.

Temporal, passing things are threatened and we are afraid, we are anxious. They are very good things. They may be very important things. Maybe even for this life, they may be essential things, but we are afraid of losing them, or not gaining them, or not having them. So Paul tells us that at the root of sin is an exchange where we stop worshipping God and we start worshipping a person, a relationship, marriage, family, financial security, whatever it may be -- many good things, many things that we are right to pray about, but all of which are insufficient to be God in your life.

Unbroken Joy - Practice the Presence of God Through Prayer

Philippians 4:6-7 | Sunday, November 1, 2015 | By Brian Brookins

Your wife cannot be God in your life. Your marriage cannot be God in your life. Some of you spouses are looking at one another. The point of that was not to tell your wife to quit acting like God in your life, or your husband. That's not the point at all. I think you get it. These things are dear to us. My children are dear to me. I prefer financial security over insecurity. But they cannot be God.

Paul tells us in Romans 1 that at the heart of sin an exchange has taken place. But listen - this is insightful, I think, it's very helpful - that begins with a failure to give thanks. As Paul sets out on this explanation, he says that they didn't honor God and they didn't give thanks - that fundamental to our created status is to look to God, acknowledging him, worshipping him, and giving thanks in all things, and that the failure to do so is the first step toward idolatry.

So, we are told: "Don't be anxious about anything. Pray about everything. And do it with thanksgiving." Just to help us apply these points, I thought I would deal with just one or two objections. If we really take seriously the call to pray about everything, therefore experiencing the presence of God and walking in his presence, I wanted to anticipate some objections. I am going to give you two.

The first one is this: Do I really need to pray about everything? After all, can't I brush my teeth without praying? Well, I'm glad you have asked that question. I think that it reveals the deeper issue, the deeper issue that Jesus taught us to pray, "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." Though it may seem like I am just being a little petty here with this objection, I am trying to identify what really are you using prayer for? Is it about the kingdom of God? Is there a defining hunger for God, for his kingdom, for his righteousness? Are you yielding yourself to God so that it puts you in a place of potential risk, so that God would work through you and in you, so that you are so aware of your dependence upon him?

Matthew 6:33: "But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you." As I referenced earlier, Jesus is really addressing the issue of worry and fear and anxiety in this very passage. He is not denying the fact that there are many essential needs in life that we are concerned about, but he tells us, "Let your focus be the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and then trust God with all the rest." I could give a lot of qualifiers here. We understand that Jesus is not telling us not to plan, certainly not telling us not to work, or any of those other ways that we might misunderstand or misapply this passage, but he is directing our hearts to pursue him first.

Unbroken Joy - Practice the Presence of God Through Prayer

Philippians 4:6-7 | Sunday, November 1, 2015 | By Brian Brookins

I think the best way to make this point is to illustrate it through the life of Corrie ten Boom. I'm grateful for Eric Metaxas. In his recent book "Seven Women", he gives brief biographies on seven Christian women who brought significant change through their lives. Well, Corrie ten Boom was a remarkable individual. If you have not read "The Hiding Place", or "Tramp for the Lord," they are wonderful books. Those are her autobiographies and are worth reading.

She was almost 50 years of age when the Nazi occupation took over Holland. We sometimes think that her greatness, if we know her story, was that as a young woman, Hitler came in and she reacted heroically. Actually, she was almost 50 and she was serving God heroically at that time. She never married. Her sister Betsie never married. They had, as adults, taken in the children of missionaries. They raised seven children, then also opened clubs for youth -- young boys, young girls -- and radically made those co-ed, which was unusual in that day, because they felt that Christian young men and women needed to learn to interact. They taught them life skills and opened up worship services and teaching for the intellectually challenged. They were giving their lives away.

Then, the first wide scale bombing of a city in history took place when Rotterdam was bombed on May 14, 1940. If you know a little bit about history, you know that Hitler immediately took occupation of Holland and threatened to bomb again. In that first bombing, hundreds and hundreds died, and tens of thousands were made homeless. The bombing took place about 30 minutes from Corrie ten Boom's home. She and her sister -- this is the characteristic I want to draw attention to as I tell you a little bit about her life -- they just prayed their way through the night. Following her sister Betsie's example, they began to pray for the pilots that were dropping the bombs, praying for their salvation, praying for their enemies.

Soon they found themselves in a position where they began to run the underground resistance. Literally hundreds of people were being cycled through. Jews were taken to freedom in one way or another. They built a hidden room in their house next to Corrie's bedroom. Every day dozens of people were coming and going. It was only a matter of time before they got caught.

On one occasion they needed to feed these people. They needed ration cards. Food was scarce. They only had the ration cards for the members of their family. So, she went to the place where these cards were distributed. She found a man whose daughter had attended the services for the intellectually challenged that she and her sister had done. She had no idea if this man would be sympathetic. She prayed. She says over and over in her testimony that she prayed, and she believed God would give her knowledge in the moment whether to speak or to not speak. She asked the man for ration cards. She needed five at the time. He said, "How many do you need?"

Unbroken Joy - Practice the Presence of God Through Prayer

Philippians 4:6-7 | Sunday, November 1, 2015 | By Brian Brookins

She said, "One hundred." The man said, "These cards are so scrutinized that I am going to have to stage a robbery in order to give you these cards." Three days later he showed up and gave her 100 cards, supplying cards for the next 18 months as they fed person after person, jeopardizing their lives.

At every moment of her testimony, "We prayed. God provided. We prayed. Should we?" Living in an atmosphere that was built upon fear and betrayal, they gave their lives, until eventually they were set up in a sting operation. They were arrested. They went into prison there. In a few short weeks her elderly father died. In a very moving scene, she describes standing in the prison, looking down the hall, and telling her father goodbye. Praying. Praying for the guards. Praying for her captors. Praying for the captives. And through a long imprisonment, one that eventually took the life of her sister Betsie, her dearest friend, she prayed, thanking God, testimony after testimony.

Her biography takes you all the way through until she confronts the man who betrayed her, the man whose actions led to the death of her father and the death of her sister. She forgives him. She meets one of the meanest guards years after her imprisonment. In her freedom she forgives. Every one of these steps is not heroically a given, but the product of prayer in her life.

We look at our lives sometimes and we say, "What do I have to offer?" I want to say that here is a 50 year old woman in Holland with no real resources, giving her life away -- praying and living "Thy kingdom come, thy will be done." The real peace that we long for is the knowledge of the presence of God and the knowledge that God is at work around us.

Objection #2 - "Brian, you are always talking about prayer. Pray may be a good thing, but we need to act, and this emphasis on prayer leaves no room for action." Now, I don't know that anyone really has this objection, but I think that sometimes we wonder what the interaction is between prayer and action. The answer is found here in this whole idea of the presence of God -- the knowledge that we are living a story that is a part of a greater story.

I will illustrate it this way. If you have ever seen the movie, "The Princess Bride", it is actually a movie that I recommend. I don't often recommend movies, but I feel fairly safe recommending this movie. It is really a wonderful movie -- Will Wesley win the heart of Buttercup? Will the characters overcome all of their adversity because of true love? What you forget as you are watching the movie is that that story is within a greater story. The story begins with a grandfather reading a book to his grandson. His grandson is, I think, home sick from school. He starts to read this story about true love and the grandson is like, "Uggghhhh...true love." The greater story is really about the grandson being won over to the ideals of love and the beauty of a great story. And there is a

Unbroken Joy - Practice the Presence of God Through Prayer

Philippians 4:6-7 | Sunday, November 1, 2015 | By Brian Brookins

picture there of us, remembering that our lives fit into a greater story, a true love story about God winning back his creation, redeeming his creation.

What happens is -- just like in watching the movie -- it is often easy to forget, because the events of today are so compelling and so mesmerizing that we forget "I am a part of something greater." The presence of God reminds us that God is here. There is a greater love story that is being told. Live faithful. Overcome the trials that are confronting you. Will Buttercup go through the marriage with the evil Prince Humperdinck? And then be unable to marry her true love? These are big problems, which wonderfully illustrate for us that our lives are part of a much more glorious, greater story.

It is not just about blessings, as wonderful as the blessings of God can be in this life. We have asked our elders and wider board to read the book "Radical". There are two books that help capture this truth -- that God has made you for something better than the American dream, not that we are against the American dream, but it is not the same thing as seeking first the kingdom of God. One of the books is entitled "Crazy Love" by Francis Chan. The other is "Radical" by David Platt. The goal is not to make you feel guilty for your blessings but rather, to raise our sights to a greater vision.

Yeah, we are not teaching here that the end game is to pray that you don't have cavities, but that the end game is to pray for the kingdom of God. That propels you into a life in his presence, and an adventure beyond anything we could imagine, because it is his agenda. It's glorious, and it's his glory, and in his glory we find peace and joy, and we want to be a part of that story.

I will end with this. I was checking out at a store and there was a new fashion magazine that caught my attention. I had never heard of this magazine. I don't know that I have ever bought a fashion magazine, but I bought this one. It's called Porter, and it's for the stylish, intelligent woman. It was not vulgar. The pictures were not as some fashion magazines can tend to be. I bought it because on the front cover it promised to produce inside a 21st century guide to anti-stress. It is an anti-stress guide for women in the 21st century. I thought, "Wow - this has my attention. I am about to preach on this subject. Let's see what Porter magazine can help me with."

It starts by citing two long-term studies, two long-term studies that determined that individuals who knew and believed stress to be detrimental were more likely to die younger. In other words, the very idea that stress is bad for you is bad for you. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. Now I stress, not only because I'm stressed, but now I am stressing because I am stressing.

Unbroken Joy – Practice the Presence of God Through Prayer

Philippians 4:6-7 | Sunday, November 1, 2015 | By Brian Brookins

We are a mess, aren't we? 30-year studies -- I am generalizing, but long-term studies, a lot of people. The first thing you have to do, according to this article, is you have to redirect your response to stress. You have to see it as somewhat of a good thing. This is rather difficult to do. Then it gives you five points. Are you ready for the five points for combatting stress from the global experts sharing their tried and tested tips on how to de-stress?

1. Work out in the morning. That is because cortisol, the stress hormone that makes you retain weight, is at its lowest in the morning, which means when you work out then, you will have greater weight loss. I'm sorry. A lot of what is said is good, practical common sense.
2. Take hot and cold baths because the change in temperature reduces inflammation.
3. Meditate.
4. Practice the right diet.
5. Use breathing techniques.

Some of these don't sound so hidden to me, but this is what caught my attention. They call this whole section "Insider Beauty." I think what they mean by that is a little play on words. They are trying to accent the connection between the mind and the body, which is clearly there, and that how you think is important -- that's a biblical idea -- and that they are giving you information and a perspective that no one else is giving.

Here is the point. The article goes on then to talk about how to not let stress give you bad hair or bad skin. I am going to suggest to you that the bible has a much better solution. I will speak to the ladies for a minute. God has a better destiny for you than good hair and good skin. Though physical beauty can be a grace, and I'm not insinuating for a moment (here go all the qualifiers) that you should neglect your bodies at all. Exercise is great. Rest is important. Diet...we get all that. But, the message that you are told over and over and over again – that you are what you look like -- is a lie. It will produce inside you an anxiety that you will never get free from. I don't care how many beauty magazines you buy, or how many products you buy.

Remember when I was walking through the -- I don't remember -- what do you call those big stores, retail stores like Macy's? Thank you. Wow. I need some of that stuff that helps you not forget. A lady yells at me across the store, "Hey, sir, what are you doing for those wrinkles?" Now, this seems to me completely inappropriate as a public announcement. But sadly, I am never without a response, so I said, "What wrinkles?" She was like, you know.... Am I really going to come over there and spend an hour and then \$100 on some cream? I mean, no! I am married to a beautiful woman. What do I care?

Unbroken Joy - Practice the Presence of God Through Prayer

Philippians 4:6-7 | Sunday, November 1, 2015 | By Brian Brookins

Again, guys, you know I am being facetious here. I am not at all against practical wisdom for taking care of yourself. But don't we get it? Don't we see that the air we breathe is a carnal, temporal message that is so superficial? God is inviting you to be a part of the coming of his kingdom, male and female, and it's glorious! But I daresay that even within the church we need this challenging message, because it is so much the world that we live in, it just seeps in and we are unaware that we are allowing our hearts to be completely captured by temporal things. So God helps us in that battle with prayer.