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<sup>4</sup> Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup> Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup> Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup> And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.  
Philippians 4:4-7.

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Can you bring to mind some time or event in your life that has brought you great joy? Maybe it is the birth of a child, the day of a wedding, good news in relation to health, a desired outcome in relation to a government decision that is truly in alignment with God's Word, or some other event or thing...

As you seek to recall those 'event's or 'things' that bring great joy, think also of a time when you have either struggled to have a sense of joy, or where some event, or activity, or organisation, or person, has seemed to conspire to want to take away those very things that give a sense of 'joy' and 'purpose' and 'hope' and 'peace'. Have you had those times when you felt you had a sense of 'hope, and 'joy' and 'peace' and 'love', and then circumstances around you seem to conspire to want to take that away?

How shall we respond when faced with circumstances such as these?

At a simple human level it is appropriate to seek out the right kind of advice and help and support. And at a very simple level, this can sometimes simply mean going back to those trusted persons or groups to help oneself be re-orientated on the path of life. For example, in home and family life, sometimes a simple conversation between those loved ones who truly care is necessary. The prodigal son returned home to his waiting father, and was received with arms of true and genuine love. The repentant sinner who stood at the back of the church saying "God, be merciful to me, a sinner' was the one who went home justified with God. The many who were sick who came to Jesus who said, "Son of David, have mercy on me' went away whole not only in body, but also soul. It is good to find people who will help us in 'soul'.

In our western world there are also many resources available to help us that exist beyond our family and social settings. On more than one occasion I have encouraged people to seek out the help of properly qualified and wise counsellors or psychologists or other such professions.

It is good to seek out these resources – as people such as these can sit 'outside' our situation and provide another perspective. And people such as these are helpful also in that if we are dealing with some internal struggle, when that time is 'over', we may leave it with them, and not have friends and families keep asking 'how are you going' and bringing us back to a dark time.

Of course, when it comes to seeking out help and guidance such as this, it is also important to seek out those people who will help us to hear what we *need* to hear rather than what we *want* to hear.

The 'joy' is something that God wants all people to know in this life. And when we feel that we are struggling with a proper and biblical sense of joy (as opposed to a 'worldly' and 'self-centred' sense of joy), it is appropriate to properly reflect on one's own life, and to seek out the right sort of help.

But there is another level we also need to be open to when we consider God's call for us to know true 'joy' in life. And this has to do with our Holy Gospel this day (Luke 3:7-18). John the Baptist had been called by God to prepare the way of Jesus – the One who would bring true joy to all the earth (as the angels sang at Jesus birth). But John began his preaching by saying, ““You brood of snakes! Who warned you to flee God's coming wrath? Prove by the way you live that you have repented of your sins and turned to God.” John the Baptist went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (Luke 3:3).

Real joy comes not from psychological or self-reflective spiritual exercises (not that these cannot have a place in our lives). But the Bible reminds us that true joy comes from a life of true Biblical repentance and faith. And there is true joy in repentance. In repentance, we pray like David: “Let the bones you have crushed rejoice.” (Psalm 51:8) and then “Restore to me the joy of Your salvation.” (Psalm 51:12). It can seem strange that repentance can produce both grief and joy — that David's bones can be “crushed” and yet “rejoice.” But this is consistent with the flavour of the gospel, which achieves life through death. Yes, it is true that in the gospel, the sins we repent of are already forgiven before we even repent. And the real joy that comes from true repentance comes not merely by understanding the relational aspect of sin, but by understanding the nature of the One with whom we are in relationship. Repentance is the other side of the coin of faith and is the change of mind turning from sin and toward Christ.

God desire is for you to know true and genuine joy in life. And true joy in life is not seeking fame and fortune for oneself, or by seeking to exercise some iron-willed sense of control over one's life or circumstances (or over the lives of others). True joy in life is not found in either rationalisation (that is, seeking to explain your actions away by assuring yourself that you are better than many others) or by self-medicating (by seeking to numb yourself to by drugs, alcohol, achievement, power, success, etc). True repentance is not a joyless, wallowing-in-sorrow repentance. It's a process that starts with grief and guilt, and ends with forgiveness and deep joy. Repenting and receiving forgiveness from God leads to real relationships with others, because it reminds us that we've got nothing left to hide.

At this point, it is also important to remember that Paul wrote this from prison. As portrayed in Acts, Paul and Silas, although beaten and in prison, sang hymns and prayed (Acts 16:25). Thus, the apostle has already demonstrated to his congregation what it means to rejoice in adversity. (At 2 Corinthians 6:10 Paul speaks of himself as "sorrowful yet always rejoicing.")

The key to understanding Paul's exhortation to rejoice is that it is "in the Lord." This signifies that the Lord is either the object of our rejoicing or its grounding, the one in whom our joy thrives. This continuous rejoicing in the Lord is a very important concept for Paul. It is a distinguishing mark for Christians (see Romans 12:12) and a characteristic of life in the kingdom of God (14:17). It is a fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). It becomes evident during times of suffering and trial (Romans 5:3-4; 2 Corinthians 6:10; 8:2-3).

Paul says, May you always be joyful in the Lord. I say it again: rejoice! Show a gentle attitude toward everyone. The Lord is coming soon. Don't worry about anything, but in all your prayers ask God for what you need, always asking with a thankful heart. And God's peace, which is far beyond human understanding, will keep your hearts and minds safe in Christ Jesus.

If you want a shoddy type of peace, look for an easy-sounding solution. If you want God's satisfying peace, however, then prepare yourselves to be changed. It is God's peace, which is beyond any human understanding, that will give us peace in our hearts and minds.

"Joy" and "peace" are themes we encounter throughout the season of advent: on cards, holiday decorations, and in music streaming forth from shopping malls. Yet experience shows us that "joy" and "peace" are often allusive, especially at this time of year. Loneliness, family tensions, inflated expectations, unexpected crises, grief, and national events make them seem beyond our grasp. The allusiveness of "joy" and "peace" invite us to pause and reflect on what it is we are seeking when we speak of "joy" and "peace." Is it an emotional high? A state of perpetual happiness? Or do "joy" and "peace" represent hopes that have become little more than a seasonal habit? We have a source of happiness that will never fail. It consists in a communion with the risen Christ, who has already passed through the lowest point of the human condition (Philippians 3:10).

What does the Lord say? He 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." (Philippians 4:6,7). Adam Clarke in his commentary on Philippians writes, "This peace passes all understanding; it is of a very different nature from all that can arise from human occurrences; it is a peace which Christ has purchased, and which God dispenses...it is communion with the Father, and His Son Jesus Christ, by the power and influence of the Holy Spirit."

When we remember that the Lord is at hand, we will find it difficult to be anxious (Phil. 4:5b). The Apostle could mean that the Lord is near in the sense that He is present with us by His Spirit to console and strengthen us, or he could mean that Christ is near in the sense that His return is imminent. Actually, Paul is probably referring to both aspects of Christ's nearness. We should not be anxious because our Saviour will be with us and will make us strong enough to endure all that comes our way. But we also should not be anxious because Jesus could come at any moment; this world will not last forever, and all of our worries will give way to eternal bliss in the new heaven and earth (Rev. 21).

Our peace is not because the Lord gives us all that we ask for, but because communion with God reminds us of all that He has done for us. And this truth gives us tremendous peace. Christ gives us an unfailing joy that can never be taken away. Amen.