

Peace in Troubled Times

Philippians 4:4-7

Has anyone heard of VUCA, V U C A? I hadn't heard of it either until a few months ago. I was working through an issue with my coach and he mentioned it to me. It's a management acronym which was first used in 1987.

V stands for **V**olatility.

U for **U**ncertainty.

C for **C**omplexity.

A stands for **A**mbiguity.

Don't those four words summarise the world in which we live today?! In the words of one person, VUCA is another way of saying, "Hey, it's crazy out there!"

I don't need to tell you that we are currently living in troubled times.

The times are volatile.

We all know about the volatility of living through COVID. Things are constantly changing, and they're changing fast. Public debate is increasingly hostile. The global political order is unstable. There's the unpredictability of war.

The times are uncertain.

Increased volatility leads to increased uncertainty. We don't know what's around the corner. What will all this mean for us? Will the current war in Ukraine break out into a larger one? We simply can't predict the future.

The times are complex.

Nothing is simple anymore, is it? Everything is complicated. Our global world is interconnected in ways we don't understand. Solutions to problems are not straightforward.

The times are ambiguous.

There are so many unknowns. It's hard to have clarity in decision-making. We have access to more information than ever in history, and yet we struggle to make sense of it all. We're living in troubled times, VUCA times. And living and working in this environment takes it out of us. It leaves us weary and exhausted. **And it robs our peace, leaving us feeling anxious, fearful, and stressed.** I think all of us, in some way, are feeling the effects of VUCA. The events of the past couple of years have taken their toll on us.

So friends, how can we experience peace in these troubled times? The apostle Paul gives us God's wisdom on how to find peace in our lives in Philippians chapter 4.

This is a well-known passage written to the church at Philippi, and in it, Paul gives three of his concluding exhortations. So, I'd love you to come there with me in your bibles as we look at verses 4-7 together.

The first exhortation Paul gives is to **rejoice in the Lord - always!**

Verse 4: *Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!*

He doesn't just say it once, but twice. In fact, he's already urged them to do this back in chapter 3:1, so he's clearly trying to make a point. He wants them to know how crucial it is to rejoice in the Lord! And the key words here are the words "in the Lord". There might not be a reason to rejoice in our circumstances, but there is always a reason to rejoice in the Lord!

We know from other parts of this letter that the Philippians were facing opposition for their faith in Jesus. Paul himself is writing this letter from prison. Life is not easy for him, and he knows it's not easy for them. He knows that if they focus on their circumstances, they will be robbed of peace and joy.

And it's the same for us. As we look at our troubled world, and the challenges we face in our own lives, we can all find reasons not to rejoice, can't we. In fact, we'd probably do anything but rejoice. But if we focus on the Lord, we can find plenty of reasons to rejoice! We can rejoice in his love. We can rejoice in his grace and salvation. We can rejoice in his strength and his presence. We can rejoice in his goodness. We can rejoice in his sovereign purpose and plan. There is always a reason to rejoice *in the Lord*.

And Paul is at pains to exhort us to do this, not just sometimes, not just when life is going well, but *always*. No matter how hard life gets. No matter our circumstances. No matter how VUCA the world is. And we don't just do this personally, but also corporately. When we gather together as the people of God, we rejoice in the Lord. That is part of what we do each Sunday, and in small groups, and in prayer meetings. Together, we rejoice in the Lord. *Rejoice in the Lord always, I will say it again; Rejoice!*

Friends, how's your rejoicing in the Lord?

The second exhortation Paul gives is, **be gentle with everyone**.

Verse 5: *Let your gentleness be evident to all.*

As followers of Jesus, we should be known for our gentleness.

Paul exhorts the Philippians to be gentle, kind, tolerant towards everyone - to one another, and to all people. In Titus 3:2, he instructs Titus to remind the people *to slander no one, to be peaceable and considerate, and always to be gentle toward everyone*. Friends, this is the way of Christ! When we're going through troubled times, experiencing anxiety, fear or stress, we're more likely to respond in ways that are inconsiderate, insensitive and unkind. God calls us to gentleness, kindness, with everyone - no matter who they are, and no matter what their views. This is essential to maintaining peace with one another, and peace in our own hearts.

Does gentleness characterise your interactions and relationships with others? Paul exhorts us to **be gentle with everyone**.

Before he continues with his next exhortation, he reminds them at the end of verse 5 that **the Lord is near**. It's not entirely clear what Paul means here. Is he referring to God's presence with us now by his Spirit, or is he referring to the Lord's return? It could be either. I think he is probably referring to Lord's return. Just a few verses earlier in 3:20, Paul reminds the Philippians of this. He writes:

But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Saviour from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.

But maybe Paul leaves it a little ambiguous and wants us to think of the Lord's nearness in both senses. Both are true. God is with us, near us, now, by his Spirit who indwells us. And his return is always near. And it seems his purpose in dropping this little phrase in amongst his exhortations is to motivate us to live them out.

In the midst of our challenges, in the midst of our troubled times, knowing the Lord is near gives us the certain hope that one day we will experience the fullness of joy and life and peace, and in the meantime, he is with us by his Spirit, strengthening us to get through them. And this reminder and encouragement enables us to **entrust everything to God**.

3 - Entrust everything to God.

In verse 6, the most well-known of this short section, Paul exhorts us to **entrust everything to God**. Verses 6:

Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

This is one of those verses that is a great one to memorise, and many of you probably know it well off by heart. Paul says ‘don’t worry about anything’, but trust God in everything’. That’s pretty challenging isn’t it. It makes you wonder, does Paul really mean not to worry about *anything*? What about our job security? Our finances? Our health? What about our families? Yep, he means ‘anything’.

He doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t care or be careless, and not be responsible. He doesn’t mean we should deny or ignore the realities we face, or minimise pain and suffering. What he’s saying is that in the midst of all the circumstances of life, instead of being anxious and worried and stressed, entrust everything to God! In the case of the Philippians, this applies to the opposition and persecution they are facing, as well as the details of their ordinary everyday lives. Paul says, don’t worry about anything, instead, trust God with everything!

Before we go any further, I just want to take a side-step for a moment. Some of us here today (or listening online) may suffer from acute anxiety. When Paul says “do not be anxious”, he’s not talking about anxiety in the sense of pathological anxiety and anxiety disorders. I’ve had my own journey in this area. Acute anxiety is complex. It goes far beyond the normal human tendency to worry and stress about things. There are biological and physiological issues at play. If you suffer from severe anxiety, then you might need to seek professional help, and I would strongly encourage you to do that if you haven’t already. Paul is talking here about the normal anxieties and worries of human life.

As I’ve been thinking about how this verse applies to mental health conditions involving anxiety, I think we can apply it like this: Do not be anxious about the fact that you have an anxiety disorder. But entrust it and its implication for your life to God, and seek the help you need. If you’d like to discuss this further, I’m really happy to chat with you afterwards.

**So how do we entrust everything to God? How do we actually do this?
By presenting our requests to him in prayer.**

In every situation, Paul writes, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. I like the way the New Living Translation translates this verse:

Don’t worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done.

One theologian puts it like this,

“The way to be anxious about nothing is to be prayerful about everything.” Isn’t that great. Friends, God is interested in the details of our lives. He loves it when we come to him, as our Father, and bring our requests to him. We are acknowledging our need for him. We are acknowledging our dependence on him, and our trust in him. We are acknowledging that he is God, and we are not. He is ultimately in control, and we are not. He is sovereign over all, and we are not. He wants us to come to him and entrust everything to him because he loves us and cares for us.

And he wants us to do it from a heart of gratitude, **with thanksgiving**. No matter how hard life gets, no matter our circumstances, we still have reasons to be thankful. In Christ, God has done everything for us, and given us everything that he can give! He has given us himself. He has given us eternal life. He has given us a hope for the future. He has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in Christ. He’s given us his creation full of good things to enjoy.

And he has answered so many of our prayers. As we’ve come to him with our petitions and requests, he hasn’t granted them all, but he’s granted many of them. We must ensure we thank him for what he has already done, and for what he has already given us. Life is a gift from God. Everything we have and enjoy is a gift. And therefore, when we come to God with our requests, the only appropriate posture is one of thanksgiving.

Friends, the way to be anxious about nothing is to be prayerful about everything, **but we have to choose to do it.** Not in our own strength, but in the power and strength of the Holy Spirit. We have to choose to entrust everything to God in prayer, and we have to choose to do it over and over and over again. We do worry and stress about things, don't we. And we will worry and stress about things, because we are human. But when we find ourselves doing that, we have a choice to make. Will we continue to worry about it, or will we entrust it to God in prayer?

If we choose to entrust it to God, we have a wonderful promise of peace in verse 7.

Verse 7:

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

God may answer our prayers, and grant our requests, or he may not. But if we entrust the situation to him, he *will* give us peace! **His peace will guard us.**

Paul might have the image of the Roman soldier guarding his imprisonment in mind. The peace of God will guard our hearts and minds from the intruders of worry and anxiety. And it's a peace that is beyond our understanding. It's a peace that won't make sense given the circumstances we are facing.

I'm sure most of us, if not all of us, have a testimony, a story to tell of when we have experienced the peace of God that doesn't make sense in light of the circumstances we were facing. God wants us to experience this peace more and more, and anxiety and worry less and less.

Friends, what do you need to entrust to God today?

What is causing you anxiety that you need to hand over to God and entrust to him?

We live in troubled times, VUCA times. Our world is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous. We face troubles and challenges and stresses in our lives. **And we have two paths before us.** We can allow ourselves to worry and be anxious, or with God's help we can focus on living out these exhortations to rejoice in the Lord, be gentle with everyone, and entrust everything to God. **Will you choose the path that offers God's peace?**

I'm going to finish by praying what is known as the **Serenity Prayer**. You've probably heard different versions of this, but I'm going to pray the full original version.

Let's pray.

God, give us grace to accept with serenity the things that cannot be changed, Courage to change the things which should be changed, and the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other. Living one day at a time, Enjoying one moment at a time, Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace, Taking, as Jesus did, This sinful world as it is, Not as we would have it, Trusting that You will make all things right, If we surrender to Your will, So that we may be reasonably happy in this life, And supremely happy with You forever in the next. Amen.