The Good and Beautiful Life

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Philippians 4:4-9

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Earlier this year, Pete challenged us to write a 100-word testimony, so today I want to begin by sharing mine. Growing up, my life was characterized by exerting a lot of energy and effort to avoid failure and to achieve excellence in school, sports and other activities and relationships. On the outside, I appeared to be successful, but on the inside I felt anxious, fearful, frustrated, and resentful. I knew I wasn’t as good or as nice as others believed me to be, and I knew I couldn’t change myself. As I stopped trying harder and trusted Jesus, my life did change. I am experiencing more and more the good and beautiful life I always wanted in my growing friendship with Jesus.

I share my experience because I think fear, anxiety, anger, and other negative emotions are realities all people struggle with in life. Events in the last few weeks such as the terrorist attacks in England, the shooting of some congressmen in Alexandria, and the terrible tragedy that took place right here in Vienna are heartbreaking and disturbing. Weekly, I have conversations with people who are feeling a myriad of emotions about things that are happening in our country and government not to mention the overwhelming personal difficulties and challenges many are facing.

I recently read a book that contained a quote by David Foster Wallace: “There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, ‘Morning, how’s the water?’ And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, ‘What is water?’”
Think about it. We are immersed in cultural realities that are constantly forming and shaping us in unconscious ways and impacting what we feel, what we believe, and how we live. God longs for all of us to experience the good and beautiful life he created and redeemed us for, but all of us need to be healed and transformed. Today, I want to share how God has used the go-to verses in Philippians 4:4-7 to transform my anxiety, fear, frustration, and resentment to love, joy, and peace. Listen for God’s word to you: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry 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.”

It’s good to be reminded that when Paul wrote this book, he was a prisoner in chains, and he is writing to believers who are suffering opposition from their pagan neighbors. He knows the reality of pain, and he also knows how suffering can dampen joy and prompt a vengeful or harsh response. But in this passage, Paul provides guidance on how we can become the kind of people who are so changed we can experience the good and beautiful life here and now even when our relationships and circumstances are messy. How does that kind of change happen?
In his book, *The Good and Beautiful God*, James Bryan Smith explains, “We cannot change simply by saying, ‘I want to change.’ We have to examine what we think [our narrative] and how we practice [the spiritual disciplines] and who we are interacting with [our social interactions]. If we change those things—and we can—then change will come.”

As I look back on my life, I can see how this principle was at work long before I understood it. Going away to college was a crisis and emotionally painful experience for me because it took me away from the familiar—the only home I had known for the 18 years of my life. The narratives that were dominating my life were that I was on my own and I wasn’t going to be able to do this. I was afraid I was going to fail. The good news is that the bad feelings drove me to search for God and the help I needed.

I was searching, but God found me and put me on a path of transformation. During my freshman orientation week, I happened to learn of a local Presbyterian pastor who was teaching a class on the life and ministry of Christ, so I signed up. One of the people in this class invited me to a campus ministry weekly meeting, so I went. One of the staff members invited me to join a small group, so I did. Eventually, she became my mentor.

These invitations led to personal spiritual disciplines such as prayer and reading, studying, memorizing, meditating on God’s word and then discussing it with others. The passage for today is among the first verses I memorized. In my new
relationships and small group, I began to share honestly and openly about my feelings and struggles. And, I started stepping out of my comfort zone and taking on new experiences such as sharing my faith, leading a Bible study, going to conferences and on mission trips.

Without even understanding what was happening, I began to notice that I was changing in ways I had wanted but could never make happen on my own. Why?

This diagram illustrates what was happening. My life was characterized by many kingdom of self and false narratives that resulted in negative emotions. As I said “Yes” to many invitations and gave myself to God through a myriad of new practices, relationships, and experiences, I became more aware of being immersed in a Trinitarian presence. I experienced the love of God, the grace of Christ, and the power of the Holy Spirit changing me.

I began to believe the kingdom of God narratives that God was with me, loving and caring for and helping me, which in turn enabled me to experience the good and beautiful life of love, joy, peace, and patience.

Now let’s go back to the passage for today. With everything that is happening in the world, it is hard not to be filled with gloom and doom, but Paul exhorts us: “Rejoice in the Lord always.” Always? Really? Yes! In case we doubt it, Paul says, “Again I will say, Rejoice.” As we choose to
rejoice, we turn from our false narratives and beliefs to God and what is true of us.

Joy is not so much a feeling based on circumstances. It is much deeper than that. It’s an attitude—and even action—that is rooted in God and what He is doing in and through and for us. As we choose to intentionally rejoice, our confidence in God grows, and we become the kind of people who are able to rejoice always.

Anger is another common experience expressed as frustration, bitterness, resentment, and even contempt. As Dallas Willard has said, “It’s hard to be angry and not hurt anyone with it.” Retaliation is based in anger, and we have seen a lot of that in our country and world of late.

There really is another way: “Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.” Rather than believing we have to be in control of our circumstances or lash out at people who hurt us, we can come to believe that the Lord is always present with us, always in control, always loving us, always working for our good, always working out His redemptive purposes. With the help of the Holy Spirit, we can become the kind of people who are able to respond to others the way God responds to us—with gentleness, kindness, and patience.

Another command is “Do not worry about anything.” I like the translation “Be anxious for nothing.” Paul is speaking to people who are anxious about the future because of persecution, but the command certainly applies to being unduly concerned about anything. Let’s be honest: we all worry at times about our children, work, finances, future, the government. You name it.
But the command is to “Be anxious for nothing.” Again, there is an alternative: “but, in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Prayer is an ongoing conversation with God in which we are invited to let go and let God do in and through and for us what only He can do. The practice of prayer is a turning from ourselves and our circumstances to God—the One who knows all things, the One who is powerful over all things, the One who is in control of all things.

In prayer, we make our requests known. Supplication is begging for something earnestly or humbly. God delights when we come to Him recognizing our need and asking Him to help us and care for us. And we can be confident that He will—perhaps not in the way we expect, but He will help us.

Our prayer is to be characterized by thanksgiving. Anne Voskamp writes, “Thanksgiving is the evidence of our acceptance of whatever He gives. Thanksgiving is the manifestation of our Yes! to His grace… Thanksgiving is necessary to live the well, whole, fullest life.” (One Thousand Gifts).

This week, I read about a lecturer who held up a piece of white paper with a blot. He asked the group what they saw. Everyone said, “A blot.” As in life, we are prone to see what is wrong rather than the wide mercy of God. We need to practice thanksgiving to help us see the hand of God who is
always present and at work on behalf of his people in whatever is happening.

Again, Paul has guidance to help us change: “Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Philippians 4:8).

Wherever we are and whatever is happening in our lives, this is God’s world where He is present and at work. We are not to deny the suffering that exists in the world, but we can choose to turn our focus to what is true, honorable, and just.

The best thing to think about is God and His Word, understanding that the Spirit of God uses the truth revealed in scripture to transform our lives. Some years ago, I made a connection with the words found in both Philippians 4 and Psalm 19:

The law of the L ORD is perfect, reviving the soul;
the decrees of the L ORD are sure, making wise the simple;
the precepts of the L ORD are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the L ORD is clear, enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the L ORD is pure, enduring forever;
the ordinances of the L ORD are true and righteous altogether.

The law of the L ORD is perfect…sure…right…clear…pure…true and righteous. I was a master at worry that resulted in fear and anxiety, but as I chose to think about God and turn to him in prayer, and by memorizing and meditating on many go-to verses, including Philippians 4 and Psalm 19, the Holy Spirit changed my old false narrative
to the true narratives of Jesus, enabling me more and more to experience the fruit of the Spirit in my heart, mind, soul, and body. This is the good and beautiful life God longs for us to live.

Rick Warren writes, “Meditation is simply focused thinking — a skill anyone can learn and use anywhere. When you think about a problem over and over in your mind, that’s called worry. When you think about God’s Word over and over, that’s meditation. If you know how to worry, you already know how to meditate! You just need to switch your attention from your problems to Bible verses. The more you meditate on God’s Word, the less you will have to worry about.”

Philippians 4:7 gives us a wonderful picture of what happens when transformation takes place: “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” We become the kind of person who is able to experience God’s presence and peace no matter what their circumstances.

Philippians 4:9 goes on to say, “Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.” It’s amazing that Paul can tell me to follow His example and teaching. This is the true test of transformation—to become the kind of person who is able to do what needs to be done. This is the good and beautiful life—to become like Christ so we are able to obey His commands and do His will.
I thank God for the ways He has changed my life and enabled me to experience and live the good and beautiful life in ways I never dreamed possible. But I do not want to give the impression that I experience love, joy, and peace all the time. I don’t. I’m a broken, sinful human being in need of ongoing healing and transformation just as you are. I continue to listen for invitations from God and look for the practices, relationships, and experiences that God can use to transform me.

There is a new spiritual practice that I want to share with you today that God is using to change my life and the lives of others. These days, as I notice that I am feeling anxious, frustrated, or reactive, I take it to the Lord in prayer—renewing prayer.

People usually come for prayer when painful emotions are right at the surface of our lives due to stress, trouble or difficulty. While it’s easy to blame others and circumstances for what we feel, that won’t help us because we can’t control other people or everything that happens to us. So, the first principle of renewing prayer is that we have to take ownership of our feelings and be willing to participate in our healing and transformation by taking it to the Lord in prayer.

Prayer ministers facilitate this process by asking questions beginning with questions that connect us to our emotions. We often have coping mechanisms that keep our negative emotions pushed down because we don’t want to feel bad. But emotions provide an accurate picture of what we believe in our hearts since we feel whatever we believe. As physical pain can lead to
discovering and treating a serious condition like cancer, so emotional pain is a gift that can lead to healing.

While I no longer feel the constant sense of anxiety and frustration I used to, I do notice when those feelings come to the surface under stress. God has made us in such a way that our emotions enable us to naturally connect to memories, or earlier times in life, when we felt the same way.

In renewing prayer, my emotions have connected to normal childhood memories when I was stressed about school or afraid of failing a test and so on, as well as more trying situations when I was injured or suffered loss. It’s not what happened that is the problem. It is what I came to believe at that time.

You see, while children are good receivers of information, they are not good interpreters of information. So, when things happen, we often come to the wrong conclusion and adopt false beliefs that may not have been true at all. Or, the beliefs may have been true in that situation, but the problem is we are still living like it’s still true in our current circumstances.

This week, in a new and unfamiliar situation, these old emotions of anxiety and frustration were triggered. As I connected with these emotions in prayer, I went to a memory when I was hospitalized at eight years old due to an illness. I had not thought about this for decades, but I remembered I was very anxious and afraid. My beliefs at that time were that I was alone, helpless, and out of control. I felt overwhelmed, and I didn’t feel I could handle what was happening to me.

Once the beliefs were identified, I asked the Lord to reveal His truth to me: This is some of what came to me: “You were not alone; I was with you, caring for you through your parents and the nurses and doctors. That was a difficult experience in your life, but I helped you then, and I will help you now in this new challenge.”

Now the truth we receive will never be contrary to what God has already revealed in scripture. In fact, the truth that I often receive is truth I know intellectually. But we are often double-minded—
believing one thing in our heads and another in our hearts. And please understand, it is the emotional beliefs that are running and often ruining our lives. Identifying a false belief and having the Lord speak truth is like identifying a cancerous tumor and focusing radiation on it so it is eradicated from the body. The light of God’s truth transforms false beliefs.

One prayer session doesn’t change everything that needs to change, but I have found it helps me make a huge step or jump forward in experiencing transformation. I have had many people say to me recently, “You seem different—more relaxed, at ease, even radiant.” To God be the glory! I’m glad some people see changes in me; I know others see how I need to change more. I thank God for the ministry of renewing prayer and how He is using it to continue His good work in me and others.

I invite you to learn more about Renewing Prayer by contacting me or other prayer ministers, and we’ll be glad to talk further or arrange a renewing prayer appointment for you.

Transformation leads to the *Good and Beautiful Life*—a life of love, joy, and peace. This is the life Jesus has already given. But to experience it more and more, we have to want it and be willing to cooperate with the Holy Spirit’s work in us. It’s time to say “Yes” to God’s invitations. There are many invitations in the bulletin, such as today’s meetings for Renewing Prayer, and the outreach initiative. But there are others like invitations to the summer Bible study or Growing Your Soul. Perhaps God is asking you to receive the gift of a new relationship through Stephen Ministry. You can’t accept every invitation, but you can accept some and so participate in the transformation that leads to the *Good and Beautiful Life*. 