

## **To Worry or Rejoice?**

A Sermon on Philippians 4:1-9 by Rich Holmes

Delivered on October 15, 2017 at Northminster Presbyterian Church in North Canton, Ohio

There are now roughly nine million people who are in some form prison or jail in this world.

You can probably name some people who are among those nine million. Some of them like Charles Manson, Sirhan Sirhan and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed are famous, or should I say “infamous”, but others have names you’ve never heard of. Among those nine million people some are in jail justly and others are in jail unjustly. Some are in prison for real crimes like murder and armed robbery, but others are political prisoners who are being locked up for so-called crimes like speaking out against their government.

What if you got a letter from someone in jail; what kinds of things would you expect it to say? I’ve never gotten one. I don’t know anybody in jail. But here’s the kinds of things I would expect such a letter to say. “Dear Rich, here’s how I’m being treated,” it might say, or it might say “Dear Rich, here’s how much I miss those I love and how much I long to see them”, or I suppose it might even say “Dear Rich, here’s how you can bust me out.”

Well, I am asking these things because what we are reading today from the New Testament, which we call “Philippians” is a letter from jail. It is a letter that the apostle Paul, a preacher, writes while he is in jail. And in fact, that’s *all* that Philippians is. You know, I can’t help but laugh every time somebody tells me that they think the bible is boring reading. If you think the bible is boring, I bet you don’t know what’s in it. If you got a letter from somebody in jail, I guarantee you wouldn’t think it was boring, and that’s what we have today.

So what does Paul say in his letter from jail? Well, he is not talking to complete strangers, but a church of people that he knows and is friends with and so some of what he has to say are the kinds of things someone would say to a church that they know well. He tells them to get along with each other and stop fighting with each other. He says he thanks God every time he thinks of them. And in the part we're reading today he says "Do not worry about anything, but in everything rejoice."

What does Paul mean by that? Maybe he means don't worry about him. That's what we'd expect someone to say when they're in jail: "Don't worry about me mother, no matter what happens I'll be okay." Paul had said that he doesn't know what they're going to do to him there in jail. He doesn't know whether he's going to be allowed to live or be executed, and he knows that the Philippians care about him, and so maybe that's why he says not to worry. But it may be that Paul isn't talking about Paul. Maybe instead he is talking about the Philippians. Maybe he is talking about all the day to day concerns of the Philippians, like whether their crops will grow and they'll have enough to eat come time for the harvest—whether their sons will find good wives and their daughters good husbands—whether they'll be able to make enough money this year to pay the taxes to Rome. So, in other words, maybe someone in jail and facing death is telling the Philippians not to worry about all their problems but to lay their worries in God's hands and God will take care of them.

Isn't that strange? What do the Philippians have to worry about? It's Paul who should be worried. But then again, it isn't so strange. People who have a lot to worry about usually have something to teach those of us who have little to worry about. You are worried about paying the deductible on your medical insurance and then you hear about a long-time friend who is

seriously sick and doesn't even have insurance. You are worried about the thirty year old roof on your house that's starting to leak and then you hear about your second cousin who soon may no longer even have a roof over his head much less a leaky one because he just lost his job.

Now, lest anyone misunderstand me, I am not saying you're problems never matter because there is someone out there who has it worse. In the first place, I don't have the right to say that. Paul had the right to tell the Philippians to rejoice because as he was facing death and living in prison, he genuinely had something to worry about. But I don't have that right and I have not earned that right. When I am sitting in a jail cell one day in some country that puts Christians to death for proclaiming their faith and the powers that be are scratching their heads and thinking about whether I should live or die, then I will have earned the right to tell you not to ever worry about anything. But I haven't done anything like that yet. And secondly, telling you not to worry about things is not going to stop you from worrying about them. Telling you that you shouldn't worry about that leaking roof over your head because of your second cousin who might lose his home is not going to make you stop worrying about your roof. It may make you feel guilty about your worrying. It may make you regret worrying. But it is not going to make you stop worrying. So why is Paul telling the Philippians to stop worrying.

Well, I think it is important to see that while Paul is telling the Philippians not to worry, he is not telling them not to worry because he had it so much worse than they did. His having it worse than they did is what gave him the right to tell them not to worry, but this is not why he told them not to worry. Rather, he told them not to worry because, he says, the Lord is near. His command to them not to worry is grounded not in him, but in the Lord Jesus Christ. Well, Paul wrote these words in the first century and if you've checked your calendar, it is now the

twenty-first century. And you may say to yourself if Paul said the Lord is near two thousand years ago, then either he was wrong or he had a much different idea of what near means than we do. Well, I think Paul was just wrong. Paul thought the Lord's coming would be soon, within the lifetime of all those who were living in the church in Philippi. But it really doesn't matter if the Lord returns to us ten thousand years from now or sometime next week. The promise we have in the gospels is that one day, one day and only the Lord knows when, everything that causes suffering in this life, everything that causes distress and anxiety and hardship will pass away. It will be no more. I love the part of revelation where it says in the end every tear will be wiped away from every eye. One of the best sermons I ever heard was titled the Baby shampoo promise. As you probably know, there is a slogan for a famous baby shampoo that says no more tears. That is to say if it gets in your little ones eyes it won't irritate his eyes like other shampoos with harsh chemicals. The baby will be okay. Well, the sermon said that God's promise to us about when it all comes to an end is like the baby shampoo promise, because it is the promise of no more tears.

The other day I read something on the internet that I think is one of the best pieces of advice I've ever heard. It was called the five by five rule. And this rule is if something you are worried about won't matter in five years, don't spend more than five minutes being worried about it now. Now, I know that the words internet and biblical have probably never occurred in the same sentence before, but I actually think that's a pretty biblical piece of advice, and that is what Paul is saying. Anything you are worried about now one day won't matter. When we get up in heaven where we will live for all eternity this brief moment of life on earth will be just like a split second. It will be like the blink of an eye. That is the thought that kept Paul going when

he was sitting in a prison cell wondering if he would live or die, and if he can say that, why can't all of us say that?

Now, I have something a little strange to say to all of you. I'm sure there are some people in this congregation who have had the experience of going out in the country away from all the light pollution of the city and seeing a million stars in the sky and as you sit out under the sky, you can't help but think about how vast this universe is and how small you are in comparison. Or if you haven't had that experience maybe you have stood alone on the beach and thought about how the oceans stretches for thousand and thousand of miles and miles and how small you are in comparison, or if you haven't even done that, maybe you've had that experience on top of the Rockies as you look at the towns and the people below that all look like ants. Well, now for the strange thing I want to say. I think we have a duty to have these kinds of experiences and have them as often as we can. A duty. Now, the reason that may sound strange is because we tend to think of duties as things like telling the truth and keeping our promises and paying our taxes, but a duty to stand beneath the stars or on top of the Rockies, what kind of duty is that? But if you think we indeed have a duty not to worry, then I think we have a duty to remind ourselves of just how small our worries are in God's vast universe from time to time. All these things will pass away, Paul tells us.

And standing under a million stars or high up on the peak of a mountain is sort of like what happens to us when we regularly worship and fellowship here at Northminster, but not just here at Northminster, but with the church all over the world. Here in this church as in every church, I think from time to time we can forget that we are part of not just one congregation but the church everywhere in the world. And when we have fellowship with each other, I think

we also find out just how small all of our own personal worries and concerns are. When we are not a part of the church, or when we sit in the church but we feel that we're sitting among strangers, we can be told all about who is in the hospital this week and who is sick and who lost their job and these things are just like the names of strangers. But when we are praying for such people daily and making meals for them and we come to know their names and their concerns just as well as we know our own, all of the sudden our own worries don't seem quite so big. They don't seem to matter quite as much. But I think if you want to have that kind of perspective on your own worries you have to do more than just be on the roles of the church, you have to really belong. Just being on the church roles and trying to see how small all your own worries are is kind of like looking at a picture of all the stars and trying to see how small your worries are just from the picture.

When I am talking to students in my philosophy classes, I sometimes ask them what might strike you as a silly question, but which I mean as a serious question. What I say to them is How do you know that I am not a robot? If you open me up, how do you know that instead of finding flesh and blood, you're not going to find a whole network of wires and microchips and mechanical parts. You see what's on the outside, but you don't see what's on the inside. Now I bring this up in a sermon not to waste your time with silly ideas, but because we don't see what is going on, what's happening on anybody's inside. As Christians, we can see when people have inadequate shelter, we can see their symptoms when they are sick, we can see when they lack clothing, we can see when they are in prison. But worry we cannot see. We cannot see who is worried or how much. Do not worry. It will all pass away. There will be no more tears. In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.