

August 1, 2021

A Letter from Paul – Philippians

XI. The Lord Is At Hand

Philippians 4:2-7

Dr. William P. Seel
Easley Presbyterian Church
Easley, South Carolina

There is a structure here to what could easily be read as just a random collection of affirmations and exhortations – tell Euodia and Syntyche to get along, rejoice, don't be anxious, and so forth. The linchpin of our passage – which holds all of this together, thematically and theologically – is what Paul says right in the middle: *“The Lord is at hand.”* The reason that verse stands out is because that is the same language Jesus used when He began His public ministry. After being baptized by John, and after defeating the Tempter in the wilderness, Jesus began His public ministry by declaring: *“The kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the gospel.”*¹ In the person of Jesus, the Kingdom of God had begun on earth. And Paul echoes that statement by saying that the final establishment of that Kingdom, its completion, is now at hand as we wait for the return of Jesus at the end of time: *“The Lord is at hand.”*

But critical to understanding that statement of Jesus, as well as this statement of Paul, is the precise meaning of those words “at hand”. This is a very particular Biblical phrase, with a very particular dual meaning. It means, at one and the same time, both “already here” and yet also “still coming, getting closer”. So, in the case of Jesus' proclamation, the Kingdom is already here in the form of Jesus Himself, who is the King of that Kingdom. And yet, His Kingdom has not yet fully come on earth, even in His Incarnation – for that to happen, He must still undergo the cross and resurrection and ascension, and then to come again in glory at the end of the age. So, the Kingdom of God has arrived in Jesus, it is already here; but it is also, and at the same time, still coming, getting closer, as we wait for Jesus to come again.

And that is the same dual dynamic at work in Paul's declaration that *“The Lord is at hand.”* As Paul writes these words, it is an historical fact that Jesus has already come. He has already died for our sins and risen to defeat our death. And even though He has ascended into heaven, from *“whence He shall come to judge the quick and the dead,”* He is still here with us, present to us, right by our side in the form of His Holy Spirit. Jesus is already here. And yet, we are also, and at the same time, waiting for Him to come again and to bring the fullness of His Kingdom, to finish the good work He has begun in us. Jesus and His Kingdom are still to come, but are getting closer every day. *“The Lord is at hand”* – He is both already here and yet still to come, drawing nearer.

Now, with that understanding in place, here's how I think this passage works – which also goes a long way to getting us to what this passage actually means for us. Everything which comes before Paul's statement, *“The Lord is at hand,”* I think can be interpreted through the “not yet,

still coming, drawing nearer every day” meaning of “at hand”. And everything after his statement, “*The Lord is at hand*,” I think draws from the “already here, right now with us” meaning of “at hand”. So, let’s look at our passage and see this at work.

“I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord.” Tell these two gracious souls in Christ that it is time for them to stop their fighting and to be reconciled to one another in the Lord. Why now? Well, first because their feud is obviously not doing the Philippian church any good – these two women are leaders in that congregation. But Paul also has something much larger in view. Instead of fighting with each other, what these two women – and, indeed, the church as a whole – should be doing is rejoicing in the Lord: *“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.”*

And why should they be rejoicing instead of fighting? Because it is their Christ-given job, the church’s Christ-bearing work, to present to the world the power of Christ’s reconciling grace. If folks inside the church can’t get along, then how in the world are folks outside the church ever going to believe the Good News of the Gospel? So, therefore, instead of focusing on fighting with one another, they are to focus on rejoicing in the Lord – and so, in this way, *“let your reasonableness be known to everyone,”* both inside and outside the church.

And why does any of this matter? What brings urgency to all this? *“The Lord is at hand.”* Jesus is coming soon. His Kingdom may not be fully here yet, but it’s getting closer every day. So, Euodia and Syntyche, do you really want Him to come and find you fighting with one another, not speaking to one another? Jesus is at hand – which means it is time to put our quarrels away and to be reconciled to one another. One of my favorite quotes, from a well-known theologian – and I’m paraphrasing: we might as well learn to get along with each other now, in this life, since we’re going to be stuck with each other throughout eternity. The Lord is at hand, He’s coming, drawing nearer every day – get ready now.

Therefore, also, instead of fighting, get busy rejoicing. And not just rejoicing – as in, just in general, put on a happy face. No – specifically, get busy rejoicing *“in the Lord”*. Meaning turn your thoughts and energies away from fighting with one another towards anticipating, celebrating, getting ready for that coming Kingdom of God. Rejoice in the Lord – take joy in everything He has done for us already; take joy in anticipating the wonderful things He will bring to us when He comes again with His Kingdom. Rejoice in the Lord – for He has given us so many reasons to rejoice.

I love the way the Episcopalian preacher Barbara Brown Taylor defines this sort of rejoicing – she says we should think of it as *“singing ahead of time”*.² Times may be hard in the moment, and sometimes the outlook may seem bleak – but Christians know what Jesus has done for them and for this world already. And Christians know what Jesus is coming still to do. And so, because we know His Kingdom is at hand – not yet fully here, but getting closer every day – we raise our voices ahead of time, in anticipation and celebration of what is and what soon will be:

*Joyful, joyful, we adore thee, God of glory, Lord of love!
Hearts unfold like flowers before thee, opening to the sun above.*

*Melt the clouds of sin and sadness; drive the dark of doubt away.
Giver of immortal gladness, fill us with the light of day.³*

And when we do just that – lay aside our strife and rejoice in the Lord, then we are also doing precisely what Christ has called His church to do. Then we are presenting to the world precisely what Christ wants the world to see in His church. Then we are doing our part to show the world the richness of the faith, hope, and love we have found in Jesus. We are letting the world see in us the Spirit of Christ, dwelling among us – so that they, too, will come to Christ in time to greet Him when He comes again. And that’s what Paul means when he says, *“Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.”* Why? Because, *“The Lord is at hand”* – He’s coming again.

And if the first half of our passage draws its meaning from the “not yet, still coming, getting nearer every day” meaning of Jesus being “at hand”, the second half draws its meaning from the “already here, with us right now in the Holy Spirit” meaning of Jesus being “at hand”. *“The Lord is at hand”* – right here, right now. Therefore, *“Do not be anxious about anything”* – He’s right here, right now. I remember reading an article in the New York Times many years ago which stated that scientists had found evidence that some people have a genetic predisposition toward anxiety. They had even located the gene responsible: the *slc6a4* gene on chromosome 17q12. People who have a short version of this gene are more likely to be anxious than are people who have the long version.⁴ How can we tell which version of the gene we possess, short of genetic testing? Well, how many of us just spent the last ten seconds anxious over whether we have the short gene or the long gene?!

Short gene or long gene, to be human is to know anxiety, at least from time to time. So, to tell us to *“Do not be anxious about anything”* is, on the surface, about as useful as telling a short person to become taller or a tall person to become shorter. But, of course, that’s not what Paul says. He says that the Lord is at hand – therefore, do not be anxious about anything. The Lord is right here with us, right here beside us – His Holy Spirit is even now dwelling within our hearts. Which means that nothing can snatch us away from Him, nothing can separate us from His love, and that He is working in our lives even now to bring all things round to good. The Lord is at hand, He’s right here with us, we’re not facing whatever it is we are facing alone. Therefore, *“Have no anxiety about anything.”* In fact, *“Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil – for You are with me.”⁵*

“The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything.” Instead, says Paul – because He is here, right here and now in the form of the Holy Spirit – instead of being anxious, just talk to Him, tell Him what you’re feeling, what you’re worrying about, what you’re afraid of: *“Do not be anxious about anything, but [instead] in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”* Instead of worrying, talk to Jesus – for He is at hand, He’s right here with us right now, with us in the midst of that which we are going through. Talk to Him, pray to Him, pour out your supplications to Him – instead of sitting there worrying ourselves to death, just tell Him about it.

For when we do, *“the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* Instead of worrying, talk to Jesus who is at hand – and

His peace will guard our hearts and minds. His peace will protect us in the midst of that which has made us anxious. “*Will guard*” – it’s a military image. Picture soldiers patrolling the perimeter of the camp, vigilant for any danger, ready to repulse any incursion by the enemy. “*And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*” Jesus, who is at hand – right here, and present to us right now, in the form of the Holy Spirit – will not only listen to our prayers, but He Himself will set a guard to watch over our hearts and minds. His peace actively guarding and guiding us safely through our fears.

Jesus is at hand – here with us right now. And what that means for us is that, instead of worrying, we can talk to Him, and He will guard us with His peace. Canadian pastor and writer, Mark Buchanan, tells of doing just this – and realizing that Paul was telling the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth when he wrote this. It happened during the birth of his first child, Adam. During labor, it was discovered that there were serious complications which required emergency surgery. As his wife Cheryl, was wheeled into the operating room, Buchanan begged the medical team to allow him to come in with her. At first they refused, but soon relented and told him to scrub up and wait in the anteroom until they called him in. He writes:

I sat in the anteroom, waiting to be called. How terrible anterooms are . . . Minutes swell hugely there. The air gathers to a crushing weight. All the anxiety of the world is distilled in anterooms. They are places where you can be broken or made.

I usually don’t do well in them.

But that night, I spoke to God with psalm-like directness. “God, show Yourself,” I asked. “Show your glory in the midst of these sallow yellow walls. Spread your fragrance amongst the sharpness of this antiseptic smell. Speak into this silence.”

And God did. Not audibly, not visibly, not even tangibly, but God genuinely visited me in that anteroom. He made the drabness brilliant. He made the heaviness light, the slowness of time swift. His still, small voice spoke, and I heard. And I heard this: “No matter what, all is well and all manner of things are well. No matter what.”

I knew something in that moment. I knew something that now, ten years later, I still know. Oh, I have lapses. I have bouts of amnesia, where I become oblivious to the truth I knew then with such piercing clarity, a truth that took hold of me and demanded I take hold of it. But it’s not difficult for me to recover that truth and know it again: That if God is present in anterooms, then He’s present [everywhere]; that if Christ is on the road to Emmaus, then He’s on every road; that if Christ was there, then He is here now.

He doesn’t need to be invoked. [We] do.⁶

Buchanan was called into the operating room. Blood everywhere. The doctors and nurses deftly untangling the cord from around Adam’s neck. Silence, terrible vast silence. And then the silence broken by the sputtering and wailing of a new-born child, by the cries of joy and relief from a frightened mother and father. Buchanan writes:

*I should have been a wreck.
I was, I think, the calmest person in that room.
God had come to be with me.
Actually, no. I had come to be with Him.⁷*

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

“The Lord is at hand” – He is coming again soon. Therefore, be reconciled to one another. Therefore, rejoice in the Lord always. So that others, out in the world, may look in and see the difference Christ makes – *“Let your reasonableness be known to everyone.”* *“The Lord is at hand”* – in fact, He is with us right here and right now. Therefore, don’t be anxious about anything, just talk to Him about what is troubling us. And His peace will actively guard our hearts and our minds through whatever we are going through. Because *“The Lord is at hand.”*

¹ Mark 1:15 (9-15).

² Barbara Brown Taylor, Home By Another Way (Boston: Cowley Publications, 1999), pp. 15-19.

³ Henry Van Dyke, “Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee,” hymn #611 in the Presbyterian Hymnal, Glory to God (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

⁴ Eric Nagourney, “Fearing More Than Fear Itself,” The New York Times, July 30, 2002, Section F, Page 6.

⁵ Psalm 23:4.

⁶ Mark Buchanan, Your God Is Too Safe (Sisters, Oregon: Multnomah Publishers, 2001), p. 151.

⁷ Buchanan, p. 152.