

The Lord is at Handⁱ

by John Hawkins

Thus there will be three effects of nearness to Jesus—humility, happiness, and holiness. May God give them to thee, Christian! — Charles Spurgeon

The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious 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. — Philippians 4:5b-7 (ESV)

When my soul was embittered, when I was pricked in heart, I was brutish and ignorant; I was like a beast toward you. Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever. For behold, those who are far from you shall perish; you put an end to everyone who is unfaithful to you. But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works. — Psalm 73:21-28 (ESV)



There are various passages in the Bible that when we hear them, or worse yet when we're given them by well-meaning Christians, they too often affect us the same as when we're told we need to diet, get more exercise, manage our money better or be kinder to our spouse. Internally we grimace with either frustration, failure or sometimes anger. Philippians 4:6-7 is one of those passages. How many times have we reminded ourselves, or been reminded by others, that we're not to be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving we're to let our requests be made known to God? And how often have we been assured that then the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus? What was its effect on us? Too often we slink away feeling we've been given the right solution but that it doesn't really solve the problem. But I guess I should try it one more time.

I believe that one of the challenges we have with Philippians 4:6-7 is that we understand it and try to practice it in perceived isolation from God. Here we are, a heap of anxiety and worry. It seems that God is not meaningfully nearby so it's all up to us. We need to lift our heads, reject our anxiety, prayerfully express our needs and our thanks to a God who is out there somewhere and then mystically and automatically experience God's peace that surpasses all understanding. And if somehow we can pull that off, then we'll feel better, we'll have done the right thing and in so doing, we'll have honored God and His Word. And we'll have done this in our own strength and with little awareness of God's presence.

I believe that we cannot meaningfully understand nor practice Philippians 4:6-7 unless we see its basis in the phrase that precedes it in Philippians 4:5b—The Lord is at hand. In the ESV translation, this section reads as follows, *The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious 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.* The Lord is at hand is the reality that provides the basis for the action called for in Philippians 4:6-7. And this makes a great difference in how we understand and apply this verse in everyday life.

Here are a few specific thoughts on the difference God's presence makes in understanding and applying this passage:

1. The reason that I don't have to be anxious and the reason that I can choose against anxiety is that the Lord God Almighty who is my Father and His Son who is my Savior are fully with me in my current context. Their presence assures me that things are not out of control and that God is sovereignly in control. Their presence also gives me the strength I need to choose against anxiety. God is here, God is in control, God will strengthen me. He is my Father, His Son is my Savior, His Spirit is my Comforter and Guide. Therefore, I will be OK.
2. As I make my requests known through prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, I am doing so to the God who is with me. My prayers and thanksgiving are part of my conversation with my ever-present Father and not a solicitation to a God who is cosmically removed from me. He's right here. He hears my prayers. He receives my thanks. He cares for me.
3. Romans 15:33 says that God is the God of peace. Ephesians 2:14 says that Christ Himself is our peace. In John 14:27 Christ says, *Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.* The reason that the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard our hearts and minds in Christ is that the God who is right beside me is peace; He is my peace; He gives me His peace.
4. Sometimes His peace is felt immediately. Sometimes it is felt over time or intermittently. The reality is that it is always with us whether we feel it or not and whether we believe it or not. His peace, like Himself is going nowhere. He is peace; He is our peace and He gives us His peace. By His grace we can lean into that and find it again and again to be true.

Philippians 4:6-7 is one of the great commands and promises of Scripture. This is because it is a description of the effect of the abiding presence of God in the life of His children. As the Psalmist says, *Nevertheless, I am continually with you; you hold my right hand. You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory. Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire besides you. My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever . . . But for me it is good to be near God; I have made the Lord God my refuge, that I may tell of all your works.* Psalm 73:23-26, 28.

The Lord is at hand. That makes all the difference. Amen and amen!

Take it to the Lord

1. Read through this meditation again, asking God to open your eyes, mind, heart and soul to His message for you today.
2. As He speaks to you, listen. Ask Him to guide you as to what you should do with what He says and for the grace to do so.
3. End your time with some form of worship—prayer, praise, thanksgiving or surrender.

ⁱ From *Longings Toward a God-Centered Life: Meditations on Great Thoughts and Passages* by John Hawkins. The purpose of publishing these meditations is to share perspectives for leaders and followers on biblical understanding for daily living. The meditations are derived from John's reflections on quotes from Christian leaders and from God's Word.