

What it must be like to own a beachfront home on Siesta Key! Being able to walk out from your home on the white sands, and take a dip in the warm gulf waters. Or to regularly see a beautiful Gulf sunset. Or to be able to take your cabin cruiser out for a trip to Key West. If you had the money, what a happy life you could have living on the Gulf of Mexico. But wait. Do you realize that red tide hits the Gulf Coast, and will make you sick. Did you realize that the traffic is awful if you want to go and do something during the day? Did you realize that you are in a prime hurricane location, and that your homeowners insurance is off the Richter scale? Did you realize that most of your family lives in the Mid-west, and you will rarely get to see your grandchildren? Do you realize that the cancer you have been diagnosed with, won't simply disappear since you have a home in paradise?

Wow, here I thought that if I had oodles of money, and retired to a lovely home on Gulf of Mexico, I'd be a happy camper. Wrong. Beautiful surroundings won't bring you lasting happiness. Ok. I'm going to sit tight and stay in the Villages, Florida. As I listen to the TV., radio, and read magazines, I am bombarded with another message where I can find happiness. Here is the message. Use me, buy me, try me, eat me, wear me, drive me, put me in your hair, and you'll be a happy person. Does it work? Maybe for a short time. But here is the truth friends. People are healthier and cleaner and richer and smarter than they have ever been before. We live longer lives, we eat better, we dress warmer, we work less, we play more than at any time in the history of the human race. But are we happier or are we just cleaner, healthier and wealthier?

The key here friend is that outward circumstances won't bring you lasting happiness. Happiness is something that comes from within. Look at the apostle Paul. He's been hungry. He's been alone. He's been stoned, whipped, beaten with rods. He's been mocked, lied about, ridiculed and undermined. As he writes these words to the Philippians from Rome, he is under house arrest, chained to a Roman guard. He faces a potential of the death penalty, having his head chopped off. And yet this guy has joy resonating from his personality. No matter what he faces in life, he has reason to smile and be happy. Paul wants to teach us today how that same joy can resonate from us, no matter what we deal with in life. His words to us today are, "Keep Your Chin Up Always!"

One of the marks of a Christian is joy. That is what I love about many of you Open Bible members. Whenever, I talk to you, there is a joyful spirit that just resonates from your personality. As Paul says, a gentleness is found in your conduct. What that means is you have a bigheartedness about you. And if I was an unbeliever, your spirit would be attractive to me, and I would want to know, why you are the way you are. I would want that joyful spirit you have. Fill me in.

Our joyful spirit comes from inside and wells up like a bubbling spring from our relationship with God. For years the apostle Paul thought that his family tree, his zeal as a religious teacher would help him gain the favor of the God of the universe. But it led to uncertainty, and never knowing if he had done enough to appease his God. But then oneday, he was knocked down on a Damascus highway, and it was revealed to him that he was headed in the wrong direction. That his present thinking, would not lead to happiness and fulfillment, but rather to damnation in hell. He was told, that the Jesus who he persecuted in his teaching, was his only hope to a restored relationship with His God. This Jesus had died for his sins, and lived the life he could never live for God. This

Jesus had provided him a clean slate in the sight of God, for every wrong he had ever or ever would commit. The blood of Jesus had cleansed him from all sin. What joy came to his heart when this realization sunk in. His salvation was a gift, that God gave him in Jesus Christ.

And so it is for us. Why am I happy no matter what the circumstance? I am happy because every mess up, I or you have ever done has been wiped clean. I am. You are forgiven. Yes, for all those ugly sins we continue to commit. God is not our enemy. He is our friend. We have a peace within our hearts that no one can steal from us. It is like Roman sentries are guarding our hearts so that the cares of this world don't wear us down. Peace reigns within. Our text says, "And the peace of God which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus". Picture the Gulf of Mexico as the sun is setting. Such peace, such tranquility. So it is with our relationship with God because of Jesus. Furthermore, Jesus is not some uninterested observer in my life. He walked this earth. He knows what I am dealing with. He knows what trials and trouble are like. He had his share. And he wants to help me deal with them. In his word he says, "I will be with you always even to the end of the world."

We hear in our text, "The Lord is near!" Do you believe that God is near you? That he is with you? If you do, you have peace.

There are two reasons why we don't believe that God is near us or with us. First of all, we think we are too small, too insignificant for a holy and powerful God to want to be with us. We are just little specs on the face of the earth. Really, it's the theory of evolution which has permeated our culture - you're just an advanced animal - there's nothing special about you. That's what our culture believes, and it sneaks into our way of thinking - We are too small for God to care about us! We are worthless, we are nothing. You're just another person standing in line at the store - nobody cares about you, unless you buy something. Do you believe that?

The second reason why we don't believe that God is near us or with us is because we think we are too sinful. Look at my life - why would God want to be with a sinner like me? He is pure and holy, and I am selfish and materialistic. I'm too selfish, too ugly for a holy and pure and beautiful God to want to be with me. Do you believe this, that God doesn't want to be with you because you are too sinful? We live in a world where so many people believe that they are too small and too sinful for God to be with them. Why is there so much violence in our world today? So much depression and hopelessness? Why doesn't anyone have peace? Because no one believes that God is with them. Do you?

The story of Christmas teaches you that God does want to be with you. You are not too small for God to care about you. What did the prophet say? "The virgin will be with child and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means - God with us." God wants to be with you so much, that he actually becomes one of you - God became a human being, a flesh and blood infant - he became small, to show you that you are not too small for God to care about you. The God of peace is with you there is in the manger - the baby Jesus Christ.

But let's face it, we are not always happy campers. We have our days, when the grump syndrome overwhelms us. Days when someone doesn't want to be around us. So Paul gives us some ideas on how we can keep the grump syndrome to a minimum. Here goes. Set aside time each day to pray. Our text says, "Do not be anxious about anything,

but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” Wow! Do you mean I don’t have to be anxious? I don’t have to worry? I can be carefree and turn my fears and worries over to the Lord in prayer? That’s what we are being told here in no uncertain terms.

According to statistics, an average person’s anxiety is focused 40% on things that will never happen, 30% on things about the past that can’t be changed, 12% on things about criticism by others, mostly untrue, 10% about health, which gets worse with stress, 8% about real problems that will be faced. Whether these stats are true or not, there are very real anxieties and concerns that we face each day, and they seem to loom up larger than reality during this time of the year. Jesus said in Matthew 6, “Therefore do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink, or about your body, what you will wear.” Jesus also told us to turn our worries into prayers when he said, “Ask and it shall be given to you, seek and you shall find, knock and the door will be opened to you.” Take all your concerns to him in prayer and you’ll find that in the Lord troubles fade to trifles.

A man was walking down a country road carrying a huge bundle. Having compassion, a farmer stopped and helped him into the back of his pickup. While driving on, glancing into the side mirror, he noticed that the poor man was still holding that huge bundle on his back. He shouted: “My friend, why don’t you put the bundle down? At times we are just that stupid. What’s your burden? Is it sin, guilt, sorrow, sorry? Christ says: Cast all your cares on me, for I care for you. Put your bundle down. Let Christ help you carry it. The hymnwriter had it right. Oh what peace we often forfeit, oh what needless pain we bear, all because we do not carry, everything to God in prayer. Bring your requests to God daily. Don’t let the cares of this world strip you of your joy!

Another way we can keep those joy flames alive is to express appreciation to the Christian friends God has placed in our lives. Let them know how much they mean to you. Write them a card or a note. Paul had received a gift from the congregation in Philippi by a messenger named Epaphroditus. The Philippians were trying to encourage him in his work in Rome. What a pick me up! So, write a card or a note today. Speak verbally of your appreciation to a Christian friend.

So what’s keeping the joyful spirit from you? Is it family strife, sickness, unemployment, worry? Don’t focus on those things. Focus on Christ. His power rests on you. Whatever the challenge, you are going to get through it with his strength. Keep your chin up! Say with Paul, “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength!”