

Christmas is a lot about exchange, isn't it? It's where we give gifts and receive gifts. And, of course, that's because of the great gift that the Father gave in the Son.

But as we come to Christmas, we often exchange gifts, and sometimes we'll take a gift that we've been given and go and exchange it for something else that fits, or maybe even for money.

Christmas is also about peace, peace on earth, or the lament that there is not such peace on earth that we would dream of. And that's certainly a reminder that we've experienced this week with what happened at Bondi. So exchange and peace.

I was thinking about this a few weeks ago, and I thought, well, there's a passage that speaks to this, exchange and peace.

And it's Philippians 4 verses 4 to 7, where we are told that God invites us to exchange our thanksgiving, our rejoicing, our requests, and our anxieties, exchange them with him for his peace, his presence, and his protection.

Let me read again this wonderful verse from Philippians 4, rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again, rejoice. Let your gentleness be evident to all.

The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything but in every situation by prayer and petition with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.

And the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. We give God our rejoicing, our requests, our anxieties. God gives us in return his peace, his presence and his protection.

Paul is in prison in Rome when he says these words, rejoice in the Lord always. I say it again, rejoice.

We give God our rejoicing. I was reading in a book this week something I thought was quite fascinating. I can only take it on face value that it's true.

But there are studies that have been done recently in identical twins that seem to show that we have a genetic predisposition to have capacity for joy or less joy.

And I thought, well, that would be really interesting because sometimes you see a little child and it's obvious that they're just so full of joy. They have a propensity to happiness, it would seem, and other children less so.

And so this study seems to be pointing us to the fact that it's not just what we learn after we're born, but even how God has designed us. We have, some people have a higher capacity for joy, it would seem, just from their genetic disposition.

Now, having said that, it doesn't change, whether you have it or you don't, the fact that rejoicing is always still a decision. Amen? To rejoice is a decision.

Paul commands people to rejoice in the Lord. He's not presuming that life will be easy, pain free, or victorious all the time. He's certainly not suggesting that we will be in a state of constant happiness.

He's simply saying, when we rejoice in the Lord, despite our circumstances, we enter into an exchange that is good for us. Paul doesn't say, rejoice in your circumstances. He says, rejoice in the Lord.

Amen? Can you see the difference? He doesn't say that we should rejoice in every circumstance, because sometimes that can be pretty tough.

But he does say, in the Lord, there is always reason to rejoice. Every day, we are well served by the seemingly cheesy line, an attitude of gratitude. It's the truth.

When we come to God daily and say, thank you, Lord God, for sending your son to save me and to shape me into the person you want me to be, it is good for us. So, we give God our rejoicing. And Paul says, also, we give him our requests.

In every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. Paul invites specificity. Not vague prayers, but concrete needs.

It's the idea of petition. Earnest, heartfelt, crying out. Who has experienced petition in prayer?

A lot of us. It's an odd feeling, isn't it? You come back to God, and you feel like having a little caveat, where you say, Hi, Lord, it's me again.

Sorry to sound like I'm repeating myself, but you did invite me to keep knocking, and I am petitioning you with this need, this request.

Isn't it wonderful to remember every day that Jesus regularly, when he walked on earth, said this line, What do you want me to do for you? He said that to many people, as he journeyed around Israel, what do you want me to do for you?

Is Jesus asking the same thing of us? I think he is. He's saying, Can I help you?

Let me know. Bring your requests to me. Sometimes our requests seem so big that they overwhelm us with anxiety.

Have you discovered that prayer resizes problems? Have you found that? Prayer resizes problems.

When we bring our requests to God, that feel completely overwhelming. That just feels so huge. You give them to the God who is all-powerful, the God who is so vastly above and beyond our problems.

It resizes them. It resizes our challenges. Paul says, exchange your rejoicing and your requests, and God's peace, presence, and protection are coming.

We give God, thirdly, our anxieties. The text says, do not be anxious about anything, verse six. Anxious is the Greek word that means literally to be divided, to be pulled apart, to be fragmented inside.

Anxiety tears us in multiple directions with questions like, what if? What if this happens? What if that happens?

Paul says, when anxiety pulls you apart, bring the pieces to God. Bring your anxieties to God.

Of course, any discussion about anxiety that involves a statement like that, just do this, just do that, don't be anxious, certainly sounds naive, doesn't it? It really does. It sounds overly simplistic.

And you might say, don't people have medical conditions that, I mean, it's just not so easy to just bring your anxiety. And of course, we should say, yes, they do.

But I would put it to you that no matter what type of anxiety you're dealing with, if it's always ultimately fixed, healed, by releasing it, rather than managing it, masking it, or muscling your way through it, anxiety breaks when surrender begins.

I think that's a proverbial truth. Like the Proverbs, it's nearly always true. Anxiety breaks when surrender begins.

Have you discovered that the most powerful thing you can do is not use your willpower? It's to surrender. Amen?

We always have the power to surrender. We always don't have the power of our will.

But we can surrender to God and literally come to Him and just say, Lord, I've been trying to solve this issue in my own strength, and I've been trying to control tomorrow. I've been stressed and anxious about control that I simply don't have.

Help me to hand it all over to you to trust that you are good and you are God.

So Christmas is a lot about exchanges, and Paul teaches here that genuinely this passage says, there's an exchange available. Come to God with your rejoicing, your requests, and your anxiety, and he promises his peace.

The text says, and the peace of God will guard your hearts and your minds. This is clearly not peace from circumstances. They're always going to be there.

There's always going to be challenges, but it's peace in circumstances. Not peace manufactured through positive thinking, but the peace of God himself. It's been said that the only virtue the devil can't fake is peace.

What do you reckon? Think about the things the counterfeit devil deceives us with. He fakes love with lust.

He fakes and does a counterfeit for humility with self-loathing. He fakes generosity with self-aggrandizement, but the devil doesn't have a deception for peace. Peace just is.

Isaiah the prophet in Isaiah 9 verse 6 gave us this wonderful verse, and he will be called wonderful counselor, which actually means counselor of wonders. He will be a counselor of wonders, mighty God, everlasting father, prince of peace.

Of the greatness of his government and peace, there will be no end. The promise was that the Messiah will come and he will have shoulders big enough to carry the weight of governing the universe.

When stuff happens like we've seen at Bondi, and you're holding that intention with in Gaza 30 children being killed a day for two years. It's terrible. The world is in such a terrible place, isn't it?

How do you hold it together? What's just? What's the right thing to do?

Well, we will always struggle, but there is one Messiah who is just and righteous and can carry the needs of the universe on his shoulders. The government will be on his shoulders. And he is called Prince of Peace.

The Hebrew is Sa Shalom. Sa means ruler, captain, commander, governor, the one with authority. Shalom is this wonderful Hebrew idea of peace, but it's also wholeness and harmony, flourishing, completeness, justice and right relationship.

Jesus is the captain of creation who brings about eternal wholeness. Peace always means both vertical, so between us and God, horizontal in community and internal with ourselves. And it's not something easily won.

It involves a battle. Jesus wins peace through victory over evil. He breaks the rod of the oppressor, shatters the yoke of slavery, destroys the darkness and disarms the power of evil.

He's the prince of peace, the sar shalom. You think about when Jesus walked on earth, what he did as the prince of peace, the captain of shalom. He spoke peace into the storm, didn't he?

Mark 4. He announces peace to fearful disciples. He says, peace be with you, because I'm the sar shalom.

I'm the captain of peace. He heals bodies, restoring shalom physically. Think about what he did, the prince of peace.

Casts out demons, restoring shalom spiritually. Forgives sins, restoring shalom relationally. Welcomes outcasts, restores shalom socially.

Paul says, when we exchange our rejoicing, requests and anxiety, God gives us a peace that transcends understanding. And it's because his peace comes with his presence. Before Paul talks about anxiety, he says, the Lord is near.

Peace is not the removal of pressure. It's the proximity of Christ. Amen?

Anxiety says you're alone. And Jesus says, I am near. I am near.

It's always the antidote to the problem of fear. We're told, fear not, why, for I am with you, says the Lord. The presence of God.

When we're dealing with anxiety, it's very important to be living in the power of the Spirit, in the fullness of the gospel of grace.

Because if you're struggling with sin without the power of the gospel, you don't feel confident in the presence of a holy God, do you? So if peace involves presence, it's a problem if you're stuck in the sin. Would you agree?

Some of us are struggling with a lack of peace in our heart because we're struggling with sin. And it's hard to embrace the presence of a holy God if we're not coming into his presence wholly and completely through the grace of Jesus. Amen?

What would we be doing typically if we're stuck in sin and we're not living in the grace and power of the gospel? We'll be doing something starting with H and rhyming with I'd-ing. We will be hiding, won't we?

We will be doing exactly what they did in the garden. The presence of God is there with them, but they're running away. So we need to confess our sins to God and acknowledge, yeah, we're not perfect.

We need a savior. We bring our anxieties and our sin before God and trust in the blood of Christ and God's goodness. We give our rejoicing, our requests, our anxiety, and God promises peace and presence and protection.

He says, the peace will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Guard is exactly like you'd imagine a Greek military term. It is to garrison, to station soldiers around something valuable.

So God is saying, I'm going to station soldiers around you. My peace will protect you, your heart, your mind, your identity. Have you experienced that?

Have you experienced what Paul is talking about? Where you bring your rejoicing to God and your thanksgiving, and you bring your requests, and you bring your anxieties, and it reshapes how big they feel when you bring them before God.

Have you experienced the wonder of a peace that transcends understanding? I'm looking around, can you give me some hands? How good is God?

Peace through presence that protects our heart and our mind.

When I was writing this, I was thinking of Daniel and Ruth, Spirit of Santo, and they're good friends of ours in our church, and they're part of our home group, and we've been journeying with them the last 18 months through the most horrifically terrifying journey in the Valley of the Shadow of Death. And you heard them give a testimony early on, and he'll talk about that in a minute. But it looked like he could have had a full healing, but that's not the way it's gone so far.

And they are a couple that are living in the midst of terrifying potential circumstances. But those of us who are blessed by spending time with them, see this peace in them, that blows us away.

So I said to Daniel, mate, is there any chance you could give a testimony for us about what it's like to walk through this space you're in? And he said, yes. So praise the Lord for this testimony.

Please give your attention to the screen.

DANIEL'S STORY



Hello, Church. Earlier this year, I shared a testimony of a cancer journey that I was on. About 15 months ago, I was diagnosed with stage four cancer.

The doctors had not been able to find the source of the cancer, but it was widespread, present in my bones and lymph nodes, and hence inoperable. And so, late last year, I underwent chemotherapy for four months.

In February of this year, after 14 weeks of chemotherapy, I shared at Church that I was thankful to God for the effective management of the cancer, as it was no longer visible in the scans.

I was not sure at the time whether I had been fully healed, but for about four months, the scans and other tests showed that there was no suspicious activity and it was looking like we were coming out of a dark valley.

In May of this year, a scan picked up that the cancer had returned, pretty much in all the areas where it had previously been. In the space of two months, the cancer was as widespread as it had been before chemotherapy had begun.

And so we found ourselves back to square one, again in the valley, disappointed that complete healing had not yet come and that chemotherapy was to recommence.

The cancer is a fast-growing one, but equally so far, it has been quick to diminish with treatment. After about two months of the second round of chemotherapy, scans were looking good again.

But the side effects of the chemo was becoming of concern to the doctors, and hence they decided to stop chemotherapy in July.

At that point, my doctor said he was abandoning, attempting to eradicate the cancer, as it did not seem possible for him to do so. The value we were in seemed to be getting deeper and darker.

We did not know what was to happen next, but we knew that the cancer was again growing rapidly while we waited for the next course of treatment to begin.

The doctor was now hopeful that a new experimental treatment option would soon be open up and could offer some benefits.

However, things were very uncertain again, as we were riding this roller coaster of battling cancer with its many downs and a handful of ups.

However, in October of this year, an opportunity to take part in an experimental treatment did open up, and I was accepted into it.

This new treatment involves taking a relatively new medication that has shown some benefits in managing similar cancers in other people.

So far, it has been two and a half months, and I'm pleased to say and very thankful that it has been working well.

But the doctors aren't sure what to expect in the medium to long term, and they think it is likely that it will only work for a limited period of time. I'm thankful that I'm currently symptom free, and the side effects so far have been manageable.

In all the uncertainty that comes with this condition and the limitations of the available treatments, Ruth and I could quite easily find ourselves becoming overwhelmed in worry about tomorrow.

Philippians 4 verse 6 instructs us, do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your request to God.

As I'd share to the church in February, this season has been one that Ruth and I have been pressing into God more earnestly. We have been learning what it is to let God be the God of tomorrow and for us to focus on today.

Tomorrow has more than enough worries of its own and we are best placed to leave tomorrow in God's capable hands.

This verse of not being anxious about anything, but in prayer and petition, presenting our request to God, is ultimately one of trusting God by handing anything that would make us anxious over to Him, surrendering it to Him and trusting Him to do His

thing, whatever that is, knowing that He is good, He is able, and He has a complete perspective of things. Sure, we continue to pray for complete healing, but it's clear that this has not yet occurred.

Nevertheless, we trust God in what He's doing in us, even in our brokenness.

So far, by God's grace, I've been able to function as a teacher throughout the year, and not by just getting by, I would say that this year, I've had the best year of teaching so far in my career.

God willing, I can continue to teach into next year and beyond. While we have breath, Ruth and I continue to seek God's face to do whatever we are called to each day and leave tomorrow to Him.

This includes trusting Him to lead us in battle and to fight for us. You see, the medical trial I'm currently on was never guaranteed to work. It's experimental.

But God enabled it to be open at the right time once conventional chemotherapy was abandoned.

I met all the qualifying conditions to be accepted for the trial, and so far the trial is being very effective in keeping the cancer at bay in all parts of my body, keeping me virtually symptom free and with milder side effects compared to chemotherapy.

Uncertainty of the length of the battle and what may happen next remains, but we clearly see God leading the battle in providing for us through the medical interventions.

There is a lot to be uncertain about, but there is also a lot we can be certain about.

And so Ruth and I constantly work to choose to latch on to the certainties that we know about God that He's given us in His word, and not on the uncertainties that are around us.

There are many promises that God makes in scriptures that speak loudly to us, and these have brought peace throughout the journey. And God has been faithful as we have seen Him continue to be present throughout the valleys, leading us on.

God has responded to our prayers at times not quite as we would have wanted, but His presence is evident and He continues to work in us in ways that help us see His power at work, transforming us and helping us to be fruitful.

God is bigger than all our circumstances. As we surrender to the knowledge that we are in His capable hands and that He is doing His good work in us, we have found great comfort and fortitude to continue in His strength.

He is a God who can do immeasurably more than we ask or imagine. Verse 7 of the passage says that the peace of God which transcends all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

This has come as a benefit of us trusting in God. Without trust, there is no peace in the valley.

When Ruth and I have handed over tomorrow to God and trusted Him with it, we have found that fear subsides and there is an overwhelming peace even in the uncertainty. This is not something we have just done once.

We have had to posture ourselves in this repeatedly.

We have received a peace that cannot be met if we were to trust instead in our own abilities or those of the doctors and their limited knowledge and limited options and the terrifying prognosis that this brings. There is a lot to be certain about.

We are on this earth, but for a brief period of time, we don't know what's just around the corner. We can choose to seek God for our future, and we hand things over to Him.

We choose to live each day in the knowledge that He holds us securely in His capable and loving hands. We have felt His presence in all our circumstances, and He has blessed us with seeing Him at work.

So this is where we sit and fight with the Lord in battle. And we find light and peace that surpasses all understanding even in these circumstances. God says that our future into eternity is secure in Him because of what Jesus has done.

We cannot be snatched out of His hand. Our prognosis, as declared by God, is certain, and it is marvellous.