

# Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost – Epistle

**REJOICE!**

**Philippians 4:1-9**

**Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 23)**

**Analysis by Ron Starenko**

1Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved. 2I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. 3Yes, and I ask you also, my loyal companion, help these women, for they have struggled beside me in the work of the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my co-workers, whose names are in the book of life. 4Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. 5Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. 6Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. 7And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. 8Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. 9Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

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## DIAGNOSIS: The Joyless Life

### **Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem)** – *How Empty*

Sisters and Brothers, grace to all of you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ. As I write this letter to you, my loyal co-workers in the gospel, I am imprisoned (1:13, 17), stripped of everything that gives quality and meaning to life, I dare to urge you to, Rejoice! Do not be surprised at my audacity. I do not minimize the reality of our painful persecutions. I know full well that joy under any circumstances is missing unless God gives it. Unmistakably, we live in a world empty of joy. We know about the pain and misery that curses people everywhere. We also know about the empty striving to find joy, imagining that we had it in the joy of eating and drinking, the joy of sex, the joy of plenty. What we called joy is only the pursuit of happiness, something that can disappear as quickly as it came. From the day I was born I believed I could find joy in living right, striving for perfection (3:4-6). I even believed that happiness was my inalienable right, that I was a special breed (2 Cor. 11:22), entitled to enjoy the good life (Acts 22:1-5). In the end I discovered that it was all vanity, “a chasing after the wind” (Eccl. 2:26).

### **Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem)** – *Always Worry-Filled*

What tipped me off, as I look back, was that all the while I was striving to find joy I continued to be anxious about many things (4:6), which is always the case when we pursue anything. I worried about how I looked to God, how I appeared to others (Gal. 1:10). I took pride in outperforming others, outclassing them, outlasting them (Gal. 1:14). Still, I had no confidence, not just in myself, but in God whom I didn't trust above everything else. Nothing seemed to hold promise for me. I had my righteousness, my accomplishments, my good intentions (Rom. 9:31–10:3), and nevertheless I remained worried and anxious, all

because I could not find joy in God. And, if I did not have a God to love and trust and rejoice in, what else could I have but joyless worry, an unsettling anxiety?

**Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem)** – *In the End, Hopeless*  
I now had a problem of eternal dimensions. I had reached a dead end. The source of my joylessness was not just in my inability to achieve joy but in God who frustrated my every attempt to live my life on my own terms. Time and again I was blind-sided by forces and fates, which was the God of wrath keeping me from finding joy in anything less than God (Eph. 2:3), messing up my plans, my dreams, my illusions, consigning me to a state of hopelessness. I came to realize that joy was a human impossibility and I was condemned to eternal joylessness. I could only cry out, “Wretched man that I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?” (Rom. 7:24).

## **PROGNOSIS: A Life of Joy**

**Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution)** – *Originates in Good News*

Little did I know that all the while, divine wrath notwithstanding, God in love willed to give me joy. Joy came to me on the road to perdition (Acts 9:1-9; Gal. 1:16-17), as I was a killjoy. Joy came to me in the One I avoided and persecuted (Gal. 1:14) and hated, my Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 5:6-11), the Joy of our desiring. His birth was good news of a great joy, that Joy would take on the form of our joylessness (Luke 2:10). He counted it a joy to suffer death on the cross in my stead (Heb. 12:2), how he would suffer away the joylessness of the damned. And when he had been raised from death, the reality of that victory filled his followers with joy (John 20:20), as he came to invite them into the joy of God’s presence. And, did not the Lord tell us that God rejoices when God finds the lost that come home to the joy of God’s forgiveness (Luke 15)? And so, as

I suffer now, not knowing whether my course in this world comes to an end here or whether I might possibly still see all of you again, I have joy which nothing can void—not my past, not my losses, not my suffering—nothing can deprive me of undeserved, unsurpassable joy, which is yours and mine forever through our Lord Jesus Christ (Rom. 8:35-39).

### **Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution)** – *That Carries Us Through*

He is our reason to rejoice. He opens us to God's future. Such joy overcomes, transcends our day-to-day anxiety, including our fears and even our death. The Lord is at hand, poised to save us, about to make good on everything he promised at his return. Human happiness lasts for a day. The gift of joy is eternal (Gal 5:22). And we have been given the joy of anticipation, which is the essence of our faith, knowing that God will bring to completion what God has already begun in Jesus Christ (1:6). I dare to tell you that I am expecting a Savior who will transform the body of my humiliation that I may be conformed to his glorious body (3:20-21). I haven't reached that goal yet, the resurrection still ahead (3:12-13), but the joy I have already will carry me to that end. I assure you that joy is a reality already, no longer something to be bought or earned or contrived, and by it we are given the power to get through all of the disasters that threaten our well being. That is our common hope, yours and mine.

### **Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution)** – *And Transforms Our Daily Lives*

Into what is otherwise an empty existence, the gift of joy transforms our living of each day where we have the certainty that whether we live or whether we die we are the Lord's (Rom. 14:8). Such joyful confidence means that we get to commend ourselves and one another to God in prayer and know that God hears our requests. It means that in the twisted skein of our

lives we get to know the peace of God which surpasses all understanding (1:7). It means that we are able to endure our suffering, knowing that we are sharing in the cross of Christ and bearing witness to the gospel. It means that we receive the power to give of ourselves joyfully in the service of our neighbor, to encourage and comfort one another, to use our energy to build community by doing what is true and honorable and just (4:8; Rom. 12:9-17), preparing the world for the day when all of our sorrows will be turned into joy (John 16:16-24). Now you know why I do not hesitate to say again, Rejoice!