

Seeing God's Presence and Power at Dothan

Rev. John Procee

Scripture reading: 2 Kings 6:8–23

Many of the miracles of the prophet Elisha were local and focused on individuals. In the miracle before us, we turn to consider one of his miracles that is much broader in scope. This was not a miracle focused on one individual, or a group of people. It was not even national in its scope, but international. It proved to be an embarrassment for the army of Syria, and most of all, it proved for them and for us the truth that God is always present and that God has all power at His disposal. May we, like the young man in this passage, likewise come to see that.

With the help of the Lord, we will consider:

Seeing God's Presence and Power at Dothan

1. Foolish Blindness
2. Confident Vision
3. Gospel Mercies

Foolish Blindness

Verse 8 tells us that Syria is back at war. The king of Syria, Benhadad II, warred against Israel and took counsel with his servants. Notice, Naaman's not mentioned. Benhadad doesn't take counsel with his favorite general. Could this be because this general wants nothing to do with this campaign? We do not know for sure, but in light of Naaman's recent healing, this campaign is a clear display of Benhadad's foolish blindness. Benhadad had seen the condition of Naaman's skin upon returning from Elisha. Didn't he see that this was a divine miracle, done by Israel's God? We would expect

Israel to have life-long immunity from Syrian attack, and that Syria would even defend them! Why this?

The only reasonable answer takes us straight to the door of the natural man's foolish blindness. Benhadad did not see the presence of God in that miracle. He was blind to God. But before you denounce Benhadad, think about yourself. Have you never failed to acknowledge God's gracious dealings with you? What then possesses you to go back into sin and rebellion and forgetting God, after He has so often delivered you? None of us can answer that question fairly, without laying our finger on our own foolish blindness. We, too, are blind to the presence of God. That is true of the unbeliever, as Benhadad here. That is true of the believer, who, after grace, commits sin in foolish blindness to the presence of God. Whenever we sin, it is the god of this world blinding our eyes to God's presence. How patient God is!

Like Benhadad, we can return God's goodness with unthankfulness, because we don't see Him. Our eye is on other things. Like what? What motivates you? Well, what motivated Benhadad? Pride and power. Self. Instead of seeing God, all he can see is himself. That's the root cause of all sin: Self. "Ye shall be as gods," Satan promised. It was all about Adam and Eve. Not God, but you shall be as gods. For you and me too, it's about "me." *My feelings, my pleasure, my status, my wealth, my reputation.* Sin boils down to "me over God."

How foolish! We owe God everything. We owe God our allegiance and submission, but we willfully push that truth away in order to satisfy and serve our own sinful desires. Self-driven, self-focused, even after God has delivered us we can be blind to God's presence.

But Benhadad was likewise blind to God's power. He makes war plans, well laid out, well executed. His soldiers were well trained; his tactics well thought out. His intelligence about Israel's vulnerabilities were nearly perfect. But as he moves out to ambush Israel, with his goal to capture their king, they're not where he expects them to be. Israel deviates from its expected pattern of

movement. King Joram and his army don't show up. There is nobody to ambush, although all the intelligence said this is where the Israelite king would be.

He checks his intelligence, makes a new plan, and goes again. He lies wait in ambush with his soldiers, waiting for Israel's king to appear. They wait all day, but nobody comes. They were supposed to be here. And so it went, over and over. Every time, again, he fails.

Verse 9 tells us why: "And the man of God sent unto the king of Israel, saying, Beware that thou pass not such a place; for thither the Syrians are come down."

Elisha warned Joram: "Don't you go there, lest they capture you." Elisha's warnings repeatedly save Joram. The text indicates this occurred many times.

We see here the power of God to reveal the secret thoughts of men. God knows all our thoughts. He made us, He understands us. He is so great. But Benhadad didn't see that. He was blind to God's power.

But the same is true for you and me. When we sin, when we go on stubbornly, when we get frustrated when things don't go the way we want them to, when we get upset at our circumstances, we easily blame this person or that circumstance or event. But we forget to look up and see God's power thwarting us, redirecting us, or preventing us!

Notice here, how Elisha represents the Word of God. This was an official message from God to Joram through His mouthpiece. The Word of God warns Joram about these enemy ambushes. But it still does that today. The Word of God warns us about the spiritual ambushes of Satan. God is ahead of Satan. He has sown his Word full of words of warning for us, so that we can know where Satan will be lying in wait.

Consider these warnings from Proverbs:

"My son, if sinners entice thee, consent thou not" (Prov. 1:10).

"Enter not into the path of the wicked, and go not in the way of evil men" (Prov. 4:14).

“[He that] committeth adultery with a woman lakketh understanding: he that doeth it destroyeth his own soul” (Prov. 6:32).

“Wine is a mocker, strong drink is raging: and whosoever is deceived thereby is not wise” (Prov. 20:1).

Do you see God showing you the ambush in these warnings? It is as if He is saying to you, “Beware that you pass not such a place: for there the devil is come down.”

Are you listening? Are you even hearing God’s warnings? Are you reading them for yourself? They’re the best intelligence you can get in the spiritual warfare raging in your life. Through His Word, God gives you all the details about your enemy’s movements, and He is saying to you, “Beware that you pass not such a place!”

Benhadad was so blind, all he could think of was espionage. He says to his servants, “Which of us is leaking state military secrets to the king of Israel? Somehow, he knows, and it’s because one of you, my servants, is a spy.”

He doesn’t even consider the God who had just cured leprosy, or Elisha, His prophet. He is blind to God’s power.

Then, in verse 12, a servant speaks up—a servant who saw more than his master. “Elisha, the prophet that is in Israel, tells the king of Israel the words you speak in your bedroom, O king.”

Did the servant conclude from Naaman’s miraculous healing that this was Elisha’s doing? Had he heard some news from the Israelite court through the grapevine? We don’t know. But we know this: he doesn’t recognize God. Even this servant falls short. He only speaks about Elisha, the prophet, not God. And so, in a different way, this servant is blind too. Because he insinuates that if Elisha were gone, the king would have success.

What foolish blindness now follows! If Elisha heard the king in his bedchamber, surely he also heard him in his council chamber. But the king is so blind, he doesn’t realize that his next orders, orders to kidnap Elisha, are likewise heard by Elisha.

Benhadad is so stubborn. He thinks all power stops with him. He thinks that all he has to do is remove what stands in his way,

and he will prevail. But he doesn't see how weak and blind he is. He is so self-absorbed, so ignorant of God, so unyielding, so proud, so foolish. Let us learn from this. Let us see in this king our own blindness. Let us repent and acknowledge the Lord God of heaven.

Well, they trace Elisha to Dothan, about ten miles north of Samaria, and surround the city with horses and chariots by night. A great army lies waiting for day.

What will happen, boys and girls? Is the prophet of God going to be captured? Does Elisha have to be afraid?

No. He may have confidence, as we see in our second point.

Confident Vision

As the morning light creeps over the surrounding hills, a man rises early and looks out over the fields around the city. It is the servant of Elisha, and to his shock, they're surrounded by an army.

He panics. "Alas, my master! What shall we do?" We are stuck. We cannot escape. It is the cry of despair and hopelessness: "We'll become captives, chained and dragged off to Syria. What are we going to do?"

Trials can be overwhelming. You can get desperate. You feel surrounded on every side, closed in, with no way of escape. Despondency and discouragement can set in, and you feel like giving up.

What shall we do?

Or consider when your sins come back to bother you. You know, deep down, that sin must be dealt with. Do your sins ever bother you? Then you can feel spiritually surrounded by enemies. Then God's law condemns you. Then your failures and shortcomings are brought home to you, and you feel encircled on every side.

What shall I do?

Or maybe you identify with this servant in that you, too, look out over the walls of the church, into the fields of this world, and you see the armies of hell gathering around, closing in on the church. Exceeding wickedness threatening the church can

overwhelm you. You see the world marginalizing God's people, trampling God's laws, and blaspheming God's name. Do you fear the rising tide of anti-Christian ideologies in our world? The animosity, the hatred, the intolerance, the vitriol?

What shall we do?

Verse 16 is the key. Elisha sees more than all those things. He sees God. He sees God's presence and God's power at Dothan.

He sees, by faith, that the God who promised, the God who called, and the God who equipped, is unable to forsake him. That's saying even more than that God won't. It is saying that God can't. It's not merely that God *will* never leave you nor forsake you. If you are His child, He *cannot*. He won't because He can't. Because if He did, He would no longer be God. And therefore He can't. So strong is the bond between God and His people. So sure are the promises God gives His people. Oh, if we only saw that more, it would make all the difference in our lives, as it did for Elisha.

He says, "Fear not." What calming words! "Don't be afraid, for they that be with us are more than they that be with them." More! Greater! Stronger! More in number! *They* are man's army, but *we* have God's army, and if God be for us, who can be against us? Name the enemy; he is no match for God.

God's people are secure in God.

Here is faith. Faith that breeds confidence. Faith that gives spiritual sight to see the presence and power of God. Elisha sees confidently. He lives out Psalm 46, which says:

The heathen raged, the kingdoms were moved: he uttered his voice, the earth melted.

The LORD of hosts is with us; the God of Jacob is our refuge.

And Psalm 27:

The LORD is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear?

Though an host should encamp against me, my heart shall not fear: though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident.

That one word describes Elisha: confidence. Not in himself, but in his God.

Confident vision: He saw, clearly, by faith, that without the will of his heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from his head.

That's why he can say: Fear not! Don't be afraid. They are but men. We have God!

Martin Luther had the same confidence in God. He went to meet the pope, saying, "Although there should be as many devils there as there were tiles on the roofs, I know and am certain that our Lord Jesus Christ still lives and rules.... Therefore I will not fear ten thousand popes; for He who is with me is greater than he who is with the world."

Can you say that? Fear not? For they that be with us are more than they that be with them? Maybe you're thinking that if you saw what that servant saw, of course you wouldn't be afraid either. But you don't. How then can you be so confident?

Let me ask you a question to answer that: did Elisha see what the servant would soon see? The servant was going to see, by a vision, a physical presence. It would be very clear and very convincing for him. But did Elisha see all that? No, he saw by faith. He didn't need the vision to be confident of the reality, and that's the same today, for you. You don't need to see the things which are not seen to have peace and confidence in God. You need faith. Faith is the evidence of things *not* seen. Faith lays hold of what God has revealed in His Word as if it were as tangible as what that servant saw that day. Faith lays hold of God's word as truth; it lays hold of His promises as truth, and that gives a confident vision.

You might wonder, how can I get that confident vision? It comes from being near to God. It comes from a personal knowledge of God. When you spend time before the face of the Lord, man becomes small and God becomes great. Elisha had that closeness. We see that in the familiar way he prays to God: "LORD, I pray thee, open his eyes, that he may see." Like a man talks to his friend, Elisha spoke to God, because he had spent much time with God. That's so important for us all: to commune with God. He just asks God to show the servant ultimate reality, and God does: "And he saw: and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots

of fire round about Elisha.” Between them and the Syrians stood the armies of God.

Now he sees, too, the presence of God, that God is near, that God is a shield for them. “The angel of the LORD encampeth round about them that fear him, and deliverth them” (Ps. 34:7).

He sees the power of God. The whole mountain is *full* of horses and chariots of fire. Angels! Thousands of legions of angels, all ready to pounce on the Syrians, if God commands. “Touch not mine anointed, and do my prophets no harm” (Ps. 105:15).

They come down to him. The Syrians are face to face with Elisha, and again Elisha prays: “Smite this people, I pray thee, with blindness. And he smote them with blindness according to the word of Elisha.” They could see things, but they do not recognize Elisha nor where they were. And now, Elisha leads these Syrians on a trip they will never forget. They will go to the capital city of the people of Israel, there to experience the gospel mercies of the God of Israel.

Gospel Mercies

In verse 19, Elisha addresses them: “This is not the way, neither is this the city: follow me, and I will bring you to the man whom ye seek.” That was true. Their ultimate target *was* king Joram. The mission to capture Elisha was actually only a distraction from the main goal. So, he leads them away.

They get to Samaria, and he again prays: “LORD, open the eyes of these men, that they may see.”

Suddenly, the Syrians realize that this *is* Elisha, and that *this* is Samaria, and that their lives are in great danger!

How true that is. Listen to the king: “My father, shall I smite them? Shall I smite them?” He’s eager to kill these men. He’s ready to pounce on them and to strike a blow against these enemies.

But now in verse 22 Elisha says something very Christ-like. “Thou shalt not smite them: wouldest thou smite those whom thou hast taken captive with thy sword and with thy bow? Set

bread and water before them, that they may eat and drink, and go to their master.”

Then notice that he prepared great provision for them. Not just bread and water, but more. He splurged for these men.

Congregation, this is a beautiful demonstration, here in the Old Testament, of what the grace of the gospel looks like. God finds the sinner at enmity against Him. The Lord leads that sinner to see the alarming state of his soul, lost and undone before the God of heaven. “Woe is me,” those Syrian soldiers thought. So the soul says: “Woe is me, for I am undone. I cannot stand before this God and His justice and His law which says, ‘Shall I smite them?’” Have you ever been there? Has that realization ever dawned on you? Perhaps you may fear that the Lord will smite you in His justice. But does the Lord do so? No! Instead, something else happens. Grace happens: “Thou shalt not smite them.” The sword of the Lord’s justice does not come down on you. But it’s not returned to the scabbard either. It comes down on another. “Awake, O sword, against my shepherd” (Zech. 13:7). The shadow of the cross falls upon Samaria that day. God does the same for you and me. Instead of smiting, He sets a feast before you. “Set bread and water before him, before her. Set conditions of peace before them.” He feeds, nourishes, strengthens, amazes, and saves. He sets a feast of fat things before you in His gospel, a spiritual feast of life in a crucified Savior. He gives not only sparing mercies, to not destroy you, but He gives superabounding grace. The God of mercy splurges in giving you of His full fullness, grace for grace. Forgiveness, yes, but more than forgiveness—the hope of eternal life. That is the grace of God.

“And he sent them away, and they went to their master.” Among all the tales of war, none ever were so filled with God and His grace than the tales these soldiers told. But they were not idle tales. They were not embellishments. God had done great things for them. This God is unlike any other—even for Syrians!

And the fruit is: God makes wars to cease. For some time at least, the raiding parties entered Israel no more, verse 23 says.

That's the fruit of the gospel. Souls at enmity with God, hating Him, become reconciled and at peace. They become, as the Catechism says, righteous in Christ before God, and heirs of eternal life, by the amazing grace of the God of Israel.

Is the Lord Jesus Christ real and precious to you? Are you trusting in Him? Then you have His presence with you, His power on your side. If not, then you are yet an enemy. Then you have no abiding presence, and no defense. You are still vulnerable to the eternal smiting of His justice. You need to pray, "Lord, open my eyes, give me to see Thee, that I may know Thy presence, and Thy power, and experience Thy gospel mercies, for Jesus's sake." Amen.

Jesus Touches the Open Coffin

Dr. Joel R. Beeke

Scripture reading: Luke 7:1–18

Our text today is Luke 7:14a, “*And he came and touched the bier.*” With God’s help, we wish to consider the following theme and points:

Jesus Touches the Open Coffin

1. To Show His Compassion
2. To Declare His Willingness
3. To Proclaim His Gospel

To Show His Compassion

The first three gospels of the New Testament provide many details of the life of the Lord Jesus Christ, particularly of the last three years of His public ministry. The most outstanding fact in the life of Jesus was, no doubt, His suffering. Jesus suffered not only in the last few days of His life on earth but throughout His entire life on earth—all of which He voluntarily took upon Himself. This truth is emphasized in the words of our text where we read, in relation to the history of the young man of Nain, “*And he came and touched the bier.*”

Jesus has departed from Capernaum, with a number of His disciples. After some hours of walking, they arrive at the village of Nain, probably the present Nein, a small village of two hundred people situated about six miles southeast of Nazareth. There Jesus and His procession meet another procession—another group of people. Verse 12 says, “Behold”—pay special attention: A funeral

procession, lamenting loudly, is walking through the gates of the city to the cemetery outside of the city. A young man who has died is about to be buried. His body is being carried out of the city on a bier—a kind of bed or stretcher on which his wrapped body was lying. The bier consisted of two long poles with bands of material across it that served much like a stretcher today. The wrapped body was then borne up by the pallbearers' hands and shoulders. In front of the bier was the funeral orator, who was to proclaim the good deeds of the dead, followed by hired mourning women, who wailed for the deceased. Behind the bier walked the young man's mother, friends, and a sympathizing multitude. The entire procession was moved; many were weeping. The young man's mother was sobbing as the funeral procession moved inexorably to the burial ground; after burial, she would enter a period of profound mourning for thirty days.

The young man's mother has good reason to weep, doesn't she? After all, her husband has already been taken from her side; she is a widow. And now her son, her only son, is taken away as well. This woman has every reason to be weeping, every reason to be filled with sorrow. Death is a harbinger of sorrow; death violates ties of blood and friendship; death strikes down young as well as old. And so, this young man dies, to the great sorrow of his widowed mother.

Remember also that this boy died in his youth. Dying at an early age was considered in Israel to be a particular punishment, something to be expected by the wicked. The Bible says, "Bloody and deceitful men shall not live out half their days." Does this widow now have to conclude that her son was a wicked one, and because of his wickedness he had to lose his life prematurely? Sadness and grief fill this mother's wounded heart. Old memories surface; old scars are torn open. All of this makes her load heavier. Her situation is tragic. No doubt, new questions arise in her heart that seriously challenge her faith: Can I trust the Word of God? Has God forgotten His promises? Where is His covenant faithfulness? The Lord has promised that He is the husband and

the judge of the widow, and the Father of the fatherless. But now it appears that the Lord doesn't verify His Word. He plunges this woman from one misery into another misery. But if these words of the Lord are not true, then what words of the Lord can you put your trust in? What is reliable? This problem of seemingly unfulfilled promises and unreliable words merges with her heavy grief. Behind the bier walks a suffering mother, a suffering widow with great struggles in her soul and mind. Today, as she buries her only son, it seems that she has nothing left. She is bereft of her husband, her son, and, seemingly, her God.

There seems to be no consolation for this woman. There is no hope; her life is immersed in the culture of death; there is death on every side. What future does she have?

Sorrow is washing over this woman like waves. Her final source of protection—her son—is gone. Her hope of perpetuating the family line is gone; the Messiah will never come from her family line. Every hope for the future has perished. She is mourning, she is weeping for her only begotten son. And it was said in Israel that there was no sorrow like the sorrow of burying an only begotten son, the firstborn son.

This is also a blow for the people of Nain. What they are doing is actually tragic. They are going to the cemetery to make space for the body of one of their fellow citizens. Death came into their city and broke the life of one of their own. Death causes sorrow; it violates ties of blood and friendship. It is sad when death comes and destroys life—especially in a case like this, for this young man is struck down by death in the prime of life. The death of a young person usually stirs more emotions of sorrow than the death of someone who has already become old. The death of a young man is normally more heartbreaking than the death of someone who, after a well-spent life, having many infirmities of old age, becomes feebler and because of physical weakness, finally dies. Of course, that is serious enough, for death is the wages of sin. But it makes a difference how old the person who dies is.

There is something very sad about the funeral of a young person, isn't there? And there are so many of them. Just walk through any cemetery and you will see it on the tombstone dates of birth and death. And yet it is so unnatural to bury one's children. I once asked a funeral director, while riding in the car with him to the cemetery: "When you have charge of so many funerals every month, can you still feel the sorrow of death?" And I will never forget his answer: "When the person is young, you can and you do feel great sorrow." In other words, he was saying that he got used to old people dying, but young people dying is something very moving.

Well, in God's meticulous providence, our text says, "Behold" — that is, pay special attention, Jesus arrives! Jesus and His disciples arrive at Nain at just the right moment, the moment in which they may witness this very sad and tragic event. Now of course that is not a coincidence; it is God's doing, and it is marvelous in our eyes. There are no coincidental happenings with God. God's timing is always perfect. God knows how to bring the Savior and the spiritually dead together. All throughout the Bible, and especially in the book of Luke, such cases abound. Twelve chapters after our text, Luke 19:1–2 says, "And Jesus entered and passed through Jericho. And, behold, there was a man named Zacchaeus." Zacchaeus ran ahead, climbed into a tree, and, when Jesus came to "the place," the right moment at the right place, He looked up and saw Zacchaeus, called him down, saved his soul, and blessed him in his house that night.

Something similar happens here, for here, too, we read this special word, "Behold!" Pay attention; Jesus comes! Jesus comes to Nain, and as verse 13 says, "the Lord [sees] her." There are many people with her there. Many neighbors are there, but the Lord sees *her*. Notice that the Holy Spirit does not say "Jesus" but "the Lord." He uses *Lord* here because the Savior is going to reveal Himself as the Lord and Master over all, even over death.

We are told that there are many people in this funeral procession—all feeling grieved, all mourning and weeping—but

the Lord sees this woman in particular. He feels the heavy burden of her grief. Right at that moment when Jesus sees this funeral procession, Jesus suffers. The Lord experiences deeply and painfully in His soul that death is powerful, so powerful that it can even cut off a young life. Jesus experiences a grief in His own heart, just as He would later experience when He would stand at the grave of His friend, Lazarus. Then, when Jesus perceives the decomposing powers of death, He weeps at the grave. What an affliction this was to Jesus that death causes so much destruction, that death ruins that which God has created good and beautiful. Jesus suffers because death breaks the happiness which God has given to man. Jesus is not an unmoved spectator at this funeral. He cannot remain without emotion at the sight of so much destruction and of so many ruinous powers that flow out of sin. His tender soul reacts to everything happening around Him. He feels pain; He experiences grief. Inwardly, He is seized by the solemnity of death.

But at the same moment, Jesus's pure soul, which sees and feels everything, sees and feels something else behind this death, namely, the wrath of God. He sees and feels the curse of God which came upon the human race because of sin. Death is not a natural thing that belongs to our earthly existence, but it is the wages of sin. Death has come as a punishment of God because of man's transgressions against the commandments of God. Death is a judgment of God because man has been disobedient. Jesus experiences these things also when He sees this funeral in Nain. The judgment of the Lord, the wrath and vengeance of God, still hasn't been alleviated. And so, the death of this young man of Nain preaches to Jesus that He who came to earth to perform the work of salvation has to continue His way of suffering, and He Himself, being on that way, will meet death personally. For Jesus's life also will come to an end. What He sees here at the gate of Nain, when these people are going to bury their dead, is to Jesus a powerful sermon of that which He Himself must expect. He will also be buried. For only then, when He, the pure and holy One, bows Himself under the power of death, can the wrath of God

be alleviated. Only then, when He Himself dies and is laid in the grave, can the violence of death and grave be defeated. He has to take away the cause of all misery and death, which is sin.

In this Messianic awareness, and with such thoughts and feelings, the Savior suffers. But He also accepts this suffering voluntarily. He says to the widow, “Weep not,” brings the funeral procession to a standstill, and then goes to the open coffin being carried, and touches it. The Bible says, movingly, “and he came and touched the bier” (v. 14).

Why does Jesus bring the people to a standstill? And why does He act in this particular way of touching the coffin?

Luke says in verse 13 that Jesus “had compassion on her.” The word “compassion” here carries profound meaning. The Greek word is related to the word “bowels,” referring to the Greek understanding of the Hebrew sense of “the seat of the affections.” The Greek literally means to say: “Jesus was inwardly moved with compassion.” In His inward core being, something begins to move. His heart is moved with tender pity; His heart goes out to her.

“Weep not!” He says to her. Literally, “Stop weeping!” or “Stop sobbing!” Those first words spoken by Jesus must have sounded strange to the crowd of mourners. If any occasion called for weeping, this was surely it. Weren’t mourners hired for this very purpose, to increase the weeping? Why did this stranger, whose very demeanor, body language, and tone of voice were full of tender pity, say, “Stop crying!”? This is a sensible command, of course, only if the One who spoke these words would remove the cause of the widow’s tears, which, of course, is what Jesus is about to do. So, His command and His compassion harmonize well with each other, though the people do not yet understand.

Yes, the Lord Himself feels inwardly moved to show compassion to this sorrowful woman. When He sees her grief, He inwardly yearns to give relief and comfort. This is the kind of Savior Jesus is. Do you know Him as such? Do you see Him in our text as a priest characterized as One who feels pity for the grief and misery of others? Do you rejoice in this great High Priest who

shows mercy? Does He dry up your tears with His compassion? When He helps, He does so as only He can, not just by speaking words of comfort and by demonstrating sympathy through a warm greeting; rather, He helps by taking the needs of this widow and this funeral procession upon Himself; and so He does for believers still today. If we look closely, that is what is revealed in the words, “He touched the bier”—that is, the coffin.

We might ask the question: Was it absolutely necessary for Jesus to touch the coffin? No. The Lord could have stopped the procession by saying to the pallbearers, “Stand still.” Or He could have requested them kindly to stand to one side. He could have given an order, and they would have obeyed.

Must we conclude, then, that Jesus’s touching the coffin was superfluous? Of course not. The Lord never does superfluous things. He touches the coffin intentionally. He doesn’t approach the bearers and touch one of their shoulders, asking them to stand still. No, Jesus puts His hand upon the coffin where the dead young man lies. This reveals Jesus’s readiness to take the suffering upon Himself and to enter into the misery of the life of sinners.

To Declare His Willingness

Perhaps you ask: But how do you get all this out of Jesus simply touching the coffin? Well, we need to remember what the Old Testament says about dead people and about the things on which a dead person lies. God said clearly and repeatedly that both the body of a dead person, as well as the bed or coffin upon which he lies, is unclean. The Lord prescribed that whoever touches a dead body should be reckoned unclean for seven days. Numbers 19:14 goes even further, “This is the law, when a man dieth in a tent: all that come into the tent, and all that is in the tent, shall be unclean seven days.”

Remember, death is ultimately the result of sin (Rom. 6:23); in death, the Lord punishes sin. Precepts concerning death have been given because Israel may not go near sin. Touching a dead body, therefore, makes a person unclean and thus unsuitable for

the service of God. So these precepts are lessons; through them Israel knows that God hates sin and that they have to hate sin as well. These precepts are the reverse side of the statement “Be ye holy, for I the Lord thy God am holy” (cf. 1 Peter 1:15–16).

Referring back to our text, then, yes, Jesus could have stopped the procession in some other way, but He chose this particular way of touching the coffin. He took the initiative Himself to become regarded as an unclean One, for we must not forget that He is also under the law of God. As a member of Israel and as a child of the covenant, He has to obey the precepts of the covenant. So, by touching the coffin, He, too, according to law, has been defiled. Here the Lord Jesus meets death, which has come to the young man of Nain and will also come to Jesus Himself. And in meeting death, Jesus, by touching the coffin, testifies, “Lo I come; I delight to do Thy will, O my God. Yea, thy law is written in my heart; I come to take upon me voluntarily all suffering, and all unrighteousness, and all impurity, and all uncleanness.”

When God the Father brings Jesus face to face with death at Nain, Jesus doesn't shrink from His task, fearing those things that will soon come upon Him. Rather, He is completely willing to accept all the consequences of the suffering that awaits Him. Why? When God in heaven, by His divine providence, leads His Son to this meeting with death, Jesus sees not only the dead young man, but His eyes also rest upon the mother, the widow, with all her grief and misery. If Jesus had seen only the death, that could have been by itself a moment of terror, just as in the garden of Gethsemane, where He prays, “Oh my Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me.” But here the eyes of Jesus are directed to the woman at the same moment He meets the dead. And then Jesus is moved in the core of His inner being. Here then is the point: because of the misery of sinners and of the need in their broken life, Jesus is completely willing and prepared to take part in that misery and to take upon Himself the uncleanness and the heavy burden of sin.

“And he touched the bier.” That means that Jesus said to His Father, “Father, I understand what Thou hast told me today. I understand why Thou hast led me to this point, and why I had to meet this funeral procession. And I fully agree, O God, to let all iniquity be laid upon me. I delight to do Thy will.”

Jesus knows what He is doing when He touches the coffin. He knows it better than anyone realizes. He knows the Lord’s precepts. He knows that by doing this He becomes unclean, and that He, from this moment, is declared by law unfit for the service of God. And even though He knows all this, He still touches the coffin; He takes upon Himself the uncleanness of death and accepts it. He accepts voluntarily all the suffering, even the bitter suffering on the cross where He has to taste the reality and essence of hell, and where He has to experience that He must be shut out from communion with God because the Lord forsakes Him. By touching the coffin, Jesus declares that He is willing to take upon Himself all uncleanness and all unrighteousness, all power of death and devil—yes, everything that has to be borne to give true salvation and deliverance to poor sinners. Jesus is a willing Mediator. He is the Lamb that is ready to be brought to the slaughter.

To the people in Nain, Jesus is a stranger. The dead young man is not a relative or acquaintance of Jesus. He really doesn’t need to make Himself unclean; He could have kept at a distance from the funeral. There was no reason to take part in the funeral; He can keep Himself clean. Yes, He can, but He doesn’t *desire* to do so. By touching the coffin, He speaks to the mourning people, “I want to be one of you voluntarily, even though I am a stranger. I want to take part in your need and in your sadness. And even more, I want to take part in your uncleanness, for I am the Savior, and I am willing to be the Deliverer. I come to render help by taking upon Me your physical and spiritual needs.”

To Proclaim His Gospel

By touching the coffin, Jesus was also proclaiming the gospel and revealing Himself as the Messiah. Yes, He really is different from

all the priests in Jerusalem. The people in Israel never saw a priest touching a coffin or entering into a house where there was a dead body. Priests always stood at a distance. In fact, God's precepts were even stricter with regard to priests. The Lord had spoken to the priests, "There shall none be defiled for the dead among his people." Uncleanness resulting from touching a dead person made a priest altogether unfit for the Lord's service. And what a tragedy it would be if a priest were no longer able to perform his work as a servant of God! That's why the Jews never saw a priest attending a funeral ceremony.

But here, the people of Nain see that Christ is completely different. He wants to be one of them, to become involved in their need and misery—oh, surely, must He not be the Savior? So, this deed of Jesus preaches the gospel for those who have eyes to see. On this day of sadness, the people of Nain receive glad tidings: the Savior is in our midst! Yes indeed, Jesus is a priest. His compassion for the woman shows that He has the heart of a priest. But what good is all this, you ask, when this Priest is defiled with death? Then He cannot stand in the service of the Lord! Well—and this is really the secret of His being the Messiah—we can read in Hebrews, "For such an high priest became us who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners." Yes, I can see that. But now Jesus is no longer undefiled and no longer in the position to serve God and to commune with God. So in what way can the service of reconciliation be continued now, when the High Priest is no longer what He ought to be?

Well, this is just the messianic secret, for by touching the coffin, this Priest actually consecrates Himself to the Lord. This Priest becomes the sacrifice; He becomes unclean. And to unclean and defiled sinners, a sacrifice is necessary. So Christ is really saying here, "Here I am, Lord; I am the Lamb of God; I am the sacrifice." He accepts the obligation to offer His own life as a priest. He accepts becoming defiled. But at the same time, He will bring His own soul as an offering to God.

Do you see in our text the willingness and the readiness of the Lord Jesus to suffer? That is the gospel that God has given to this world. The widow in this story profits immensely from the willingness of Christ to identify with her. And the people of Nain have sung of this merciful deed of Christ. After Jesus raised the young man to life, we read in verse 16, "There came a great fear on all: and they glorified God, saying, That a great prophet is risen up among us; and, That God hath visited his people."

How much the people understood at this moment is hard to know, but their testimony is true. God indeed has visited His people. He has visited them by sending this willing Savior, this Jesus who touches the coffin. This is the gospel of God for those who have to die because they are sinners. And who can save himself from the grave? Who possesses the possibility to deliver himself? Who is able to undo the chains of death? All the people of Nain together were powerless to raise the young man from the dead. They could mourn and weep, they could feel pity for the poor mother, but they couldn't bring back the dead boy to life. No one is able to overcome death, for no one is able to overcome sin! You can weep and burst into tears when you stand at the deathbed of your loved one, but it will not stop death as a mighty intruder upon our lives and our plans. You can clench your fists in rebellion against death when death prevails, but that will not help you. There is only One who can undo the price of death, and to deliver, and that One is Jesus! He does give deliverance to all of them who acknowledge before Him that they are subject to death justly by the justice of the Lord, and who confess that the cause of death lies in the sin that permeates their lives. And who with pain and grief in their heart learn to supplicate for mercy. Jesus comes into our life when we are so needy and miserable because of the continuous threat of death that flows out of our sins and because our life is one long string of uncleanness. Yes, Jesus enters into our lost life. Our text says, "He came." He takes the initiative; He steps forward, He makes His way to us as a mourning people and He stands in our midst. Yes, He touches the coffin that signifies uncleanness

and unrighteousness. Oh, the beauty and the fullness of His free, sovereign grace!

Jesus wants to touch our coffins, not only to take our death upon Himself but also in order *to deliver us from death*. Yes, that too. The history of our text tells us that the young man is raised. Jesus speaks to the dead young man as if he were only asleep, and as if he could hear and obey. His voice rings with authority, “Young man, I say unto thee, Arise.” The young man comes to life as if he had merely been sleeping; he sits up and begins to speak, and Jesus delivers him to his mother. It all happens so calmly. There is no protracted struggle, no arduous wrestling, as in the case of Elijah and Elisha, whom God also used to raise children from the dead. With one simple sovereign word of command—“Arise!”—the young man is brought back to life. The simple reason for the difference is that Jesus is God. His victory over death is immediate and complete; He is the calmly victorious Savior and Lord.

“Behold!” Behold, Jesus comes. Behold what happens when the widow of death meets the Prince of life, when the results of sin meet the Savior from sin, when the culture of death meets the culture of life! The king of destruction, death, meets the King of life, Jesus! The king of death, which is so strong and so powerful that everyone falls prey to death—for you and I will also die—meets the King who rightly calls Himself the resurrection and the life. He is far more powerful than death. Death and life meet at the gates of Nain and the Prince of life gloriously, easily prevails. That is the beauty, that is the glory, that is the hope and the wonder of this story.

Behold, the Way of Life triumphs over the way of death; the Second Adam’s merits and power counter the tragic fruits of the first Adam. With a touch of His hand and a word from His mouth, Jesus arrests and reverses the chariot of death; the spoil is taken from the mighty, and the lawful captive is delivered. Death flies defeated from the gates of the city.

What a lesson is this for all of us! If Christ can do such mighty works with but a word from His mouth, why should anyone here

ever despair of salvation? Where is the heart that is too dead for Christ to break?

By being the willing Savior who does all that has to be done, Jesus brings true happiness to this small family—the widow and her son—in the midst of the people of Nain. This is the way Jesus brings salvation. He takes upon His shoulders all unrighteousness and all uncleanness. And by bearing death and the cause of death, namely sin, He gives life. When all iniquity is laid upon Him, there is, at the same time, life and deliverance for all who learn to trust in Him and who look for their salvation in Him alone.

What a change there is in Nain, especially for the widow and her son! The day that started so sad and dark ends in happiness. The Savior was there, the willing Savior. Never will they forget the glorious moment that the young man sat up and began to speak. They will never forget the moment that Jesus spoke the mighty words, “Young man, arise.” Oh, how happy they are that Jesus arrived at that moment in their city. All the people glorified God. They said, “God hath visited his people” (v. 16)—literally, “God has come to look after his people.”

Conclusion: Your Response?

Dear friends, there must be a response to God’s dealings with us—also to this very sermon. God waits for our response. How do you respond tonight to the word of the living God?

(1) *Do you respond by glorifying the Lord and resting in His Son for both compassion and salvation?* God has visited His people, also today. The Lord has visited us with the gospel, the blessed message of the Savior, Jesus Christ. Did you listen? Did you see the Savior? Did you see His miracle? Did you see His willingness to be the true Savior? I think these words are the most important words in the story, that Jesus touched the coffin. In these words lies the secret of salvation. No, we cannot be saved by a Savior who only performs miracles. We cannot be saved even when we have a Savior who raises one from the dead and who, by His might, performs

all kinds of wonders. We can only be saved by a Savior who has compassion and who, because of that compassion, comes into our need, touches the coffin, and takes upon Himself our death, impurity, sin, and guilt. We must know Him as the Savior who willingly bore all our uncleanness and unrighteousness. It is not enough to know *about* a Savior who keeps death from us and who heals us in days of sickness. For the most part, we fear, based on such passages as Luke 9:18–19, that the crowd failed to see the true greatness of the Prophet and Priest among them. Though they glorified God to some degree, they underestimated the majesty and divinity of Jesus and did not worship Him in Spirit and truth. They saw Him as a great prophet but not a divine High Priest who saves our souls from all our sin.

We can only find salvation in a Savior who, first of all, takes all uncleanness upon Himself and then overcomes death. Uncleanness because of sin is the first thing that has to be removed. And when we have discovered by the teaching of the Spirit that we have departed from God, and we have listened to the devil, when we become aware of the manifold sins and impurities in our life, then we understand, first, that a solution for our sins is necessary. Yes, then we need a Savior who truly reconciles us with God. And that, thanks be to God, is precisely Christ's work: *He* touched the coffin. Oh, friend, have you ever seen by faith His willingness and readiness to take upon Himself all uncleanness and sin, and all the power of death? Has that sight ever moved you to surrender all to this precious Savior?

(2) *Do you respond, young people, by consciously rejecting the Savior of sinners, or by receiving Him?* This miracle occurred in the life of a young man, so it has special significance for you, young people. Some of you, spiritually, are like the young man when he was dead. You are dead in your trespasses and sins. You don't see your dangerous plight. Your relatives—parents, brothers, sisters—weep over you, but it doesn't affect you. You don't understand their grief, don't understand their secret prayers: "Lord, it would be better for

my son, my daughter, to never have been born than to turn away from Thee!” Nor do you understand, as you heard this morning, that Jesus is able to raise sinners from the dead. You don’t hear the message of life, don’t realize that Jesus speaks to the spiritually dead and the impenitent, just like you, with authority, even now, saying, “Young man, I say unto thee, Arise.” *Will you not hear His voice? Will you hear Him before it is forever too late?* The pallbearers were on their way to bury this young man. It was apparently too late for any possible change, but at the last moment, the King of kings intervened! I warn you, dear friend—and especially you, dear young friend—your time may well be running out. You have no idea how long you will live. You can also die young, like many other young people. Don’t fritter away your time. Today is the best day of your life to seek the Lord, to repent of your sins, to surrender your sinful heart and life into the hands of the willing and almighty Savior. Remember, as this miracle clearly shows, God delights to heal sinners just like you. He delights to save sinners; He is in the business of saving sinners; He has decreed to save sinners. It brings Him great glory and great satisfaction to save sinners! Oh, that you would cry out, “Draw me, O Lord, and I will run after Thee!”

Or, are you already saved, and do you respond by resolving to be more like Christ—to show more Christlike compassion and Christlike willingness to assist fellow sinners and to proclaim the gospel to them? Is your sympathy sincere—like Jesus’s, flowing from your heart—not artificial, like so many in this world? Then you are greatly blessed indeed, and I pray God your light may shine more and more unto the perfect day.

(3) *Dear friends, young and old, do you respond by not responding?* That is what Israel did in 1 Kings 18:21 when Elijah said to them on the top of Mount Carmel, “How long halt ye between two opinions? If the LORD be God, follow him: but if Baal, then follow him.” And then we read these tragic words: “And the people answered him not a word” (v. 21b)—not a single word! They responded by not responding! Is that what you will do today? Will you walk out

of this church building and talk together outside the church about some secular thing, perhaps about the score of some ballgame this past week, with the casualness of a worldling, as if Jesus did not offer you His grace today, in this very sermon, to raise you from spiritual death to everlasting life?

Will you once again—like thousands of sermons before this—offer no response to God’s overtures to you? Will you once again turn a deaf ear to Jesus—to His compassion, to His willingness, to His gospel? May I ask you, Can you find any fault with this willing Savior? You say, “Oh no, I can’t.” But why then don’t you repent before Him and really believe in Him alone for salvation? What kind of objections do you have against believing in Him? Has He not done enough? Oh, look to Him; consider how He raises the dead young man, and delivers him to his mother. See how He brings happiness in Nain.

But consider especially and be challenged and exhorted and encouraged with this message, this particular point, that He touches the coffin. If He did this for a young man, why can He not also do it for you in all your spiritual deadness? He is able and willing to save the hardest of hearts—and that upon His own initiative. Ask Him to do this also for you. He will show you that He is still today a great, compassionate, willing Priest-King who triumphs even over sin and death. He can meet and conquer death within you, too, and carry away His helpless prey. To Him be the glory forever. Amen.

Be Anxious for Nothing

Rev. Ian Macleod

Philippians 4

Our text is Philippians 4:4–7.

Rejoice in the Lord alway: and again I say, Rejoice. Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand. Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Dear congregation, after God finished the creation of the world, after He had created man, God looked at all that He had created and God said, “Behold it is very good.” God rejoiced in His creation, angels sang for joy on the morning of creation, and man himself would have rejoiced at the goodness of God to him. And because there was no sin, there was a beautiful harmony among all the creation of God: between man and God; between man and themselves, Adam and Eve; between man and himself, Adam’s relationship with himself. There was in all of this a beautiful peace and a beautiful rest and a beautiful harmony. But when man sinned, this beautiful and good creation was left in ruins: “In the day that thou eatest thereof thou shalt surely die.” The peace that was there was now shattered. There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked. The joy that had been there was now turned into great sorrow. “Quickly,” the psalmist says, “was my prosperous state turned into misery.” Every relationship was broken between man and God, between man and woman and each other, and indeed the

relationship in themselves was broken, and ever since it has been true that man that is born of a woman is of few days and full of trouble. They're born into trouble like the sparks fly upwards, and there's not a person who doesn't know something of the trouble, sorrow, and misery that has come because of sin. There's not a person here who doesn't know something of what it is to worry, to have anxiety, to be burdened with anxious care. You find this in the Psalms, and therefore you find this in the experience of God's people too. Psalm 39, "Man lives in empty show, his anxious care is vain." Or Psalm 73, "Burdened with anxious care, I groped in dark despair." Or Psalm 77, "My heart inquired with anxious care, would God forever spurn, shall we no more his favor see." Maybe that's the way that you've come into church this Lord's Day. You've come and you want to listen and you want to worship God and you want a blessing for your soul, but what you find within yourself is that you are full of worry, full of anxiety, full of anxious care, restless and distracted in your mind. Well, the word of God has something to say to you and to us all.

Here Paul is writing to the church in Philippi from a prison in Rome. He is under house arrest, and he's writing to this church that he calls in verse 1 of this chapter his joy and his crown, a church that he loves and cares for deeply. There's a message here about the anxious care that they have; you can well imagine this situation that Paul finds himself in. Imagine he has been in prison in Rome for some time, and one day there is a knock on the door, and it's Epaphroditus, a man who has come all the way from Philippi over land and sea to see Paul. How happy Paul would have been to have seen this friend from such a far off place, from Philippi; how he would have embraced him, how they would have sat down and Paul would have asked Epaphroditus how things were going in Philippi—the place that Paul had gone to first when the gospel went into Europe. You can well imagine Paul saying, "Tell me, how are things in Philippi. How is my friend, the jailer? How is Luke? How is Lydia? How are Syntyche and Euodias

doing?” And maybe Epaphroditus, you can imagine him saying something like this: “Well, for the most part things are going well.

“We can’t complain, but we do have our worries, Paul. We do have our concerns and indeed to be perfectly honest, it has been a stressful time. Mrs. God-fearer, she has passed away. Mr. Strong-in-Faith, he’s weak now and he can’t attend the means of grace with us. The authorities are clamping down. They say, the word on the street is that soon we are going to have to say that Caesar is lord or we will not be able to worship, and we’re not sure what’s going to happen with our homes and our jobs, and really it’s all a tremendous worry for us. In church, things for the most part are going well. We’re still singing the Psalms, the Word is still being read, the Word is still being preached, but there is this conflict between Euodias and Syntyche, and the people are starting to take sides; it’s threatening our unity, it’s threatening our peace. Actually, Paul, you are one of our biggest worries and concerns. We don’t know what’s going to happen. We haven’t had word what is going to happen to you. We can’t bear the thought of losing you, Paul, and really, it’s all a tremendous worry.”

In many ways, this helps us understand the very first words of the letter that we have in chapter 1, the first thing that Paul told them—“To all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ”—and how throughout this letter, Paul has been calling the Philippians to look away from themselves and to focus and anchor their minds upon the Lord Jesus Christ. How often you find that message in this book: “Look not every man on his own things, but every man on the things of others. Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus: who...humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” (2:4–5, 8). And then as he comes to the close, in this last chapter of his letter, he addresses perhaps more pointedly than before this issue of anxiety, of anxious care, of excessive worry. And in these verses (4–7), we see three antidotes that Paul gives for this anxious care, and it’s bound up with

three relationships. First of all, in verse 4, you have the upward relationship to Christ: “Rejoice in the Lord.” Second, you have the outward relationship to others: “Let your moderation be known unto all men” (v. 5). And then third, there is the inward relationship to ourselves: “Be anxious for nothing, but pray,” in verses 6–7.

So let’s first look at the upward relationship to God: “Rejoice in the Lord always.” Now this letter to the Philippians, some have said, was written in the atmosphere of joy.

Paul is in prison. He can’t preach the gospel in the streets of Rome, and yet there is a joy that permeates this letter. It’s something Paul has spoken about often and repeatedly. You have it in chapter 1, verse 4, right at the beginning. He says, “I pray for you with joy.” In verse 18 of chapter 1, when Paul hears of some preaching Christ this way, some out of pretense, some doing it in truth, he says, “Either way, I will rejoice, because Christ is being preached.” In chapter 2 and verse 2, he speaks of their unity: “Fulfill my joy by being like-minded.” And later in chapter 2, he goes on to say, in verses 17 and 18, how he joys and rejoices with them. Even when the prospect of death is before him, he can say this: he is joying in their work of service toward him. In chapter 3, verse 1, he says, “Finally, my brethren, rejoice in the Lord.” It’s something Paul is speaking to time and again in this book, but by the time you get to chapter 4 and verse 4, where Paul says, “Rejoice in the Lord always,” you can almost at this point anticipate an objection that comes. It’s as though you could imagine Epaphroditus thinking or maybe even saying, “But Paul, have you not listened to what I have said?”

“Maybe I didn’t make myself clear. These things that are happening, this great threat that is there in Philippi—if only you knew the situation, you couldn’t speak like this.” But Paul, as it were, anticipates that objection, because he repeats the command again, “Rejoice in the Lord always: and again I say, Rejoice.” And this is a command. This is as much a command as any other in Scripture. “Remember the sabbath day to keep it holy.” “Honor thy father

and thy mother.” “Thou shalt not kill.” Here is another: “Rejoice.” It is an imperative: “Rejoice in the Lord always.”

But you ask, as maybe Epaphroditus would ask, “How is that possible? How is it possible when all things around me and within me and in my own soul’s experience, seem to be crumbling? There are times when I feel sad and depressed and I have a down day. Is this not setting the bar too high?” Well, we have to understand that the kind of joy that Paul is speaking about concerns not primarily our emotions. Paul is not simply speaking about a feeling of happiness; this joy is not simply the opposite of sadness. It’s certainly not Paul in any kind of superficial and flippant way, like we often hear today, saying, “Well, just hang in there.” He’s not saying, “You need to smile more.” It’s not like the kind of flippant superficial bumper-sticker you might see today that says, “Don’t worry; be happy.” It’s not the kind of superficial song that says, “If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands.” What if I’m not happy? What if I don’t know it? What if I don’t want to clap my hands?

And we have to remember that, as Paul wrote these words, there were very likely still tears flowing down his cheeks. At the end of chapter 3, Paul had said that he wrote this letter weeping—weeping because of the enemies of the cross of Christ. “[I write this] even weeping. They are enemies of the cross of Christ. [Their] end is destruction, [their] God is their belly.” This is a joy that is not primarily about our emotion; it is not dependent on our circumstances. That is a hugely important point to grasp. It is not a joy that is dependent on our circumstances. Would Paul have been joyful if this joy that he was speaking about was based upon his own condition? He’s in a prison. He is chained to one of the Praetorian guards. He is not able to preach the gospel on the streets of Rome. People are saying things about him in Rome. He has the possibility of receiving the death penalty from that wicked Emperor, Nero. What happens, then, to this joy when you have a bad day, when outward circumstances seem to suggest that there should be no joy? Even things like your car breaking down or failing an exam or getting that news from a doctor, the bad

news, or when someone who loves you leaves you or dies. Does the joy disappear?

What a wonderful thing that this joy is not produced by the circumstances around me! The key words here are these: "Rejoice in the Lord." In the Lord. Here is the sphere of this joy. This is a joy that depends on God. This is a joy that anchors itself in the unchanging God, in the faithful covenant God. The closer we come to this God, the more we know Him, the more we love Him, the more deeply we will draw from Him who is the fountain of joy. This is a joy the world cannot give you, and it's a joy the world cannot take from you. John Newton had it right: "Fading is the worldling's pleasure, all his boasted pomp and show. Solid joys and lasting treasure, none but Zion's children know."

And when the Philippians sat there and listened to this letter that Epaphroditus brought them from Paul, they knew this to be true of Paul. There would have been some there who would have said, "Remember that when he came to us at the first [you can read about this in Acts 16], the people, the magistrates in Philippi, treated him and Silas so harshly and cruelly and threw him into prison and put him in chains." The circumstances were so appalling there, and yet what do we read in Acts 16:25? "At midnight Paul and Silas prayed, and sang praises unto God: and the prisoners heard them." And since then, Paul has gone through appalling conditions. You can read about them in 2 Corinthians 11: near-death experiences, perils of the sea, perils of robbers, perils of his own countrymen. This seems a huge catalog of suffering and, yes, these things had shaken Paul. He was human, but it had not shaken his joy in the Lord.

The Lord was still there. The Lord was still true. His covenant had not been shaken. His promises were still there. The blood was still there that cleansed from all sin. And Christ was still coming again. His joy was in the Lord, and so he says in 2 Corinthians 6:10, "As sorrowful, yet always rejoicing."

So, there is this upward relationship to God: "Rejoice in the Lord always." But then, second, there is the outward relationship

to others. Verse 5, “Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord is at hand.” If I have joy that is in the Lord, it is from above. That is going to affect my relationship with others around me. If my joy is self-centered—if it’s in me, if it’s all about me and my emotions and all we have is the ten steps to a joyful life—then that is also going to affect how I view others in a very different way.

Here Paul says, “Let your moderation be known unto all men.” The word “moderation” is a word that speaks of gentleness, reasonableness, patience, forbearance. It’s a word that speaks about relationship with others. It’s a word that implies a conflict. Why do you need patience? Why do you need self-control? Why do you need reasonableness, except that there is some conflict? And that’s what we see here in chapter 4 in the first few verses. There’s this conflict between these two ladies, Euodias and Syntyche, and it’s causing division. Paul, then, is calling them to moderation, to patience, to reasonableness—to this moderation that will prevent this kind of conflict.

Now Paul is not saying, just be a pushover. He’s not saying, let people ride on top of you. He’s not saying, don’t hold any convictions. Not at all. But what he is saying is this: Don’t be easily annoyed. Don’t be soon angry. Don’t be a serial complainer or fault-finder. Don’t run to extremes. Don’t insist and press your own rights all the time. Hand your reputation over to Christ. Check your temper. Hold yourself back. Judge charitably. Overlook offenses when you are able. That’s what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 13:4 in that great chapter on gospel love, “Charity suffereth long, and is kind; charity envieth not; charity vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil; rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth,” and so on.

“Let this be known,” Paul is saying. “Let this be known to all men. What do you want to be known for?” Young people here, we ask you this, and old people too, but young people, what do you want to be known for? How do you want your peers to think about you? What do you want them to know most about you?

That you're funny? That you're witty? That you're intelligent? That you're good-looking? That you're good at sports? That you're wealthy? Do you want people to know about your family tree and about your church connections? Do you want people to know that you are a holy person? Is that what you want to communicate to others? "I want to be known as a prayerful person. I want to be known as a holy person." Be known, Paul says, for gentleness. Be known for having patience. Be known as a reasonable person. Let your moderation be known.

Then he says, "The Lord is at hand." Commentators go back and forth—is he speaking to the second coming, the fact that Christ is coming again? The Lord is at hand. The Lord is coming again. Certainly, the thought of Christ coming again in judgment and the fact of us appearing before Him, if we would keep that in mind, would affect our relationships to God and to others. My own thought is that this is Paul speaking more personally. "The Lord is at hand. The Lord is near. When all other men forsook me," he says, "the Lord was near, the Lord was at hand." How that moderates us, when we are conscious of the Lord and we think of what Paul was like, the mind of Christ. The Lord is at hand.

Third, let's look at the inward relationship to ourselves. There's another command here. Paul says, "Be careful for nothing." It's a good translation. Don't be full of cares. It's the idea of anxious care, because there are good cares, there are things we should care about. The Bible speaks about this. In 1 Corinthians 7:32–34, the married man cares for the things of his wife and she cares for the things of her husband. Paul has already said in Philippians 2:20, speaking about Timothy, "I've no man who will naturally care for you." This was a good thing.

But there are bad cares that Scripture speaks about. Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount, says, "Take no thought for your life." It's the same word: "Take no care, no anxious care, no thought, for your life, what you shall eat or drink nor yet for your body, what you shall put on." Then He says, in Matthew 6:27, "Which of you by taking thought," which of you by care. It's the same word:

which of you by anxious care “can add one cubit unto his stature?” We’ve often thought of that in terms of height—you can’t by your anxiety add any height to yourself. But it’s quite plausible that what the Lord is saying there is, “Which of you by taking thought can add to your life? Will anxiety and care help add to your life?” And it won’t. It’s useless. It’s worse than useless. Christ speaks about this elsewhere: “When they deliver you up to magistrates, take no thought for what you will speak.” “Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things.”

And again here, this is not the kind of bumper-sticker that says, “Don’t worry; be happy.” It’s not the kind of philosophy we get today that says, “Whatever will be, will be.” It’s not the things that the world sings about. I remember hearing about this song that spoke about a monkey on your back, and the song supposedly was meant to help people who were struggling with depression. There was this repeated refrain, “It’s alright. It’s alright. Everything’s going to be alright.” But is it? It is going to be alright? We’re going to see, in a moment, that, without Christ, it’s not.

But what Paul is saying here is that, as Christians, we ought not to have that anxious care, that crippling care, that paralyzing anxiety. What does it communicate, Paul says. It communicates that you don’t have a Father in heaven who is ordering all things together for the good of His people. It is as though there is no covenant mercy. It is as though there is no covenant love. It is as though God has forgotten to be gracious. And really, at the root of it, it’s a self-sufficiency. It’s a self-sufficiency and a pride. It’s “I need to know.” It’s “I need to understand everything. I need to be in control of everything. I need to know what he said. I need to know what she said.” And Paul is really saying here, “Is it not enough that we know that our Father in heaven knows?”

But Paul doesn’t just say be careful for nothing and leave us there like the world does. Rather, he gives this antidote of prayer. One of the church fathers said, “Care and prayer are as mutually opposed as fire and water.” Care, anxious care, cannot breathe, as it were, in the atmosphere of prayer. It’s hard to pray, though, isn’t

it, when we're full of cares? But we're called, like Peter says, to cast all our cares upon Him because He cares for us.

Be anxious for nothing, “but in every thing by prayer.” This is the word that speaks about our coming to God—our adoration, our recognizing God for who He is. It's like a child coming to a father—you're asleep at night, you wake up and hear these noises, and it's very dark and you're afraid. And you have this care, this anxiety, and maybe you remember crying and your dad or mom would come and they'd speak to you. Well, the darkness was still there, wasn't it? The noises were still there outside, but when you heard your father's voice, when you heard your mother's voice, it gave a settledness. And so, Paul is saying, “By prayer when you go to God, when you pray to your heavenly Father and you hear His voice, oh, what a calm it gives.”

Then, by *supplications*. That's a word that speaks of the earnestness, the persistence, the importunity, with which men ought always to pray. “Day and night, I cry to thee.”

Then, pray with *thanksgiving*. Thanksgiving is when we thank God for what He has done. The purpose is not to remind God, who knows everything. But think of what it does for us when we thank God for what He has done, when we remember what he Has done. And how often do we read that in the prayers and the Psalms: “This is what the Lord did. This is what He did when we were in great distress. This is what He did when Pharaoh was behind us and the Red Sea was in front of us. This is what our Lord did. This is what He did when the enemy was too strong for us.” In thanksgiving we remember what the Lord has done, and that ought to take away our anxiety.

Then we have our requests, and that gets down to the specifics. We don't just pray in general. We can pray in general; we can ask the Lord to bless us, but *requests* speak about specific things. The sin that is besetting you, that seems to be around you, that never leaves you—you take that sin, you name it, and you bring it before the Lord and make your request known to Him.

“In everything,” Paul says. There was a missionary in Africa who was attacked by a lion and cried out to God in prayer and the Lord spared him from the lion. He went home, he said, and all night long he couldn’t sleep because of a mosquito. And in the morning, he felt convicted; he had prayed to the Lord for the lion but for the little mosquito he had not prayed. In everything, big and small, take it to the Lord in prayer.

And here’s the promise, found in verse 7: “the peace of God, which passeth all understanding.” Isn’t this the problem with anxiety, with anxious care? Is the problem not often that we want to understand everything? We don’t want something that passes understanding; we want to know it all. But here, the peace Paul is speaking about is that which passes all understanding. “The peace of God,” he says, “will keep your hearts and your minds.”

Now the word “keep” is the word for garrison, and Philippi, you remember, was a Roman colony. It belonged to Rome. It had Roman law. It had Roman protection. It had a Roman guard around it, a garrison, and it’s as though Paul is now saying, “I want to tell you about a garrison. I want to tell you about a protection, the kind of protection that Elisha knew he had when the whole army of Syria was around them and his servant was trembling and he said, ‘Lord, open his eyes,’ and his eyes were opened and he saw the chariots of God around them, garrisoning them.”

Paul is saying, “The peace of God, not the Pax Romana but the peace of God, will garrison.” And what will it keep? What will it protect? Oh, we talk about our need for home insurance and protection, financial insurance and protection, health insurance and protection, and these things are all fine in their place. But look at what Paul is saying is in great need of being garrisoned and protected—your heart and your mind. Keep your heart with all diligence, for out of it are the issues of life. And here in application, we want to, again, highlight these critical words at the end: “through Christ Jesus.” Through Christ Jesus. Without Christ, there is no peace. Without Christ, there is no joy. Without Christ, my dear friend, if that’s where you are this morning, you should be

anxious, and you should have care. You ought to care for your soul as we care for our bodies by eating and drinking. We ought to care for our never-dying souls and we should have a great concern.

It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God, and even to God's people that command comes, that warning found in Hebrews 4: "Let us therefore fear"; let us have an appropriate concern, "lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it." But what you are to do here, if this is where you are without Christ, is you are to take your care and fear to the Lord Jesus, through Christ Jesus.

This letter has been pointing continually to the Lord Jesus Christ. You think of Him; you think of the Savior and how He was careful for nothing in the sense Paul speaks about. He was once in a ship in a great storm, and the disciples were anxious and had great care. They came and said, "Master, don't you care? Carest thou not that we perish?" They found Him sleeping. They found Him in peace. There was already a great calm in His soul before there was a great calm in the sea. Think of Gethsemane and all the agony and the pain and the legitimate concern that was there. What did the Lord do? He prayed, we read, the more earnestly: "Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared." He was careful for nothing.

And then, think of His moderation. "Let your moderation be known unto all men." Think of the Lord Jesus, how His moderation, His reasonableness, His patience were known. Paul can write to the Corinthians, "I beseech you by the meekness and by the gentleness of Christ." That is what was known. When He was reviled, how was He known? When He was reviled, He reviled not again. When He suffered, how was He known? When He suffered, He threatened not but committed Himself unto Him that judges righteously. He was conscious that the Lord was near, that His judgment was near, and that He would judge righteously. He was conscious of the nearness of the Lord. He could even say at

Gethsemane, “Don’t you know that even now I could command twelve legions of angels?” But, no, His moderation was known unto all men.

His humbling of Himself was what He was known for—and all for the eternal good of others—and how the joy of the Lord was His strength. In Psalm 16, which is messianic, the Lord says, “I have set the LORD always before me: because he is at my right hand.” Because he is near, “I shall not be moved. Therefore my heart is glad, and my glory rejoiceth: my flesh also shall rest in hope.”

And think of the Lord Jesus, who was the faithful witness. He spoke of judgment. He does that in Matthew 11. He speaks of the woe that is coming upon Capernaum, and the woe that is coming upon Bethsaida, and the woe that is coming upon Tyre and Sidon. We don’t read of Him rejoicing in that, but He was faithful in that. But by the end of the chapter, we do read of Him rejoicing. It tells us that He rejoiced in His spirit. And why? Because He was then going to say, “Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.” That is what He rejoiced in—the joy of the Lord was His strength.

So we are all to come to Calvary and see there the place—yes, a place of great sorrow and pain—but the place from which flows a river of life that makes the city of God glad. You are to take your anxieties here. You’re to take your burden here. You’re to take your soul here. You’re to take your lostness here. If that’s where you are today, you’re to find here the peace that passes understanding. “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?” Paul asks. What manner of anxiety, what manner of care, can separate from the love of Christ when you see it especially at Calvary? “Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword?” Even death itself? Yes, sinner, take your lost soul here. Take the burden of your lost soul here, and here make request for mercy and for peace, and you will find here joy from above, moderation to all men, and a great peace within. Amen.

