

## Philippians 4:4-7 – Anxiety stalks, but praise and thanksgiving overcomes

### Knowing God through Jesus, and knowing His nearness by the Holy Spirit, is to rejoice

4 Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: rejoice!

*"Rejoice... always" – the back-story here is a disagreement serious enough for the parties to be named in a letter to be read out. The enemy's strategy is always to find ways to cause disagreement and division. The God-given remedy is the capacity that Christians have to see beyond themselves, and find agreement. Rejoicing is an attitude of relationship with God, not circumstances, and in that relationship His way becomes clear.*

5 Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.

*"Gentleness" – the quality of Christlike consideration, generosity of spirit, especially required of church leaders, 1 Tim. 3:3, Titus 3:2.*

*"Near" – A reminder, repeated elsewhere in the NT, that the next great event in God's salvation*

**IN PRACTICE** The Lord is gathering those that are really His with rejoicing, not with arguing. However, we have an enemy who is utterly opposed to the love, grace and acceptance that is the heart of the Gospel, and will work on our thoughts wherever our independence from God (the short word is 'sin') has given him a way in... and we may not realise where it from until it is too late. Church politics, often linked to religious inflexibility, has resulted in millions that believe in God but don't believe in His church. If, however, we are characterised as those who "Rejoice always" because we know that God is good even when things are challenging, then that is a very attractive proposition. Anxieties abound in our complex and conflicted world – and everyone is looking for the people who can deal with doubt and fear by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving. A tall order? God has called us, as Christians, to live differently and has given us His Holy Spirit to empower us to do it.

**QUESTION** *The adversary, Satan, was real to Jesus – in the temptation and wherever He found oppressed, sick people. Have I become too rational and educated to look for these spiritual realities, and tackle them as Jesus did?*

**PRAYER** Lord, as I draw near to You in this season of preparation, I recognise that preparation involves change, and You ask all of us to check our thoughts, consider our priorities, review our responses – and give them all to You! Help me to let go of all that hinders, so I can grasp with both hands all You have for me that is lifegiving. In Jesus' name and for His glory, Amen.

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*schedule is Christ's return. From Christ's coming at Bethlehem to the final consummation of the kingdom is "the last time" in which, from God's perspective, a thousand years are like a day, 2 Peter 3:8. "Near" or "at hand" also speaks of the Lord's nearness in the prayer relationship, attentive as One poised to return.*

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

*"Do not be anxious" – because the Lord is near. Prayerful thanksgiving in every situation is the antidote to anxiety, bringing God's peace.*

7 And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

*"The peace of God" – the assurance of those who know their sins are forgiven and, receiving God's love, can trust Him beyond their perspective of circumstances.*

# The Living Word

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The Bible readings for Sunday, Dec. 16, 2018, with commentary notes

Revised Common Lectionary readings for **Sunday, December 16**, in Bible order

Prepare for Sunday by reading the Bible passages beforehand - read again to reflect on Sunday's teaching

Theme: **Advent ABCD: Change as Christ's coming beckons**

Zephaniah 3:14-20 – The alienated ones are gathered with rejoicing

Luke 3:7-18 – Whose values are we agreeing with?

Philippians 4:4-7 – Anxiety stalks, but praise and thanksgiving overcomes

Also: Song of Praise, Isaiah 12:2-6

**SUMMARY** *The Lord is taking delight in His faithful people, gathering them and bringing them home. John foretells that One greater than him will baptise with the Holy Spirit and with fire, warning people to get right with God. Paul reminds his churches, don't be anxious but rejoice, for the Lord is near!*

## Zephaniah 3:14-20 – The alienated ones are gathered with rejoicing

**God's wrath over man's rebellion is real, as is His mercy for all who turn to Christ**

14-15 Sing, Daughter Zion; shout aloud, Israel! Be glad and rejoice with all your heart, Daughter Jerusalem! The Lord has taken away your punishment, He has turned back your enemy.

*"Be glad and rejoice" – a reversal of the woe and wrath pronounced earlier in the chapter, after which a remnant arises again to find God's favour.*

The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you; never again will you fear any harm.

*"Taken away your punishment" – as if judgment day had already happened. God removes His wrath and lifts the curse of transgression through Christ.*

**For further study**, read Rom. 5:9, 8:1, Gal. 3:13-14.

*"The Lord, the King of Israel, is with you" – the true king of Israel was always the Lord, Yahweh, and other rulers were to represent Him. The NT uses this title of Jesus, John 1:49, Matt. 27:42 and at His Triumphal Entry, John 12:13.*

16 On that day they will say to Jerusalem, 'Do not fear, Zion; do not let your hands hang limp.

*"Hands hang limp" – do not be discouraged.*

17 The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in His love He will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.'

*"The Mighty Warrior" – Yahweh is the supreme Commander, Psalm 24:8.*

*"Will... delight in you" – like a bridegroom with his bride, Isaiah 62:4-5, 65:18-19. Zephaniah (possibly a disciple of Isaiah) tells that when God's people seek Him, Zeph. 3:12-13, and rejoice in Him in a relationship of trust, vv.14-15 above, the Lord is so delighted He bursts forth in loud singing.*

18 'I will remove [or gather] from you all who mourn over the loss of your appointed festivals, which is a burden and reproach for you.

*“All who mourn over the loss” - a difficult verse. The context esp. vv.19-20 below suggests this is God’s promise to make things right, by gathering and removing those who remain rebels to God’s truth, and also gathering and bringing back those driven from Jerusalem by oppressors.*

19 At that time I will deal with all who oppressed you. I will rescue the lame; I will gather the exiles. I will give them praise and honour in every land where they have suffered shame.

20 At that time I will gather you; at that

time I will bring you home. I will give you honour and praise among all the peoples of the earth when I restore your fortunes [bring back your captives] before your very eyes,’ says the Lord.

*“I will rescue... gather... give honour and praise” – special favour in an intimate way for those who have held on to faith through the deprivation and shame of exile.*

*The weak and humble abused by the rebel majority (Zeph. 1:9; 3:1-2; cf. Ezek 34:21) are the ones on whom Yahweh’s justice would shine (3:5; cf. 2:3; 3:12*

**IN PRACTICE** This week’s theme of ‘Be Prepared’ starts with a passage that is set in the context of God’s wrath. The start of Zephaniah 3 is about Jerusalem, the city of oppressors, and God’s judgment which, as always, is intended to be a wake-up call and bring correction, Zeph. 3:1-7. However, following the inevitable punishment, a refining takes place and God delights in those that remain, who have kept faith in Him. In our world, we can see where God’s judgment for ‘doing our own thing’ has resulted in a dramatic fall in church attendance and prosperity. Perhaps it’s needed, so that we wake up and think again about whose church it is, and whether we are in love with God the Father and His Son Jesus, or the traditions we are attached to. The bottom line is that God is good, He loves us and He has a real purpose for all of us - for which some discipline is also a measure of His love.

**QUESTION** *What does God want from us as a faith community, that is a tension with what we want?*

**Luke 3:7-18** – Whose values are we agreeing with?

**John challenges hearers to change their stance before God at the coming of One who baptises with the Holy Spirit and fire**

7-9 John said to the crowds coming out to be baptised by him, ‘You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. And do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father.” For I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. The axe has been laid to the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.’

*“Vipers” – a way of challenging them about having become the seed of the Serpent, Gen. 3:15, in their attitudes and actions. These vipers, Isaiah 59:5, are the rebellious ones who turned the way of the Lord into crooked roads, Isaiah 59:8.*

*“We have Abraham” – the erroneous and somewhat arrogant belief of some Jews who believed that descent from Abraham was their assurance of salvation, John 8:33-39, Acts 7:2.*

*“The axe... tree... good fruit” – genuine faith produces good fruit. Claiming the ancestry of Abraham was meaningless if not matched with righteous, just and generous-spirited living, including a willingness to engage in repentance responding to John’s call.*

10 ‘What should we do then?’ the crowd asked.

11 John answered, ‘Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same.’

*“Two shirts” – a long tunic undergarment.*

12 Even tax collectors came to be baptised. ‘Teacher,’ they asked, ‘what should we do?’

13-14 ‘Don’t collect any more than you are required to,’ He told them. Then some soldiers asked Him, ‘And what should we do?’

He replied, ‘Don’t extort money and don’t accuse people falsely - be content with your pay.’

*“Tax collectors...soldiers” – probably a form of police paid by Herod Antipas to protect the tax collectors, a rejected community seen as supporting the Roman oppression. John preaches honesty and concern for those in need, against the fraudulent dealings and extortion that were part of the accepted way of life.*

15-16 The people were waiting expectantly and were all wondering in their hearts if John might possibly be the Messiah. John answered them all, ‘I baptise you with water. But one who is more powerful than I will come, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. He will baptise you

with [in] the Holy Spirit and fire.

*“The Holy Spirit and fire” – a holy ‘drenching’ that will transform and purify. Fire is often used in the OT as an illustration of the judgment that purifies, exposing what is insubstantial and ‘combustible’. The Holy Spirit similarly reveals what is not of God and exposes our self-deceptions.*

17-18 His winnowing fork is in His hand to clear His threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into His barn, but He will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire.’ And with many other words John exhorted the people and proclaimed the good news to them.

*“Wheat... chaff” – the righteous versus the unrepentant. John’s theme throughout is on the need for a humility before God which brings with it a sincere dependence on God and a lifestyle of willingness to recognise and deal with everything in life which is not God’s way. “Winnowing fork” – many Jews had a false sense of entitlement, believing that only pagans would be singled out when Messiah came, but John makes clear that judgment and punishment that judgment will come on all who do not repent.*

*“Proclaimed the good news” – The Saviour coming, both imminently and also in the final judgment – proclaimed with joy and justice for all who would receive Him, but a stark warning for those who would not, both present and future.*

**IN PRACTICE** The Jews were confident that they deserved favour from God because of their heritage, conveniently overlooking the swathes of their Scriptures (OT to us) which speak of rebellion and apostasy, and its consequences, which they suffered in exile and then a series of invasions. The hated (but for the most part, just and professional) Roman rule was just the latest of a number of occupations.

What about us? We live in a so-called Christian country. We may have served our church or fellowship faithfully, with others looking to us as the ones who ‘keep things going’. But has that given us a false sense of entitlement? This “be prepared” season is a good time to ask if we are holding on faithfully, or perhaps holding tenaciously, what God actually wants us to let go of, so He is free to “do a new thing”, Isaiah 43:18-19. And to be humble enough to let go of any sense of entitlement is definitely a good way to “be prepared”.

**PRAYER** Lord, as I mentally line up for John’s baptism and wonder what in me has more of the hallmark of the snake, rather than the Spirit, help me to let go of attitudes that need to go, and to embrace the change and holiness You are revealing in this season. For Jesus’ sake, Amen.