The last thing Paul will do in his letter to the Phillies is thank them for the financial aid Epaphroditus has delivered to him. But before we get to that Paul offers his Philippian friends some **closing remarks.** Short, easily remembered commands that tie back to the general content of the letter. Right in the middle of these remarks is the little phrase **“The Lord is near.”** The nearness of the Lord is a blessing [Noah, David, Daniel]. The Psalm writer says: : **Psa. 73:28** But as for me, it is **good to be near God**. I have made the Sovereign LORD my refuge…

**I think that little phrase is the centerpoint of verses 4-7.** God’s nearness is the reason we can **“rejoice always”-** even in life’s hard places. And because *The Lord is near* we can live out the **Gentleness** of Christ –His controlled strength- even for those making our lives difficult. Paul wants his friends at PhillyChurch to know that **Joy and gentleness** are reasonable and natural byproducts of God’s presence in and with us … despite rising opposition from their Caesar-loving neighbors**.**

**And Paul wants them to understand the same about the Peace of God.**

**“Anxiety”** is a dangerous thing spiritually. It’s tainted with a sense of loss and separation- it’s touched by death [Death is felt as separation], It sees no solution. It is hopeless and afraid. *Anxiety is a trust-destroyer and a Joy-blocker!* *Anxiety is not content with a comfy chair in the corner of your mind. It wants the run of the whole place.*

There’s a ranch somewhere in Washington that we took some kids to from the Science Center. The place was inundated with rabbits. Big, furry, domesticated, **semi-wild rabbits by the hundreds** in every color you can imagine, every size, every ear-style, everywhere you looked. I asked about it and one of the wranglers told me that because of feed for horses they’d had a serious rat problem. **Rats everywhere** and in everything. So they brought in a bunch of rabbits and let them breed…like rabbits. Being in the same niche as the rats- but bigger and stronger- the rabbits flourished and the rat population dwindled to nothing cause the Rabbits filled the niche completely. Now there’s killer bunnies everywhere.

I know this example is weird but what the rabbits did to the rats is what Anxiety does to Joy and gentleness: it chokes them out. Some results of ongoing anxiety [incredibly habit-forming] can be depression, fear, despair and anger. **As Yoda said:** “Fear is the path to the dark side. Fear leads to anger. Anger leads to hate. Hate leads to suffering.” And -if left unchecked- ANXIETY can lead to the **disintegration of one’s Faith in God.**

In his book *“Deep & Wide,”* **Andy Stanley,** of North Point Community Church in Atlanta, writes about how *adverse circumstances can damage or destroy one’s Faith*. And he offers that the **pivotal issue is how those circumstances are interpreted**. He tells a story about one of the wealthiest men in America who grew up wanting to be a missionary. When he was young, his sister contracted Leukemia. He and his family were told if they prayed with enough faith she would get well. Instead she died. **And his interpretation of the events was that God was either weak, inattentive or non-existent.** He walked away and never looked back.

This is not unusual. People who have been a part of the church, reading their bible, praying, and then some ugly Job-level tragedy rolls into their lives [divorce, a child’s illness, financial tragedy, death of a spouse]. And they begin to say “Why me, God;” and to blame God for the pain and the loss. *And the* ***Enemy of our Souls,*** *comes skulking around and says: “How can a loving God let this terrible thing happen to you? Think of all you’ve done for Him, and He treats you like this. He could make this go away in a blink. Why doesn’t He? Either He’s too impotent to fix it or He just refuses to do so. Some God of Love, if you ask me. Why are you wasting time follow Him?*

**Our hearts and minds need protecting from this sort of stuff.** And according to Solomon’s proverbs it’s a matter of constant vigilance! **4:20** My son, pay attention to what I say; listen closely to my words. **21** Do not let them out of your sight, keep them within your heart; **22** for they are life to those who find them and health to a man’s whole body. **23 Above all else, guard your heart, for it is the wellspring of life. 24** Put away perversity from your mouth; keep corrupt talk far from your lips. **25** Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you. **26** Make level paths for your feet and take only ways that are firm. **27** Do not swerve to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil.

**The “heart”** is the center of a person’s being in the Hebrew thought. Solomon calls the heart the **“wellspring of Life”** But like any well that spring can be polluted. Prov. also says: **25:26**    Like a muddied spring or a polluted well is a righteous man who gives way to the wicked.

The **Prophets** Hosea and Jeremiah both tell us “The heart is deceitful above all things….” [Jer 17:9, Hos 10:2]. And, in Mark 7 **Jesus says** the stuff that comes out of men’s hearts can make them unclean. **We have the modern saying: “The heart wants what the heart wants.”** Which implies that the emotional sense we call “The Heart” is typically foolish, nonsensical and idiotic. It can lead us off God’s path… it can lead our “foot to evil.”

“The Heart” needs looking after. **The surest way to protect a well is to keep it guarded.** And so the Teacher in Prov 4 advises the student to avoid corrupt talk, to be careful about where your eyes go, to stick to firm, level, straight paths. And keep your foot from evil. Those are all **euphemisms** for *actively and attentively protecting your Heart and Mind from going to places far* from God and toward Evil.

The fact is “The Heart” is delicate. It’s easily deceived and damaged. *Adverse circumstances, bad company, the Enemy’s lies or simple Anxiety* can poison the heart. **It needs guarding.** That is why we need the Peace of God: to **guard our hearts and minds** from despair, anger, anxiety and the Enemy’s lies**.**

**In this case Anxiety or worry is the issue Paul is addressing.** He tells them not to be anxious about anything. The Greek translated “anxious” is the same word used by Jesus to describe Martha. **Luke 10:41**    “… “you are **worried** and upset about many things,…

It’s used again when Jesus tells the Ds **Luke 12:11** “When you are brought before synagogues, rulers and authorities, do not **worry** about how you will defend yourselves or what you will say,

And again: **Luke 12:25** Who of you by **worrying** can add a single hour to his life?

*The God-Man himself paints anxiety as useless and counterproductive.*

**But our friends in Philippi do have things to be anxious about.** Remember Paul’s converts in Philippi were mostly former pagans. They lived their fragile, mortal lives surrounded by **a great pantheon of gods** who were petty and jealous and easily offended. You could offend one unknowingly. And if you did it would certainly punish you in unpleasant and destructive ways. Fear was the air they breathed.

And let’s not forget **the opposition** rising up from their Roman neighbors had certainly begun to breed some fear. Remember Paul telling the Phillies: Conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ…without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you. [1:27-28] And- we haven’t mentioned this as much- but for a craftsman to be a part of local guilds meant sacrificing to whatever god was patron of that guild. No sacrifice no guild. No guild, no work. No work, no income- you know the rest. And no Paul and no Timothy to walk them through this. They have to walk through this working out their own salvation.

**The result: lots of potential for an anxious heart and mind.**

The members of PhillyChurch, however would have learned from Paul that following a Crucified King did not include a guarantee against suffering. Remember He tells them: : **29** For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him, **30** since you are going through the same struggle you saw I had, and now hear that I still have. They understand **hardship and suffering are part of the deal when following Jesus**.

*God “hath promised us not a rose garden” in this life.* There will be challenge and there will be frustration and there will be FEAR.

**But THE LORD IS NEAR! And He hears our prayers and supplies our needs.**

He, the Lord Jesus, is neither distant, nor impotent, nor careless nor easily offended.

Paul taught the Phillies that the Creator-God, the one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac & Jacob who poured out the entirety of his Self, into the man Jesus of Nazareth, was in **ultimate control of the Kosmos** and that He would always hear and answer our prayers. And, most important, He loves us and is actively interested in the stuff of our lives: big and small. **For instance:**

**In 1:3-6** Paul thanks God for the Phillies and petitions God on behalf of the Philippians with a confidence that God will complete His good work in them.

**In 1:9** Paul petitions God regularly to enhance the Phillies love with knowledge.

**And in 1:19** he is convinced that the Philippians prayers will blend with help from the Spirit of Jesus Christ to accomplish his release.

**And in 4:19** Paul is certain that **19** ..God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

See, even in this fairly short letter *the expectation that God is actively near and listening and concerned for our well being is obvious*. Paul petitions God on behalf of the Phillies with the **understanding** that God is interested and active and participatory. And the Phillies pray for Paul with the **understanding** that the Lord is near and actively involved in his life and theirs.

*In this closing comment Paul is telling us that worry and anxiety CAN and SHOULD be undone by honest, trusting, earnest, grateful communication with our Lord* who is near!!! Paul serves up three Greek words for prayer:

The first, “**prayer,”** is a general word for earnest communication with God. This is about talking to God openly and honestly about anything and everything-[David/shepherd]

The second is **“supplication”** –like a treasured child asking for something from a much-loved father- a direct and fearless request. None of you should be afraid to “pester” the Lord with whatever concern is on your mind. Ask for what you think you need [with humility and the knowledge that you might be wrong about what you need.]

And third is “**Thanksgiving.”** Thanksgiving recognizes that everything comes as a gift.

**This gratitude piece** is very important in terms of **“guarding hearts and minds.”**

When in our prayer we are gratefully remembering past blessings from God we are **witnessing to ourselves** about God’s generosity to us and his goodness to our own spirits. **In this we are preparing our minds to rightly interpret adverse circumstances, undercutting those anxieties that might make our heart wander off away from God.** So remembering what God has done for us is an excellent guardian against anxiety for the future.

Think about the Psalms we call “Laments.” Like **Psa. 13:1**    **How long**, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? **How long** will you hide your face from me? OR **Psa. 10:1** Why, O LORD, do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in times of trouble? **Psa. 35:17** How long, O Lord, will you look on and do nothing?

These are anxious, fearful, complaining psalms written in times of trouble.

But they all flow back to **confessions of trust** because of what God’s done in the past [I cry to you O’ Lord, I say you are my refuge…] **prayers for help** [Deliver me from my persecutors, … **a reason God should answer- like gratitude** [I’ll give thanks to your name] or even **a shout of praise!** –Ps 142]

**The Psalmists fearlessly express their anxiety to God.** But the Psalmists also **“guard their hearts”** in their song lyrics- not letting them cross over to an attitude of *“What’s the point of following you!?”*

Please understand a habitual lack of gratitude can be spiritually deadly to us, leading us off the trail God’s set for us. Remember Paul’s words in **Rom. 1:21** For although they knew God, they **neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him**, but their thinking became futile and **their foolish hearts were darkened.**

As we engage in the praying Paul prescribes, **as we do the talking and the asking and the thanksgiving** we exercise the spiritual muscles of our Dependence on God and our Trust in God. In these acts of faith- prayer is an act of faith- **we prepare ourselves to receive the peace of God, the Shalom of God** –which for the Jews was wholeness and balance in all of life. Meaning: completeness, wholeness, health, peace, welfare, safety soundness, tranquility, prosperity, perfectness, fullness, rest, harmony, the absence of agitation or discord.

***Important thing alert:*** *I think when we consider this passage and the Peace of God some part of us is expecting the Holy equivalent of nitrous oxide- laughing gas-* ***a spiritual euphoria in the midst of crisis.*** *That’s not a legitimate expectation.*

*[And if that’s your expectation and you’re not feeling it you might wonder what’s wrong with you.*

*The answer is nothing is wrong with you.]*

***The shalom of God is not the gift of supernatural air-headedness.***

That shalom, that ineffable Peace that “guts” anxiety, that guards our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, and keeps us from wandering off the path of God, is simply:

**a quiet, strong Confidence in God’s active, loving care.**

And that confidence –along with the dismissal of anxiety- comes from the active, loving **prayer, supplication and thanksgiving** that you address to Jesus, the Prince of Peace, who said to us all:

 **John 14:27** Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.

We can dismiss anxiety because **The Prince of Peace is the Lord who is near**.