

## “Joy Ride: Joy in What We Know”



I remember back in 2009, the company I was working for was bought. We were a small, locally owned business that prided itself on customer service and the personal touch.

We'd carved out for ourselves a niche in the marketplace, by becoming experts in sanitation and janitorial cleaning products specifically for hospitals, nursing homes, and schools.

We had earned our customers trust because we had the right products at the right price, but also because we offered a tremendous amount of hands-on value-added services like training, consultation and expertise. Our customers depended on us to make their housekeeping and janitorial operations a success.



But in 2009 we were bought by a multi-national, publicly-traded corporation that was known for efficiency. Their number one goal: maximizing shareholder wealth.

As you might expect, they downsized us, streamlined us, changed computer systems and reorganized the warehouse. I was a sales person who managed key accounts, and at the time it seemed like the world was coming to an end. We were pretty sure everything we had worked so hard to build was going to be undone in the name of greater profit margins for people we'd never met.



Almost immediately people started showing up from our new head office in Oakville, and even from offices around North America, to implement their takeover plan.

These slick well-dressed executives seemed to know nothing about our actual business. They kept saying things like, “We want to learn from you guys,” all the while they dismantled everything that made us unique and gave us a competitive edge.



The year-long takeover was one of the most stressful years of my life. There was talk of layoffs, poor performers were fired, there were even rumors of closing our branch. Everyday there would be whispered conversations in the breakroom, because we never knew what was coming down the pipe next.

But a year or so later I realized that, despite all the anxiety, we were actually doing okay. And in the end, our business was thriving, and new growth was happening in ways it couldn't before. On a daily basis, I was still doing what I always did – providing excellent products and services to my customers.

I learned a lot in that year of anxiety and fear. Not only did I learn to navigate a new computer system and a new set of Operating Procedures, but I also learned a lot about myself.

I learned that worrying is futile. It's a waste of time. I learned that it affects everything. It erodes your relationships, it is wearying on your body, it affects your mental health.



Over the last year, the United Church of Canada has been undergoing massive corporate change. It feels a lot like some of the changes implemented back in 2009. New software systems, new ways of doing things, different people in charge.

I have a number of colleagues who have lost a lot of sleep about it all. They're really stressed out and agnry. And, I can understand why. It feels like everything they have been working for, is falling away. The new way doesn't yet feel like an improvement.

But through the last year, I've decided to not be anxious about it. Not because these changes don't matter, and not because they won't affect me or our churches. But because, this is God's church. It's possible that God is using this time of change to do something we can't quite see yet.



You know, I often realize, as I'm visiting, that for many of you, you have lived through incredible change in your lifetime. If you think about it, just about every aspect of life has changed over the last fifty years! Technology, social values, styles, habits, work-life...everything has changed. Not always for the better, but sometimes those changes have brought about good things.

For some, the one thing that hasn't changed is church. From one year to the next, you could count on church being pretty much the same. The same people, the same place, the same music, the same feel. And then this young minister came along and started changing everything... You've been very patient with me!



But in a world that is constantly changing we do need some things that remain stable. It's like an airplane – we need those back fins – to keep us from rolling too far to one side. We need stabilizers in our lives.



And that's kind of what Paul is on about this morning. Last week Paul instructed his church saying, "Stand firm in the Lord." Today, Paul builds upon that theme, instructing them, "Do not be anxious about anything."



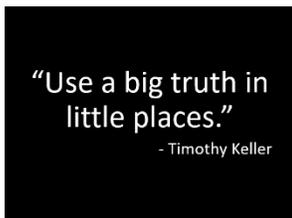
Well, that's all well and good, but how do we actually do that? If you visit the bookstore you will find hundreds of books on the topic of stress management and coping with anxiety. And if you read a couple of those books you will find that they offer a myriad of techniques and approaches to keep your life on the level.

From as simple as drinking more water and special relaxation techniques, to schedule management, the power of positive thinking, diets, pharmaceutical options. Managing our anxiety is a big deal today! And so it should be!

Apparently, anxiety disorders affect 1 in 5 people at some point in their lifetime. The World Health Organization says that 300-million people worldwide struggle with disorders related to anxiety. In fact, Generalized Anxiety Disorder is the most common mental illness in North America.

And here's an interesting fact. Anxiety disorders are especially common in high-income countries. In other words, the more well off we are, the more stressed out we're likely to be! But that's a theological insight for another time.

But interestingly, Paul doesn't approach anxiety like our culture does. He doesn't prescribe some simple relaxation techniques or some positive thinking mantras. In fact, he doesn't begin with a method at all; he starts with a truth.



Timothy Keller says Paul's approach is to "Use a big truth in little places." In other words, Paul uses Christianity's most central reality and he keeps that reality front and center even in the most mundane details of life. What's the truth? It's almost easy to miss it in the text. It's the shortest sentence in the whole letter: "The Lord is near."



You see, this isn't a hopeless denial of reality. After all, Paul writes his letter from a Roman prison cell. Who could blame him if he felt defeated, hopeless and bitter by how things have turned out? And yet, even in the midst of this, Paul is calling his church to hold two realities in view at the same time. There is the reality of the current circumstances (which in Paul's case are pretty brutal), and then there is the reality of the Risen Christ. Both are true. Both illuminate the other.

And if you think about it, in light of this big truth, everything else pales in comparison. "We've been bought by a multinational publicly traded company" – but, the Lord is near! "The church is dwindling" – but, the Lord is near! "I've lost my job" – but even so, the Lord is near. "I've lost a loved one." – The Lord is near!

You see, followers of Jesus don't start with methods like the ubiquitous self-help books. We start with big truth. Because if "the Lord is near" then that reframes reality in such a way that whatever comes next, whatever unfolds doesn't depend on your ability to negate the stress.

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" Why? "Because the Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."  
- Philippians 4:4-6

Paul says, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" But, why does he say this? "Because the Lord is near." He says, "Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God."

"Okay," we might say, "now we're getting into method!" Well, yes, we are. But it's a different kind of method than what the world would prescribe. With the world's methods we're on our own; medicating it, managing it, numbing it or avoiding it. But Paul doesn't want us to do this on our own, he wants us to give it to God.

Have you ever had the experience of God taking your stress? I have. All the time, actually. God doesn't necessarily change the circumstances, but He takes away the worry. And when he does the fog lifts, the fear dissipates, and the reality of things becomes manageable.

"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."  
- Philippians 4:7

Paul says, "And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." There isn't a self-help technique that can come anywhere near that!



As a father of a three-year-old, I am acutely aware of the power of closeness. To a three-year-old the world is filled with terrifying possibilities. But when Daddy has your hand, or scoops you up in his arms, suddenly you can face just about anything. With Dad at your side, the swimming pool goes from a terrifying death trap, to a place of splashes and giggles. When Daddy is there, the dark spooky basement becomes a fun place to play. With Daddy's close at

hand the climb up the playground slide goes from perilous to joyous!

And so, Paul lays out his unique method in light of this big truth. If in fact, "The Lord is near," then we can follow Paul's simple steps to living with joy even in the face of challenge and adversity.

**Paul's Method:**

1. Prayer & Petition (Thanksgiving and request)

The first step is prayer and petition. "Pray with thanksgiving and present your requests to God." Again, this is an acknowledgment of the reality that God is not a distant and uninvolved overseer, but a present and caring Father.

**Paul's Method:**

1. Prayer & Petition (Thanksgiving and request)
2. Think

Paul's second step is to "think." "Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things." The truth is, our lives are so often lived worrying about the monster in the closet. Paul says, don't fill your mind with things that "could be" but live in the truth of what is." That's a very healthy way of living. I suspect our therapists and psychologists would agree with Paul here!

As we've been navigating Andrea's health challenges over the last 20 months, it sometimes feels like we are moving from one bad news situation to another. Insurance companies and employers are always looking for ways to get off the hook, and progress has been slow. Imagining the terrible possibilities for us can be consuming.

Now, we're not out of the woods, but at the moment we're doing okay. And so, we think about what is true. We think about what is right in our lives. We enjoy one another and the blessings that God has bestowed on us even in the midst of our struggles. We let God guard our hearts and minds through our prayers.

**Paul's Method:**

1. Prayer & Petition (Thanksgiving and request)
2. Think
3. Do what Paul does

Finally, Paul says, "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me or seen in me – put it into

practice.” This is more of what Paul was saying last week, when he exhorted us to follow him and those like him as role models. And last week, we saw how our church is full of people who live faithfully and who can, in our times of challenge, show us a different way to be in the world.



Often when we face life’s difficulties, we feel like we’re the only one in the world who has every experienced this. We feel alone. The thing I’ve learned about a church family is there is always someone or “someones” who have been through it. “We’re not alone” in more ways than one. God is with us, but we are also strengthened by those who God has brought across our path to journey life’s bumpy road together. I don’t know where we would be without the blessing of our church family over the last year and a half!

So, yes, Paul offers us yet one more method to deal with our stress and our anxiety. But in a world cluttered with self-help solutions, and a rising problem with anxiety, I’m putting my hope in this time-tested approach.

Christians are people who are deeply rooted in reality while also keeping our eyes on our hope. We can, in the moment, be sad and disappointed, we can be well aware of the challenges we face, but even so, we can say, “This is not my whole story.” In Christ, and through Christ, my story is so much bigger than my immediate circumstances.

Paul says to the Corinthian church, “Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all.”

So, rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Because the Lord is near. And that, makes all difference.

So, may the peace of God, which transcends all understanding guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.  
Thanks be to God, Amen.