

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, February 21, 2010**

**HOW TO WEATHER THE WINTER BLUES...
AND OTHER LIFE CHALLENGES**

Philippians 4:4-9

A man named David Arnold describes what happened on a trip to Paris several years ago. "When I arrived in Paris," he says, "it was dark and rainy, and at the height of the tourist season. I didn't have a hotel reservation, and I didn't speak French. To make matters worse, Paris' subway system, the Metro, was on strike, and getting a taxi was nearly impossible. The train station was swarming with people who shared my predicament, and many were settling down on their luggage for the night. Nearby, a little boy seemed on the verge of tears." That is understandable, isn't it? As David Arnold walked by, he heard the boy's mother say to him in a distinctly British accent: "But dear, this is what is called an adventure."

Arnold says: "I'm not sure what effect those words had on the boy's visit to Paris, but it did wonders for mine."

Does it seem to you that this winter has been, well, an adventure? We've had more snow this winter in the Washington metro area than any year since they began keeping records back in 1899. Dulles Airport has recorded more snow this winter than they have gotten in Buffalo, New York. What is wrong with this picture? Last week, as you probably know, there was measurable snow on the ground in 49 of the 50 United States. Only Hawaii (imagine that!) did not have any snow. A little more than a week ago (on Friday, February 12), two-thirds of the land mass of the entire U. S. had a covering of snow.

When round one of the blizzard of 2010 hit us two weeks ago, people were calling it "snowmagedon" or the "snowpocalypse," and just about everything came to a standstill. The federal government was closed for several days. Schools were closed for more than a week. We were snowed in and "snowverwhelmed" by it all. After a few days, the novelty wore off, and an epidemic of cabin fever set in. A week ago Friday, on the first day the federal government reopened for business, the traffic congestion was so bad, in many cases the result of lanes lost to the snow, it was called "the commute from (you know where)." And, with snow piled high in parking lots and along the sides of streets, we're still not back to normal, the herculean efforts of snow plows and road crews notwithstanding.

The words of that mother to her son in the Paris train station may just be what we need to hear: "But dear, this is what is called an adventure." No doubt about it, this winter has been hard on everyone. It has been hard on businesses, hard on schools, hard on kids (even if they enjoyed all of their snow days), hard on moms (and dads, too), hard on our seniors, hard on the road crews, hard on the electric company, hard on sports teams, hard on the budgets of state and local governments. It has been a season of postponements or cancellations, inconveniences and disappointments. It has been hard on everyone.

We can hope that the worst of this winter is now behind us. We can hope there will be no more big snows, no ice, no flooding, no more hazardous road conditions, no more school closings. But there is no guarantee. There may yet be some more surprises for us this winter, more winter for us to weather.

So, what can we do to weather the winter blues? What can we do to keep from being overwhelmed by it all in our spirits? What can we do to weather the other kinds of storms – or adventures – we experience in life?

As usual, as always, God’s Word speaks to our circumstances in life. These verses in Philippians 4 speak powerfully to us about weathering the winter blues or handling whatever challenges we may be facing.

You probably know that Paul was in prison when he wrote this letter to the Philippians. He was in Rome awaiting a trial which he knew could well result in his death. We could understand if he had been depressed under the circumstances. But what you find when you read through this letter from prison is not discouragement or despair, but joy. The words for *joy* or *rejoice* appear more than a dozen times in Philippians. In the midst of circumstances that were both undesirable and unpromising from an earthly perspective, Paul radiated the joy of the Lord – the joy that comes from trusting God fully and finding our satisfaction in Him.

You and I are not in prison the way Paul was. But it can feel like we are prisoners of winter and all the snow. There are other kinds of prisons, too. You may find yourself in a prison of pain, whether physical or emotional. You may be a prisoner of some kind of fear or anxiety. Maybe it is a prison of loneliness. Or doubts that you just can’t seem to shake off. Maybe you find yourself in a prison caused by financial stresses.

Whatever our prisons, whatever our circumstances, God’s Word gives us practical principles to apply to our lives in such a time as this. Here are several principles for weathering the winter blues and other life challenges.

1. REJOICE IN THE LORD ALWAYS

This is so important that after Paul says it he says it again: “Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” (4:4).

One of the shortest verses in the Bible (and, thus, one of the easiest to memorize) is 1 Thessalonians 5:16. There Paul says: “Be joyful always.” Three simple words.

These two verses (Philippians 4:4 and 1 Thessalonians 5:16) tell us what God wants us to do and when He wants us to do it.

What are we to do? We are to rejoice in the Lord. We are to be full of joy.

When are we to do it? Always.

There is never a time when it is not time to rejoice in the Lord. Our joy is not a function of our circumstances. It is not dependent on what is happening in our lives. Joy is something that transcends what the Germans call our *sitz im leben*, our situation in life.

When does God want us to be joyful? In good times and bad times. In sickness and in health. In plenty and in want. Always. No matter what we're facing in life.

Bob Reccord tells this story in his book *Forged by Fire: How God Shapes Those He Loves*:

“As I write this book, I'm having to exercise the faith of dealing with the prison of pain. Unexpectedly, I suffered a severe cervical spine injury. The pain was so excruciating, the hospital staff couldn't even get me into the MRI until they had significantly sedated me. The MRI showed significant damage at three major points in the cervical area. The orthopedic surgeon's assistant later told me, 'Bob, your neck is a wreck.' He said there was hardly any way I could avoid surgery.

“Because of the swelling of injured nerve bundles, the only way I could relieve the pain was to use a strong, prescribed narcotic and to lie on bags of ice. Sleep, what little there was, came only by sitting in a reclining chair.

“(About) 48 hours from the onset of the injury, doctors estimated that I had lost about 80 percent of the strength in my left arm. Three fingers on my left hand totally lost feeling. Even the slightest movements would send waves of pain hurtling down my left side and shoulder. To add insult to injury, physicians said I had to step away completely from my work (which I love) and begin to wear a neck brace ... 24 hours a day for five weeks.

“About halfway through that experience, I found myself sitting on the screened-in porch behind our home. The day was cold and blustery, but I was committed to being outside, just for a change of scenery. Suddenly a bird landed on the railing and began to sing. On that cold, rainy day, I couldn't believe any creature had a reason to sing. I wanted to shoot that bird! But he continued to warble, and I had no choice but to listen.

“The next day found me on the porch again, but this time the atmosphere was bright, sunny, and warm. As I sat, being tempted to feel sorry for myself, suddenly the bird (at least it looked like the same one) returned. And he was singing again! Where was that shotgun?

“Then an amazing truth hit me head on: The bird sang in the cold rain as well as the sunny warmth. His song was not altered by outward circumstances, but it was held constant by an internal condition. It was as though God quietly said to me, 'You've got the same choice, Bob. You will either let external circumstances mold your attitude, or your attitude will rise above the external circumstances. You choose!'”

Joy is something you can choose. To rejoice in the Lord – and to rejoice in Him always – is a choice you and I can make. It is a choice God tells us to make.

It is not merely a command to rejoice. Nor is it merely a command to rejoice always. It is both a command and an invitation to rejoice *in the Lord* always. Our joy in life is not found in changing circumstances, in our wealth or possessions which may be here today and gone tomorrow, in our physical health which could change in an instant, in our relationships or anything else. The source of true, lasting joy is the Lord Jesus Christ. God wants us to find our joy in Him. God wants us to find our joy in the assurance of His unchanging love for us. God wants us to find our joy in the saving work of Christ for us on the cross. God wants us to find our joy in the sure and certain hope of eternal life we have through the death and resurrection of Christ. God wants us to find our joy in knowing and trusting Him in all the seasons and storms, all the prisons and problems of life.

When we choose to rejoice in the Lord, even when it seems like there is no reason to rejoice, God graciously enables us to rise above the circumstances which so often get us down.

Whether it is the winter weather or some other challenge you're facing, rejoice in the Lord. Always. I will say it again: Rejoice!

2. BE PATIENT

That is another way of saying what Paul says in verse 5: "Let your gentleness be evident to all." The word translated "gentleness" is the Greek word *epieikes*, which refers to an attitude of gentleness or kindness when exactly the opposite is what you might expect. It is a spirit of patience and courtesy toward others rather than rage when road conditions or traffic congestion or the actions of other drivers threaten to bring out the worst in you.

Patience, says Paul in Colossians 3:12, is one of the qualities of the new nature in Christ with which we are to clothe ourselves. It takes patience to weather the winter blues. It takes patience with our circumstances, patience with other people, and patience with ourselves.

Someone said: "Boys will be boys. But just be patient, and (eventually) boys will be men." Winter will be winter. And it may last longer than we like. But just be patient, and one of these days, one of these months, all the snow will have melted and winter will be spring. Thank God this is not Narnia under the spell of the White Witch, where it was "always winter ... but never Christmas"! Winter doesn't last forever. Spring will come.

In the meantime, we must endure it with gentleness and patience. And we must bear with one another in love (Ephesians 4:2). Isn't it ironic how prolonged periods of cold, wintry weather can cause us to lose our cool with one another? If we let it.

Let your gentleness and forbearance be evident to all. Bear with your circumstances. They won't last forever. And bear with one another in love.

3. TURN YOUR WORRIES INTO PRAYERS

Worry is probably the most unproductive thing you can ever do. It is the biggest waste of time and energy in the world. Why? Because worry produces absolutely nothing – except for ulcers and other stress-related health problems.

Some of you have heard before what the noted baseball player/philosopher Mickey Rivers once said:

Ain't no use worryin' 'bout what you got control of
 'Cause if you got control of it
 Ain't no use worryin' 'bout it.
 And ain't no use worryin' 'bout what you ain't got control of
 'Cause if you ain't got control of it
 Ain't no use worryin' 'bout it.

Amen!

Listen to what Paul says in verse 6: “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”

What are we to worry or be anxious about? Nothing.

What are we to bring to God in prayer? Everything. Every concern. Every need. Every situation. Every fear. Every doubt. Every desire. Every request. Every worry. Everything. There is nothing in your life that is too big for God. And nothing too small.

Be anxious about nothing. But in everything, bring your praises and prayers and petitions to God. Turn your worries into prayers. And let God replace your anxiety with peace – His peace that is beyond our human capacity to fully understand or explain (4:7). When we let go of our worries and fears, and let God be God in our lives, He gives us His peace to guard and protect our hearts and minds from enemy attacks. It may or may not bring any change to our external circumstances – there may still be a prison of some kind to endure – but His peace changes us. It enables us to sing “It Is Well with My Soul” even when we’re dealing with some really hard things in life.

4. THINK ABOUT THESE THINGS

If you want to weather the winter blues, or any of life’s challenges, train your mind to think about the things Paul commends in verse 8: “Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble (honorable), whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable (commendable) – if anything is excellent or worthy of praise – think about these things.”

In these winter days, with all their inconveniences, with all their challenges, take time each day to praise the Lord and forget not all His benefits, as David said in Psalm 103:2. Focus

your mind and heart on the One who “redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion” (Psalm 103:4).

What will it be for you? Will you focus on your circumstances, on the snow, on the inconveniences of winter, on the disappointments and difficulties of life? Or will you fix your eyes and your mind on the goodness and promises of God?

Here is what God has promised, regardless of the weather or the circumstances in our lives. As we have already seen in verse 7, He has promised His peace to serve as a garrison around our hearts and minds. Second, to those who trust in Him through the Lord Jesus Christ, He has promised His presence to protect, guide and equip us. In verse 9 Paul says: “The God of peace will be with you.” Not only does He give us His peace, He gives us Himself. Third, He has promised His provision to meet all our needs. Verse 19 says: “My God will supply all your needs according to His (incomparable) glorious riches in Christ Jesus.”

Be careful what you think about. Be careful what you put into your mind. If you are filling your mind with junk that is pulling you into the gutter, if you are filling your mind with stuff that is negative and demeaning or depressing or unwholesome, stop what you are doing and ask God to help you instead to think about what is good and life-ennobling and honoring to Him. God *will* help you if you let Him take charge of your life. All of it.

If you want to weather the winter blues, if you want to gain the victory when you face hard things, be careful what you think about. And keep your eyes on Jesus.

CONCLUSION

My friends, this winter has been an adventure. And it is not over yet. This life is an adventure full of ups and downs, surprises and disappointments, blessings and challenges. And it will be until we die (or Jesus comes back first).

Do you have the winter blues? Are you facing a challenge of some kind in your life? Here is how you can weather it:

- Find your joy in the Lord and rejoice in Him always.
- Let your gentleness and patience be evident to everyone.
- Turn your worries into prayers and replace your anxiety with God’s peace.
- Think about the blessing of God and all that is good in life.

Do these things with a heart full of faith, and it will be well with your soul. May it be so in us, to the glory and praise of God. Amen.