

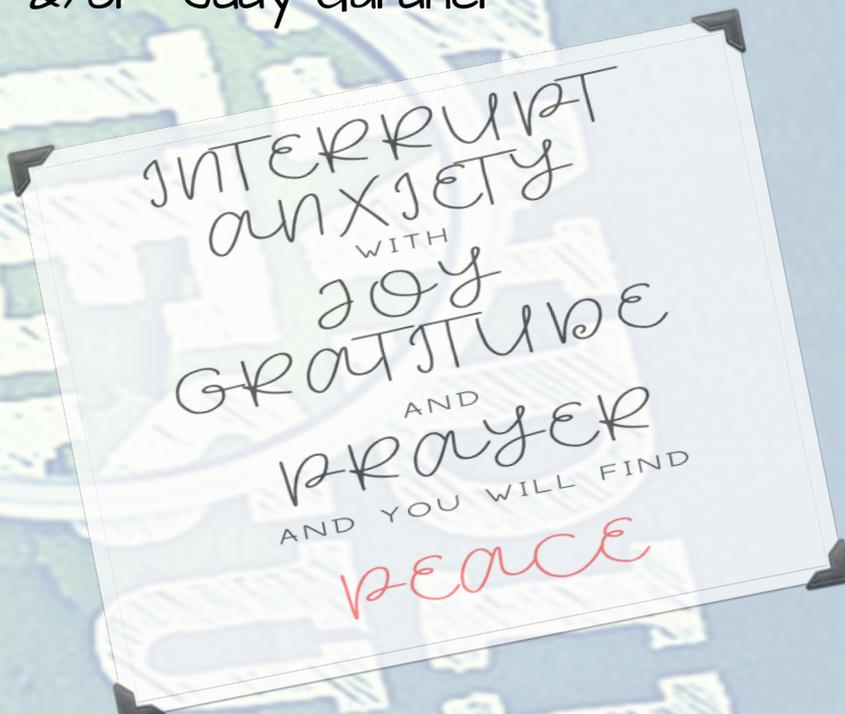
March 22-26, 2021 Edition

The "BIG Story" Of The Bible #42

Finding Jesus In The Old Testament
Finding Peace In The Midst Of The Storm

By: Ed &/or Judy Gardner

March 20/21, 2021



INTERRUPT
ANXIETY
WITH
JOY
GRATITUDE
AND
PRAYER
AND YOU WILL FIND
PEACE

When you read the Bible ask yourself if there's anything you're reading where God is speaking to you personally... anything that you need to start applying in your own life. Then try to reflect on what you read... what you heard from God throughout the day and we know you'll be blessed.

*** These are EXTREMELY rough drafts so if you see typos... well you knew the rest ;0) These are essentially the ramblings of thoughts running through Ed or Judy's mind the week before Ed teaches a lesson on these concepts. They are pretty much how Ed gets ready for the weekends. They are not necessarily coherent so if they don't make much sense... sorry about that.

**** Also these devotionals are the product of both Judy & Ed's experiences and education. Figuring out which are from Judy and which are from Ed (sometimes both are contained in a single day) is half the fun.

You can also get these devotionals on Riverside's Facebook page (www.facebook.com/EagleRiverside). You don't have to have a FB account to read them but if you do have an account if you "like" the Riverside page and click the box to get updates the devos will show up on your wall every weekday (along with other news and event updates).

These are recycled reflections from Thanksgiving weekend of 2019 but they hit so close to home with what we're all experiencing now I didn't bother to "tweak" them to "seem" current. They already seem pretty current to me. Sorry if this lesson is old hat to you but I know I could use the refresher.

Monday Reflection: Confession time- this is probably the first time I've sat down to write out "fresh" reflections since my heart attack in August of 2019. I'm probably at about 90-95% of where I was before my health crisis and as we approached Thanksgiving I realized how much the lesson I give pretty much every year around this date impacted me in my darkest and scariest moments during and immediately after the "event" (that's what people in my cardiac rehab class call their heart attacks- "THE EVENT").

So I decided I'd take the time to write out my thoughts now- after I had a REALLY good opportunity to put into practice (and I don't use the word "practice" lightly because that's exactly what it was/is) the lessons I've been teaching at Thanksgiving for the last 20 years.

Up until about August 13, 2017 (when Pastor Jeff died suddenly and plunged me into the first crisis in which I had the opportunity to "practice" the steps outlined in this lesson) whenever I gave the lesson on the interaction between joy, gratitude, prayer and peace I always felt kind of bad because I didn't really have that much to worry about. I'm not a natural "worrier" anyways (those of you who know me better than you wish you did can attest to that fact- sometimes I probably should worry more than I naturally do ;o), and my life was pretty smooth. Not perfectly smooth but I hadn't really had a huge crisis in most of my time here at Riverside Community Church. But every year (and sometimes more than that) I would present the apostle Paul's 5 step prescription for dealing with worry. I would apologize and admit that I must sound like a used car salesman telling people to just practice these steps and you'll go from worry to peace just-like-that. I kept teaching the lesson because I could see how important it was for those of you whose lives were being turned upside down by mayhem.

Then in August of 2017 I had my first real test when it came to putting-my-money-where-my-mouth-is, so to speak. How would I handle this massive (at least for me) crisis? I spent night after night (and many days too) running through Paul's 5 step process/recipe/prescription for peace. I was glad it was basically tattooed into my brain after 18 years of teaching it- often twice a year. Somehow we made it through the last quarter of 2017 and then somehow we made it through 2018 and I was just starting to feel like things had calmed down in my life when on August 14, 2019 (exactly two years and one day after Jeff's sudden passing) I got some more excitement in my life (and many of you got to go along with me on that "exciting" ride in your own way). When I started feeling crummy I didn't have time to "worry". When I went home and told Judy to take me to the doctor I didn't have time to "worry". When the ride to the doctor suddenly became a ride to the fire station I didn't have time to "worry". And when the trip to the fire station became a ride in an ambulance to the emergency room I didn't have time to "worry".

At first.

But after I had thought about what I could actually do at the moment to try to take care of Judy (who had plenty of time to "worry" while I was too busy to "worry" I am sure) and as I laid (or would it be "as I lay" or maybe even "as I lie"? My English professors would be so

disappointed in me because I have no idea) in that ambulance and started to think about what was happening and just how bad is this and what's going to happen as a result of this I started to find time to "worry" and started to see the border of freak-out-town. I didn't want to go to freak-out-town so I tried to calm myself down while riding in that ambulance and struggling with the pain I was feeling in my chest. "Stop worrying, Ed!" I told myself. "Freaking out would be worse for your heart, if that's what this is. So stop it!"

That didn't work.

But do you know what did help, quite a bit actually. Paul's 5 step plan/process/recipe/prescription for dealing with stress/worry/anxiety/freaking out. I closed my eyes and started reciting Philippians 4:4-6 over and over and tried to follow Paul's advice (do you know why I give memory verses at the end of every lesson sheet each week? It's so when you're lying on your back in an ambulance (or in a situation where you don't have access to your Bible) you can still meditate on God's words and find peace through the power of His words). Advice that I had given to anyone who would listen at Thanksgiving time about the interaction of joy, gratitude, prayer and peace. I won't say it was easy to think through while I was dealing with everything I was dealing with on that ambulance ride and during those murky moments in the emergency room and the catheter lab while getting my stent but I hate to think about what those moments would have been like just winging it with my-best-thinking on the subject. So this week I'm going to tell anyone who will listen (and myself again) about Paul's 5 step plan/process/recipe/prescription for dealing with stress/worry/anxiety/freaking out. I'm going to tell you how important it was for me to have these words imprinted on my heart (every time I talk about the spiritual concept of the heart now it takes on an entirely more vivid picture than it ever used to) rather than trying to find these words in my Bible. When I needed them most I didn't have access to my Bible or to Google. That's the reason I give you memory verses every week- so we can move the words of God from the pages of the Bible into our very hearts where we can access them when we really need them.

So as we prepare to look at Paul's words on worry let's start out the week by looking at Jesus' words on worry from the Sermon On The Mount:

So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For... your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own. Matthew 6:31-34 (NIV)

Tuesday Reflection: So how does the Bible suggest we handle worry? That's a great question. Jesus says simply, don't do it (although technically that's not true- He tells us to "seek first his kingdom and his righteousness" which is not simply saying stop-it!). Easier said than done, right? Especially when things are at their darkest. Jesus must not understand what I'm going through, right?

But let's remember who Jesus' audience was at the Sermon On The Mount. These people were the dregs of first century society. They were poor, sick, abused, disadvantaged and powerless. They struggled every day with food, shelter and freedom. In 21st century America

we are in just about every way better off than they were. We are better educated, wealthier (even if you're one of the poorest people in Eagle River Alaska you are fabulously wealthy compared to the people Jesus was preaching to in the first century), healthier, safer, have more freedom and more opportunities than they did. Wow! That must mean we don't have anything to worry about, right?

Not. So. Much.

By just about every expert's understanding we worry more than they did. We struggle with depression and anxiety on historical levels even though in just about every measurable category we are better off. Why? Probably because we have the time and space to really think about our lives. The people of the ancient world were busy just trying to survive. We don't have to worry about "surviving"- we just have to wonder how we're doing in our lives?

And it's killing us.

There was one guy who had the time and space to really think about his life and the lives of others- Solomon. He was ray of sunshine (not really though). Have you read Ecclesiastes? It is one of the darkest, most depressing books in the entire Bible.

So that brings us to, well, us. How are we doing at following Jesus' advice to "not worry about tomorrow"? Depends on the person but most of us struggle with this to one degree or another in our society/culture. So what's the answer? I'm glad you asked. In Philippians 4 Paul writes this:

Always be full of joy in the Lord. I say it again-rejoice! Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon. Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus. And now, dear brothers and sisters, one final thing. Fix your thoughts on what is true, and honorable, and right, and pure, and lovely, and admirable. Think about things that are excellent and worthy of praise. Keep putting into practice all you learned and received from me-everything you heard from me and saw me doing. Then the God of peace will be with you. Philippians 4:4-9 (NLT)

Now Paul is writing to people who have it slightly better than the people Jesus was speaking to at the Sermon On The Mount. But they are still having problems (don't we all to one extent or another in one area or another?). Paul writes to them what would come to be known as the "Treatise On Joy". The book of Philippians uses the word, joy, enjoy & rejoice more than the rest of his letters combined. Hearing that we may think Paul was in a really good place. Maybe on vacation or maybe he's experiencing a particularly easy season of his life.

Nope.

He's in jail. In fact he's pretty sure he'll never get out of jail. He's pretty sure he's just waiting for the emperor to sign his death warrant and then he'll be checking out of this world. And in that setting and frame of mind he writes the greatest work on joy that has ever been written. How? By following this 5 step plan/process/recipe/prescription for dealing with stress/worry/anxiety/freaking out. Tomorrow we'll begin looking at the step by step process and breaking

the steps themselves down but today maybe it might be smart to spend some time with the passage of scripture printed above and if you're wanting to make sure that when things get really dark and scary you will always have access to this 5 step plan maybe spend some time actually memorizing the words of Paul because you might not always have access to a Bible or your phone when you need these words the most.

Wednesday Reflection: So today we begin looking at the 5 step plan/process/recipe/prescription for dealing with stress/worry/anxiety/freaking out that Paul lays out in Philippians chapter 4 and it begins, interestingly enough, with joy:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I say it again-rejoice! Let everyone see that you are considerate in all you do. Remember, the Lord is coming soon. Philippians 4:4 (NLT)

We will look at the Pollyanna Principle (or if you'd rather the Forrest Gump Principle) on Friday but it's worth mentioning here- choosing joy as the default setting of my life does NOT mean I pretend bad stuff isn't happening all around me (and all around you too). I think that's one of the things that has caused people to wonder how anyone with a brain could ever choose to be a Christian- don't we see how bad things are?

Yes. We do. So did Paul. So did Jesus. It's the reason He came to live the life I should've lived (but couldn't) and die the death I would have died if He hadn't stepped in and taken my place so that He could share the reward that rightfully belongs only to Him. He did that because He knew how bad things are now and how MUCH worse they could be in our future had He not stepped in and taken my place so that I could take His place (theologians have a fancy phrase for that- substitutionary atonement which simply means Jesus took my place so I could take His place but there's no getting around how crazy that idea is when you really stop and think about it- at least there's not for me).

Things can be very dark in this world. But they can be very bright too. Choosing joy is a follower-of-Jesus' first step in overwhelming the darkness that can come with worry due to the troubles and sufferings of this world. Paul invites us to "Rejoice in the Lord always."

Always.

And when I actively choose joy- no matter what's happening all around me- then I push back the darkness that this world can throw at me (and you too by the way. Sometimes I get more sidetracked by what happens to the people I love than the things that happen to me). So how do I "choose" joy? For me it all comes down to how I choose to respond and look at the events in my life that threaten to rain down darkness upon me. I remember the weeks and months leading up to Pastor Jeff's sudden passing back in 2017- an event that rocked Riverside Community Church and rocked my own life more than that crazy earthquake we all experienced in November of 2018. Our youth pastor of 4 years- Mitchell Slater- had announced that he was moving to Florida one week before Jeff died but he had told me and Jeff he was leaving about a month before that. Mitchell was so loved at Riverside and we both knew his leaving would rock the church. Jeff & I kept reciting one of our favorite sayings:

IT'S ALL GOING TO BE OK IN THE END. IF IT'S NOT OK, IT'S NOT THE END.

Why did I choose that font for that “saying”? Because it brings me joy. It makes me smile. Sometimes it’s the little things that add up to a lot. Anywho, Jeff and I repeated that to ourselves, to each other and to the congregation often in the weeks and months before he died. On August 13th, 2017 I had a tough time believing that happy little saying. I chose to believe it but I had a tough time convincing my heart that it was true. Joy isn’t the experience of everything going our way. It’s how we choose to approach life when everything is NOT going our way. Maybe you’ve heard another happy-little saying:

JOY ISN'T WAITING FOR THE STORM TO PASS.
IT'S LEARNING TO DANCE IN THE RAIN.

There’s that font again. Isn’t that fun? Anyways, a few days after Pastor Jeff died we celebrated his life and his influence at Riverside. The auditorium was PACKED (although I didn’t know how packed until later- I was in a very dark place and I was sitting up front and didn’t really look back until later when I got up to speak about Jeff’s impact on my life, on Riverside church and on God’s kingdom and then I was blown away) and Jeff’s kids (CJ, Caleb & Caitlyn) along with a few of his friends and family from down south did what Jeff would have loved to have been there to see- they danced in the rain. I saw those kids do something that is braver than just about anything I’ve ever witnessed. They sang and played songs that were meaningful to their dad. And it was the most beautiful and in some ways the most terrible thing I’ve ever seen.

Sometimes that’s what it means to “choose joy”. It’s not an emotion like happiness. Joy is a decision about the default setting I choose to live my life with. CS Lewis called joy “the serious business of heaven”. It is important to choose joy in the easier times of our lives so that when the darkness threatens to wash over us we have practiced enough that we can “dance in the rain”. God has invited His children to learn this incredibly important concept since the very beginning. Even in the Old Testament:

Fig trees may no longer bloom, or vineyards produce grapes; olive trees may be fruitless, and harvest time a failure; sheep pens may be empty, and cattle stalls vacant- but I will still celebrate because the Lord God saves me. Habakuk 3:17-18 (CEV)

What Habakuk says may not seem like a huge deal to you but in an agrarian/farming/ranching culture like Israel was the picture he paints would have been an economic meltdown of Biblical proportions (literally in this case ;o). But Habakuk paints the worst scenario anyone can imagine and then gives a defiant “nevertheless” in the face of that bleak picture.

No. Matter. What. I. Will. Choose. Joy/Celebration. Why? Because joy is not just the serious-business-of-heaven. It’s also the spiritual practice that more than any other imparts strength to us. I grew up never knowing that joy was a spiritual practice/habit/discipline. Nobody told me. When I learned it was one of the spiritual practices/habits/disciplines it immediately became my favorite. It still is. It’s not always easy to “practice” joy but I’ve learned how important it is to always-be-joyful- because it’s in the moments when it’s the toughest to choose joy that I need the strength it brings the most.

In the book of Nehemiah in the Old Testament there’s a moment in Israel’s history that is pretty important. The people of Israel had been carried away into captivity by the Babylonians but when Persia conquered Babylon they allowed the Israelites to return to

Jerusalem. But all was not well in Jerusalem. Ezra the scribe read the Law of God out loud to the people of Israel and as they listened to the words of the law they realized how far they had strayed from God's plan for them. They. Were. Devastated. So here was Nehemiah's prescription for them:

Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher, and the Levites who were teaching said to all the people, "This is a holy day to the Lord your God. Don't be sad or cry." All the people had been crying as they listened to the words of the Teachings. Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy good food and sweet drinks. Send some to people who have none, because today is a holy day to the Lord. Don't be sad, because the joy of the Lord will make you strong." The Levites helped calm the people, saying, "Be quiet, because this is a holy day. Don't be sad." Then all the people went away to eat and drink, to send some of their food to others, and to celebrate with great joy. They finally understood what they had been taught. Nehemiah 8:9-12 (NLT)

You might be in a pretty sad place right now. You might wonder how it's ever going to be ok again. What would God recommend? Celebrate. Don't be sad. Choose joy. Why? Because it will make you strong. And you are going to need strength for the days that are ahead. It is the first step in Paul's 5 step plan/process/recipe/prescription for dealing with stress/worry/anxiety/freaking out. So how are we doing?

Thursday Reflection: So yesterday we talked about how joy is Paul's first step to dealing with worry. Today we look at the second step- don't worry. About anything:

Rejoice in the Lord always... Don't worry about anything... Philippians 4:5 (NLT)

Gulp! Did he just say don't worry... about ANYTHING?!?!?!?

Yes. He did. It's the second step in his prescription. Now that doesn't mean "don't think about the things that worry you." Nobody can control (at least not much they can't) the things that they think about. If I asked you NOT to think about a pink polka dotted hippopotamus wearing a purple tutu named Constance could you stop yourself from picturing her? Probably not. You're probably thinking about her right now and why she's wearing a purple tutu. Is she a ballerina? The mind boggles with the possibilities.

Jesus knows you can't control where your thoughts go just by trying really hard not to think about something. But He (and here Paul) still ask you not to worry (which might make you worry more because you were already worried about something and now that you see Jesus and Paul tell you not to worry- what does that mean?!?!?!). There's this great moment on the night before Jesus died when He's trying to teach his disciples (and us by the way) a very important lesson on humility and so he washes His disciples feet DURING THE LAST SUPPER. The disciples have LOTS of questions and so there's this moment where Jesus says this:

You don't understand now what I am doing, but someday you will. John 13:7 (NLT)

Earlier this week I saw that verse on Facebook in the form of a meme with the words, "this is why I try not to worry" above the words of Jesus. I was blown away. Couldn't that go for an awful lot of my life- I don't understand now what Jesus is doing but someday I will. That's the only way I know of to even find a jumping off point for not-worrying. I've talked quite a bit

this week about Pastor Jeff's death and the impact it had on me. I have to admit I still don't understand what Jesus was doing there. I have SO MANY WHY's. Ultimately I remind myself of something I've been reminding myself of since the first real tragedy I ever experienced in my life (our first miscarriage back in 1999). I don't understand now but I believe one day I will.

I have had similar thoughts since my heart attack in August. So. Many. Why's.

For me the jumping off point for not-worrying is to trust. Not easy but I learned a long time ago there's really no place else for me to go- as Peter says in John chapter 6, Jesus has the words of life. I don't know where else to find those words. And so I stick with Jesus trusting that He knows what He's doing even when it doesn't make much sense to me. I'm better at it some days than others but I think we get credit for practicing even when we fail miserably.

So Paul says to choose joy and then don't-worry-about-anything. So what do I do instead? If I can't control what I think then what do I do with those thoughts that if I'm not careful will turn into worry and flood my heart and soul with darkness? Paul is glad we asked:

Rejoice in the Lord always... Don't worry about anything... instead, pray about everything.
Philippians 4:4-6 (NLT)

This is genius! Paul invites us to take the thoughts we cannot control and turn them into prayers. To take those thoughts that are invading our minds and threatening our hearts and talk to Jesus about them. And when I do something powerful happens- even if I don't realize it. Prayer takes things I have zero control over and turns them over to the only One Who does have some control.

But here is where we have to be VERY careful- it doesn't mean Jesus will fix everything according to how we think things should be fixed. If you were at the noon service on August 13, 2017 then you know that between the end of the 10:30 service and the start of the noon service Pastor Jeff started feeling pretty crummy and Connie (his wife) took him to the hospital. He finished the final song of the 10:30 service and bounced off the stage in typical Pastor Jeff fashion and in the next couple of minutes something happened to him internally (we aren't sure exactly what). Connie came and told me he was struggling and she was taking him to the hospital (which is when I KNEW something really bad was happening because in the 10 years he had worked at Riverside he never missed one opportunity to lead God's people in worship). I walked them out to the car and prayed for Jeff while we were walking. I got up before we started the noon service and told the few people who were already there (if you know Riverside you know that last service usually starts with about 5 people in the seats and people trickle in until there's around 100 a few minutes into the service) about Pastor Jeff and we prayed for him. Then when I got up to preach I told the people who had come in after we started (the vast majority) about Pastor Jeff and we prayed for him. Then after my sermon we prayed for him again.

I left the church building to hurry to the hospital but on the way Caleb (one of Jeff's sons) called and told me Jeff had passed away in the ambulance. I was shaken. What does that mean about prayer? We. Prayed. Four. Times. For. Him! What does all of that mean about prayer, I wondered. Somewhere over the last 2,000 years Christians have gotten the idea that prayer is our cosmic to-do list for God. That if we pray and if we pray correctly then God will

do whatever we ask Him to do. Prayer is powerful but it's not God's marching orders. Even Jesus knows that. In the Garden on the night before He died He prayed 3 different times that God would take-this-cup-from-me.

"Father, if you are willing, take this cup from me; yet not my will, but yours be done." ...And being in anguish, he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground. Luke 22:42-44 (NLT)

Jesus knew something we somehow choose to ignore- just because you ask for something in prayer doesn't mean you'll get it. That's a hard truth but it is a truth. And yet we are invited to bring all of our thoughts, our fears, our worries and our hopes to God and lay them before Him and the leave them there and let God honor them with His infinite love and knowledge and understanding. Prayer is telling God what I most need/want/desire and then trusting Him to be God because I know I am not.

That's what this step in Paul's prescription is about- taking my worries and talking to God about them and telling Him what frightens us and what we'd love to see happen and what we're terrified might happen and anything and everything else we can think of. It doesn't necessarily change the outcome (although sometimes it does which I don't know about you but that confuses me even more! Sometimes I want to just aaaaaarrrrrrrgggggggghhhhhhhh out loud ;o) but it changes you and me. And it leads to something pretty important that we'll get to tomorrow. But for today, choose joy ~ don't worry about anything ~ pray about everything.

Friday Reflection: So steps 1-3 for Paul's 5 step plan/process/recipe/prescription for dealing with stress/worry/anxiety/freaking out were: 1) always choose joy 2) don't worry about anything 3) pray about everything. Today we look at the next steps beginning with step 4- be thankful in all things:

Rejoice in the Lord always... Don't worry about anything; instead, pray about everything. Tell God what you need, and thank him for all he has done. Philippians 4:4-6 (NLT)

Ahhh- NOW you get to Thanksgiving! Why didn't you put this step in yesterday's reflection? Well, because if I did yesterday's reflection would have been even longer than it already was. You should be thanking God that I didn't try to shoehorn it into yesterday's reflection ;o).

So where was I? Oh yeah, be thankful in all things. That may seem like another impossible task but it's not. This is not pretending bad stuff doesn't exist- this is more like the Pollyanna Principle. If you've never seen the movie then you might think that a "Pollyanna" is someone who is so nauseatingly optimistic that they pretend like nothing bad ever happens. If that's what you think then you've obviously never seen the movie. Pollyanna is a little orphan girl who has lots of suffering in her life. Her dad taught her the "Glad Game" before he died when she was hoping to find a dolly in the charity barrel in her town one Christmas Eve but instead she was given the only thing left in the barrel- crutches. She was devastated and so her dad taught her the glad-game. He said let's think of one thing to be glad for in this situation and what they decided was they were both "glad" she didn't actually need crutches.

This "game" shaped her life. My favorite part of the movie is when she is sitting around with her aunt's servants (after her dad died she was taken in by her mother's sister who didn't

want Pollyanna around but felt it her "duty" and so Pollyanna had a place to stay but was treated pretty badly) while they complain bitterly about how bad church was (I know- those of you who call Riverside home can't identify with that at all but just try to imagine it, ok? ;o). The staff are complaining about getting yelled at by that boring Pastor. They all agree- they HATE Sundays.

Pollyanna tells them if they knew how to play the glad-game they wouldn't be as bothered by things as they are. And so they challenge her- just try to find one good thing about Sundays! She thinks and thinks then suddenly brightens and says, "just think- because it's Sunday today it means it will be a whole 6 more days until it's Sunday again!"

That's the Pollyanna effect. She's not pretending church isn't HORRIBLE. She's not ignoring that fact. She's just finding something to be glad about in the midst of the horror that is church. There's a more modern figure that embodies this same attitude- Forrest Gump. He does a very similar thing- he looks for the good in every situation. Even when talking about that time he got shot (in the buttocks) his summation of the whole ordeal was, "the best thing about getting shot in the buttocks... is the ice cream!"

Let's face it. Sometimes we have to really think hard to find something to be thankful for. Sometimes it doesn't seem like there's anything to be thankful for at all in a given situation (or even a given season of life sometimes). But Paul (and Jesus) invite us to live lives of Thanksgiving no matter what kind of situation we find ourselves in:

Always be joyful. Never stop praying. Be thankful in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you. | Thessalonians 5:16-18 (NLT)

Two things to notice in this passage of scripture- one that once again Paul is linking joy, prayer and gratitude together. And two is that Paul says that it is "God's Will" that we be thankful-in-all-circumstances. He doesn't say to be thankful FOR all circumstances but IN all circumstances. That's a HUGE difference. Jesus wasn't thankful FOR the cross but He was thankful and joyful in the midst of the cross. When I was laying in the catheter lab waiting for my stent "procedure" to hopefully save my life I was trying my best to work through these steps while I waited. Choosing joy- ok, I'll try. Don't worry about anything? Ok, then I'll pray about everything and tell God what I want and what's on my mind. That was much easier. Then I got to this step- be thankful? I'm not sure what to be thankful for? After a bit I guessed I was "glad" that I got to the hospital quickly. That they were waiting for me when the ambulance pulled up and they already knew I was having a heart "event" of some kind because of their communication with the paramedics. They wheeled me right into the emergency room and within a very short time I was in the catheter lab about to get fixed-right-up according to the nurses.

There was a ton to be thankful for as it turned out (and what I shared isn't even the half of it). Not to mention all the blessings in my life that had nothing to do with what I was going through at that moment. But sometimes it's hard to remember, isn't it? At least it is for me. That's why I keep a "thankful list"- a concept I found in the Bible actually:

I'll make a list of God's gracious dealings, all the things God has done that need praising. Isaiah 63:7 (MSG)

Whenever I start feeling like there's nothing good in my life and nothing to be thankful for I get out that list and it doesn't take long to be reminded I have a TON of things to be thankful for. A ton. There's just something about gratitude that short circuits worry and anxiety in our lives and imagine that- doctors are just starting to figure out what God has been telling us about ourselves for 3,500 years. I guess the Bible really is the owners manual of the human being. So how about for today you take a piece of paper (or open a note on your phone- that way you've always got it with you) and start making a list of all the things God has done in your life that deserve gratitude. It will change your life- I guarantee it.

Friday Reflection: So once I've listed out and remembered all the things I'm grateful for Paul recommends another step- focus-on-the-good-stuff:

You'll do best by filling your minds and meditating on things true, noble, reputable, authentic, compelling, gracious- the best, not the worst; the beautiful, not the ugly; things to praise, not things to curse... Do that, and God, who makes everything work together, will work you into his most excellent harmonies. Philippians 4:8 (MES)

Our minds are pretty powerful as it turns out. We can pretty much ruin our days by focusing on all the crummy stuff in our lives. Heck, we can pretty much ruin the days of the people we love by focusing on all the crummy stuff in our lives and in the world. Paul has some advice for us: STOP IT!

Is there bad stuff going on? You bet. There is today. There was 2,000 years ago when Paul wrote this letter (remember he was in prison awaiting his execution and Christians were being martyred for their faith and Rome was in power- one of the most brutal, evil and corrupt nations that has ever existed). But Paul asks us not to focus on the bad. We might have to visit it in order to live our lives but don't let it define you. Let the good define you. The truly good news is that as the good defines you it will also empower you to live through the dark stuff you acknowledge but don't focus on- just like Jesus:

For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Hebrews 12:2-3 (NIV)

Does that seem crazy to anyone else? For the "joy" set before Him He endured the cross? What joy? I don't see any joy associated with the cross? Well, no- not if you're focused on the cross and the pain and shame itself. So how did Jesus see joy in the cross? He didn't. He saw joy in what enduring the cross would bring Him.

You. And me.

He knew that if He didn't endure the cross we would be lost. But if He did endure it then His reward would be... US! I don't know about you- seems like a crummy reward to me but to Him it was what got Him through. Crazy, right?

And now He invites us to do the same thing. Be thankful IN all circumstances- not FOR all circumstances. Choose joy knowing it's not about storm avoidance but about learning to dance in the storm. Living a life that is NOT defined by the storms we find ourselves in the midst of but defined by something MUCH greater than that. Don't worry about anything- not because there's not things to worry about but because worrying leads us to be defined by

the things we're scared of. And so He invites us to pray about EVERYTHING. Not because prayer will change things and make them turn out the way we think they should but because prayer changes us (and sometimes our circumstances too). And the thing that should color all of these choices is a focus on the good and not the bad.

Now, I've been telling you this whole week that Paul's plan/process/recipe/prescription for dealing with worry/stress/anxiety/freaking out was a 5 step process but there's one more step we need to talk about that's not really something we do but something we experience IF we've practiced the other 5 steps- PEACE. Paul gives his 5 step plan (always choose joy, don't worry about anything, instead pray about everything, be thankful IN all circumstances and focus on the good stuff) and then says this:

If you do this then you will experience God's peace, which exceeds anything we can understand. His peace will guard your hearts and minds as you live in Christ Jesus.
Philippians 4:7 (NLT)

There is nothing like it. But it's not exactly what we might think it is. It's not always a feeling of serenity. We love it when we get that feeling but often God's peace is ability to be calm in the midst of life's most alarming circumstances even if you're struggling to not lose it. It is the ability to recognize that even though I don't understand what's happening right now I trust that one day I will understand (like Jesus said in John 13:7 and we talked about earlier this week). I mean heck, He even warned us so that we could have peace:

I have told you all this so that you may have peace in me. Here on earth you will have many trials and sorrows. But take heart, because I have overcome the world.
John 16:33 (NLT)

He told us "all this" so we could have peace in Him. What did He tell us? Have you ever read John chapters 13, 14, 15 & 16 before? Do you know what He's been telling them in those chapters? How tough things were going to get. How bad. How much trouble and pain and suffering was coming. Ah- thank God He warned us so we could have peace. Huh? How does His warning lead to peace?

Because we won't spend all our energy asking "why?". I don't know about you but when things go wrong in my life do you know what the first question I ask is? Why? Why me? Why now? What did I do wrong? Or (and this one is generally much more nuanced in the way I think it) what's wrong with God?

When Judy and I had our first miscarriage my question was, why? Why me? Didn't I dedicate my whole life to You? Aren't I a minister of Your gospel? How could you let them happen to ME??? When Pastor Jeff died on August 13, 2017 my question was, why? Why me (I am ashamed to admit that my first thought is almost always about me and not anyone else. I have tried to train myself to push that first thought out of the way and focus on others as much as I can and I'm better than I used to be but I'm still at heart a VERY selfish, self centered person)? Why Jeff (that was my second question that day). Why Connie? Why didn't our prayers work? When I was laying in the back of an ambulance and then in an emergency room and then in a catheter lab getting a stent place my first question was, why?

I don't think I'm that different from most of you in that way. I think that's why Jesus warns us that trouble is coming for ALL OF US NO MATTER WHAT and then says, I told you all of that so you could have peace in me.

As I laid in that ambulance and asked the question, why me? I quietly did my best to run through Paul's words about joy, gratitude, prayer and peace. I did my best to practice Paul's step by step plan for finding peace. I tried to remember that it was all going to be ok in the end. If it's not ok, it's not the end. I tried to remember that Jesus overcame-the-world and because of that I would overcome this world too- just like Pastor Jeff did a couple years back. I was hoping I wouldn't overcome the world "quite yet" but if that day ended at death's door for me I got to the place where I was ok with that. I "worried" a bit for Judy and Jonathan and the rest of my family. I "worried" a bit for my church family and what would happen with Riverside. But I found a miracle I can't begin to explain to you- I found Jesus' peace.

And so can you. But you've got to "work the steps" as anyone who's been through recovery can tell you. So I want to encourage you to memorize as much of the scriptures as you possibly can. You won't always have access to a Bible or your phone and when you need the words of Jesus the most I hope you have them written and impressed on your hearts and that you find yourself in a place where you've been "practicing" the steps Paul laid out in Philippians chapter 4.

Jesus. Is. Awesome.