

A Peace That Passes All Understanding

Galatians 5:22; Philippians 4:7

July 27, 2014

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When Israel was on the very outskirts of the Promise Land and eager to inherit the earthly promise made to their fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, Moses sent 12 spies throughout the land to gain information about the bounty of the land and about the nature of the inhabitants.

The majority report of 10 of the spies was this:

We be not able to go up against the people; for they are stronger than we. . . . And there we saw the giants, the sons of Anak, which come of the giants: and we were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight (Numbers 13:31,33).

This evil report destroyed all peace in the hearts of the people and brought panic to their minds, and they even conspired within their hearts and with their words against God and Moses to return to Egypt:

And wherefore hath the LORD brought us into this land, to fall by the sword, that our wives and our children should be a prey? were it not better for us to return to Egypt? And they said one to another, Let us make a captain, and let us return to Egypt (Numbers 14:3-4).

Dear ones, how the dread of fear and the anxiety over enemies (within and without) can entirely divide us against ourselves, against our God, and against His promises.

Who among us cannot to some degree identify with Israel who walked by sight at the report of giant enemies? Those giants appear so great as to swallow you up at times. They rob you of peace. Their shadow seems to block the sun as darkness stretches across the landscape of your mind. You try to run. You try to occupy yourself with other activities. But you cannot seem to escape those giants. Beloved, there is good news. You can do nothing without Christ, but you can do all things through Christ who strengthens you. Dear believer, you are not a victim to your fears and worries, for “the peace of God, which passeth all understanding shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7).

We continue, this Lord’s Day, in our study of the Fruit of the Spirit, focusing our attention on the fruit of peace. The main points of the sermon taken from Philippians 4:7 are in the form of 2 questions: (1) What Is the Peace of God? (2) What Does the Peace of God Accomplish?

I. What Is the Peace of God (“And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding”)?

A. In the previous sermon, biblical peace was introduced and was generally defined as a wholeness, a harmony, or a reconciliation and removal of enmity that once brought division. Biblical peace was noted to have three aspects toward which it is directed: an upward peace (peace with God, Romans 5:1), an inward peace (the peace of God, Philippians 4:7), and an outward peace (peace with others, Romans 12:18). Having addressed the believer’s peace with God by means of justification by faith alone in the previous sermon, we now move on to the next aspect of biblical peace: the peace of God within the hearts and minds of all believers.

B. It is easy for those who have little within this world to trouble them to share their words of sympathy from their ivory towers with those whose hearts are anxious over how they will pay the rent, afford health insurance, keep their car running, or secure a full-time job to provide for the needs of their family.

1. But who was he who here said to the Church at Philippi, “And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus”? He was a prisoner in a Roman jail. He was awaiting his trial, which might end in his death at the end of a Roman sword. Everything in this present life that lay ahead for him was uncertain. It was this man, the Apostle Paul, who being in the very crisis of his life, turned to his brethren in Philippi, who had far fewer causes of anxiety than he had at the time, and cheerfully encouraged them with the Divine promise that the peace of God shall guard their hearts and minds through Christ Jesus from all fears that they faced in life.

2. We all know how one who has gone through far greater suffering than we are suffering can drive very simple words of encouragement directly to our hearts, because we know what he/she has been through. So the Apostle Paul speaks to all of us today from that perspective with the words of promise and hope that we find in our text today. He’s not speaking from a luxurious beach resort, or from a mountain top high above the problems and fears that we all face, he’s writing from a prison cell, not knowing whether we will see the light of another day. Let’s hear what he says as a fellow-sufferer for Jesus Christ and as an apostle who speaks to us the inspired revelation of Jesus Christ.

C. Let us now move on to consider the first question, What is the peace of God?

1. First, “the peace of God” is a peace of which God is the author—it is a God-peace, not a creature-peace as to its origin.

a. Dear ones, there is no battle, no war, no conflict, no enmity, or no division within the nature of God. Perfect peace, perfect wholeness, perfect agreement, perfect tranquility and calm forever (from eternity to eternity) exist as an attribute of God’s nature. God is never divided or at odds with Himself. He never fears, never worries, and never panics. He is the God of peace (Philippians 4:9; Romans 15:33; Romans 16:20; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; Hebrews 13:20).

b. The reason there is so much disorder, fear, and unrest in our lives comes mainly from our being divided and torn apart by warring impulses and passions within. The Spirit righteously pulls this way; the works of the flesh sinfully pull us that way. Fears invade our hearts and minds over our salvation, over our sin, over people, over the miseries of life, and over death. Dear ones, the good news is that “the peace of God” which is already ours (purchased by Christ and implanted within us by the Holy Spirit) is a peace that dispels these battles within, so that we grow in learning to live more and more in the atmosphere of God’s perfect peace.

2. Second, “the peace of God” within is the Spirit-wrought response in our conscience to the judicial, legal “peace with God” (which we considered last Lord’s Day)—that reconciliation of God to us through the righteousness of Christ and our reconciliation to God through faith alone in Christ alone in our justification before Him.

a. Whereas “peace with God” is objective in the heavenly court of God’s tribunal (Romans 5:1), “the peace of God” is subjective in the court of the believer’s conscience (Colossians 3:15). Whereas “peace with God” is not experiential (it occurs in that heavenly court), “the peace of God” is experiential—it occurs in our “hearts and minds” (Philippians 4:7).

b. We look to our “peace with God” as the basis/ground as to why Satan can register no just accusation against us before God’s tribunal and why there is no condemnation any longer against (Romans 8:33-34). However, it is our daily battle with fears, with worries, with panic over the things in this world that call forth “the peace of God” to guard our hearts and our minds.

3. Third, just as the biblical concept of wholeness and reconciliation in removing the enmity that divides and separates us from God underlies our “peace with God” (God has removed the enmity

of sin through Christ so that He is reconciled to us who were His enemies and we are reconciled to Him by faith in Christ), so likewise the biblical concept of wholeness and reconciliation in removing the enmity that divides us against ourselves also underlies “the peace of God” within us. For when fears assail us like mighty giants that would crush us, there exists a battle/enmity within us. We are torn—we are divided—we are beside ourselves with fears and worries. But when the fruit of the Spirit of peace overcomes and reigns within us (i.e. “the peace of God”), a wholeness, a harmony, a reconciliation of all the parts of the inward man is brought under the control of the Prince of peace (the warring sins and fears are subdued by Christ like the wind and waves that crashed against the boat on the Sea of Galilee).

4. Finally, this “peace of God” is described by the Apostle Paul as that “which passeth all understanding” (Philippians 4:7). It is a peace that surpasses all that the creature has conceived or imagined.

a. It isn’t that “the peace of God” is irrational and cannot be understood in any sense, but that it is beyond our ability to fully comprehend. Why? Because it is “the peace of God”. It is a taste of that peace which is the very peace that belongs to God Himself.

b. I would expect, dear child of God, that there have been times in your life, when you were overwhelmed by fear and panic, and yet like a ground-level fog that sweeps over the landscape, “the peace of God” swept over your soul with a calm in dispelling your fears and in causing you to repose like a child in the almighty arms of the God of peace. Where the storm within raged, a holy calm has chased the panic out of the heart and mind. That’s a peace that passes all understanding.

II. What Does the Peace of God Accomplish (“shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus”)?

A. The Spirit-inspired words of the Apostle Paul promise to the believer that this “peace of God” will be like a military garrison of mighty soldiers encamping around the hearts and minds of those who have been justified by faith alone to guard them from fear, worry, internal upheaval and turmoil (Philippians 4:7; 1 Peter 1:5). Though the Christian has this inward “peace of God” as a fruit of the Spirit, he/she still has to wage daily battles against unbelief, against fears, and against sins that would bring war and division within and rob him/her of “the peace of God.”

B. Let us go back to Philippians 4:6, where we see the means that God would have us to sanctify and to use in seeing this promise of keeping and guarding our hearts and minds realized in our lives.

1. First, there is this command (“be careful for nothing”). Being a Divine command, it is not optional; it is not a suggestion, but is that which we are called by the Lord to do on an ongoing basis (present tense). An undue care with the concerns and burdens of this life, dear ones, is an intrusion into the rule of God over our lives. It places ourselves on the throne of our lives as if we must face every fear, every trial, every heart ache, and every pain in this life by ourselves and in our own power.

a. The Greek verb (*merimnao*) in this command (“be careful for nothing”) signifies “to divide.” This command has in view such overwhelming cares about life that tear our hearts and minds apart by fears and worries (contrary to “the peace of God” which unites our hearts and minds by guarding them against the fears and worries of this life). Now this command does not require us to be unconcerned about all things in life (as one clocks out at the end of the day from work), or to withdraw from life like a monk in a monastery, or to just sit around doing nothing to stand for Christ and his truth or to seek reconciliation with others, or to act as a fatalist (*que sera, sera*, whatever will be, will be). In fact, the English translation, “careful”, in the Authorized Version means “full of care” (i.e. be full of care for nothing). The prohibition calls us away from that painful kind of anxiety which comes upon us when we feel all alone, bearing the weight of burdens in mere self-dependence amidst the difficulties and dangers of life. That is not our strength or virtue as a Christian, dear ones, that is our weakness and disobedience as a Christian (for we are to cast all our cares, burdens, and concerns upon the Lord, 1 Peter 5:7).

b. Let me say before proceeding that there are many things that we as Christians are to take a godly care for in this life: we are to care (and not be apathetic) for our bodies, and especially for their souls; we are to care for our families (in fulfilling duties out of love toward each member); we are to care for our lawful callings; we are to care for the peace, purity, and unity of Christ's Church; and we are to care that we seek to glorify and enjoy God now and for all eternity. However, as Christians, we are not to be filled with distress, with fear, with anger, or with idolatry and love for the things of the world over our love for God. This command by Paul is actually the same command that was uttered by Christ in Matthew 6:25,34.

c. Dear ones, let us be ever watchful for the three following causes that often lead to such distressing fears in our lives about the cares of this world.

(1) A practical distrust of God and His character (His love, His wisdom, His faithfulness, His sovereignty, His justice). Even those who are most sound in theology may be often guilty of this practical atheism. Faith in God is useless in our subordinate standards if it is absent in our practice and our daily lives.

(2) An over-valuing of this present world. Where our treasure is, there will our heart be also (Matthew 6:21). When we love our loved ones, our friends, our jobs, our health/wealth, our gifts/abilities, our accomplishments, and the approval of men more than we love Christ and His commandments, we set ourselves up to fall into great distress. When Christ is our life and our reason for living, we do not cling so tightly to the things of this world, so that if Christ should take them from us, we lovingly and submissively open our hands (rather than our hands being pried open). Dear ones, the way of loving obedience to Christ and His commandments is the way of peace (Psalm 119:165). The way of sinful disobedience is the way to great distress (Isaiah 38:17).

(3) A forgetful neglect of all that we have in Christ Jesus. "All things are yours" (1 Corinthians 3:21-23). All the promises of God are yea and amen in Christ Jesus (2 Corinthians 1:20). The promises are ours, but we neglect to plead and to trust them as our inheritance, ratified in the blood of our Testator, Jesus Christ (Isaiah 26:3-4; Romans 8:28,31-39; Philippians 4:13,19; Hebrews 13:5-6).

d. Dear ones, when we fall prey to this kind of distress, fear, anxiety that completely tears apart our heart and mind, we will likely be paralyzed by it (like a deer caught in the headlights), or we will run from it by immersing ourselves in activity (which only returns when we are all alone and by ourselves), or we will just check out of reality and what is actually happening. None of these, however, are the remedy to overcoming the fears and distresses of this world. Therefore, Paul gives us a Divine remedy.

2. Second, after the command ("Be careful for nothing"), Paul does not leave us in a state of confusion to figure out for ourselves how that is to be realized in our lives—he provides the remedy (Philippians 4:6).

a. This is prayer that expresses your deepest concerns, fears, and agitations to the Lord. Dear ones, prayer is a taste of heaven to come, for prayer is communing with the Lord. If we do not enjoy such communion with Christ upon the earth for a time, why should the prospect of an eternity of communing with Christ in heaven be all that exciting to us? Prayer, dear ones, prepares us for heaven.

(1) The word, "prayer" is a broad word that refers to all of our communication with God, but the word, "supplication", has in view a direct pleading with God to work His grace in our lives in overcoming whatever is tearing us apart in our hearts and minds.

(2) Here the Lord invites (yea commands) you to cast all your cares and needs upon Him (1 Peter 5:7). Having in love commanded us as His dear children to do so, would God play games with us and turn His back upon such needy cries from those He has loved with an everlasting love and sent His Son to die for? It's unthinkable.

(3) We don't bring our prayers and supplications to God in order to inform Him, but because He desires a relationship of love and trust ever growing in our hearts (as He answers our prayers and supplications).

b. And finally, our earnest prayers and supplications to the Lord must always be filled with sincere and loving thanksgiving for all that He has done and shall do for us and others. This guards us against feeling sorry for ourselves before God (as if we have been treated so unfairly and so unlovingly by the Lord). If we are not already filled with thanksgiving for all that Christ has freely bestowed upon us, what makes us think we will be thankful for future blessings that we plead with Him to bestow upon us. A thankful heart is one that is ready to have the windows of heaven opened that the blessings of heaven might fall like gentle rain upon our prepared hearts. Sincere and loving praise and thanksgiving to the Lord is the sweet fragrance in which the Lord delights and rejoices.

C. But never ever forget that this “peace of God” within our hearts and minds is only and always “through [or in] Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:7). It is purchased by Christ and implanted as free grace and fruit in the life of everyone who trusts alone in Christ alone for his/her justification before God.

We are going to pursue this “peace of God” that guards our heart and mind in the next sermon as well, but I want you to know dear Christian, God Himself says He has not given such fear to the Christian who trusts in Christ alone for his eternal salvation (2 Timothy 1:7). Fear is torment from which God has delivered us (1 John 4:18).

Although God’s people, Israel, were torn asunder by fear at the unbelieving testimony of the 10 spies (who said they were like grasshoppers in the sight of their enemies, and implied they could not take the land promised to them by God), nevertheless they were not left without the faithful, believing testimony of peace that came from the minority report of the other 2 spies, Joshua and Caleb, to God’s people:

If the LORD delight in us, then he will bring us into this land, and give it us; a land which floweth with milk and honey. Only rebel not ye against the LORD, neither fear ye the people of the land; for they are bread for us: their defence is departed from them, and the LORD is with us; fear them not (Numbers 14:8-9).

I leave with you the words of faith found in our Psalter (Psalm 118:5-6) upon which “the peace of God” rests:

I in distress call’d on the Lord;
The Lord did answer me:
He in a large place did me set,
From trouble made me free.

The mighty Lord is on my side,
I will not be afraid;
For any thing that man can do
I shall not be dismay’d.

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