

## Philippians 1:1-9

### The Peace of God that Passes Understanding

*And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus – v. 7*

In 1945 the United Nations was formed with the aim of stopping wars between countries and promoting the kind of dialogue and cooperation that could establish and maintain world peace. Perhaps one of the greatest ironies of our day is the motto statement of the United Nations found on a wall outside the main building of the UN in which a quote is engraved from Isa. 2:4 ...*and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruninghooks: nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*

The irony of such a motto is that it comes from the Bible. Indeed, it comes from the Old Testament which has been the Jewish Bible for centuries. The idea that worldwide peace can be obtained with no reference to the God of the Bible is what creates the irony. How can a world filled with people that are sinners by nature and as sinners are at war against God – how can such a world ever hope to establish or maintain peace?

The motto inscribed on that wall sets forth an impossible ideal, given the spiritual condition of the nations, but on the other hand it also sets forth what is undoubtedly a worldwide desire. The world, you see, desires peace. There's an interesting definition given for world peace on wikipedia: "**World peace** is an ideal of freedom, peace, and happiness among and within all nations and/or people. World peace is an idea of planetary non-violence by which nations willingly cooperate, either voluntarily or by virtue of a system of governance that prevents warfare. The term is sometimes used to refer to a cessation of all hostility amongst all humanity."

What the world longs for and will never attain is a blessing that the Christian can and does know. And so Paul makes reference in v. 7 to *the peace of God which passeth all understanding that shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus*. This statement follows immediately on the heels of the various exhortations that we've been studying in this section of Philippians. Taken in its context this peace of God that passes all understanding is a consequence of what precedes it.

So we can interpret it to mean that as we rejoice in the Lord and as we let our moderation be made known to all men and as we guard ourselves from being full of care and give ourselves to prayer and supplication with thanksgiving the thing that will inevitably follow is that we'll know the peace of God, a peace that passes understanding and a peace that serves a definite function. It is this peace that shall keep or literally will guard your hearts and your minds through Christ Jesus.

This verse sets forth a definite need in our lives as Christians. We need to have our hearts and minds guarded or protected. The very fact that we stand in need to have such a guard about our hearts and minds indicates, doesn't it, that there will be assaults on our hearts

and minds. Your freedom in Christ will be assaulted. Your assurance of God's love and grace and favor will be assaulted. Your faith will be assaulted and thus the need is real and the need is constant for your heart and mind to be guarded or protected. The peace of God serves that purpose.

Doesn't that make it important that you know all you can about that peace? You'll notice that the text says that the peace of God passes all understanding. Some versions translate the word *surpasses* all understanding. That's something different from by-passing all understanding. It goes beyond our understanding but it doesn't do an end around our understanding.

If you would gain the benefit of that peace that passes understanding then it becomes important for you as a Christian to know the nature of that peace and the grounds for that peace. Most importantly you must know the source from which that peace comes. It is the peace of God which we can take to mean the peace that comes from God.

What I want to do this morning is to look at this text with the aim of analyzing it so we may gain the benefit of what it holds out to us. This is something the entire world wishes it could have but that the Christian can, in fact, have. Listen to the words of v. 7 again:

*And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.*

What I want to do this morning is to approach this text from 3 different perspectives. Each perspective will serve to answer a specific question about this peace. We will first approach the text circumstantially and that will enable you to answer the question: What does it mean to have a kind of peace that passes understanding? We will then look at the text from a theological perspective. That will enable us to answer the question: Why the Christian can have this kind of peace. And then we'll look briefly at the practical perspective of the text to answer the question: What must the Christian do in order to gain and maintain this peace.

## I. Circumstantially – What does it Mean?

The peace of God that passes understanding – what are we talking about when we speak of a peace that passes understanding? Perhaps the best way to approach the matter is to deal first with the obvious which would be that peace that falls easily within the boundaries of our understanding.

We could term this kind of peace the peace that the world gives. Christ makes reference to this peace when he contrasts it to the peace that he gives. Jn. 14:27 *Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.*

The peace that the world gives is the peace that comes through the comfort and ease of the world. Such peace may be illustrated by a parable that Christ told in Lk. 12: *And he*

*spake a parable unto them, saying, The ground of a certain rich man brought forth plentifully: 17 And he thought within himself, saying, What shall I do, because I have no room where to bestow my fruits? 18 And he said, This will I do: I will pull down my barns, and build greater; and there will I bestow all my fruits and my goods. 19 And I will say to my soul, Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years; take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry.*

I should point out regarding this parable that the man that is described is a man that is industrious and that's a good thing. There is nothing wrong with working hard and finding satisfaction in your work and enjoying the rewards of hard work. The problem with the character in the parable was not that he made himself rich but he that he failed to make himself rich toward God. But I cite the parable now just to give an example of a kind of pass that easily falls within the realm of our understanding.

The peace that surpasses understanding is that expressed by the prophet Habakkuk at the end of the book that bears his name. The imagery is somewhat the same as what I just cited in Lk. 12 but the contrast is profound. In Hab. 3:17 we read *Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labour of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls: 18 Yet I will rejoice in the LORD, I will joy in the God of my salvation.*

The word *peace* is not used in this passage but the concept of peace is certainly present. And you begin to see the meaning of a peace that passes understanding. It's a peace that is present when your understanding could easily tell you that you shouldn't be at peace, that you have every reason to be in a state of consternation instead. This contrast is brought out again in the gospel of Mark where the contrast is seen between Christ and his disciples.

*Mk. 4:35ff And the same day, when the even was come, he saith unto them, Let us pass over unto the other side. 36 And when they had sent away the multitude, they took him even as he was in the ship. And there were also with him other little ships. 37 And there arose a great storm of wind, and the waves beat into the ship, so that it was now full. 38 And he was in the hinder part of the ship, asleep on a pillow: and they awake him, and say unto him, Master, carest thou not that we perish?*

The disciples are nearly panic stricken. It's not hard to picture them exerting great effort to bail the water out of the ship as it splashed over the sides and began to fill up the ship. By way of contrast Christ is not the least concerned. He's able to sleep. I've read this passage many times but never really appreciated the detail that's given to us in v. 38 that he was not only asleep but asleep on a pillow. Generally speaking our Savior had no place to lay his head but now in a storm at sea he's able to find the comfort of a pillow. It's as if he's not merely sleeping but he's enjoying luxurious sleep. He's obviously at peace and in this case it's worth noting that his peace is due not to the circumstances surrounding him but it's due to the confidence he has in his heavenly Father.

This is a peace that passes understanding. Some time ago I found a book in the library down at BJ entitled *Voices from the Edge of Eternity*. The author of this book contrasts the

death bed accounts of some Christians with some non-Christians. The French philosopher Voltaire is one of the subjects in this book. This man was not a Christian and on his death bed he could be heard cursing Christ. So angry and distraught was he when he knew his life was slipping away that he became unbearable to all those around him. The nurse who tended to him was reported to have said that never again would she tend to a man on his death bed that was not a Christian.

By way of contrast the same book presents the account of DL Moody's death in great detail. It seems that Moody slipped in and out of consciousness and reported each time that he regained consciousness that heaven awaited him and there was no pain or valley. Near the end when the attending doctor was going to give him another injection of a heart stimulant Moody looked him and inquired whether or not it would really do any good. The doctor, knowing that Moody's time was short was content to honor Moody's request by allowing his patient to slip quietly from this life to the next.

Now it would be a mistake to think that every Christian's death follows the same pattern as DL Moody's. There are those whose departure from this world is wrought with difficulties and may pose spiritual challenges. On the other hand Moody's death definitely illustrates a peace that passes understanding. I think Paul shows a peace that passes understanding in this epistle to the Philippians. The glory of heaven shone so brightly on his soul that his preference was to depart and be with Christ. He knew that would be far better. You can sense his resignation not at having to depart from this world but in having to remain in it.

We see, then, a number of instances in which this peace that passes understanding is demonstrated. You might say that the reason peace passes understanding is because the Christian understands only too well that he deserves nothing from God and yet he receives great favor from God. We might well ask, as Nicodemus asked of the Lord – *how can these things be?* And this leads to my next perspective on the peace of God that passes understanding. We have seen the circumstantial perspective, would you consider next:

## II. The Theological Perspective on the Peace of God

This perspective provides the answer as to why those who are by nature at enmity with God can nevertheless gain a peace with God that passes all understanding. Notice in our text the phrase *peace of God* and then notice just a couple of verses later in v. 9 the phrase *the God of peace*. Php 4:9 *Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you.*

This phrase *the God of peace* is what leads us into the theological perspective on the matter of *the peace of God*. Simply put – the reason we can have peace with God is because our God is the God of peace. He is the source from which this peace flows. This explains why the Christian's peace is a peace that passes understanding. It's because God himself surpasses our understanding.

It's interesting to note just how many things that are said about our God and about the benefits we receive from our God can be said to be beyond our comprehension. In Eph. 3:17-19 Paul's prayer for the saints at Ephesus is *That Christ may dwell in your hearts by faith; that ye, being rooted and grounded in love, 18 May be able to comprehend with all saints what is the breadth, and length, and depth, and height; 19 And to know the love of Christ, which passeth knowledge...*

Just as God's peace passes all understanding so God's love passes knowledge. And in 1Pe 1:8 we read concerning Christ: *Whom having not seen, ye love; in whom, though now ye see [him] not, yet believing, ye rejoice with joy unspeakable and full of glory.* For something (in this case the Christian's joy) to be described as unspeakable means that it's beyond understanding in the sense that words are not adequate to describe it.

God himself is beyond our understanding. Small wonder, then, that his thoughts and his ways are beyond us. Isa 55:9 *For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.* Now remember what I said in my introduction – the peace of God surpasses all understanding but it doesn't bypass our understanding. It's the Christian's welcome challenge to strive to know that which is beyond knowledge and to look to experience that which is unspeakable and that which surpasses understanding.

One of the ways we can hopefully add to our understanding is to look at the occurrences of this phrase *the God of peace*. The phrase occurs 5 times in the New Testament. Let me just mention those occurrences to you and then briefly note some things that are associated with those phrases.

In Ro 15:33 Paul pronounces this benediction: *Now the God of peace [be] with you all. Amen.* The same thing is found in this verse which occurs in Php 4:9 *Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you.* In both of these verses the thing that is mentioned in close connection with the God of peace is God's presence.

It's God's presence that makes for God's peace. This is what causes our peace to pass the understanding of circumstances. How can you have peace in a world of turmoil? How can you have peace when the storms of life seem like they're about to sink your boat so to speak? How can you have peace in the face of death itself? The answer is found in the presence of Christ. If you know that he's with you and that he's for you then you can maintain a sense of calm when the winds are blowing furiously all around you.

But let's bring the issue even closer to home. Why is it that the world doesn't know peace and why is it that you may be deprived of peace? Isn't because you know in your heart, your conscience bearing to the truth of what God himself says in Isa 48:22 *There is no peace, saith the LORD, unto the wicked.* And again in Isa 57:21 *There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked.* You know that you are by nature to be found among the wicked and you know that you have a sin nature within you that qualifies you for that category.

And you know that it is on account of sin that we forfeit the presence of God. How, then, can you and I expect to know the presence of God and hence experience the peace of God? Another reference to the phrase *the God of peace* can answer that question for you. Another benediction statement is found in Heb. 13:21, *21 Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, 21 Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.*

In this statement about the God of peace we learn much that makes for our peace. Notice the phrase *the blood of the everlasting covenant*. That's what makes for our peace, the blood of Christ. I love that simple but sublime hymn that asks: *What can wash away my sin? Nothing but the blood of Jesus. What can make me whole again? Nothing but the blood of Jesus.* The last stanza in that hymn states: *This is all my hope and peace – Nothing but the blood of Jesus; This is all my righteousness – Nothing but the blood of Jesus.*

Your peace has been secured by the blood of Christ. Your peace is true and real and lasting and deep and stabilizing because the thing that kept you from knowing peace, even your wickedness and your sins, has been dealt with through the atoning death of Jesus Christ. And what's more, according to these verses in Heb. 13 the Lord Jesus who is the great shepherd of the sheep through the blood of that everlasting covenant is at work in your life. He is making you perfect in every good work to do his will because he works in you that which is wellpleasing in the sight of God. He leads you in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake (Ps. 23).

This truth is brought again in another reference to the God of peace. 1Thess. 5:23 *And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and [I pray God] your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.* God is sanctifying you and you will be preserved blameless. Not because you'll attain sinless perfection in this life but because the blood of Christ cleanses you from all sin so that you can pray or sing: *Dear dying Lamb, Thy precious blood Shall never lose its power, Till all the ransomed church of God be saved to sin no more.*

What I'm describing now is all within the realm of your understanding and can and should be appropriated by faith. *I do believe, I will believe, that Jesus died for me, that on the cross he shed his blood, from sin to set me free.* The thing that will forever surpass our understanding is the question – why? Why, Lord, would you condescend to such depths to save a poor, vile, and guilty sinner like me? Why, Lord, would you undergo such pain and endure such shame and scoffing rude in order to make peace with those who were rebels against thee? We will never understand the “why” of Christ's atonement. But we can and should affirm that it is to the praise of the glory of his grace.

In Romans 16:20 we see another occurrence of the title the God of peace:

*And the God of peace shall bruise Satan under your feet shortly.* Satan is, of course, the enemy of your soul. He's the one that would rob you of your peace. He's the one that would lure you away from the basis for your peace. Just as Christ defeated the devil it is now the Christian's task to do the same.

And we do so through the blood of Christ. So we read in Rev. 12:10,11 *And I heard a loud voice saying in heaven, Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down, which accused them before our God day and night. 11 And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death.*

You begin to see, I hope, in some measure the rich theology behind the title *The God of peace*. You can have peace with God because God is *the God of peace*. You can see, I hope, the value of theology. Theology is the study of God. And the more you devote yourself to searching out the theology of God the more you'll equip yourself to experience the peace of God that passes all understanding.

It remains for us to consider one more perspective concerning our text. We've viewed it circumstantially in order to figure out what it means. We've viewed it theologically in order to figure out how it can be. Let's note finally:

### III. The Practical Perspective on the Peace of God

This perspective will answer the question – how can you make the peace of God your peace? I said in my introduction that our text viewed in its context shows us the consequence of heeding all the previous exhortations.

We've studied each of those exhortations over the last number of weeks. Let's just note them again. They begin in v. 1. *Therefore, my brethren dearly beloved and longed for, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, [my] dearly beloved.* You should hear that exhortation not as coming from an Apostle thousands of years ago to Christians that he dearly loved, but hear it rather as coming straight to your heart by the Spirit of the Lord who speaks on behalf of Christ. Hear it, in other words, as coming from Christ. You are his dearly beloved. You are one that he longs for. Stand fast in the Lord because you are his dearly beloved.

Php 4:4 *Rejoice in the Lord alway: [and] again I say, Rejoice.* Remember that Paul is not dealing with the frivolous kind of joy that the pleasure seeking world craves and seeks. He's dealing with something deeper. He's not suggesting that circumstances in life will always be pleasant or that you'll never know grief or sorrow or pain or sadness. You will know those things. But in the midst of those things you will never be without hope. There is such a thing as a sad Christian and a sorrowing Christian but there is no such thing as a hopeless Christian. And it is on account of your hope in Christ that joy will be the emotion that is anchored deeply in your soul.

Php 4:5 *Let your moderation be known unto all men. The Lord [is] at hand.* Remember that moderation is a broad term. There is no adequate term to translate the Greek word.

The best commentary on this exhortation is what we studied earlier back in 2:3 *Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.* 4 *Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.*

And then finally Php 4:6 *Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.* Remember to pray but remember to pray from the right perspective. If you know and believe that you can't possibly seek from God anything that is greater than what he's already given you, since he has already given you his Son and everything therefore that comes with his Son, if you go to God in prayer with that in mind, that you are already bountifully blessed of God then you will express your supplications and requests with thanksgiving.

And as a result of heeding these exhortations v. 7 will be ministered to your soul *And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.*

The whole world is seeking something that you as a Christian already have. By the grace of God and through the power of the gospel you have spiritually speaking beat your sword into a ploughshare and your spear into a pruning hook. You have laid down your arms against the Lord and have entered into the service of your Lord. I trust that you're knowing the peace of God that passes understanding. I know that you either are or you will sail through stormy seas. You will face trials and challenges. You will have to cope with the sense of your own sins and failures.

You can and should even in the midst of your failures and hardships know the peace of God that passes understanding. It passes understanding because it comes when it doesn't make sense for peace to come to your heart. It comes because there is a theological basis for it to come. It will come, therefore, when you abide in Christ and he abides in you. His peace comes because he himself comes to provide and protect and lead you forward. May you go forward, then, in the peace to which he calls you.