

The Peace of God

Philippians 4:4-9

I recently saw a movie called 'I Heard the Bells.'

The movie is about how a Christmas carol came to be written by a man named Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

Longfellow was a 19th century American poet who is likely best known for his poem 'Paul Revere's Ride' which tells the tale of Paul Revere riding through the night to warn people about the British attacking at the start of the American Revolution in April of 1775.

While he did enjoy great success as a writer, Longfellow also experienced tragedy in his life.

His first wife Mary had died from the complications of a miscarriage, and his second wife Fanny, who was his wife for eighteen years and was the mother of his six children, died as a result of her dress catching on fire.

He himself was injured by the flames and was prevented from even attending the funeral.

Historians suggest he was so grief stricken by her death that he at times believed he was on the verge of being committed to an asylum.

His grief over Fanny coincided with the start of the American civil war and within two years his oldest son Charles ran away and joined the Union Army.

Only months later in November of 1863 Henry was informed that his son had been seriously wounded by a bullet coming within an inch of his spinal cord.

Still grieving the loss of his wife, his son's recovery still somewhat uncertain, and his country in the throes of war, Longfellow wrote a poem on Christmas day 1863 entitled, "I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day."

It is hymn number 152 in our hymnbooks. Listen to what it says,

I heard the bells on Christmas Day	The unbroken song	Then from each black, accursed
Their old, familiar carols play,	Of peace on earth, good-will to men!	mouth
And wild and sweet		The cannon thundered in the South,
The words repeat	Till ringing, singing on its way,	And with the sound
Of peace on earth, good-will to men!	The world revolved from night to	The carols drowned
	day,	Of peace on earth, good-will to men!
And thought how, as the day had	A voice, a chime,	
come,	A chant sublime	It was as if an earthquake rent
The belfries of all Christendom	Of peace on earth, good-will to men!	The hearth-stones of a continent,
Had rolled along		And made forlorn

The households born Of peace on earth, good-will to men!	Then pealed the bells more loud and deep: "God is not dead, nor doth He sleep; The Wrong shall fail, The Right prevail, With peace on earth, good-will to men."
And in despair I bowed my head; "There is no peace on earth," I said; "For hate is strong, And mocks the song Of peace on earth, good-will to men!"	

The refrain for the poem is taken from King James Version's translation of Luke 2:14 where the multitude of angels rejoicing at Jesus' birth say, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men."

Here is a man wrestling with grief and witnessing the horror of war finding hope in the reality of Christmas.

I think it is safe to say that most people want peace in their life and in the world, but not everyone find it or believes it is possible.

Longfellow's poem reminds me that peace is not only possible, it is something that will certainly come to the earth because the LORD will prevail.

That is one of the central themes of Christmas. Jesus' birth, His life, His death, and resurrection is about bringing peace to everyone who trusts Him as Lord and Saviour.

[That is where we want to turn our attention on this second Sunday of Advent. We want to consider the peace of God. Towards that end we are going to spend our time in God's word in the book of **Philippians 4:4-9**. While we rightly look forward to a day when there will be peace throughout the entire earth, we also need to understand that peace is something the Christian can begin to experience in the present. These verses have some powerful lessons for us about experiencing God's peace. This is one of the reasons for which Jesus came into the world. He came to give His people His peace. Do you want that in your life? If you do then you have to give your attention to what the Bible has for us in this text. Firstly, we learn from this passage that...]

Point #1 – A heart satisfied in Christ desires peace with others. (Verses 4-5)

When a human being finds contentment in the LORD it removes almost all of the things that cause fights between people.

In these verses the apostle Paul gives a series of seven commands. The first command that he gives is repeated immediately here in verse 4.

I find it incredible that believers are given a command regarding their emotions.

It is one thing to encourage someone about how they feel, it is something else to say this is how you must feel.

Not only does he give this command, he gives it twice which usually is done in the Bible to emphasize the important of something.

Beside this being an emphatic command it is a pervasive command.

This rejoicing is supposed to happen 'always'.

That means every minute of every day and he offers zero exceptions to the command.

My first thought when I read that command is, "How can God command us to have joy always?"

What about all the pain and suffering that comes from living in this fallen world? Are we supposed to put on a happy face no matter what?

If that were the case then we would have no way to make sense of many passages in the bible where people deal with tremendous grief.

If this command meant never feeling sorrow then how could Paul tell us in Romans 12:15 to mourn with those who mourn?

Or most significantly of all, how could we reconcile this command with Jesus weeping and being grief stricken?

It has to mean something deeper than be happy no matter what.

It is also significant to have in mind here where Paul is writing this letter to the Philippians from.

He is writing from jail. Earlier in the letter he talks about the possibility of his imprisonment ending in his death.

In the face of that he writes, "Rejoice!"

Now here is the critical part of the command. He says, "Rejoice in the Lord, always!"

So the state of our affections is to be fixed on Jesus rather than the things and circumstances of life.

He is commanding believers to have fixed in their hearts the goodness of Christ no matter what!

He is after something far deeper than fake smiles and happy talk. He is after making the LORD our highest treasure.

I believe this command is just another way of saying the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods."

To that he adds this command in verse 5.

The word translated ‘reasonableness’ here has the sense of ‘gentleness’ or ‘forbearance’. The idea is to have a significant capacity to tolerate the offenses and short comings of others.

It is very important to know that the commands to ‘rejoice in the Lord’ and ‘let your reasonableness be known to everyone’ comes right after Paul’s plea in verses 2-3 for two believers to be reconciled to one other.

It is clear in those verses that the division is over some secondary or matter of worldly importance rather than a something that is important to Christ.

That is why the vast majority of fights happen.

They happen because we love something more than God and we see other people as being in the way of getting that something.

[I was a little too young to remember the cabbage patch doll craze of 1983, but I have heard the stories. People were obsessed with getting these dolls and there were a number of violent incidents as a result. I even read of one case where a mob of a 1000 people stormed the store injuring multiple people. Wikipedia calls it the cabbage patch riots.]

It is easy to look back on that and think, “Those people were nuts”, how could people fight over something so silly.

What we need to keep in mind is that everything in this world is worth about as much as a cabbage patch doll if we take the LORD out of our thinking.

Most of the things that lead to conflict are things that we are valuing too much.

What is the solution? “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice.”

Be looking to the Person and Work of Christ to satisfy the desires of your heart.

If that is what is happening in your heart, do you know what happens? Instead of fighting with people we are wanting to make peace with them.

[That is what should be happening in the church and in Christian homes. When it says here ‘let your reasonableness be known to all’ he is saying that people should look at the church and the Christian home is see places of peace. He adds the statement at the end “The LORD is at hand” which is likely a reference to Jesus’ return. Listen, when Jesus comes we are not going to be worried about cabbage patch dolls! If we can know and believe in our hearts that Jesus is a

good and glorious Saviour, if we can treasure Him even through deep sorrow and countless tears, then we will be people that seek peace with others. Now that is not always possible because some people refuse to let go of earthly desire, but even when that happens this text has good news for us. Even when peace with others is impossible the Christian can still have peace. That is the second lesson from our text, that...]

Point #2 – God’s peace comes when faith is conquering fear. (Verses 6-7)

When we believe the Lord’s promises and trust in His goodness we find rest.

He gives two more commands in verse 6.

Again a feeling is commanded, but this time the command is against feeling anxiety or worry.

‘Don’t feel anxiety about anything!’

Commentator Ralph Martin points out this is the same word Jesus uses in Matthew 6:25-34 during the Sermon on the Mount.

In that passage Jesus is specifically talking about material needs like food and clothing.

Paul likely has the same thing in mind here. We are not to be anxious about our earthly needs/desires being met.

That is a very difficult command because there is so much to be worried about.

For fun I typed into google, “What is the number one worry for Canadians?” Anyone want to guess what it was? For almost half of Canadians money is the number one concern.

On top of that, people get stressed about work and school, we worry about health, what people think about us, and the list goes on.

I can tell you first hand there is nothing peaceful about being in the grip of anxiety.

Thankfully, there is a solution that the word of God offers us here.

The solution offered is prayer.

He says, ‘in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God’

Prayer is simply the action of speaking with the LORD.

That involves more than just coming to God with a list of stuff you want, it is an act of worship.

If you look to the Psalms, to the pattern Jesus laid down for us, and to the example of the apostles, you will see that the praise and adoration of God is significant to prayer.

Declaring Who God is, His knowledge, power, presence, holiness, goodness, justice, faithfulness, love, grace, and mercy is so good for our souls.

When we pray we are reminded of Who we are trusting in and that is a powerful remedy to fear.

That is why by bring ‘supplications’ to the LORD in prayer.

Supplication is simply asking God for what we need. The only reason it makes any sense for us to ask God for things is that we believe He is able to meet those needs.

The very act of coming to God with supplications is an exercise of faith.

To that he adds ‘thanksgiving’. That is incredibly powerful. Thanksgiving is recognizing what God has already given us.

What has God given us? Everything good. Air to breath, food to eat, clothes to wear, and health to live another day.

If we just thanked God for those things it would keep us busy, but for the Christian we must also thank Him for every spiritual blessing that we have in His Son.

Jesus was sent into the world by God the Father, into the womb of Mary, born amongst the animals, live and died in humility to pay our debt of sin, raised on the third day, and is now reigning in heaven until He comes again.

Why did He do that? So that those that belong to Him by faith would be made alive by the power of the Holy Spirit, forgiven, redeemed, adopted, set apart, loved, and become heirs of God’s covenant promises including the gift of eternal life. That is a fear conquering way to pray.

As David Garland puts it, “*The way to be anxious about nothing is to be prayerful about everything*”.

Doing that comes with a promise according to **verse 7**.

Commentator Ralph Martin says this promise is a military metaphor.

The picture is a soldier standing guard on a city wall watching for enemies and ready to take action to defend the city.

When we are praying to God about everything with praise and thanksgiving the LORD acts in such a way so as to guard our hearts and minds in Christ with His peace which is beyond understanding.

[Remember when Peter was put in jail by Herod and was scheduled to be executed in Acts chapter twelve? Do you remember what he was doing the night before in jail? He was sleeping. How do you sleep in a situation like that? You have the peace of God guarding your heart. When God rescues him from jail he goes to a house where some believers had gathered. Do you remember what they were doing? They were praying.]

When we make our ‘requests...known to God’ we are not giving the LORD new information.

What we are doing is expressing our trust in His power and goodness and when we trust Him He guards our hearts and minds with His peace.

That is a fantastic promise.

I think if we are honest we will admit that it is pretty easy to be anxious about all kinds of things.

I know what it is like to be overcome by fear and I know firsthand that nothing good comes from it.

How much better would it be to have the peace of God instead?

[What would it be like if we prayed instead of worried? It would look like the kind of life that makes people scratch their heads and see something different in us. It would look like the power of God at work in the lives of His people. What an amazing promise of peace. That brings us to one more lesson from this text. In addition to finding our satisfaction in Christ and bringing our needs to the LORD, we find in verses 8-9 that...]

Point #3 – Believers enjoy God’s peace by striving to think and act rightly. (Verses 8-9)

The fruit of a heart born again by the power of the Holy Spirit is the clearest of all evidence that the King of the universe is on our side in all of life.

Verse 8 speaks to us about our minds.

The first and perhaps most important thing to consider about this list is the way the list is given assumes that what is listed is objective in nature.

It is possible to know what is true and what is true is not a matter of opinion but a matter of fact.

What is honorable is not a matter of preference but has defined qualities.

Justice is a constant unchanging set of moral standards applied to all people no matter what you look like or where you come from.

To be pure or holy is to be completely unstained by the corruption of evil.

Loveliness/beauty is recognizable.

Excellence is a knowable quality.
 Things of worth truly deserve praise.

That must be the case, otherwise the command to “think about these things” makes no sense.

If there is no objective reality to the list then how can we possibly know what to think about?

The command to think about these things demands that these things are knowable qualities.

That of course raises a question, “Where do we learn what is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and praise worthy?”

Well the only way to have an objective standard for anything is for a transcendent being (that is a being who is above everything and everyone) to make Himself known.

That is the biblical worldview. That the LORD is above all and that according to the nature of His Being He makes Himself known and therefore objective reality can be discerned.

In other words we know what all these things are by knowing Who God is and What He is like.

We can know what God is like because He has given us His written Word.

So the command here is to ‘think about’/consider/reflect upon the nature of God as revealed in the Bible.

The fixing of the mind is essential to the Christian life.

As one theologian puts it, “You cannot love what you do not know.”

We are what we think about and so we need to think about right things, but there is more. (**Verse 9** stop at ‘practice these things’)

At first glance we might think Paul is being a bit prideful here by making much of his own example, but we know enough from other parts of the Bible to know that Paul is not trying to make this about himself.

Commentator Ralph Martin makes the excellent point that the picture Paul is trying to paint here is like an apprenticeship.

[When I was an apprentice electrician I was paired with a licensed electrician so that I could watch him and learn from him. When I became a licensed electrician I had apprentices paired with me so that they could watch and learn from me. The idea is you learn from watching what works and from doing what works.]

Paul is someone who practices what he preaches and when he lived and worked among a group of believers they got to see with their own eyes that what is being said here is true.

Now look at the promise that comes with striving to think what is right and do what is right. **(End of verse 9)**

This, I believe, is saying something more than God will be present with you.

That is true of everyone.

One of the attributes of God is that He is omnipresent meaning He is present everywhere at the same time.

It is impossible to go somewhere where God is not there.

The end of verse nine here is saying something more than God is present.

He is saying God is on our side. He is present and acting on our behalf.

He is actively keeping and sustaining the faith of His people in all things.

I believe even more than that. I believe he is teaching us that the LORD is making His presence known and felt in our lives.

Talk about peace that passes all understanding!

To know and live the truth of Romans 8:31, "If God is for us who can be against us?" is a gift beyond measure.

That is why Jesus came into the world.

He came to give His people peace with God by dying on the cross.

If we have peace with God we will know the peace of God.

We will seek to have peace with one another.

We will have a faith that can conquer fear.

And we will have the peace of knowing the Lord is with us.

I believe Henry Longfellow was right when he penned the words:

"God is not dead, nor doth He sleep;

The Wrong shall fail,

The Right prevail,

With peace on earth, good-will to men."