

And the Peace of God

Grace, mercy and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text is from the Epistle reading. Paul writes to the Philippians, **“and the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.”** Amen.

Don't worry. You didn't doze off and miss the entire sermon. The words of our text are just the usual words I use to close the sermon. It lets us know the sermon is over and rouses us from our seats. But the sermon isn't over; it's just beginning. You've heard these words every week, “the peace of God which passes all understanding.” But with any words that we hear over and over again, sometimes we don't think about what the words mean. What is this peace that's beyond understanding, and how is it attained?

Now most of us understand world peace. It's when nations lay down their arms and no longer fight and struggle with one another. The war's over, and they have peace. The turmoil has stopped, and they have rest and healing. It's always been the desire of many beauty pageant contestants for world peace, though most of us have concluded that it's just impossible. We're never going to get there. But what's even more illusive is the internal peace of the individual soul. A person has internal struggles and anxieties. He worries about problems at work. He struggles with guilt. He has unrest in his relationships. His heart is in turmoil about what the future holds. He fights within himself over what decision to make. He has no peace in his soul. Can a person ever have internal peace or is it just impossible like world peace? We hope for it, but can we ever attain it?

People have tried and suggested many remedies to attain peace within the soul. Try meditation. Sit with your legs crossed and your palms up and empty your mind. Or think about walking through the cool grass by a waterfall. Better yet, get away from it all and go there yourself. Take a vacation. Lie on the beach. Walk through the woods. Get in tune with nature. Forget all your troubles. Some people try stimulants or depressants. I just need a drink to unwind. These pills will calm my nerves. Or unload your troubles on someone else. Dump on your spouse, or friend, or pay a psychologist. Get those anxieties off your chest. Or just do something to feel better about yourself: exercise, get fit, go shopping. Have some pent up anger? Get revenge. Then you'll be at peace. But these are all just suggestions of the world, desires of the flesh, or even lies of the devil. At best they're only a temporary cease fire on the war within the human soul.

But the apostle Paul offers us, not world peace or any internal peace that the world attempts, but the peace of God. The context of Paul's letter is his imprisonment for preaching the Gospel. Certainly not peaceful circumstances but more a time of uncertainty, anxiety, and fear. Yet Paul speaks to us about peace. And the context of Paul's words are, “AND the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard your hearts.” Paul is offering an internal peace of the heart. But that little conjunction “And” means that we need to back up to find the source of this peace. What does Paul say before he promises the peace of God? He tells us two things.

First he says, “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.” But what does it mean to rejoice in the Lord? And how does that give us peace?

In the Old Testament the Israelites rejoiced in the Lord. They rejoiced when the Lord delivered them from their enemies at the Red Sea. They continued to rejoice every year at every festival when they remembered how the Lord delivered them out of bondage in Egypt, preserved them in the wilderness, and brought them into a land of bounty in the Promised Land. They rejoiced every week at the Temple where God was present with his Word and altar to forgive their sins. They sang in the psalms and rejoiced that the Lord reigns, that the Lord is good. They rejoiced in the Lord's salvation, his love, his name, his righteousness, and his promises. They rejoiced in the Lord's provision of their daily bread. They rejoiced in the Messiah, the Holy One of Israel, to come. They rejoiced in the Lord's inheritance. They rejoiced in the great things God had done for them. They rejoiced in God their Savior.

In the New Testament, the shepherds rejoiced in the birth of the Savior. The people rejoiced when their king came riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. The women and the disciples rejoiced at the resurrection of Jesus, and they rejoiced again at his Ascension to fill all things. They even rejoiced in their suffering because Jesus told them their names were written in heaven. They rejoiced that God had reconciled them to him, that they had peace with God.

And we rejoice in the Lord for the same things. We rejoice in what God has done for us in this life and for what he promises to do for us in the next. We rejoice in our Savior Jesus Christ who died and rose again to take away our sins so that we are no longer at war with God, but are at peace with him. And knowing that we are at peace with God, gives us peace in our hearts. No fear of God's judgment, no anxiety about life after death, no turmoil about the future, only peace in the heart. We don't empty our minds or distract them with other things, but we fill our hearts and minds with joy in the Lord.

The second thing that Paul promises will bring us the peace of God is prayer. He writes, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.” Here Paul gives us two of the elements of our prayers: thanksgiving and supplication. But according to the Scriptures, our prayers also include two other elements: adoration of God and confession of our sins. You can remember these four elements of prayer with the acronym “ACTS” – A – C – T – S: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication.

In our prayers it’s typical of us to jump right in with our requests, especially in a time of duress. “I need this. Give me that.” But the first part of our prayer is our *adoration* of God, who he is and what He’s done for us. We address God by name: Our Father in Heaven, Almighty God, Ruler of all nations, Merciful Healer, Spirit of Power, Dear Jesus my Savior. These addresses remind us of whom God is and that he has the power to grant our petitions. We’re not making our requests to an earthly father or another human being who is limited in power and can only commiserate with us. We’re beseeching the Triune God who not only hears us but has the power and authority to grant our requests. Then we praise God by repeating back his saving deeds and promises in his Word. “Lord, in your Word you reveal how you saved me. Lord, in your Word you’ve taught me what your will is. Lord, in your word you’ve promised me these things.” We’re not just flattering God and buttering him up so we get what we want. We’re showing that we’ve first listened to him in his Word, we’ve let him speak first, and now were ready to ask. We have peace in our hearts that we’re praying to a God whom we know and who knows us. We have peace that we’re asking according to his will and what he’s promised us.

And then, just like we do at the beginning of our service, we *confess* our sins to God. If we have turmoil in our hearts that we’ve sinned against God, how would we ever dare ask for anything? If a son feels guilty for hurting his father, if their relationship is broken, he’ll be too afraid to ask his father for anything. He has no confidence that his father would listen. Martin Luther wrote in the Large Catechism, “Where the heart is not right with God . . . it will never dare to pray . . . A confident and joyful heart can come only from the knowledge that our sins are forgiven.” And so we pray, “I’m sorry Lord, forgive me of my sin.” We have peace in our hearts that for Jesus’ sake our sins are forgiven. Our hearts are right with God.

“Now, what do you say?” our mother’s reminded us. “*Thank you.*” If someone has given us a cookie, we remember to thank them for the first one before we ask for another. But when we thank God, it not only shows him common courtesy, but it reminds us of all those requests which God has already answered. If you thank God for all the specific things He’s done in your life, all the answered prayers, you have confidence that he hears you now and will answer this prayer as well. We have peace that someone is on the other end of our prayer, listening intently to grant our petition.

Now we are ready to ask, to make our *supplication*. “Lord, I have this problem at work . . . Heavenly Father, please help my daughter . . . Dear God, I don’t know what to do, please guide me . . . Merciful Lord, help me forgive my friend . . . God of compassion, grant me healing and relief from this suffering.” We dump on God. But this is what Jesus tells us to do. “Come to me all who labor and are heavy burdened, and I will give you rest.” I will give you peace. “Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you.” And our God is not too small to answer our biggest request, nor is he too big to answer our smallest request. Paul says that in *everything* present your requests to God. And for any uncertainty about the sanctity of our prayer – maybe in my sinful nature I’m out of line for asking for this – we say, “Thy will be done.” We close with, “in Jesus name. Amen.” because for the sake of Jesus, God has promised to hear our petition, and we believe this is true. Now we have peace in our hearts. In faith, we’ve given our burdens and anxieties and worries to God. It’s his problem now. We no longer worry; we trust him. We have the peace of God.

And so to attain peace, we don’t empty our minds, but we fill our minds with joy in the Lord, who he is and what he’s done for us. We don’t flee our troubles, but we flee to Him. We don’t commune with nature, but we commune with God. We let God speak to us in his Word. We rejoice in the Lord’s presence in the Sacrament as we eat and drink his body and blood. And we respond with our prayers. ACTS: Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, and Supplication. We don’t dump on people who can’t always help us, but we dump on God who can, knowing that he has the power to grant our petitions, knowing that our hearts are right with him, knowing that he’s answered our prayers in the past. We give our burdens to Jesus and he takes them. We have peace in our souls. The world doesn’t understand this peace. Our puny minds can’t understand it. Not even the angels do, for it surpasses *all* understanding. It’s not peace that we generate ourselves, but a peace of heart and mind that God gives us. It’s the peace of God. Jesus said, “Peace be with you. My peace I give to you.”

Rejoice in the Lord always. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which passes all understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.