

Peace Beyond Understanding

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Introduction.

Christians who don't think the Bible has anything to offer to the world today haven't been paying much attention to the Bible. The promises of God are eternal, and they have an eternal impact. There are untold thousands who would find those promises just as appealing today if only they knew about them. As a case in point, consider Philippians 4:7. Even though our nation is rich in material possessions, we are poor in peace. How many of us have non-Christian friends, family members, and neighbors who go through life constantly harried and harassed, who never know so much as a moment's peace or contentment? And yet, God promises us that we can have a peace that is so deep, so profound, so lasting, that it cannot be understood, only experienced. It's impossible to put a market value on a peace like that, yet God offers it to us freely. If we offer that peace to all the agitated people we know, it would be like water in the desert.

Of course, for us to be ambassadors of God's peace, we have to show the evidence of that peace in our lives. This can be a real challenge for us. Sadly, the world often has an easier time sucking us into its uproar, confusion, and discontentment than we do sharing our heavenly peace with it. Many Christians live lives that are just as frazzled as those of their non-Christian neighbors. I don't think that's a sin, but it is certainly tragic. We hold the keys to peaceful lives in our hands, but we get so distracted that we never fit them into the lock. We never receive the promise of heavenly peace.

This is precisely why we need to return to the study of peace again and again. If we don't have a handle on it, we need to get one, and if we do, we need to make the effort to maintain our grasp. Only then can we experience the full blessing of what it means to be a child of God. Let's consider, then, the Bible's take on peace beyond understanding.

Defining Peace.

As is usually a good idea, we ought to begin our exploration of the peace of God by defining it. In the first place, we need to ascertain **WHAT IT ISN'T**. This is important because even on an individual level, peace means very different things to different people. Especially in our culture, many people think of peace as accommodation, as getting along with others regardless of what they do or what they believe. In some areas, this is appropriate, but it's not what Jesus wants to see from us in the religious realm. Consider His words in Luke 12:51-53. This passage describes an experience all too familiar to us today—the way that our discipleship can bring us into conflict with our own families. I certainly have relatives who don't want to do what Christians do and don't even want to hear about what Christians do, and that's going to be a source of contention between us until either they become faithful or I stop being faithful. That can really make life hard sometimes, but Jesus warns us here not to expect anything else. The peace that God promises, the peace that passes understanding, is no guarantee of a conflict-free family. Indeed, sometimes it's the opposite.

Nor is this limited to our relationships with our relatives. Jesus explains further in John 14:27. In this verse, He points out that the world's idea of peace and God's idea of peace don't even necessarily overlap at all. If we just swim through our lives like a fish through the ocean, if our faith never brings us into conflict with anyone else or makes our earthly lives more difficult, that is almost certainly a sign that we don't understand what it means to be a disciple. Jesus on earth had a better grasp of the peace of God than any other human being ever will, but it certainly didn't give Him a serene, trouble-free existence. His own family thought He was crazy. The people of His town rejected Him and tried to stone Him. The religious leaders of His day accused Him of being an instrument of Satan. One of His closest followers betrayed Him. And then, as a final insult, He was arrested, publicly humiliated, and killed like a common criminal. In worldly terms, it's hard to imagine how Jesus' ministry could have been any **LESS** peaceful!

Every one of those troubles, though, came from a single origin. They arose because Jesus taught the truth, lived the truth, and wouldn't stop. His dedication to God was the source of the conflict. Times have changed some since Jesus preached in Galilee, but they haven't changed that much. Public stonings aren't the fashion anymore, but we can be certain that if we are dedicated to God, it will create conflict in our lives too. The peace that the world gives won't be a peace that we will ever know, because the world is only at peace with His own. Discipleship means turmoil.

So, then, now that we've ascertained what godly peace isn't, we can turn our attention to **WHAT IT IS**. The great discussion of the peace of God in Scripture appears in the second chapter of Ephesians, and we can find the heart of that text in Ephesians 2:14-16. We've already seen how Jesus is a divider. This passage tells us that He is a uniter too. First, the blood of Jesus unites man with man. Two thousand years ago, that was true because Christ did away with the Law of Moses, which stood between Jew and Gentile. As a result, both groups could now come together as one. Even today, Christianity brings together people who probably wouldn't have two words to say to one another otherwise. For many of us, the resulting family that we have in Christ is more important to us than our blood families. Nor is that all. Through His death, Christ didn't merely reconcile us to one another. He also reconciled us to God. Before the sacrifice

of Jesus, our sins separated us from God, but in that sacrifice, Jesus bore our sins in His body on the cross, and our guilt died when He did. As a result, a just God can welcome us back into a relationship with Him. The peace of God, then, is the peace that we have through Jesus. It is the peace that joins us both to other Christians and to God.

That's the peace, but why does it surpass our understanding? Our immediate answer tends to be that it's just such a wonderful peace to know that we can't really describe it, and that's certainly true. However, that's probably not all that Paul meant, and we get some more insight into the fullness of what he did mean in Titus 3:3-5. Of all the portraits of mankind in Scripture, this is one of the least flattering, and that's before we recognize that Paul is actually describing people who were future Christians! We like to believe that we're pretty good people, but the truth is that every one of us can locate ourselves somewhere on this list, or maybe even in all the elements on it. Because sin is an expression of hatred, our sin proved that we hated other people, and we were worthy of hatred ourselves. And yet, even though we were such miserable, wretched, unlovable people, God loved us anyway, and through the gift of His Son, reconciled us to Him. We were rebels against the King, but instead of punishing us as we deserved, He adopted us into His family. Here we are: at peace with one another, at peace with God. The existence of that peace is truly beyond our understanding.

Ways to Find Peace.

Once we recognize just how precious the peace of God is, we naturally want ways to find it and to maintain it. The first of these paths to peace that the Scripture identifies is **FAITH**. Look with me at Romans 5:1-2. As we've discussed before, the sacrifice of Christ does not automatically save everyone. Instead, if we want that sacrifice to take effect in our lives, we must believe and be led by our belief to obey the gospel. From that point on, though, we enter into the peace with God and our brethren that Ephesians 2 describes. It's easy for us to assume we'll stay faithful. However, as Jesus warns, it's also easy for Christians to lose their faith and fall away. The other week, Bob Priest was telling me about the trouble he's been having with soil erosion around the house he's building in Arkansas, and just like rain can wash away a hillside, the storms of life can erode our faith. We must constantly protect it and build it back up through our study of the word. If we don't do that, if we don't read the Bible on our own, if we don't assemble here every time the doors are opened, it is likely that our faith is being worn down faster than we can build it up. Once our faith has been eroded, we lose the peace of our relationship with God. Let's never let that happen. Let's take care of our faith.

Just as faith leads us to peace, so too does one of the most important expressions of our faith—**PRAYER**. This, in fact, is the source to which Paul attributes the peace that surpasses understanding. Look at Philippians 4:6-7. There's a hymn in our hymnal called "What a Friend We Have in Jesus". It's one of the most familiar hymns we sing. In fact, if you talk to JoAnn Bunch about it, you'll know that she feels we've sung it about enough already. And yet, even though we know this hymn so well, we pay attention to it so little. We stagger through life groaning beneath all kinds of different burdens, God is waiting in heaven to take those burdens away from us, and yet, we never give them up to Him. We never pray. Prayer is the spiritual equivalent of a Ghinsu knife. There is nothing it is not good for. There is no problem it cannot solve. Whenever we are wrestling with any problem, our first and last response should be to pray. Then, once we have prayed, we can safely leave the problem in God's hands, at peace with the resolution that only He can provide.

As important as prayer is, though, it's only part of one of the most important keys to peace—**A SPIRITUAL MIND**. Paul explains in Romans 8:6-8. This is the key distinction between one who is right with God and one who is not. As Christians, we still sin. The difference between us and the citizens of the world is that we don't want to. We live for something greater than ourselves. We desire something more than just the satisfaction of our appetites. We are people who have a mind that is set on the spirit. As long as we have that mind, as long as we scrap and claw and fight to do what's right, we also have peace with God. However, just as soon as we start putting anything else in front of God, peace with Him becomes impossible. In my work, I talk about spiritual things with a lot of different folks, both inside and outside the church. However, the saddest conversations I have are with those who want to obey the gospel, but want something else even more. They love God, but some other element of their lives is too precious to give up. I readily admit that some of those situations are hard to be in. I'm glad I'm not in them. In the end, though, the situation doesn't matter. Unless we wrench our minds away from the flesh and set them on the spirit, we cannot have peace with God.

Finally, though, the last thing we have to do to hold on to this peace beyond our understanding is to have **UNITY** with one another. Paul addresses this topic in Ephesians 4:1-3. On one level, this seems like a very easy instruction to obey. After all, as richly blessed as all of us have been by God, what could we possibly have to fight about? In reality, we know this is actually extremely difficult. It's hard to be lowly when we see some brother get up on his high horse. It's hard to be gentle when someone contradicts us obnoxiously. It's hard to be longsuffering, well, all the time. That's why it's **LONG**suffering. However, the only way that we can be at peace with one another in this church is if we constantly work on all these things. What's important is not how we feel in the anger of the moment. What's important is that we keep the overall objective in view. Unity and harmony within the congregation is essential to the work we do here, and it is precious to God. If we want to keep our peace with Him, we have to keep peace with one another too.