

Peace in an Anxious World

M. W. Bassford, 10-16-11

When I get on the phone with my dad, and the conversation turns to things that he's seen and experienced, he will often express the opinion that he has lived through America's golden age, that things in this country will never be as good again as they have been during his life. Of course, the future is impossible to predict, but there seems to be a lot of evidence to support his point of view. The economy is a mess. We're theoretically out of the last recession, but millions of people are still out of work, and we may be about to nose into another recession. Politically speaking, both parties appear more interested in arguing with each other than working toward a solution. Other nations, like China, India, and Brazil, seem poised to pass us up and reduce us to the same sort of economic backwater that Great Britain has become.

All of these things have a very real effect on the personal level too. Prices for everything from gas to Corn Flakes seem to increase continually. Five years ago, I never would have imagined that I would be happy to see the day when I paid \$3.50 a gallon at the pump, but that's where we are. Nor are our incomes keeping pace with inflation. In fact, our employer are usually looking for us to work harder and for longer hours, with the implied threat that if we refuse, we too might get to spend some quality time in the unemployment line. The value of our homes and retirement portfolios have shrunk faster than the waistslines on "The Biggest Loser." Things are grim, and they don't look like they're getting better.

When we consider all of these anxieties and concerns, what a relief it is to remember that this nation, and indeed this world, is not our home! To the people of the world, all of these things are disasters. To Christians, they are annoyances. In Christ, we know that none of these things can harm us, and that we can find peace in an anxious world.

The Basis of Peace.

This peace that the Christian has, a peace that the Scripture describes as surpassing knowledge, is based on two main concepts. The first of these is **GOD'S NATURE**. James deftly describes what God is like in James 1:17. As all of us have learned to our sorrow, people are not dependable. The same man who will shake our hand one day will stab us in the back the next. People will shift and change all over the place, but God never changes a bit. As the King James says in this verse, in Him there is no turning, nor even any shadow of turning. This is bad news if we are enemies of God. We can be certain that just as His enemies thousands of years ago came to a bad end, so too will we if we continue to oppose Him. However, for those of us who are God's friends and indeed His adopted children, this is an extraordinarily reassuring thought. As long as we don't abandon Him, He will never abandon us. If our lives are going wonderfully, and everything is rainbows and puppies and lollipops, God will be with us. Similarly, if our lives become misery and woe, to the point that it becomes an effort to keep going, God is still going to be with us. We can trust Him without reservation.

Because God is so trustworthy, we can rely on **HIS PROMISE**. The Bible is filled with these promises, which Peter praises in 2 Peter 1 as precious and magnificent. However, when we consider our subject matter this morning, one promise in particular stands out. Let's look at Isaiah 26:3. If we keep our minds fixed on God and trust His word without reservation, He will bless us with a peace that is complete and perfect. We won't have to worry about anything anymore, because just like we as parents take care of our children, our heavenly Father will take care of us. I don't think that Zoë lies awake in her crib at night, stressing about where her next meal is going to come from, or how she's going to manage to pay the bills. Instead, she relies so fully on Mama and Daddy to take care of her that she doesn't even think about it. All of our lives will be equally peaceful if only we will learn that same childlike reliance on God. Unlike Zoë, we must carry our share of the load. God is not merciful to the unrepentantly idle or the unrepentantly wicked. However, if we do our best to live as He expects, we can be assured that He's going to take care of the rest.

Finding Peace In . . .

God's promise of perfect peace extends to all of the most tumultuous areas of our lives. First, He promises us peace despite the **SIN** that we have committed. Paul points out the reason for this peace in Romans 5:8-9. Of all of our problems, the problem of sin is the largest and the one that we are least equipped to handle. Every other problem only threatens to harm us in this life, but sin threatens to destroy us eternally, and there is nothing that we can do to make up for the sin that we have already committed. However, God's love for us is so great that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us, so that we could be saved from the wrath we have earned. This is mercy on a scale so great as to be almost incomprehensible. It's as though we owed a million dollars to the bank, and one day the bank president calls us into his office and says, "Don't worry about that million dollars; I've decided to pay the debt out of my own pocket. You don't owe us a dime." That never happens in human interaction, at least not to me, but it is exactly what God has done for us. And yet, many Christians still struggle with guilt long after they know that God has forgiven them. Friends, that's like

arguing with the bank president. That's like trying to make payments on a debt that has already been discharged. If God says our sins have been forgiven, who are we to say differently? We need to accept His grace and not raise a fuss.

On a smaller but still important scale, God gives us peace despite our **MATERIAL CONCERNS**. Look at the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:25. Let me suggest to you, friends, that this might have been the most shocking thing in the entire Sermon on the Mount to those who heard our Lord that day. Remember, most people in Galilee were subsistence farmers. They were very poor people, subject to obscenely high taxation, and completely dependent on the whims of the weather. A couple of bad harvests in a row, and they could find themselves quite literally watching their children starve before their eyes. It is to people like this that Jesus says, "Don't worry about food. Don't worry about clothing."

Jesus could say such a shocking, indeed appalling thing, because He knew that the children of God could trust in their Father to take care of them. Brethren, if Jesus could say that to people who were unimaginably destitute, and expect them to have faith, what does He expect of us? There's not a one of us here who is in danger of starving to death. We're not worried about having clothes to put on our backs; we're worried about mortgage payments and pension plans. We're stressing about things that our brethren 2000 years ago would have considered ridiculous luxuries. In a nation where God's providence is so evident, we forget about it so often. Instead, we ought to draw a line between wants and needs, and trust God when He promises to take care of the needs. We can't provide for ourselves, but God can.

We can also rely on God to give us peace in the midst of **CONFLICT**. Let's look at Peter's thoughts about this in 1 Peter 3:9. This is one of the most counter-intuitive statements in Scripture. When somebody pushes us, we want to push back. When a friend or family member says something offensive to us, we want to offend right back. We usually don't recognize it at the time, but that's the worst thing we can do. Not only does it keep the quarrel going, but it injures us directly by pulling us away from what God wants us to be. Instead, Peter tells us to bless when we are reviled. Most people will find it difficult to respond to a blessing with more reviling, so our soft answer will turn away wrath. In addition, when we show that level of forbearance and love for peace, it finds favor with God and invites His blessing. In God, we have a security and peace that we could never provide for ourselves. Why, then, would it ever be worthwhile to try to gain those things for ourselves by attacking someone else? Let's find our peace in Him instead.

Likewise, God has also promised us peace in **SUFFERING**. This is also a topic that Peter explores, in 1 Peter 5:10. Whether we want to admit it or not, this world is a place of suffering. Sooner or later, every Christian will suffer, and there is nothing that we can do to protect ourselves from it. Sometimes, as in 1 Peter, this suffering is the result of persecution. More often, we suffer because of the hardships of life that everyone, Christian or no, must endure. All of the things that we've talked about already, from sin to interpersonal conflict, can create suffering for us. So too can the frailties of our human flesh, whether we are having to deal with pain in our own bodies or watching the pain of a loved one. Although the varieties of suffering are nearly infinite, one thing is true of all of them. For the Christian, they are all temporary. God does not allow Satan to torment His people indefinitely, and sooner or later, He will act to relieve our suffering. Whether this relief occurs in this life or the life to come, we can be certain that we will be happy again. Even when we are in the middle of our suffering, we can still find hope and peace in that thought.

This is true of even the greatest suffering. We can know peace even as we wrestle with the **LOSS** of a loved one. Paul makes this point with his words of comfort in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-14. Like suffering, the pain of death is a human constant. I'm not all that old yet, and I've already experienced the death of my mother and the death of my daughter. However, my grief at both of those things is tempered by the knowledge that this life is not all there is. I don't have to mourn as those who have no hope. Instead, I can anticipate the day when I will be reunited with them in heaven, to renew my relationship with my mother and to establish the relationship with my daughter that this life has denied me. All I have to do is to be obedient and patient, and I know that those things will happen. This life is not perfect. In fact, much of the time, it's not even within shouting distance of perfect, but it doesn't have to be. Through Christ, I know that my loved ones are happy and safe, not here, but there, and there can be no greater comfort than that.

As a result, we can find our peace in God no matter what **TOMORROW** may hold. Jesus explains why in one of the most beautiful promises in all of Scripture. We find it in Matthew 28:20. None of us have ever seen Jesus, we can't see Him now, but that doesn't make His presence in our lives any less real. Parents, children, spouses, friends, all of these relationships come and go, but our relationship with Jesus is always the same. "I am with you always" is an absolute. As long as we want Him with us, there He will be. We can talk to Him any time we want to through prayer. We can listen to Him any time we want to by reading His word. No matter how cruelly life may use us, we will always have Jesus. Even at the end of our lives, when we must face the river of death that so many have faced before us, Jesus will be there. Every other friend, every other helper will inevitably drop out at that point, but Jesus will love us to the end and even beyond.

As the hymn says, "I don't know a thing in this whole wide world that's worse than being alone." The flip side of that is that there is nothing better in this world than to have someone with us, someone we can rely on. Jesus is that someone. Once we have found shelter beneath His mighty hand, there is nothing that can possibly harm us. Even the worst that the devil can do is nothing more than an inconvenience. This is the perfect peace that God's children have.