

KNOWING GOD'S PEACE

Phil 4.5-7

INTRODUCTION

We've come this morning to look at some of the best-known verses of the New Testament, for in them we find one of the greatest promises of the New Testament.

Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

But you will notice that these stirring words are introduced by

1. A REASSURING FACT (v5b): *The Lord is near* Paul tells us.

When we pray, we aren't calling on the name of a distant or remote deity.

Illustration. We're not like the prophets of Baal in the days of Elijah. When the pagan deity didn't respond to his prophets' frustrated cries, Elijah taunted them by suggesting that Baal had perhaps gone away on holiday or was too far away to hear their noise (**1 Kings 18.27-29**). *"Shout louder!" he said. "Perhaps Baal is deep in thought, or busy, or travelling. Maybe he is sleeping and must be awakened." So the prophets shouted louder and slashed themselves with swords and spears, as was their custom, until their blood flowed, we're told. Midday passed, and they continued their frantic prophesying until the time for the evening sacrifice. But there was no response, no one answered, no one paid attention.*

Baal, of course, was a false god, just a product of the prophets' rather limited imaginations. That's why he didn't answer them – he couldn't! There was no reality to his being. He was just an idol, a man-made substitute for the One True God. And that's why Baal seemed so remote to his prophets. He had no separate existence, apart from them. He was simply a figment of their own very limited imaginations.

But not so the Lord - not so our Lord Jesus Christ. We know he is real because he has come down to earth and has walked this planet, and is now back at his Father's right hand side in glory, where he reigns supreme, exalted and glorified!

But this same Lord Jesus Christ is also near us – every moment of every day - because *he lives within us*, by his Spirit. That's the wonder of being a Christian. We don't pray to some vague or remote God, up there somewhere. I get really annoyed and frustrated when people talk about 'praying to whoever might be up there' – a God so remote to them, that they know nothing about him. That's so tragic when they could be experiencing the nearness of God.

We pray to a God whom we know intimately and personally, because he lives within us, by his Spirit. *I won't leave you as orphans, Jesus assured his disciples in **John 14.18,20,23**. I will come to you. On that day [the Day of Pentecost, when Jesus outpoured God's Spirit on the first disciples], you will realize that I am in you. If anyone loves me, that person will obey my teaching. My Father will love that person, and we will come to that person and make our home with him or her.* This is why as Christians we can say with confidence, *'The Lord is near'* – knowing it to be always true for us.

Unconfessed Sin. The only thing that puts a distance between us and God relationally, is our sin - especially when we refuse to acknowledge it and confess it. We are the ones who distance ourselves from the Lord, in those circumstances. *If I had cherished sin in my heart, the Lord would not have listened to me, says the writer of **Psalm 66.18-20**. But God has listened and heard my voice in prayer. Praise be to God, who has not rejected my prayer or withheld his love from me!*

The norm is for God to be near us – at all times and in all circumstances – because he lives within us, by his Spirit. What a great reassurance that is to us!

And so this is the background against which Paul issues

2. HIS CHALLENGING CALL (v6a): *Do not be anxious about anything.*

We need to be careful when looking at a phrase like this to distinguish between *legitimate concerns* and *sinful anxiety*.

2.1 Legitimate concerns

- Paul was very concerned about *the rift* that had developed in the church at Philippi between two of his former colleagues, *Euodia and Syntyche* (v2), because potentially it could completely wreck the good spirit being enjoyed within that fellowship, and so mar its witness to the world.
- Paul was also very concerned about *those who had once professed to be Christians*, but whose lives now gave a lie to that claim (3.18). They were living as *enemies of the cross*, because everything about their lifestyle was a living denial of the very reasons for which Christ had died for them.
- Paul was also concerned to *press on* with his life, *to take of that for which Christ Jesus had taken hold of him* (3.12).

So in saying to us, *Do not be anxious about anything*, Paul isn't calling us to a way of life that is so laid back that we're *indifferent* to everything – cultivating a false sense of peace in which nothing really matters to us any more.

2.2 Sinful Worry

No, what he's talking about here is *worry* – that state of mind in which we drive ourselves to distraction over things that we ought to be getting into a better perspective.

Illustration. Apparently, the English word 'worry' is derived from an Anglo-Saxon word meaning 'harm'; and that Anglo-Saxon word is also the origin of our English word 'wolf'. A wolf will 'worry' sheep by prowling around them in a menacing kind of way, until it pounces and starts to tear them to pieces.

- And it's like that with our worries, isn't it? They prowl around us in a menacing kind of way. We can't seem to get them out of our mind. We're continually dwelling on them, churning them over in our thoughts. And because they keep on demanding our attention, they soon begin to distract us from what we should *really* be focussed on, the task in hand, whatever that might be. So we begin to lose our focus, and sense of vision and purpose. Our effectiveness and efficiency drops – and that makes us even more worried! Our worries start to cause us sleepless nights until eventually, they begin to eat away at personality. *An anxious heart weighs a man down*, Proverbs 12.25 reminds us. We can become sick with worry, literally. We can end up developing ulcers from our worries.

And this is why in the Gospels, on at least a dozen occasions, Jesus says to us ***Don't worry*** – *it will do you no good, but a lot of harm*. Let's turn to **Matthew 6.25** for a few examples of what *not* to worry about.

(a) Food and fashion (Mat 6.25)

Don't worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Isn't life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? People can get so hung up over food and fashion, can't they? There's a whole industry devoted to celebrity diets and designer clothes. But Jesus says to us here, getting hung up over these relatively trivial matters is not what life is about. For us as Christians, it's about our character development, not our clothes. It's about our heart, not our outward appearance (**1 Sam 16.7**). It's what comes *out* of our mouths, when we speak, that matters - the words we use and the tone of voice we adopt - not the foodstuffs that go into our bodies (**Mat 15.11**). Of course, we should eat healthily; but it's far more important to *speak* healthily – to be worried about our words and the effect they have, not our diet and how much weight we'll put on.

(b) Health and Lifespan (Mat 6.27)

In **verse 27**, Jesus continues, *Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?* Many people worry about how long they are going to live; and because they *worry* about their *lifespan*, they end up reducing it!

Illustration. Bishop Taylor Smith used to write this ditty when he was asked to sign an autograph book: *The worried cow would have lived 'til now if she had saved her breath; but she feared her hay wouldn't last all day, and she mooed herself to death!*

- Why should we worry about how long we're going to live when God has told us in his word that *all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be (Ps 139.16)*? What we should be concerned about is not *how long* we are going to live, but *what we are going to do* with the days God does give us, whether they be few or many.
- *Make the most of every opportunity*, Paul urges us in **Eph 5.16** (cf **Col 4.5**), adding - *because the days are evil*. Time and opportunities must be snatched up like bargains in a sale, because we don't know how long they will be there for us. *As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me*, Jesus said in **John 9.4**. *Night is coming, when no one can work*.

God knows what we need to both survive and serve him, Jesus reminds us in **verses 31-32**. So if we put our character development and service to God first, he will ensure that we have everything else we need for doing his will (**Mat 6.33**). *Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well*.

(c) The Future (Mat 6.34)

Jesus concludes the chapter (**Mat 6.34**) by telling us *not to worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own*. Some people get so concerned about the future that they fail to make the most of the present. Some people get so uptight about what they've got to do next that they fail to enjoy the 'now' moment. *"You can't change the past, but you can spoil the present, by worrying about the future,"* someone has said

- Often, we have a sense of being caught up in a world that is moving ever faster in its relentless drive for efficiency. Everything has to be done quickly, so that we can move on to the next thing. News and current affairs programmes epitomise this trend. Interviewees are cut off in mid-sentence, before they've had time to develop their argument, so the presenters can move on to the next story.
- And so Jesus says to us here, "Don't get so up tight about what you've got to do next that you fail to enjoy the 'now' moment – and most importantly, use it for God's glory.
- It's right to plan ahead, of course. Not to do so, is to be irresponsible. But our forward planning must never be at the expense of the 'now' moment.

Some people, by nature, are very laid back. Few things ever faze them. But other people are perennial worriers – they start to get worried if they have nothing to worry about! That *really* worries them!

Illustration. Winston Churchill is reputed to have said, *"When I look back on all that has worried me, I remember the story of a man who, on his deathbed confessed, "I've had a lot of troubles in my life, most of which never happened."*

Each of us will be inclined to worry over different things.

- For some people it's their clothes – what they look like, cool or crazy.
- For others it's their health – they are forever thinking there must be something wrong with themselves.
- Other people worry about money – making ends meet, or having enough money to buy that luxury item.
- Some people worry over their possessions – and are terrified of losing them.
- Some people get very up tight about their work – finding a job, or pressing for promotion.
- Most parents worry about their children – their safety or behaviour when young, or their prospects when they're older; the relationships they embark on, perhaps.

The great irony in all of this is that, the one thing we should *all* be concerned about, is something we give relatively little attention to: namely, *our Christlikeness*. If we worried as much about that, as about all the trivial things of life, we would all be much better Christians, I suspect! *How can I become more like Jesus – in my thoughts and attitudes, my words and actions?* That's what we should *really* be concerned about!

Burdens

Legitimate concern crosses over the boundary into sinful worry when we fail to put what is troubling us into the Lord's hands – and leave it there. Sometimes we take our burdens to the Lord, in prayer, but then hang onto them – as if we aren't quite sure whether he is up to dealing with them to our satisfaction.

Illustration. It reminds me of the traveller with a heavy rucksack who was offered a lift by a farmer on his horse-drawn wagon. The farmer felt sorry for the man, puffing and panting his way up a steep hill. "Clamber on board and I will give you a lift," the farmer called out. So that's what the man did. But the wagon had travelled only a few yards when the farmer heard the traveller still puffing and blowing. So he turned round, and to his astonishment found that the traveller was still carrying the rucksack on his back. "Why are you still wearing your rucksack?" the farmer asked, very bewildered. "I didn't want it to be a burden to your horse," the traveller replied. It was good of you to give me a lift; but I didn't want to burden your horse with my pack as well."

- *Cast all your anxiety on him* – the Lord - *because he cares for you*, **1 Peter 5.7** tells us. The word 'cast' in that verse is the same one that occurs in the Gospels to describe the crowds throwing their cloaks onto the donkey, for Jesus to ride on, into Jerusalem, on the first Palm Sunday. And when the people threw their cloaks onto that donkey, they let go of them. That's what we must do with our worries, our cares and concerns – throw them onto Jesus, and leave them with him.

So that's where Paul takes us next, in verse 6. He gives us

3. A CLEAR INSTRUCTION (v6b): in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. Here is *God's timeless and universal remedy for anxiety*, someone has observed.

3.1 Everything should be made a matter of prayer

Illustration. I've used a simple prayer diary for my own prayer requests for many years now, and I would commend the practise to you. It's in the form of a loose-leaf filofax binder, so I can easily update it every three or four months.

- Each member of my family is assigned to a different day of the week;
- So are missionary friends and organisations I support.
- Our church activities are listed out too.
- But then there's space for special events – like family holidays and celebrations.
- I have sometimes included a list of the fruit of the Spirit, to remind me to pray about character development, not just other people or activities.

You see, our whole life is to be lifted up to God in prayer, day by day and moment by moment.

In times of anxiety, it's tempting to retreat into a corner and brood over what's troubling us. We may start to secretly grumble about our lot in life, and feel sorry for ourselves. But when we bring the matter out into the open before God, we start to find release from our worries, Alex Motyer points out [p211]. Prayer is the best therapy for anxiety; and prayer is the best antidote to worry.

You will notice, however, that Paul encourages us to

3.2 mix our requests with thanksgiving.

Being grateful for what we already have, and thankful for all that the Lord has done for us, is also one of the best antidotes to anxiety. When we recall with thanksgiving everything the Lord has done for us in the past, it gives us confidence to face the future with him.

Illustration. That applies to us as a church, as far as our building refurbishment work is concerned. God's provision of funds for our new ramps and accessible toilet facilities – not to mention the roof work and rewiring that has been carried out – gives us confidence that he will provide for our future needs, whatever they might be. If he wants further work to go ahead, which, I believe, he does - so that the church is fit for the 21st century - he will provide the necessary financial resources for it. He will have to, because we don't have the resources ourselves! In many ways, it's more of a worry when we do have the resources ourselves – because then we struggle over how much we need to empty our pockets for the

Lord's work. But when the target is beyond our resources, then we can trust the Lord to provide for us, as he has done in the past.

Illustration. A brilliant example of someone praying with thanksgiving, in the midst of adversity, is Daniel. You will remember how he had risen to become one of the three highest office bearers in the government of King Darius (**Dan 6.1-10**). In fact, *Daniel so distinguished himself among the other administrators by his exceptional qualities that the king planned to set him over the whole kingdom.* This made many of the other administrators very jealous of Daniel. *So they tried to find grounds for charges against Daniel in his conduct of government affairs. But they were unable to do so. They could find no corruption in him, because he was trustworthy and neither corrupt nor negligent,* the text tells us. *So finally, these other men said, "We will never find any basis for charges against this man Daniel unless it has something to do with the law of his God." So the administrators ... went as a group to the king and said: "O King Darius, live forever! The royal administrators ... have all agreed that the king should issue an edict and enforce the decree that anyone who prays to any god or man during the next thirty days, except to you, O king, shall be thrown into the lions' den. ... So King Darius put the decree in writing.* But in Dan 6.10, we read that *when Daniel learned that the decree had been published, he went home to his upstairs room where the windows opened toward Jerusalem. Three times a day he got down on his knees and **prayed, giving thanks to his God, just as he had done before.*** Daniel was in the habit of mixing his prayers of petition with prayers of thanksgiving – and he saw no need to change the habit of a lifetime, just because the king had issued this decree.

- Like Daniel, we need to cultivate the habit of always praying with thanksgiving – not just placing our requests before God, though it's perfectly proper to do that – but mixing our petitions with expressions of gratitude for all that God has done for us and given to us, already. We can thank him too, for everything he will yet do for us in the future, as he responds to our prayers.

And so to verse 7, where Paul presents us with

4. A HEART-WARMING PROMISE (v7). *The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

When we follow the formula Paul presents us with here – refusing to give in to worries, and instead, bringing our life before God in prayer, being thankful for all he has done in the past and will yet do for us in the future – then we will experience a deep sense of his peace in our lives.

4.1 God's peace is something supernatural

It's beyond human explanation. It *transcends all understanding*. Sometimes people will say to us, "How can you be so calm when there is so much for you to worry about?" The answer is, "Our calmness comes from Christ, living within us, as the Prince of Peace. Peace is his speciality."

- Jesus himself said in **John 14.27**, *Peace is what I'm leaving with you; I give you my own unique form of peace. I do not give to you as the world gives* – because the only kind of peace the world can offer us is a peace based favourable circumstances. It's a fair-weather peace, not a peace for the storms of life. By contrast, the kind of peace Jesus imparts to us is a peace based on the knowledge that, come what may, he is Sovereign and is working out his eternal purposes for us, through everything that happens to us. *We know that in all things, God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose,* **Romans 8.28** assures us. That's the basis for this supernatural peace. And so Jesus is able to say to us, *do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.*

Those words reinforce what Paul is telling us here.

4.2 God's peace is for guarding our hearts and minds, so we stay loyal to Jesus.

God's peace *guards our hearts and minds* so that they remain fully *in Christ Jesus*.

- Philippi was a garrison town. It was probably a walled city, like most ancient cities were. The citizens knew they were safe from attack, so long as they remained within the city walls, because surrounding the city walls on the outside were a troop of crack soldiers, guarding the city.

- And so Paul says to us here, “The function of God’s peace is to keep us safe in our relationship with Jesus.”
- When Paul speaks about our *hearts* here, he isn’t referring to the muscular organ in our chest cavity that keeps blood circulating round our body, so we stay alive physically. He is speaking about the dynamo that drives our whole life and personality. It’s the inner spring from which our outward life and personality flows.

Think of all the many different ways in which we use the word ‘heart’ in our English language.

- We talk about *loving* someone with our heart, for the heart is the seat of our *affections*;
- we talk about *longing* for something with our heart, for the heart is the source of our *desires*;
- we talk about *setting* our heart on something, for the heart is the place where our *ambitions* are determined;
- we talk about what’s *dear* to our heart, for the heart is where our *values* are established;
- we talk about *doing* what’s on our heart, for the heart (rather than the head) is where our *decisions* are made;
- and we talk about doing things either *whole-heartedly* or *half-heartedly*, for the heart is where our level of *commitment* is settled.

This is why it’s so important for our hearts to be guarded, so they remain true to Jesus. Our hearts – our affections, desires, ambitions, values, decisions and commitment levels - will come under continuous attack from the society we live in, as Satan seeks to compromise our loyalty to Christ and Christlikeness.

Our *minds* need protection too – the way we think, what we plan, what we imagine – because the way we think determines the way we act. Belief determines behaviour. Attitudes shape actions. Our hearts and minds are prone to wander away from Christ, which is why they need to be guarded so carefully. And God’s peace is our sentry, on permanent duty, warding off the attacks of the evil one. God’s peace is like a strong city wall, right around about us. Without God’s peace, we would be vulnerable to the attacks thrown against us. Worries would get the better of us – and we would be pulled away from Christ.

That’s why prayer is such a priority for the Christian. It builds the wall of God’s peace ever higher, to keep our hearts and mind true to Christ.