

EXPERIENCING GOD'S PRESENCE

Phil 4.8-9

INTRODUCTION

I received a book through the post this past week, from Scotland. It's one I had ordered and I'm very much looking forward to reading it. It's the official biography of Peter Barber, who for many years was the General Secretary of the Baptist Union.

- Peter was a tremendous encouragement and inspiration to me as a young minister. I can remember him coming up to me, and chatting to me, at a ministers' conference. I was going through a particularly tough time in the church I was pastoring, and Peter knew it. He didn't say very much to me, but what he did say was an enormous encouragement to me to keep going. And but for that single sentence, who knows whether or not I would still be in the ministry. They were words of such wise counsel and hope.
- But what was so striking about everyone who knew and loved Peter was the sense of Christ's presence when we were with him. Very fittingly, his biography has been given the title, "*To me, to live is Christ*" – for that was so true of Peter. He had a burning passion for Jesus. But besides being passionate *about* Jesus, and *for* Jesus, Peter was amongst that rare breed of Christians, of whom it can be said, "When you were in his presence, you sensed you were in the presence of a true man of God" – not in any stuffy sense, because Peter was blessed with a wonderful sense of humour. I can still picture him, splitting his sides with laughter over some incredibly corny joke he had just told – often one that was mildly self-disparaging. But when you were with Peter, you sensed you were in the presence of someone who lived so close to Christ, that you were drawn nearer to Jesus yourself, just by being with him. God was with Peter in a very special way, there's no doubt about that.

So what's the secret of enjoying that kind of life – a life in which God is so evidently with us?

- Well, part of the answer is found in the verses we're looking at this morning (Phil 4.8-9), for they conclude with the words: ***And the God of peace will be with you.***

Last week, from **verses 6 and 7**, we were thinking about how we could experience ***the peace of God***.

- by not getting *anxious about anything*;
- but instead, *bringing everything in our life before God in prayer*, not forgetting to *thank* him for all the blessings he has already bestowed on us.

1. EXPERIENCING GOD'S PRESENCE

But precious though it is to experience the peace of God in our hearts and minds, this morning we're focussing on something even better – not just the peace of God, but ***the God of peace*** – present *with us* in all we do. And the presence of the God of Peace with us moment by moment, isn't just 'better' than experiencing God's peace. It's absolutely essential to all we're about as Christians.

(a) essential

Do you remember how Moses put it in **Exodus 33.15-16**? "*If your Presence does not go with us, do not send us up from here. How will anyone know that you are pleased with me and with your people unless you go with us? What else will distinguish me and your people from all the other people on the face of the earth?*" God's presence with us – the presence of the God of Peace – is what marks us out as his people. It's what makes us different from everyone else in the world – the fact that God is truly with us, and we are experiencing his presence with us day by day.

(b) promised

- It's something God has promised us: *Be strong and courageous*, Moses told Joshua in **Deut 31.6**, as he was about to take over the leadership of God's people. *Do not be afraid or terrified because of [what you will face], for the LORD your God goes with you; he will never leave you nor forsake you.* That's a promise that is repeated many, many times in various forms throughout the Scriptures.
- "*All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me*, Jesus told his disciples in **Mat 28.18-20**, shortly before his ascension. *Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the*

name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."

But let's spend a moment thinking about the particular description Paul gives us here of the God whose presence he wants us to experience: *the God of Peace*. It's a lovely description of God, isn't it, and one that occurs no fewer than five times in the New Testament.

1.1 God's nature

It tells us, first of all, something about God's nature. He is totally at peace with himself, in all that he is and all that he does. He is the most perfectly integrated being there is, experiencing complete internal harmony. How different from ourselves! Our lives are so often characterised by internal tensions, aren't they?

(a) A battle for supremacy.

Our old, sinful human nature (the one we were born with) battles against our new God-given nature (the one we received at our conversion). We experience internal civil war at times, as our old nature tries to gain the upper hand over our new God-given nature. **1 Peter 2.11** speaks of *sinful desires, which war against your soul*.

- But God doesn't have that problem, because he is **holy** through and through. There are no internal battles he is called to fight. He knows complete peace within his being.

(b) Ignorance of all the facts.

Sometimes we will experience internal tensions due to our ignorance. We have an important decision to make, but it tears us apart, because we don't have all the information we need to make the right decision. We can't see into the future, and we don't know everything there is to know about the past or the present. That's why we often get anxious over the decisions we are called to take. We want to make the right decision, but we're not in possession of all that facts to enable us to do so. That's why we sometimes become anxious; and even when we're not anxious, we experience the tension of having to live by faith so often. It's what Paul has spoken about back in **1.21-24**. *To me, living is all about Jesus, and dying will bring gain. So if I am to go on living in the body, this will mean fruitful labour for me. Yet what shall I choose? I do not know! I am torn between the two: I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far; but it is more necessary for you that I remain in the body.*

- God never has this probably of being torn apart internally over decisions he has to make because he is always in full possession of all the facts. He's **omniscient**. He knows the end from the beginning, and so is at perfect peace over all he decides to do.

(c) Inherent weakness.

We also experience internal tensions because of our inherent weaknesses. Very often, we know what we want to do, but we can't do it. We are often thwarted by circumstances beyond our control, or our limited power to influence other people or events.

- But God doesn't have that problem, for he's **omnipotent**. His power is unlimited. He doesn't have to seek permission from other people to carry out his decisions. He isn't dependent on anyone else, or on anything else, to carry out his plans, because he is in total control of everything. That's why he can be at perfect peace with himself and the world he has made. He's in complete control.

This wonderful title, *the God of Peace*, tells us so much about God's nature. But it also tells us plenty about

1.2 God's intentions.

What God enjoys within his own being, he wants us to experience too! He wants us to both experience his peace (as we were seeing last week), and also be people of peace ourselves, like him.

- You see, whenever the Bible uses the word *peace* it conveys the idea of 'wholeness' – everything being as it could and should be. And so the Biblical concept of peace is something very dynamic, not passive.

I wonder what kinds of pictures are conjured up in your mind's eye when the word 'peace' is mentioned.

- For some, it may be a picture of *tranquillity*, a spot in the countryside where you're able to say, "Isn't it peaceful here," because there's not a sound in the air. You're away from the noise and bustle of city life.
- For others, peace means *relaxation* – after the children have gone to bed, or the grandchildren have gone back to their own homes, parents or grandparents may breathe a sigh of relief and say, "Peace at last" as they slump in front of the television.
- For some, peace means *solitude* – away from the office where the telephone keeps on ringing; away from the responsibility of having to take decisions on behalf of other people; away from other people altogether, so you don't even have to engage in conversation with them! "Just leave me in peace," a person may say wearily.

We all have our own ideas as to what peace means to us. And that's why it's good to look at some of the other places in the New Testament where this phrase, *the God of Peace* occurs, so that we have a right understanding of what it will mean for us to experience the presence of *the God of Peace* with us day by day. Alex Motyer puts it well in his commentary on these verses when he writes (p208), *detached from its New Testament context, the word 'peace' is a sort of spiritual marshmallow, full of softness and sweetness, but without much actual substance!* So let's look at three other places where this phrase *The God of Peace* crops up, to see what it will mean for us to experience *the God of Peace* with us day by day.

First, in 1 Thess 5.23, we see that the God of Peace goes with us to effect our

(a) sanctification (1 Thess 5.23-24)

May God himself, the God of peace, sanctify you through and through. May your whole spirit, soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it. The God of Peace goes with us to effect our sanctification. We've already said that the word 'peace' in the Bible conveys the idea of 'wholeness' – everything being as it could and should be. So this is the main reason the God of Peace goes with us – to refine us and perfect us for the coming of Jesus. The God of Peace goes with us to transform us into the likeness of Jesus – a far cry from spiritual marshmallow-ness.

Then in Hebrews 13.20-21, we see that the God of Peace goes with us to equip us for

(b) service (Heb 13.20-21)

May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. The God of Peace goes with us to equip us and empower us for Christian service – not to ensure we have undisturbed rest! The God of Peace is a God of power, resurrecting his Son to life after his death on the cross for us, putting everything back as it should be again.

And in Romans 16.20, we see that the God of Peace guarantees us ultimate

(c) success (Romans 16.20) in our battle against the forces of evil.

The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. There cannot be peace whilst there's still opposition to God's purposes. So the God of Peace must ensure the ultimate overthrow of all his enemies.

This then is an indication of what we should expect when the God of Peace goes with us in our lives.

- He doesn't simply bringing us inner peace in place of anxiety, precious though that is.
- He will work to refine our character, so that it's fit for Jesus at his return.
- He will equip us with everything we need for carrying out his programme of mission to the world.
- And he will eventually grant us victory over all our foes.

This is the kind of God whose presence we are promised day by day.

And so in verses 8 and 9 of Phil 4, Paul describes how we can ensure the presence of this kind of God with us, day by day.

2. ENSURING GOD'S PRESENCE

You see, as Alex Motyer puts it so well again (p207), *the presence of God can become a creedal formula rather than a living reality. Theoretically, we know God is with us; but experimentally, we may forget him and lack a vivid sense of his presence with us. And when that happens, we fall into sin and slackness, which mars our lives, in a way that wouldn't happen if we were more conscious of Christ's presence with us.* So how can we ensure the presence of The God of Peace with us? It's not an impossible ideal, like a donkey's carrot on a stick, always just out of reach. Paul gives us two conditions for knowing God's presence in our lives, to add to everything that's gone before in this chapter.

First, he calls us to

2.1 Think Positively (v8)

Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable--if anything is excellent or praiseworthy--think about such things.

Paul is calling us here to discipline our minds so that they are focussed on positive aspects of people and situations, not negative ones. You see, it's possible, even for a Christian, to get sucked into a negative way of thinking about something, or worst still a negative mindset, in which we look at everything through dark glasses. It's one of the tactics Satan will use against us, as part of his strategy to undermine our confidence and credibility, our witness to the world and our fellowship with Christ and his people.

- *Do everything without complaining or arguing*, Paul has already urged us in **2.14**. We complain and argue when our mindset is negative, rather than positive.
- *The thief* [that is, Satan] *comes only to steal and kill and destroy; but I have come that you may have life in all its abundance*, Jesus taught us in **John 10.10**. Satan would have us focus our thoughts on faults and failings, disappointments and difficulties – so that our outlook becomes defeatist. But that's not how the God of Peace would have us live! He has promised us ultimate victory, so our outlook can be positive – even in the face of apparent setbacks and difficulties.

This is something really important for us to grasp. You see, ***the way we think will determine the way we behave***. Our innermost attitudes will shape our actions – and our words, too. The word Paul uses at the end of this verse, when he calls us to *think* positively, is the one from which we get our English words 'logic' and 'logical'. So what Paul is calling us to do here is think logically and rationally, in the light of all that God has revealed of himself - and his purposes - to us. It's a call to ponder God's truth – to give due weight to it – so that it starts to determine our whole outlook on life.

You see, we can't expect to experience God's presence with us unless we are prepared to think the way he does about life.

- *Do two walk together unless they have agreed to do so?* God asks us, in **Amos 3.3**. It's impossible to journey through life with someone unless you are of a common mind with them.
- Now, in **Isaiah 55.8-9**, God says to us, *My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.* So we need to elevate our way of thinking to bring into line with God's. We have to be prepared to get rid of all our negativity, so we start to think as positively about life and other people as God does.
- That's why in **Romans 12.2**, Paul says to us, *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.* You see, the way we've been used to thinking about life and other people we have largely been determined by our upbringing – the family and society we have grown up in, not to mention the fallen nature we are all born with. So our mind needs to be reprogrammed, so that it is brought into line with God's.

And so Paul gives us a simple checklist here to help us bring our minds into line with God's mind, the mindset of the God of Peace, whose thinking is always positive.

- *Whatever is true* – focus on that. Don't entertain lies, or gossip, or rumours, or half-truths, in your thinking about other people or situations you are facing. Concentrate on what you know to be true.
- Next up, *whatever is noble*, or honourable, or dignified about a person. The word crops up in **2 Tim 2.20f**, where Paul tells us that *in a large house there are articles not only of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay; some are for noble purposes and some for ignoble* [dinner plates and rubbish bins, if you like]. *If a person cleanses himself from the latter* [ignoble attitudes and practises, a tendency to rubbish other people, perhaps], *he will be an instrument for noble purposes, made holy, useful to the Master and prepared to do any good work.* If our thinking about other people is positive, rather than dismissive, God can use us as a dinner plate rather than a refuse bin. Some commentators have suggested that the word 'noble' here also carries the idea of being serious, rather than flippant or superficial.
- Then Paul tells us to focus on *whatever is right* – in God's sight, that is, for he is the one who determines right from wrong. *Find out what pleases the Lord*, Paul urges us in **Eph 5.10**. We should forever be asking ourselves what it's right to do as far as God is concerned, not just what it's easy or convenient for us to do – what suits us, or what other people expect of us, or what those without Christ would do.
- *Whatever is pure* comes next on Paul's list. *Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God*, Jesus told us in **Mat 5.8**. We can't expect to see God clearly whilst we're entertaining impure thoughts. It's like pulling the curtains to block out his sunlight.
- *Whatever is lovely*, attractive, pleasing to our sense of beauty, Paul continues, as opposed to dwelling on things that are ugly. It's why a walk in the country, to appreciate God's handiwork in creation, can be so therapeutic.
- *Whatever is admirable*, comes next, to cover anything that people admire or have a good opinion about.
- *If anything is excellent*, Paul continues. We should think in terms of excellence, because that's the way God is. Our God is a God who excels in everything he does, and he wants us to aim for the very best for him. We should never think in terms of 'what we can get away with', or even 'what will do' as far as God is concerned. Our sights should be set on excellence.
- **Praiseworthy** is the last quality in Paul's list – because in all our thinking we should be conscious of what will bring God maximum glory.

This is the mindset we must cultivate – one that focuses on positives, in other people and the situations we face; because how we think will determine the way we behave. Our innermost attitudes will shape the way we act - and what we say. And what's at stake in all of this is the presence of the God of Peace with us. There's no higher blessing than that, and so no greater incentive to think positively, as God would have us think.

Let me quote from Alex Motyer again (p212): *An old subject is being brought up again in these verses – the cardinal place occupied by the Christian's mind, for good or for ill. Just as a worldly mind is the surest passport to the downward path [described in 3.19], so a mind drilled in the things of which God approves is the steadiest way into holiness. If, in a difficult relationship, we allow our minds to be clouded by half-truth, or if we allow frivolous and damaging thoughts about another person to simmer in our minds, we are hardly being like Christ. Instead, we should determine to think only the truth about other people, to value what is attractive and praiseworthy about them; for this will prove to be the way of peace.*

We're not quite finished yet, because Paul gives us a second condition for ensuring a sense of God's presence with us day by day. It's vital that we think positively; but it's not enough. We must also

2.2 Act obediently

Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me - put it into practice. And [then] the God of peace will be with you. We can't expect to experience God's presence with us unless we are prepared to live out the truth he teaches us.

- One of the chief reasons for us losing a sense of God's presence in our lives is a failure to put into practise what he teaches us in his word. If we know that there is something we should do, because the Bible makes it plain that this is what we should do in a particular situation, if we then fail to carry out the Bible's clear teaching, how can we possibly expect to enjoy a deep sense of God's presence with us?
- Paul has reminded us in **3.16** that it's a mark of maturity to live up to what we know to be right.
- Jesus said to his disciples in **John 14.23**, *"If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. Notice the order of these words: love, obedience, fellowship. True love will always show itself in obedience to God' word; and the fruit of obedience is always an increased sense of fellowship with God.*
- John drives the same point home in his first letter (**1 John 1.6;2.3-4,9-11**): *If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. ... We know that we have come to know Christ if we obey his commands. The person who says, "I know him," but does not do what Christ commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him. ... Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. ... Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness, and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.*
- To experience the presence of the God of Peace in our lives, we must live up to what we know to be right, as God has revealed it to us in his Word. You see, the peace God has promised us in **verse 7**, isn't to be just an inward peace of mind for ourselves, important though that is for our Christian stability. The peace Paul has in mind here is peace with our Creator, through us living in accordance with his Word. And it's also peace with our fellow believers – which Paul has appealed for so passionately in **verses 2-3**. We cannot expect to enjoy a sense of the God of Peace with us if we're out of sorts with any of our fellow believers, whom he has accepted.
- The promises of God's peace and God's presence in these verses are conditional. If we follow his rules, we enjoy his blessings. But if we ignore his rules, we forfeit those blessings.
- So let's make sure that we think positively and act obediently so that the God of Peace may truly be with us.