

HOW TO EXPERIENCE THE PEACE OF GOD

4²I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord. ³Indeed, I ask you, Syzygus—[loyal yoke fellow]—to help these women who labored with me for the gospel, together with Clement and the rest of my fellow-workers whose names are in the book of life. ⁴Always rejoice in the Lord. Again I say, Rejoice. ⁵Let your gentle spirit be evident to all men. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything. On the contrary, in everything, by prayer and petition—with thanksgiving—let your requests be made known to God; ⁷and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. ⁸Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if there is any virtue and if there is anything praiseworthy, reflect on these things. ⁹Put into practice the things you learned and received, and heard from me and saw in me, and the God of peace will be with you. (Phil. 4:2-9)

Introduction

The hymn writer, Edward Bickersteth, asked the following questions:

Peace, perfect peace, in this dark world of sin?
Peace, perfect peace, by thronging duties pressed?
Peace, perfect peace, with sorrows surging round?
Peace, perfect peace, with loved ones far away?
Peace, perfect peace, our future all unknown?
Peace, perfect peace, death shadowing us and ours?

To each of those questions he provides the answer “Yes,” and points us to some aspect of the peace of God:

Peace, perfect peace, in this dark world of sin?
The blood of Jesus whispers peace within.

Peace, perfect peace, by thronging duties pressed?
To do the will of Jesus, this is rest.

Peace, perfect peace, with sorrows surging round?
On Jesus’ bosom nothing but calm is found.

Peace, perfect peace, with loved ones far away?
In Jesus’ keeping we are safe and they.

Peace, perfect peace, our future all unknown?
Jesus we know, and He is on the throne.

Peace, perfect peace, death shadowing us and ours?
Jesus has vanquished death and all its powers.

In this next passage of Philippians the Apostle Paul directs our attention to the subject of the peace of God. The Lord desires for us to experience His peace in our lives. But in order for us to do so, we must understand the three keys to experiencing that divine peace as they are presented to us in this passage.

I. Always Seek to Maintain Christian Unity (vs. 2-3)

In verse 2 we find that two women in the Philippian church are singled out for a special word of admonition. They were at odds with one another and it was having a detrimental affect upon the local congregation.

Notice that they are two sincere Christian ladies; they labored with Paul for the gospel (vs. 3.) Nevertheless, despite their mutual commitment to Christ, a division and separation has developed between them. Maybe they took opposing sides on some controversial subject; maybe one or the other gave personal offence; or possibly a combination of these things happened. But whatever the problem, these two Christian sisters are now at odds with one another and it is having a detrimental affect on the peace of the church and their own personal relationship with God.

How does the Apostle Paul address this particular problem? In this case he does not single either one out as being especially blameworthy, no doubt both were at fault. He exhorts them both to *“live in harmony in the Lord.”*

This is similar to the admonition Paul gives to the Corinthian church: *“Now I urge you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you; but, rather, that you be bound together by the same attitude and by the same purpose”* (1 Cor. 1:10.) Paul exhorts the Corinthians *“to be bound together”* (or, *“mended together,”* from the Greek word, καταρτίζω), by having *“the same attitude and the same purpose.”* It is not only (or even primarily) a matter of striving to achieve this same attitude and purpose; rather, as Christians we possess the attitude and purpose that are the keys to maintaining spiritual unity and we must cultivate them for the sake of Christ. What is this *“mind,”* or *“attitude”*? We may look to Philippians 2:3-8 for the answer:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but with a humble mind let each one consider others as occupying a higher position than himself. ⁴Let each one be concerned not only about his own interests, but also about the interests of others. ⁵Have this mind in you that was also in Christ Jesus: ⁶existing in the form of God, he did not regard his being on an equality with God as a thing to be exploited; ⁷on the contrary, he emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men. Being found as a man in appearance, ⁸he humbled himself by becoming obedient unto death, even death on the cross. (Phil. 2:3-8)

What is this “*same purpose*”? It is the purpose expressed by Paul when he testifies, “for me, to live is Christ” (Phil. 1:21a.) We should be striving together to exalt Christ, following the example of John the Baptist when he declared of Christ, “*He must increase, but I must decrease*” (Jn. 3:30.) We should be striving together to promote and advance the kingdom of God, as our Lord teaches us to pray, “*Your kingdom come. Your will be done, as in heaven, so on earth*” (Matt. 6:10.)

What about those times when sincere Christians take different sides on a particular issue? How can unity be maintained in the midst of diversity of opinion?

When sincere Christians differ and conflict threatens to result, they should consider the following guidelines in an effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit. First, they should each ask themselves such questions as these: Is there a biblical principle at stake in this controversy? Is a biblical command clearly being violated or a biblical truth clearly being sacrificed? Or, am I only insisting on my own way in this controversy or seeking to impose my own personal scruples? If so, we must protest and stand for the truth, as Paul and Barnabas did when the truth of the gospel was at stake. Concerning false “brothers” who sought to deny the truth of the gospel, the Apostle Paul declares, “*[But] not even for a moment did we submit to them; we resisted them so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you*” (Gal. 2:5.) On another occasion, when Paul saw that Peter and Barnabas were acting hypocritically and by so doing were compromising the truth of the gospel, he stood up against them and called them to account: “*But when I saw that they were not walking in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles, and no longer like the Jews, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?*” (Gal. 2:14.) But on those occasions when we must stand up for the truth, and speak out against error or sin, we must do so in love, as Paul exhorts Timothy:

... the Lord's servant must not quarrel; instead, he must be kind to everyone, skillful in teaching, and not resentful. ²⁵Those who oppose him he must gently instruct, in the hope that God will grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶and that they will come to their senses and escape from the trap of the devil, who has taken them captive to do his will. (2 Tim. 2:24-26)

Second, when sincere Christians differ and conflict threatens to result, they should humbly look to the Holy Spirit for enlightenment and grace. They should seek the grace to yield to their brother when a biblical principle is not clearly at stake, as opposed to insisting on having their own way. On the other hand, they should seek the grace to speak the truth in love when a biblical principle is at issue, again, following the counsel of the Apostle Paul given to Timothy:

... the Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome; instead, he must be kind to everyone, able to teach, not resentful. ²⁵Those who oppose him he must gently

instruct, with the hope that God would grant them repentance leading them to a knowledge of the truth. (2 Tim. 2:24-25)

Third, when sincere Christians differ and conflict threatens to result, they must be confident that it is Christ's church, and so ask Him to graciously exercise His lordship and humbly offer themselves in His service—praying in accordance with Paul's admonition recorded in Philippians 3:15-16, "*All of us who are mature should have this attitude* [i.e.; the attitude of pressing on towards the goal of our Christian calling], *and if you have any different attitude, God will certainly reveal that to you; ¹⁶only let us walk in line with what we have attained.*" We may pray for the Lord to graciously convict and convince our brothers if they are clearly acting or speaking contrary to the Word of God, in accord with the promise of verse 15; at the same time, we must be careful to set a godly example by living a consistent Christian life, in accord with the admonition of verse 16.

Fourth, they should be careful to avoid a self-righteous and condemning spirit, avoiding the example set by Elijah as recorded in 1 Kings 19:14,18, when he exhibited an attitude of self-pity and self-righteousness, viewing himself alone as being faithful to the LORD:

And [Elijah] replied, I have been very jealous for Jehovah, the God of hosts, for the children of Israel have forsaken your covenant, broken down your altars, and put your prophets to death with the sword. I am the only one left; and now they are trying to kill me, too. [In verse 18 we find the LORD's response to Elijah: "*Yet I will reserve seven thousand in Israel—all whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and all whose mouths have not kissed him.*" (1 Kg. 19:14,18)]

Paul urges a mature Christian, Syzygus (σύζυγος, meaning "yoked together,") to live up to his name and show himself to be a "true yoke fellow;" i.e., a true partner with Paul in the cause of Christ by helping these two women to be reconciled. Sometimes the aid of a mature and trustworthy Christian brother or sister is needed to bring brethren together in reconciliation.

If you would experience the peace of God, always seek to maintain Christian unity. As the Psalmist exclaims, "*Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brothers to dwell together in unity!*" (Psl. 133:1.) By the grace of God, may we heed Paul's exhortation given in his epistle to the Ephesians:

So then, I, the prisoner for the Lord, exhort you to walk in a way that is worthy of the calling for which you were called: ²[walk] with all humility and meekness, and with patience, bearing with each other in love, ³making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit by the bond of peace. (Eph. 4:1-3)

II. Always Rejoice in the Lord (vs. 4-7)

In verse 4 there comes the exhortation: *“Always rejoice in the Lord.”*

Does this mean that we as Christians are to simply “put on a happy face and spread sunshine all over the place?” Does it mean that we are to constantly and indiscriminately shout “Praise the Lord!” no matter what happens? (like the man who shouted “Praise the Lord!” in response to hearing that the devil is the prince of this world.) Does it mean that we are to always be happy and continually experience a sense of spiritual euphoria?

Other passages of Scripture would argue against such views as those mentioned above. Ecclesiastes 3:1,4 declares, *“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven ... ⁴a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance.”* Standing at the tomb of His friend, Lazarus, *“Jesus wept”* (Jn. 11:35.)

What does the Apostle Paul mean when he exhorts us to *“always rejoice in the Lord”*? What does it involve? What makes it possible?

First, always rejoicing in the Lord involves the awareness of and confidence in God’s sovereignty and goodness in all the circumstances of our lives as Christians: *“And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who have been called according to his purpose”* (Roma. 8:28.) Note, too, the perspective and encouragement offered to the Christian in 2 Corinthians 4:17-18, *“Our light and momentary afflictions are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸So we focus our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen; for what is seen is temporal, but what is unseen is eternal.”*

Second, always rejoicing in the Lord involves the acceptance of God’s divine will for our lives, as Paul gives an example from his own life:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given to me a thorn [or, stake] in my flesh, a messenger from Satan, to torment me. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹But he said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, because my power is made perfect in weakness.” Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ’s power may rest upon me. (2 Cor. 12:7-9)

Third, always rejoicing in the Lord involves the assurance of the Lord’s promise as recorded in Isaiah 43:2-3a,

When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and [when you pass through] the rivers, they will not sweep over you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be burned; the flames will not set you ablaze—³because I am Jehovah your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior. (Isa. 43:2-3a)

Fourth, always rejoicing in the Lord involves the act of trusting and resting in the Lord. Referring to the Lord Jesus Christ, the Apostle Peter writes, "*Although you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, by believing in him you greatly rejoice with a joy that is inexpressible and glorious*" (1 Pet. 1:8.)

We may view the apostle's instructions in verses 5-6 as "three aids" to assist us in rejoicing in the Lord always: First, we are to have "*a gentle* (or, *forbearing*) *spirit*" (vs. 5a.) That is to say, by the grace of Christ, we are to cultivate a controlled and accepting spirit, one that does not persistently insist on its own way and its own rights, fretting and fighting when it is crossed or disappointed. Paul had previously admonished the Philippians: "*Do all things without grumbling and arguing, ¹⁵so that you may become blameless and pure, children of God without blemish, in the midst of a perverse and depraved generation, among whom you shine like stars in the universe*" (Phil. 2:14-15.) As the hymn writer, Georg Neumark, expresses it:

If you will allow God to guide you, and hope in him through all your ways,
He'll give you strength, whatever happens to you, and bear you through the
evil days.
Whoever trusts in God's unchanging love builds on the rock that nothing can
move.

What can these anxious cares do for you, these never-ceasing moans and
sighs?
What can it help, if you weep in self-pity over each dark moment as it flies?
Our cross and trials only press the heavier for our bitterness.

Only be still, and wait His leisure in cheerful hope, with heart content
To take whatever your Father's pleasure and all-deserving love has sent.
Nor doubt our inmost wants are known to him who chose us for his own.

Second, we are to have the assurance that "*the Lord is near*" (vs. 5b.) The Greek text may literally be translated, "*the Lord is on the verge of coming.*" The Apostle Peter speaks of "the salvation that is ready to be revealed at the last time" (1 Pet. 1:5.) The salvation accomplished by Christ's work is finished and prepared and waiting to be revealed at God's command, at which time the Lord Jesus shall return in power and great glory. By way of illustration: In June of 1989 the Chinese Red Army was poised on the outskirts of Tiananmen Square, all prepared and simply awaiting the command to advance against the student demonstrators.

Third, we must employ the practice of converting anxiety into prayer (vs. 6.) Anxiety is the symptom that indicates we are trying to play the role of God and we are aware that we are not succeeding: things are out of our control or beyond our control, thereby causing a sense of anxiety. The Word of God teaches us that

the alternative to anxiety is prayer: *“Do not be anxious about anything ... in everything ... let your requests be made known to God.”* There is no concern that is either too big or too small for us to bring to the attention of our heavenly Father; may we heed the counsel of 1 Peter 5:6-7, *“humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, (so that he may exalt you at the appointed time), by casting all your cares upon him, because he cares for you.”* Our prayers are to be *“with thanksgiving,”* acknowledging God’s goodness and mercy to His children in Christ, as He expresses His gracious purposes for His children in Christian through the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah 29:11, *“I know the plans I have for you, declares Jehovah, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future”* (Jer. 29:11.) Our prayers are to be *“with thanksgiving,”* remembering His past acts of covenant faithfulness and His unchangeable character: *“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever”* (Heb. 13:8.)

Paul assures us that when we heed his divinely inspired counsel, *“the peace of God ... will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* That is to say, the peace of God shall stand as a sentinel protecting our emotions and our thoughts from the devastating attacks of the evil one.

If you would experience the peace of God, always rejoice in the Lord as that commandment is defined and explained by the Word of God.

III. Always Cultivate a Christian Mind (vs. 8-9)

Let your mind dwell upon *“whatever is true.”* Using the Word of God as our standard, we are to let our minds concentrate upon and contemplate truth, as opposed to falsehood and fantasy.

Let your mind dwell upon *“whatever is honorable.”* We should focus our thoughts upon those things (actions, words, decisions, etc.) that command respect because of their moral uprightness or devotion to righteousness. The Greek word (σεμνός) also denotes seriousness, as opposed to frivolity; in which case the instruction is to avoid filling our minds with senseless frivolity, concentrating rather on that which is wholesome and worthy of the Christian’s attention and respect.

Let your mind dwell upon *“whatever is just.”* We must consider justice and rightness, as opposed to that which is merely convenient or pragmatic or popular or unscrupulous. We must heed the admonition our Lord Jesus gave to the Pharisees:

Woe to you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tithe of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the Law—justice, mercy, and integrity. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. (Matt. 23:23)

Let your mind dwell upon *“whatever is pure.”* We should focus our thoughts upon those things that are morally clean, as opposed to what is lewd and immoral and disgusting. We must heed the admonition of Scripture: *“Do not participate in the unfruitful works of darkness, but instead rebuke them, ¹²for it is shameful to even speak about the things that they are doing in secret”* (Eph. 5:11-12.)

Let your mind dwell upon *“whatever is lovely.”* We should focus our thoughts upon those things (acts, relationships, etc.) that bring forth a feeling of affection, those things that are precious (such as family, friendships, Christian fellowship, etc.)

Let your mind dwell upon *“whatever is admirable.”* We should focus our thoughts upon those things that command respect and admiration and cannot be heard reported without a sense of respect or appreciation for them, such as acts of courage, deeds of love, examples of humility and self-sacrifice.

Let your mind dwell upon *“virtue.”* What is in view here is moral excellence (αρετη); term originally was used by the Greeks to mean those qualities that should characterize a man. As a Christian, whenever you see a man reflecting the character of Christ, take note of that man and praise God and seek to emulate him.

Let your mind dwell upon anything that is *“praiseworthy.”* That is to say, let your mind dwell upon whatever accurately reflects the moral character of God, the majesty of God, the creativity of God, (whether it be witnessed in human activity or in God’s creation.)

As you cause your mind to be so oriented and your life to be so shaped (vs. 9,) there is the assurance, *“the peace of God will be with you.”*

If you would experience the peace of God, always cultivate a Christian mind.

Conclusion

As we study Philippians 4:2-9 there is brought to our attention these instructions for Christian living, which we may call, “Three Keys to Experiencing the Peace of God:” 1) Always seek to maintain Christian unity; 2) Always rejoice in the Lord; and 3) Always cultivate a Christian mind.

May our Lord Jesus Christ help us to accept and implement His instruction, and in so doing we shall find that *“the God of peace will be with us.”*