

THE GOD OF PEACE WILL BE WITH YOU

SERIES: PHILIPPIANS

by Steve Zeisler

To judge from all the trivia being reported out of Detroit these days, you would hardly know that the Super Bowl was being played today. We learned from the papers what are the names of Joe Montana's horses, what Dwight Clark had for dinner every night last week, the hourly weather reports, comments on the hotel service in Pontiac, etc. You almost have to force yourself to remember that these football players are actually in Detroit for a reason, and that is that a certain sporting event will take place this afternoon.

In the same way, certain aspects of the Christian life also suffer from low exposure. Certain truths in God's Word do not get the attention they deserve because other things seem to be more interesting and attractive, so we lose track of some of the things the Lord wants to have central in our walk. One of these truths is the peace of God, which should be every Christian's experience and possession.

The Hebrew word "shalom" describes the deep sense of peace and well-being, the contentment, the confidence, the security that is the heritage of the people of God. That word could well be the theme word in the passage from the letter to the Philippians which we will be looking at today. The apostle gives a series of commands aimed at reminding us how important is the heritage of peace that should be and can be the hallmark of every Christian life.

The first command deals with a problem of disagreement and friction that existed between two women in the Philippian church. Philippians 4:2:

I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord. Indeed, true comrade, I ask you also to help these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel, together with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

We know nothing about these two women apart from the fact that friction and mistrust had arisen between them, and this had affected the rest of the church. An unnamed comrade of Paul is called upon to minister to these two women, to help them get over whatever has separated them and has in turn affected the rest of the church.

A good friend of mine who is a pastor in a church in another location told me recently about a grievous problem that has affected his congregation. This problem is not obvious on the surface, a casual visitor would never know of it, but a poison has been spread throughout the whole congregation because the wives of two elders, gifted women who are capable of leadership, have a great dislike for each other. This has gone on for a number of years now and it has greatly affected their church.

The ministry of reconciling Christians to one another is one that is often overlooked. We do not give enough importance to this critical responsibility of Christians. If you know of brothers and sisters in Christ who are in disharmony with one another, you have a responsibility to be involved in helping them get along again.

We do not know anything about the history of the quarrel these Philippian women had; we do not know anything about the merits of the case, which side is right or wrong. And the apostle does not take sides. "I urge each of you

be reconciled to the other,” he says. We do not even know the name of this yoke-fellow, this “true comrade,” who is supposed to be involved in ministering to these women. That ought to suggest something to us. In most of the areas of enmity, anger and frustration dividing Christians, who is right or wrong is unimportant. When we are in the midst of those situations, however, we feel that the merit of our own case is central. But that is really much less important than learning to get along with people we have something against. This is Paul’s advice: “I urge you two women to agree together, to be in harmony in the Lord.”

Having recognized that there are things we don’t know about this situation in Philippi, let us look closely at what we do know about these two women. We know that they were co-workers in the struggle of the gospel. In Philippians 4:3 we are told, “I ask you to help these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel...their names are in the book of life.” Getting involved in restoring their relationship is important because they are important. Their eternal destination is heaven; they have been involved in the work of God. They are now caught in a trespass and they need help to get out of that problem because they are valuable people. Paul is not berating them, rather he is holding them up to remind the church of how valuable they are and how valuable is the glory that awaits them.

The second command given is in Philippians 4:4 in this simple, unadorned statement:

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice!

The command to rejoice is sewn throughout the fabric of this Philippian letter. You can hardly read a paragraph without finding some reference to Christian joy. Yet this letter is also filled with descriptions of difficult, demanding human circumstances, such as imprisonment, execution, sickness, deprivation, spiritual danger, betrayal. We ought to conclude something from that: the joy to which the apostle is referring here has nothing to do with the circumstances we find ourselves in. We are not being told to “Put on a happy face. Smile and the world smiles with you.” That would be a phony cover-up, a denial of hurts we feel deep inside. Nor are we being told that every cloud has a silver lining. Some clouds do not--they are big black thunderclouds which are immediately followed by other big black thunderclouds with not a silver lining anywhere in sight. I have been reading the book of Job lately and it struck me that the series of devastating circumstances in which he found himself occurred one right after another. God doesn’t seem to make any attempt to help Job find some glimmer of hope in those terrible circumstances of the death of his children, the loss of his fortune, etc.

What is reflected in this statement in Philippians about rejoicing is the idea to not try to make the circumstances somehow look better but to recognize that underneath everything are the everlasting arms of God, as we are told in Deuteronomy, that God is sovereign over, above and around all our circumstances, that he is greater than, whatever we are going through. Our joy is to be in him. If we believe that if we are convinced that God stands behind whatever we are going through, that he is a purposeful and loving God, then we can have a deep joy and contentment, despite our circumstances, and still be honest about how much it hurts. This joy too is related to the peace of God. Our deep sense of well-being, our assurance that things are just as they ought to be gives us a sense of joy.

The third command is given in verse 5:

Let your forbearing spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near.

Another way to say that would be, “Let your nondefensiveness, your willingness to yield be known to all.” It occurs to me that that is exactly the opposite of having a chip on your shoulder. This is talking about accepting

people. Far from being prickly, one who has this kind of personality is gentle, he is not always defending his rights, demanding his own way, etc.

I read an article recently about a professional wrestler named Andre the Giant. He is seven feet four inches tall weighs five hundred pounds, is enormously strong, and is actually quite well coordinated for such a big man. But Andre is a very gentle man. The article said that it had never occurred to him in all his adult life to be physically afraid of anything. As a result, he is secure, he is gentle, he does not have to prove himself and defend himself all the time.

About the same ratio of size and strength obtains when I wrestle with my children who are 6 and 8, yet they win most of the time. I find it's easy to let them knock me down and jump on me because I know that if I had to I could win. I am big enough and strong enough to out-wrestle them; therefore I am free to be nondefensive, to not have to win all the time.

A sense of security brings gentleness, non-defensiveness. That is exactly the point of Philippians 4:5: "Let your forbearing spirit be known to all because the Lord is near. You have a champion nearby. You have a great, strong Savior who is as near to you as your own heart. He is capable of taking care of you. He will fight your battles for you and bring about justice on your behalf."

And the Lord is near not only in spirit, but in history. We may be right at the end of the history of this world. The Lord may return at any time, and when he returns all the wrongs will be righted. Our confidence, our security in this enables us to be forbearing, to yield, to not have to fight back. We are trusting in the great One himself to take care of us, therefore we can be concerned to take care of others.

Now if you want to check whether or not you are a gentle, forbearing person, see if your forbearance works with everybody, not just certain people. Anybody can be gentle with nice people, but the Word of God to us is to "let your forbearing spirit be known to all"—everybody, hard people, intimidating people, pushy people. That is how to check whether or not we are really trusting in the nearness and the strength of Christ. This gentleness is also part of the peace we have with God. Harmony between brothers and sisters in the family of God, joy in everything, and gentleness as we face all the things the world throws at us are all evident in people who receive God's peace.

The fourth command is given in Philippians 4:6:

Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God which surpasses all comprehension shall guard our hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

This is one of the first passages I committed to memory. These verses have been favorites of Christians throughout history, I think, because some very important aspects of the life of prayer are elucidated here. Many times when you hear public prayer being offered, it sounds as though a competition in Christian poetry is going on. Prayers are offered in 16th century English, profound theological issues are mentioned, etc. One of the problems I have with my own prayer life is a sense that I am not doing it right, a sense that the things I am talking about are unimportant and God really doesn't want to hear about them. If I could just grow up and pray properly, I feel, I would be a lot more motivated in prayer.

These verses are helpful because of all the places in Scripture where prayer is mentioned, they highlight humility and weakness. "Don't be anxious for anything," we are told. We are discouraged by many things, but we have an antidote to our anxiety here: "in everything let your requests be made known unto God." Nothing is too

inconsequential for God. You are not praying poorly when you are talking about things that matter to you, your emotions and concerns. Scripture commands us to talk about everything in praying to the Lord.

Prayer should be like conversation between good friends or, better yet, between two people who have loved each other a long time. They can talk about everything; they have long since grown so secure in their friendship that they are free to be open about who they are. Such prayer is filled with thanksgiving, we are told, a sense of appreciation, of gratitude for each other. As we come to believe that God cares about even the little things in our lives, we are increasingly free to be thankful for his activity in all areas of our lives. This command to pray sets forth a great understanding of the life of prayer.

The command concludes with the promise that “the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds.” This is a military term. We will be “guarded” in the sense that an army guards its camp. The peace of God will securely guard our hearts and minds. Again we return to that theme of the peace of God. It will bring harmony between individuals, joy in the Lord, a forbearing spirit when we encounter others, and it will guard our emotions and our thinking.

This thought leads into the next command. If God is going to guard our minds, practically speaking, what does that include? Well, one of the ways God guards our minds is to give us the directions in Philippians 4:8-9 of what to think about, what to let our minds dwell on. If we will hear the Word of the Lord here we will be greatly protected and guarded in our minds and in our thinking. Philippians 4:8:

Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things. The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things; and the God of peace shall be with you.

These verses bring us back to the theme we have been speaking of all along. In Philippians 4:7 we are told that the peace of God will guard our hearts; now we are reminded that the God of peace will always be with us.

In these verses we are given two lists, one a list of things to think about (to have our minds set as they ought to be), the other a list of things to practice (or to have our steps, our actions, set as they ought to be).

The first list is unusual in some ways. We are not told a lot of specifics, and the words are not very religious in their impact. We are not told, for instance, to think all the time about the great hymns of the church, or to think scholarly thoughts about the deep themes of Scripture. We are told to think about anything that is lovely, anything that is virtuous, good, true or worthy. Our minds are guarded when we contemplate all that God has made, all the elements of his redemption, when we see his hand at work and we appreciate him and delight in him for these things.

For instance, backpacking in the Sierras can be one of the healthiest things you can do. You can hike high into the mountains, find a deserted lake and see the work of God in the beauty of your surroundings, and be filled with gratitude for what he has done. If anything is lovely, think about it. It can be a mentally healthy thing to get out your wedding pictures, for instance, and recall the vows you made on that day, the joy you had, etc., and be grateful for that worthy thing that God has accomplished. It can be mentally healthy to take a sip of good hot coffee on a cold, rainy, northern California morning and say, “This tastes good, I thank God for it,” or to read a good novel in front of a fire, with soft music in the background.

My daughter just recently turned 8 and she is learning to read. The other day when I was preoccupied by some things she said to me, “Dad, I want to read you a poem.” She got a book of children’s poems for Christmas and had been able to read one herself and wanted me to share her excitement. I sat down on the couch next to her and she read to me this little poem:

*There’s too many kids in this tub.
There’s too many elbows to scrub.
I just washed a behind
That I’m sure wasn’t mine,
There’s too many kids in this tub.*

Then she read another and we had a great time laughing about the poems she was reading, enjoying the fact that she could read at all, that she was growing up and was excited about it. Later, I reflected, “What a nice thing for God to do. What a ‘worthy of praise’ moment to have shared together.” Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, let your mind dwell on these things.”

Then we are given a list of things to practice. Paul lays out his own life. “What you have learned and received and heard from me and seen in me, practice these things,” he says. It struck me that if you read through this letter you will find all the things he is saying in these verses we are looking at today are illustrated in his own life.

First, Paul urges Christians to get along with each other. In Philippians 1 he says there are Christians in Rome who are doing their very best to make life hard for him, to sow the seeds of discord, but he refuses to let that happen. He will not allow disharmony to interrupt the peace that is the heritage of the people of God.

Then Paul says that we ought to forbear and be gentle in spirit. Recall the concern he expressed for the Roman guards who were brought into his home every day and chained to him. Instead of being prickly, distant and defensive with them he loved them and won many of them to Christ. He tells others to forbear in spirit and he acts that way himself. He says to pray and not be anxious when times are hard. Many times in this book he expresses the desire that others pray for him. There is evidence that, knowing that he might be executed, he prays for himself. He tells others to pray and he is a man of prayer himself. “Practice the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me,” Paul says. Think what is right and do what is right.

The last phrase in this section is a reference to the God of peace: “and the God of peace shall be with you.” The God of peace himself, our living Lord, will go through life with us. He will deal with the things that hurt us, he will stand with us when we are anxious, he will minister to us when we are frightened, concerned and confused.

The deep sense of peace and well-being which should be every Christian’s heritage is sometimes lost in the bustle of life’s daily demands. This peace, which should be our everyday experience, suffers from a low exposure in relation to other truths of the good news. Scripture tells us we are to have harmonious relationships with each other. We are to rejoice in the Lord, we are to be gentle as we encounter people around us, we are to pray instead of being anxious, and we are to think and act as we ought to. All these things remind us that the God of peace himself is with us to support us.

Thank you, Lord, for your great love for us. Thank you that you are the God of peace and that you minister to us in our need. Help us to learn the lessons that the apostle lived out himself, and to become the kind of people others will emulate in this respect. In Jesus’ name, Amen.

Catalog No. 3733
Philippians 4:2-9
8th Message
January 24, 1982
Steve Zeisler
Update June 7, 2001

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