

“The Sustaining Peace of God”

Introduction:

For the last couple of weeks we have been looking at Paul’s letter to the Philippians and exploring what it means to be a part of the Christian journey. We established that the faith journey is lifelong and has its ups and downs. And in order to fully commit to the journey, we need to turn away from who we were before Christ and turn towards him, grasping after the good things that he has in store for us.

So today, we reach the last part of what’s turned into a trilogy. We’re going to discuss our perseverance in the journey, and what will keep pushing us forward in our faith.

Big Idea: When we choose Jesus Christ, we enter into a lifelong journey of faith, which will involve suffering, pain, and struggle. For us to continue on this path, we have to rely on God. When we cast our anxieties on God and focus on good, Godly things, His peace will hold and sustain us.

A) The Character of God

During our discussions, we’ve had the opportunity to get an understanding of Paul’s view of the character of God. A few weeks ago, we took a look at 2:12 and how we need to work out our salvation with fear and trembling. Fear is not something that we like to talk about in relation to God, nor is it a quality of God that we would gravitate to, and yet, Paul advocates that it is an important aspect of our relationships with God. And now, just two chapters later, Paul talks about God as a God of peace. One of the nice things about looking at Philippians as a whole is that we can understand the full range of Paul’s thoughts and understanding of God. Instead of a 2-D, flat image of God as only love, we get to see the full picture of God, his passion and

compassion, his love, holiness, and anger, and the reverence and awe that we are to have for him.

In verse 7, Paul writes, “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” and in verse 9 he writes “And the God of peace will be with you.” The full picture of God that we see in Philippians is of a God who desires us to come to Him and who will do anything for us to make sure that we get there.

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Transition: How is it, then, that we can experience the sustaining and life-giving presence of God? Today we are going to look at **two** ways in which Paul says that we can receive God: through Prayer and through our Thought Life.

A) Prayer

The first way that we’re going to look at is prayer. Paul writes in verses 6 and 7, *“Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, 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.”*

I want to focus on two words in these verses. They’re simple words, and you might not have even noticed them, but I think that they’re vital to our understanding of how much God loves us: “anything” and “every.” Now, what is so important about those words? Well, I want to

use another simple word: EVERYTHING. Much of the character of God hinges on how those words interact in this verse.

First, Paul says do not be anxious about *anything*. ANYTHING. To me, this seems pretty impossible; like everybody else, I get anxious about things. When I'm using the microwave, I have this weird habit of stopping the timer 5-10 seconds before it runs out. I get anxious watching the clock run down; it just bothers me, so I stop it prematurely. Then of course, I usually have to microwave it for another 30 seconds anyways, so my anxiety was pointless. And that's just a small thing. We get anxious when our loved ones go into surgery, or when a bill is due and we're not quite sure where the money is coming from.

I think that part of reason for prohibiting anxiety comes in its definition. The word *worry*, a synonym of *anxious*, means to "allow one's mind to *dwell* on difficulty or troubles." It's not recognizing that things are wrong that is the problem. It is dwelling on the problem, remaining in the problem, and allowing the problem to consume you that Paul warns against.

In Matthew 6: 25-27, Jesus says, *"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?"* This is one of my favorite passages in the Bible; I personally find so much comfort in it; our big God's love is shown to us in the small things, including in the way that he cares for some of the smallest of creatures. And if he is so aware of the needs of even the birds, how much more will he care for us, his creation made in his own image and likeness?

He also says something in here that should become our motto. *“Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?”* For some reason we think that by worrying ourselves to death over things, we will actually be able to change their outcome. Now, I’m not saying to be irresponsible and not take care of things that need to be taken care of. But dwelling in our anxiety has not and never will solve our problems, and in doing so, we are choosing to rely on ourselves instead of God.

So what should we do instead?

This is where the second word comes in: EVERY. Paul tells us that in EVERY situation we are to present our requests to God. EVERY is all inclusive; there is nothing that falls outside of the realm of EVERY. Again, if we look at the Matthew 6 passage, in verses 28-29 Jesus says, *“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these.”* Again, God cares for even the smallest parts of his creation. And so he also cares for even our smallest worries and problems. And He wants to talk with us about them in prayer.

Prayer is the first way that we can receive God’s sustaining peace and presence. Again, verse seven says *“And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”* If we spend our time in prayer, communicating with God, He will guard and protect our minds against the anxieties and troubles that we are going to face in life. This doesn’t mean that bad things won’t happen, but when we dwell in dark thoughts we will get consumed by them; if we dwell in God we will be filled with peace.

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anxieties on God and focus on good, Godly things, His peace will hold and sustain us.

Transition: So, the first way in which we can receive God's peace is through prayer. This leads us into a look at second way. And understand, that these aren't mutually exclusive; we should integrate both practices into our lives.

2) Thought Life

The second way that Paul talks about that we can receive God's peace is through our thought life. He writes in verses 8 and 9 that, *"Finally, brothers and sisters, 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. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you."*

One of my all time favorite movies is "Ghostbusters." In the movie, the Ghostbusters encounter an ancient god, Gozer, who is bent on destroying the earth. Gozer tells them to choose who the "destructor" will be; whatever they think of is going to be the thing that ends the world. So they try to keep their minds blank, but soon enough they hear Gozer's voice saying, "The choice is made." Ray, played by Dan Akroyd, couldn't keep his mind blank, and tried to think of something harmless from his childhood. So he thought of the Stay-Puff marshmallow man, a character from marshmallows that his family used to eat. What was once a small picture on a bag ended up turning into a giant marshmallow person that sort of looks like the Michelin Man.

The point is, it seems like we don't often have control over our own thoughts. Ray could not control himself, so instead he tried to think of

something good, but even when he did it still turned into something that wanted to kill him. Now, if I say to you, don't think about "Pink Elephants," what is it that you think about?

And our minds wander like crazy. Right now, there are probably a number of you thinking about something completely different than what we are talking about. You might have started by listening, but then something I said may have sent you off on a rabbit trail somewhere that you couldn't explain now even if you tried.

And when our minds wander, they often go into the territories that we dwell on the most. And they're not always good places to be.

What is it that we spend the most time thinking about? Is it money or sex? What about our relationships or our jobs? How about ourselves? Do we think about ourselves a lot, how we look, how we could look, and how other people think about us?

Now granted, these things are all very much a part of our lives; we cannot avoid them or pretend that they aren't there. However, I'm not so sure that we should be spending as much time on them as we do.

In verse 8, Paul says, *"Finally, brothers and sisters, 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. "*

Why do you think it is that Paul chooses these specific things for us to think about? What is it that is so special about these qualities?

My dad always told me “garbage in, garbage out,” meaning that if I put bad things into my body and mind, then only bad things will come out of me.

Jesus talks about something similar in Matthew 7:15-20. He warns people to watch out for those prophets going around and proclaiming that what they say is truth when they are really only out to hurt them through lies. He says that they will be able to recognize these “false prophets” by the fruit that they bear.

¹⁵ *“Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. ¹⁶ By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.*

Jesus basically says that those who have nothing but darkness and contempt in their souls will produce nothing but darkness and contempt. This applies both to people during His time and people today. We will generate whatever is inside of us, good and bad. Paul tells us in Galatians 5:22-23, what a person will produce if they are rooted in God. *“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”*

Paul gives us this list of thoughts because if we fill our minds with right, good, healthy, pure, just, thoughts, then we cannot help but produce the fruit of the Spirit. If we focused specifically on the joys of the world, then our lives will emanate joy, even during hard times. But, if we instead choose to think about anxieties and vanities, then we will produce garbage.

So, how does our thought life help us to experience the peace of God?

Well, Paul tells us that if we think about these Godly things, and if we put his teachings into practice, then the God of Peace will be with us.

Now, I don't believe that Paul is quoting the law of physics, for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. It is not as if we do 'x', then 'y' will happen. We aren't earning God's peace by just thinking "happy thoughts;" this isn't Peter Pan. Paul is saying that by having a Godly thought life, we allow God's peace into our minds rather than the junk that everything in our society and culture tells us is important. When we choose to turn towards God in our minds, we *open ourselves up* to experience his peace and goodness that is already around us. We can receive holy and righteous things in a world where we are often surrounded by pain and darkness. But here's the truth:

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Conclusion:

This week concludes our mini-series on Philippians and the journey of Christian faith. Philippians has often been referred to as "the Epistle of Joy" or "the Epistle of Excellent Things." I don't know if joy is the feeling that you've gotten over the last three weeks; Paul has certainly offered a fair amount of challenges. We've been called to become part of the race of Christianity, which admittedly is filled with trouble and hardships. It is a lifelong journey; there is no room for pit stops. And along the way we are supposed to shed the things that we formerly took pride in exchange for the salvation that comes in Christ. And not only are we supposed to turn away from those external things that

used to define us, but now, we are asked to take on the superhuman task of controlling our minds.

It seems like “joy” might not be the word that we would use to describe Paul’s writing. And yet, behind every challenge, God is there to support us. For everything that we are called to do, Jesus has already done. We have the example in Jesus and we have the support of God. I believe that there is a lot of joy in this message. We are not called to something that is impossible, and we aren’t asked to do it alone.

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May we place our faith and hope in Christ Jesus and experience the life giving peace and joy of God. Let us pray.