

## **The Peace that Passes Understanding** (Philippians 4:4-13)

A Sermon preached by Stuart Taylor

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The peace that passes all understanding. This phrase from Paul's letter to the Philippians has haunted me all of my adult life as a Christian. I have always wanted to "understand" what the Apostle declares is not understandable, a peace that passes understanding. More to the point I have longed to experience that peace myself. So let me as your preacher be up front with you. I come to this theme today as one without authority. My experience of this peace has all too often seemed fleeting and fragmentary. Sometimes I feel very centered and grounded in God's peace and yet there are other times when my life feels a little bit like a front row seat on a roller coaster ride. And so I stand before you in this pulpit not as one who can testify to always knowing this peace. I do not stand before you but rather I sit beside you in the pew eager to listen with you to the Apostle's testimony to the Philippians about his experience of Christ's peace. And I am hoping with you that we might hear and discover together some clues that would help us experience more deeply the "peace that passes all understanding".

The first thing that we would rightly notice is the context in which the Apostle wrote these words. Paul was a political prisoner of the Roman Empire, writing this letter from a prison cell. The reason why we take note of this context is that the peace that God promises us is not divorced from the struggles of the world. The peace about which Paul testified his experience of that peace was situated in a life of engaged discipleship and the risky vocation of peacemaking. This peace that passes understanding is not a withdrawal from the world into a private haven of tranquility. Paul's peace is not divorced from the struggles of the world but is a gracious gift to be found in the midst of those struggles. The second reason that it is important to note the context of Paul's letter is that it makes it all the more remarkable that Paul could experience this peace. We can only imagine what it was like to be a prisoner of the Roman Empire: the living conditions, the food and quarters, the isolation, perhaps even abuse, the uncertainty about his future – all things that would seem to make peace impossible and yet the Apostle is writing about a peace that passes all understanding.

A preacher colleague has told the story of two artists who were commissioned to paint a picture of the peace that comes from trust in God. One painted a lovely pastoral scene. You know meadow, woods, still pond, beautiful sky, family having a picnic. A tranquil moment. But the second picture depicted one of the most terrifying storms imaginable. The sky was ominous, the lightning sharp and jagged. The heavy rain was lashing against the rocks and added force to the raging waters. A close inspection of that second painting revealed a small bird in the cleft of a rock unruffled by the storm. Underneath the picture was the one word: Peace. We all need from time to time the tranquility of the first scene. That is what I go to my family's mountain cabin to find. We all need that and should seek out those times and places. But it is the second portrait of peace that comes closest to the world we live in and the peace that the Gospel offers us in the very midst of the struggles we face and inside this chaotic world.

The Apostle Paul keeps our gaze fixed on Christ Jesus who is the source of our peace. Listen again to Paul's words as he writes from his prison cell. Vs. 4 - 7 "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I say rejoice. Have no anxiety about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your needs be made known to God. And the peace of God which passes understanding will keep your hearts and minds in Christ". Have no anxiety about anything but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your needs be made known to God. This phrase "in Christ" is repeated over and over again in all Paul's epistles. The Apostle's life and witness are founded on the firm belief that in Christ, we live and move and have our being. For Paul, every Christian is heir to this promise of living in Christ and knowing Christ's peace. It is a gift that has already been given to us. The challenge for each of us who would like to experience the peace of Christ is to find a way to connect with what already has been given. Paul suggests that the way in which we connect to the peace that comes through being in Christ is through the practice of prayer. Now I know we all would welcome a shortcut at this point. We would like to by-pass the practice of prayer and just feel the peace. But I am guessing that there may be more than a few of us in this sanctuary who are in the right place in our faith journey to hear the Apostles invitation to prayer. We are thirsty for something more. We are ready to claim the peace that is offered to those who will take seriously the practice of prayer in their lives. Paul invites and challenges us to take up the discipline of ongoing conversation with God about what we are facing and living through in our lives. Let your needs be made known to God, the Apostle writes. Pour out before the God who loves you, your human hurts and fears, your vulnerabilities and longings, your brokenness and your dreams.

Why don't we practice that right now? I ask you: Where in your life do you most need to hear Christ's blessing of peace? I invite you to close your eyes and to join me in a moment of quiet meditation. Bring that situation to mind that most seems to block your experience of Christ's peace. It may be financial concerns or problems within your family. It could be health related crisis or struggles with your work. Whatever it might be bring that situation fully into your awareness. Continue to breathe deeply and listen to the Christ who is speaking to us from the core of our being. Listen to the Christ who is saying to you: "My peace I give you, not as the world gives. Let not your hearts be troubled. Neither let them be afraid" My peace I give you. My peace I give you. My peace I give you. And now as you open your eyes and return to this sanctuary filled with your brothers and sisters, I would make a modest proposal to those of you who are ready to take up with renewed commitment the practice of prayer. Find a time and a place where at least once a week, you can sit quietly and comfortably, not forcing yourself to feel anything, not really bringing a heavy expectation that you will automatically feel more peaceful. Again, bring to mind the situation that feels antithetical to the experience of peace in your life. Whatever it is that are you living through, observe it, view it fully and pronounce Christ's word of peace upon it. And as you speak that word of peace on your lives in prayerful meditation, may we discover and affirm by faith that it is the living Christ who speaks through our words, saying: "My peace I give you".

Returning to our text, in Vs. 8ff, we hear the Apostle say: “Finally brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things”. Paul is suggesting that if we want to experience peace in our lives, we need to make responsible choices about where we spend our time and to what we give our attention. In our media driven market culture, we are continuously bombarded with images that seek to inculcate desires in us, promising satisfaction – peace of mind if only we will buy this product. Because of this it is essential that we take responsibility for the input that comes into our lives. How many of you have run across Barbara Kingsolver’s wonderful little essay entitled “the one eyed monster and why I don’t let him in”. The essay begins with a quotation from a song by Charlie King: “Nobody gets killed at our house. No one gets shot at, run over, or stabbed, / nobody goes up in flames”. The song is a litany of horrors that surely you wouldn’t want to see in your house until you realize he is discussing what routinely happens on the screen that most people happily host in their living room”. The one eyed monster that Kingsolver is talking about is television, the single most defining medium of our culture, which brings us countless images of violence and drivel that are stored forever in the brain and imprinted on the soul. What can be said about television is certainly true of all our electronic devices. It is no wonder in our culture that so many of us feel agitated and over-stimulated, distracted and restless, thoroughly bombarded by things that fragment our God-given peace. The question for us to ask ourselves: Is there peace to be found in the hours we spend in front of the television? What I am proposing here is a modest exchange of loyalties. Try taking one or more hours from TV viewing per week and turn it toward something else: A walk, reading, prayer time, letter writing, listening to good music, making music, tending your garden. Whatever it might be. Make that commitment to switch loyalties from the television to something that will contribute to your sense of peaceful well being. Finally brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.

Paul has given us two very important clues in our search for the peace that passes understanding. First, there is the invitation to a life of prayer as ongoing conversation with God. Second: there is the challenge to be responsible for the focus of our lives and to what we give our attention. And then finally, in vs. 11ff we catch sight of the third clue: “For I have learned this secret that anywhere anytime, I am content whether I am full or hungry, whether I have too much or too little. I have the strength to face all conditions by the power that Christ gives me”. The peace that passes all understanding is not found in a life that is always, happy, full, content, satiated. The peace that passes all understanding is found by those who know that in Christ we have a peaceful center from which we can look out on our lives moment by moment. Whether we are rich or poor, full or empty and in whatever circumstances we can claim a peace and a strength that is beyond us but deeply within us.

As I have pondered these words this past week, they really struck a chord in me. I realized that in my own pursuit of inner peace, I have always approached it as if peace were somewhere else. I would find peace if I could adopt this attitude or maintain this

state of mind. I would experience peace if I were more like this certain person or if I read this book. But peace cannot be somewhere else. But Paul is suggesting that peace is not to be found over there; peace is to be found here in the midst of whatever it is you and I am living through. As long as peace is somewhere else it will always elude us. What the Apostle is trying to convey to us is that there is a contentment, a resting in the presence of Christ that is available to us in the midst of the circumstances of our outer lives. There is a resting peacefully in the presence of Christ in the midst of whatever is passing through the mind and heart. Our life situation may be one of plenty or want, it may be tranquil or it may be anything but tranquil. But if we find a still point of being in Christ, of Christ being in us, speaking to us his word of peace, here and now. My peace I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled. Neither let them be afraid. These words coming from a friend could be a tender reassurance. From a wise counselor a wise message. But when Jesus says, do not be anxious it amounts to a command, an impossible task were we not simultaneously given the grace to fulfill it. My peace I give to you. And so the peace that passes all understanding is more than a momentary insight or a passing feeling state. It is the presence of the living Christ who from the deepest depths of our self speaks to us a word of peace. My peace I give you. And Paul's final words written to us from his jail cell in vs. 9 are these: "What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me practice and the God of peace will be with you."