

“THE PEACE OF GOD”
Scripture: Philippians 4:1-9
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Rev. John W. Fowler

Many years ago there was a Jewish Rabbi, I think it was Joshua Liebman, that wrote a book called *Peace of Mind* and it was a tremendous best seller. The only problem with that is that he was just swamped with people wanting to know how to put this peace of mind into practice. And wouldn't you know it, he just about lost his peace of mind because of all the demands on his time.

When you have a message called “The Peace of God” I just want you to know that I'm still a work in progress when it comes to not worrying or not letting anxiety get the best of you. But really, what I share with you today is a prayer that Paul, I'm sure, knew from experience, especially now that he is in prison. It's not so much a technique as it is a relationship that when you learn to have prayer of rejoicing, there is a power that is unleashed in your life and no longer do you allow worry to dominate your life. It doesn't mean it won't keep coming and knocking on the door of your soul, but it means that you learn to come back; you learn to pray and rejoice in the Lord. And then, there is this gift that comes with that. It is a peace that doesn't mean the problem is solved, it doesn't mean that the trouble has gone away, but it does mean that you are confident, absolutely confident that God Almighty is here and he's helping me, and what a tremendous difference it makes. In chapter 4, I begin with verse 2, where the Apostle Paul says:

²I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. ³Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests 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 noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹Whatever 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.

In Nell Mohny's book, *You Can Soar Like an Eagle*, she has an inspiring story about John D. Rockefeller, who apparently grew up very poor in very humble circumstances, but with hard work and determination, he became the CEO of the Standard Oil Company. But it came at a great price — his peace of mind and his health. The only thing he could eat at this time, because his digestion was so poor, was milk and crackers, and at age 50, even though the world thought he was a great success, many thought he won't live a great deal longer. But then he discovered an article entitled “Try Giving Yourself Away”, which at that time there were a lot of people that

wanted Mr. Rockefeller's money and he worried about that as well, but this pointed out that God is after more than just your money to be given away: Try giving encouragement away; try giving your smiles away; try giving your life away and have an attitude of great gratitude for what God has blessed you with and the opportunities He has given you to serve Him.

And so, Rockefeller took that article to heart and his health improved; his life became more enjoyable. In fact, he lived to the ripe old age of 98. Now, I share that with you, not that if you find God's peace you will necessarily live to be 98, but there is a better way to live than milk and crackers and constant stress and anxiety. There is a peace that God promised that will guard your heart and your mind in Christ Jesus.

The Apostle Paul tells us we can experience this peace of God. How can we do that? First of all, Paul says you need to try rejoicing. You need to try rejoicing. I remember as a youth minister, one morning — you know, Monday mornings are oftentimes the worst day for preachers; it's just a let down. It's great to be on Sunday where people come to Church, but sometimes on Monday there is a let down. It was Monday after the Sunday night youth group. I don't know what went on, but somehow, maybe the attendance was off, but something was discouraging and I was in school at that time, but I think it was a lot of little things. But, oftentimes, isn't that what you worry and get stressed about? It's a lot of worry things, small things and frustrations that add up. And on the radio I was listening to a preacher talking about Paul's words of *rejoice always; pray constantly and give thanks in all things for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you*. That's from I Thessalonians 5:16-18

I thought, Well, I don't know about that, but I might as well try it; I've tried worrying about it. It wasn't so much I had this exuberant praise, but I just began to thank God. I began to thank Him for things I hadn't thanked Him for in a long time. I thanked Him for my health, my eyesight. I thanked Him for my wonderful wife. I thanked Him for the opportunity that I have to be a youth minister here in Atlanta. I started to thank Him for the apartment we lived in, the food, things I had just been taking for granted. And what happened to me is what happens to a lot of people at Thanksgiving. I actually was thankful instead of taking for granted God's many blessings, and thirty minutes later, when I pulled into the parking lot, the problems hadn't changed, but I had, because I had tried rejoicing.

The Apostle Paul said: *Rejoice in the Lord always, and again I say rejoice.*

It's important to know that this little letter that Paul wrote to the Philippians is just laced with joy — was birthed ten years ago — because he was put in prison for preaching the Gospel, along with Silas, and they were beaten as well as being put into prison.

Now, I dare say, if this week, if we were beaten for being a Christian, were put in prison, most of us would not be rejoicing. Most of us would be giving way to being angry and bitter and resentful about, well, This is some thanks for serving God. But about midnight, they start singing hymns to God, it says in the Book of Acts in chapter 16, and people are listening to them. I mean, people listen to people that, under terrible circumstances, choose to rejoice. They might think you are crazy, but still they listen to you. Then there is this incredible earthquake and all the jail cells fly open. And the jailer, the Roman jailer, is ready to kill himself because that's

what happens to jailers if the prisoners get free.

And Paul said, “No, no, no, no; don’t do it; we are all here.”

And he turns on the lights and this man who was imprisoning them said, “What must I do to be saved?” And Paul said: *Believe on the Lord Jesus and you and your whole household will be saved.*

And they were. So Paul knew from experience that even in the worst of circumstances, when you rather choose to be resentful and angry and bitter — and that’s part of it when you are upset — but you want to move towards rejoicing, even when you don’t feel like it, that God can change lives.

Do you ever wonder that our Lord marvels that we don’t thank Him more for what He has done for us? In the 17 chapter of Luke there are 10 lepers. Leprosy is a terrible disease, and it not just physically so difficult, but socially at that time they were outcasts; they had to leave their families because they were so contagious, and so they were at a distance, but one day they meet Jesus and Jesus heals them. He tells them to go see the priest, which is what you were supposed to do, but only one of those ten came back. Where are the other nine? Has God done something in your life recently and you, “THANK YOU LORD,” or maybe you just gave Him a quick “thank you,” but you haven’t really thanked Him?

Thanksgiving helps us to rejoice, helps that peace to come into our lives. This week as you pray, begin to give thanks to God, even if you don’t feel like it. You may feel, I’d rather be cranky; I’d rather complain to God about . . . , and the laments are in the Bible; that’s all right, but don’t stop there. Put down what you are thankful for, what God has done for you. Try rejoicing.

And then Paul also says though, secondly, that we are not only to rejoice, but we are to quit worrying. He says: *Have no anxiety about anything.* That’s pretty all inclusive. He says not just some things, most things, but have no anxiety about anything.

I heard of a counselor who was getting nowhere with one of his clients and this man was a chronic worrier and just seemed to be bent on worrying, and he said, “Here’s what I want you to do: Every time you feel compelled to worry, don’t worry; just write it down on a piece of paper what you are worried about. And throughout the day, don’t worry about it; just write it down and if you need a big piece of paper, that’s fine, but just keep writing it down but don’t worry about it. But then a four o’clock I want you to get that piece of paper and you just worry as intensely as you possibly can. What do you think about that?”

Well the man was kind of quiet for a while and he said, you know I just think that’s the dumbest advice I’ve ever heard. I can’t believe I’m paying you for advice like that.”

And he said, “Well, it is dumb, but is it any different from what you are already doing? I’m just giving you a plan for the worry that you seem to enjoy.”

If we enjoy worry, that’s another matter. We need to face up and we need to realize it is harm-

ful. Some people come from families that if you are not worrying about something you feel guilty. I mean, it's like you are irresponsible. There is a difference between worry and concern and Jesus is not calling us and Paul to be irresponsible. What He is trying, though, is to get us to live by faith.

In Mark, chapter 4, Jesus talked about the parable of the sower, and he said that worry and the cares of this life may choke the Word. Think of the truths of the scriptures that have been choked by worrying in your life. Throughout Genesis through Revelation there is a love story of God for His children. Have there been times recently that worry has choked the truth that God loves you? Right now? Plain and simple; you can't earn it. If you are good today, He loves you. If you are bad today, He loves you. But He loves you unconditionally. Think about the truths of the Resurrections, when Jesus said: *I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in Me, though he may die, he shall live.*

Does the fear of death or worry about death sometimes choke that truth in your life? Or sometimes you feel like, God's just not answering this prayer, but in I John, it says: *Now this is the confidence that we have in Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us.*

So we need to realize that worry is harmful; it actually chokes out the truth of God's word that, as Jesus said: *If you continue in my Word, you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.*

Sometimes we worry about good things that need to be done. There is the story in Luke chapter 10, at the end of that chapter, of Mary and Martha who are entertaining Jesus and His disciples. They are preparing a meal, although Mary didn't seem to help a great deal about it. She is sitting at the feet of Jesus, longing to hear what He has to say. Martha comes in. She is upset with Mary. She is upset with Jesus. She says, "Lord tell her to come help me."

You know it's a good thing to prepare a meal and I know some people are more like Martha than they are like Mary. They are doers and there are people like Mary that are more contemplative and prayerful. But what He tells her, he says, "Martha, Martha, only a few things are needful but Mary has chosen the better portion."

What He is trying to tell Martha is that it is one thing to fix a meal, it is another thing to worry about it.

We need to realize too that worry is contagious. You know, when I know that somebody's got pneumonia or the 'flu, I don't rush up and hug them. I keep my distance. Worrying is contagious and if it's really got the grip on you, you need to realize it can spread and you need to watch it. You need to be convinced, though, that it is harmful. Paul says: *Have no anxiety about anything.* But what does he say? Thirdly, he says to start praying. *Have no anxiety about anything, but in everything, by prayer, with supplication, with thanksgiving, let your request be made know unto God.*

If you had a request for prayer, if you had three primary requests to God, what would they be? (tape change)

. . . And oftentimes when I am worried, I will pray this prayer. And from Matthew 6, starting at verse 25, listen to these words of Jesus, as a prayer:

²⁵"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 important than food, and the body more important than clothes? ²⁶Look 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? ²⁷Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?

²⁸"And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³²For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

What is our Lord saying? He is saying when we start praying we experience God's incredible love and care. To me, I find that is one of the great gifts when we especially pray this passage.

One of the things — of course I miss my parents — I miss the back porch that we used to go and visit. They had a bird sanctuary and we would enjoy a nice breakfast, but one of the most peaceful times in my life, we would just be watching the birds and listening to them and oftentimes, especially years ago, we would go there on a day off and it was a relaxing, peaceful place. But just watching the birds reminded me of this passage, that is, God takes care of these birds, well how much more will He take care of me?

When we start praying we experience God's help and we experience His love. The Apostle Paul knew that in prison. It wasn't his choice to be in prison but he knew that God was using this for the Gospel, so I am going to rejoice; I'm not going to worry; I'm going to pray; I'm going to keep on praying. And then as we rejoice, we quit worrying, we start praying, we experience His peace, according to Paul. In verse 7 it says it this way:

⁷*And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*

It's a military term. He had a military guard so it's just like this peace, it comes in; you just can't explain it; it guards your heart from this worry and this fear that keeps wanting to come in and take up residence in your heart.

When Jesus was with His Disciples on the last night He tried to describe this peace. He said,

²⁷*Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world gives do I give unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.*

Think of the peace that the world gives. The peace that the world gives is dependent on, Do I have enough money? Do people like me? Am I healthy? I mean, it is usually dependent on something outward. Jesus is speaking, though, more referring to the gift of the Holy Spirit when He comes into our lives, He gives us this peace. And Jesus knew that there would be trouble in this world. In the 16th chapter of John He said:

In this world, as disciples of mine, you shall have tribulation: but be of good cheer; I have overcome the world.

David is certainly one that knew about God's peace and he knew about trials as well. When he was anointed king by Samuel, I wonder if he had any idea what lay ahead of him, for God allowed a wicked king named Saul to be jealous of him, to be envious of him, to hunt him down. One time, especially when he was ready to pounce upon him, David ran away from him. There was a king named Achish that was a friend of Saul's and David didn't know what to do, but one of the things he did was just pretend that he was crazy. So Achish didn't do anything about him. He said, "Why is Saul worried about this guy? I think he is crazy." And he was just pretending.

And then he wrote Psalm 34 in response to this. He said:

¹I will bless the LORD at all times: his praise shall continually be in my mouth. He delivered me from the hand of my enemy.

Sometimes when I am especially troubled I will come by to the 23rd Psalm and even though you may have it memorized, let me read it to you because this, too, is a peace that God wants to give us. We pray this prayer:

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.

²He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

³He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

⁴Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

⁵Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

This was written by an older shepherd, looking back on his life, not only the trials with Saul, but with Goliath, with all that David went through, the sin with Bathsheba, but he knew that

God forgave him and he knew that when he brought his troubles to the Lord that there was someone that loved him and helped him.

Are you convinced of that? Are you convinced that this one that Paul is speaking of, that you can go to Him in everything and anything and take it to the Lord in prayer? When we do that and we are resolute to not let worry keep its grip on our lives, there is a peace that it's just hard to explain, and believe you me, it's a great witness for Christ. It may not be a witness that you really want to have, but people notice. They can tell when you are going through difficult times when that peace is there. And it's not because you are working hard. It's because you are allowing God to be at work in your life.

Otis Spafford was a 43 year old businessman in 1871 and he lost everything in the great Chicago fire and he and his wife decided it was time for a vacation. So he sent his wife and four daughters over to England because they were good friends of Dwight L. Moody, the great evangelist, and they were going to have some evangelistic meetings over there. But on the way over there, the ship that Spafford's wife and daughters were on sank. A cable came to Spafford that said, "Saved alone." His daughters died in that accident; his wife was saved and he came, very soon after that, and when he got to the point in the ocean where the ship went down, he felt inspired to pen these words:

*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou has taught me to say,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.*

Refrain

*It is well, with my soul,
It is well, with my soul,
It is well, it is well, with my soul.*

Let us pray: *O Lord, we thank You today for this great promise, of peace through rejoicing and prayer. We confess at times we simply don't experience it and sometimes we just don't practice it. Lord, help us to come back to this prayer: Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say: Rejoice! Let all men know your forbearance. The Lord is at hand. To have no anxiety about anything, but in everything, by prayer with supplication, with thanksgiving, we let our requests be made known to You. And O Lord, we thank You that the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. For this we give You thanks today. Amen.*

