

God's Peace and Purpose - Rev. Calum Macdonald (Retired)

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[0 : 00] I'd like us to turn together now for a short time to the passage that we read from Paul's epistle to the Philippians chapter 4.

! Particularly these words in verse 7.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. If you're going to carry out any kind of meaningful study of any part of the scripture, it is more than likely that you will read some commentator or some Bible study aid to help you in your studies.

And very often you will find that those commentators will help your understanding of what you are about to study more deeply by the title that they give to their study.

They'll give you a flavour of what to expect through your study of the passage that you're going to read, whether it is a book of the Bible, a Gospel, or a Psalm, or whatever.

[2 : 16] However, some titles that have been given to this epistle are like that.

It is described as an epistle of joy. It is described as a book for daily grace.

Or someone with a very provocative, I think, title, which is Chained and Cheerful, which speaks of the bondage that the servant of God had to endure.

And yet the way in which he, despite his circumstances, remained in full connection with the fullness of God's joy governing his heart.

Our focus this evening will be on a particular verse, but it belongs in a part of the epistle where the apostle is winding down, as it were, or summarising or coming to an end of what he has to say.

[3 : 58] And he's emphasising some of the teachings that he has already brought to their attention. He reminds the reader of the need the Christian believer has of ensuring that their relationship with the person of the Lord Jesus Christ remains firm, remains constant.

And the way for ensuring that is to maintain a life of prayerful observance of all that Christ would have them to be.

Their relationship with him is one that is nurtured and nourished through prayer, which focuses on the person of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And this is essential for them for the simple reason that, as many of the epistles of the apostle remind us, the Christian life at this time, and I'm sure at any other time, is never an easy one.

There are always opponents to the beliefs that they have. There are always those who despise what they believe.

[5 : 22] There are always those who would seek to undermine what they believe. There are always those who would perhaps put alongside them false teachings and doctrines that counteract the belief system that they have put their trust in.

And inevitably, as we saw this morning, this promotes anxiety. And different reasons are found behind or underneath our anxieties.

We can be anxious because of how we find what we believe in to be threatened by the current belief systems that are to the fore in modern society.

Many of the things that the Christian should believe in are often met with resistance because what you believe in as a Christian is not necessarily something that the world view adheres to.

It's not something that those who are of the world or in the world and whose mind is steeped in the ways of the world.

[6 : 57] And the doctrines and the teachings of the Bible often challenge these and show them to be things that are not to be followed or adhered to.

And this is the truth that every generation will at some point come to discover for themselves. Enemies of the cross of Christ abound.

And as he has written earlier in this epistle, he says, don't be frightened in anything. Don't be frightened of anything.

Don't be frightened by anything your opponents have to say. And clearly what the apostle there is alluding to is that oftentimes you are challenged in your thinking to perhaps give way and to yield ground when the best thing is to be steadfast, to stand fast, to resist.

But the pressure is such that it's hard at different times to do that very thing. But he still insists that we follow the example of Christ, that we follow the way that he, in all humility, accepted the challenge of dealing with this world's woes.

[8 : 38] Now we want to look at this section in particular. And it is a reminder to us that regardless of the challenges that a believer in Christ may fear, that there is a security that is theirs that is entirely sure.

It is not carnal, it is spiritual. It is not security that they themselves are responsible for maintaining. It is theirs because someone else has made them secure.

And I want us to think in particular of the word that we find here at the heart of what he has to say, that the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

That is said in the context of all the threats, all the challenges, all the temptations that any person who believes in the Lord Jesus Christ may encounter.

I want us first of all to think about the word peace. Because simply to use the word peace may create in our minds a thought that is related to our experience.

[10 : 17] And our experience of peace may not necessarily be the peace of which this passage speaks. There is a peace that is perfectly reasonable to speak of it as peace, but it is not necessarily what the apostle wishes us to relate to or understand.

The second thing is that the peace of which he speaks challenges any and all understandings of the word peace, if it is not of the unique sort that will accomplish in their life what they most need.

We know from a reading of the scripture that even within the pulpit, even from the mouth of the prophets who labored under the title of prophet, apostles who were false apostles presented the idea of peace.

And prophet of prophet gave out the thought that they could have peace.

Their hearers could have peace. Their followers could have peace. But the peace that they extended was no peace. And we need to understand from the reading that we have here that this peace of which he speaks is a peculiar peace, a unique peace.

[12 : 10] It is the peace of God, which he says surpasses all understanding. And what that peace does and how it does it can be understood from our own experience, if indeed we have that peace as it is described here.

Universally, I would say there are many in this world who desire peace.

It is something that most of us, whatever we are, whoever we are, would at some point desire to have. Sometimes we describe, you know, something very menial or something very much that belongs to our everyday life.

And we use the word peace with regard to it. We can speak, for example, of the peace and the quiet that we enjoy so liberally in rural communities.

We can, any one of us, if we're fit and able, take a few moments and go out to the moor, or as I do often walk along the shore or the cliffs and we're in a solitary situation, we're undisturbed by others.

[13 : 50] And that we can call peace. That's what it is. It's a period of solace, a period of solitude, a period where we're left alone to ourselves and our thoughts.

And there's no harm in describing that as peace. If you're a mother or even a father who's raising children, once you see the children dropped off to school, peace and quiet is precious.

It's something that we would definitely call peace. If you've got several children, or one, even one or two, or even one, depending on the child, to have some time without their hustle and bustle and busyness, you can call it peace.

But this passage, as you can see, is a passage that speaks of a peace that is different.

The language itself doesn't help us much. The Greek word is the word ireni, and it compares favorably to the Hebrew word, which we might be more familiar with, the word shalom.

[15 : 17] Both words are descriptive of the peace that the people of God in particular possess in all its fullness.

The peace that God alone gives to us. And it covers and governs every area of our life. Not just in our daily tasks.

We can engage in them. However busy the life is, we can possess peace at that moment. And in the Old Testament usage of it, it speaks of the result of covenant faithfulness.

It speaks of the experience of knowing that in your obedience to God, that you are confident or conscious in your heart and mind that all is well between you and God.

And when we look at the application of it in the New Testament, the same thought applies. There is the sense of covenant obedience being met.

[16 : 39] But the understanding of the New Testament believer is that the Lord Jesus Christ comes into your thinking. that the true genuine peace of which it speaks is peace with God through Jesus Christ.

Peace by way of the blood of the cross. Peace secured by another's obedience and by another's sacrifice. Now this is where the uniqueness of the peace comes in.

We may possess all of these experiences of peace in the world without being in possession of the experience of peace that belongs to the child of God, that belongs by reason of being in a healthy, wholesome, liberating relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

The peace of the believer can include and does include all these other experiences that may rightly be the possession of others.

but it incorporates the blessings that God conveys to his own people alone.

[18 : 13] And this is what Paul the Apostle is bringing to our attention. He's reminding us that there is a peace that belongs to God's people that equips them to deal with all the situations that may create anxiety and concern.

There is a peace that is rightfully there that is greater than any turmoil or any storm that life brings our way as it often does.

And not only can we read into the words of the Apostle, this fact, we are reminded of it repeatedly within the Scripture, that when God speaks of peace, he speaks of God's peace as being a peace that comes to us from the God of peace or a peace that comes to us through the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, or a peace that is ours as a gift bestowed upon us by God's Holy Spirit.

There are various passages that we can alert you to that speak of this. God is the source of peace as God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

God is the source of peace as the one who is the Father of mercies, the God of all grace. In the Passion of Jesus, we are told, it pleased the Father that in him all the fullness should dwell and by him to reconcile all things to himself by him, whether the things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the cross or through the blood of the cross.

[20 : 19] So, through that passage, we see the person of Jesus Christ being a source of the peace that is spoken of here.

as we said, in Galatians, when we read a passage on the Lord's Day at a communion season, very often we used to read Galatians 5 and we read of the fruit of the Spirit and part of the fruit of the Spirit is peace.

And it's alongside all kinds of other important graces and fruits that are all attributable to the passion of the Holy Spirit.

Writing this epistle to the Thessalonians, the first epistle, Paul begins the epistle and he says, he concludes the epistle with the same understanding.

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely and may your whole spirit, soul and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[21 : 33] So, what we have here is a peace which we can think of. We've experienced peace even without being Christians.

We know something of the peace or what we mean by it. We mean perhaps silence, freedom from concern. we mean by it the contentment.

But more importantly, the apostle says, the genuine peace of which this passage speaks is the peace of God.

And such a peace, he says, it passes all understanding. It is not incomprehensible. In other words, we could believe by that word, when we read these words, yet we could think that the apostle is

describing something that is indescribable.

Now that would be something, giving a description to something that can't be described. But what he is saying is that the peace of God surpasses all understanding.

[22 : 49] Every experience that we have offered is included, but we can constantly find ourselves thinking of other occasions where the depth and the breadth and the height of this peace which is ours through Christ Jesus that sustains us in all circumstances is the possession of the child of God.

In his commentary on the larger catechism, Thomas Watson reflects on the nature, multifaceted nature, of peace experientially.

In other words, to, as it were, pinpoint what the apostle is saying here, that it is so great, that it is so expansive, that it is so all pervasive, that no matter what, it can be experienced in all circumstances. It can, as Watson says, it can be external, it can be something that we experience within, it can be in the political realm, or state, it can be ecclesiastical, but decidable above all, it is spiritual peace, peace with God, peace of conscience, where your conscience has been covered by the blood of sacrifice, where sins have been dealt with.

In other words, a peace that surpasses, that is greater than any other experience of it.

[24 : 50] And it goes beyond, at times, the best of our experiences of peace. peace. And when we think of it, as I suggest, that every one of you here, without exception, can allow your mind to think of this experience as your experience.

And yet, there are occasions where you have to confess that it's not really making the great, as it were. It's not really reaching the marrow of what this peace is all about.

It can at times be temporary. It can at times be easily disturbed. It can at times result in your sensing a lack of it, disturbing you, because it's not there.

But the genuine nature of this peace is it's there at all times. And it belongs to the believer. It is there by right, and it is there with this purpose in view, that you are kept safe, that you are kept from the disturbances that will affect your walk, that will stop you progressing as a child of God.

And how can we say that? Well, look at what he goes on to say. he says again, this peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts.

[26 : 35] You will guard your hearts. And the word that is used often is will garrison your hearts. A word that conjures up in our minds.

a picture of a soldier who's on duty. And his duty that he is committed to requires him to act as a sentry, ensuring that whatever he is guarding is kept free from intruders.

If you can imagine a Roman soldier who is entrusted with the safety of the occupants of a fortress, so that no intruder is allowed access.

Or perhaps the up version of that, the Roman soldier on the inside, ensuring that anything and everything inside is kept safe from intrusion.

And this is what this peace does. It guards, it keeps, it protects, it keeps out enemies, and it keeps, at times, it keeps the resident from going beyond the boundary where he could be exposed to danger.

[27 : 55] The psalmist in Psalm 3 and Psalm 4 and Psalm 5 perhaps, there are a cluster of psalms there that speak of the experience of going to sleep with that peace governing their heart and mind.

Psalm 4, the lovely words that come at the end of that psalm, I will both lie down in peace and sleep for you, O Lord, make me dwell in safety.

This is the assurance that he has, that he is perfectly able to enjoy that peace because God is, God is the sentry, God is the one garrisoning us.

Some of the commentators, when it comes to the psalms, they want to, and it's good for us to do that, to discover the origin of the psalm, who composed it, what were the circumstances when the psalmist composed these words, and some suggest that Psalm 3 and Psalm 4 were composed during the rebellion of Absalom against David, and David was trusting in God for his preservation. Others have suggested, no, that David's thoughts were much more the result of his meditation on the words of Numbers 6, where these well-known words of the of Moses had brought to our attention, the Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you, and the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace.

[29 : 49] Words that are equally valid, I suppose, in understanding what the apostle is saying to us.

What we need to remind ourselves of is this, the reality for every believer is this, that in Christ they are guarded, kept, preserved by the blood of Jesus Christ, by the sacrifice for sin that he offered on behalf of sinners that made peace with God on their behalf, peace that is secure, peace that is incapable of being disturbed by anything if we truly believe.

And often we find ourselves questioning, questioning whether that is truly the case. Is it not amazing?

If I say to you today, that or tonight, that your security as a believer is entirely dependent upon the relationship of faith to Jesus Christ.

and if you are convinced by God's grace that you have such a relationship and that you trust that Christ has died for your sins and that your sins like every sin that he died for are blotted out, why would you question this truth when you confront sin in your own experience?

[31 : 42] As if you are saying, well, I trust that word, I trust what that word says, I trust what that truth implies, but my sin is greater than that truth.

My sin is greater than what Christ has done, because that's the logic of what you're saying. And if your peace depends on what Christ has done, and if your peace with God depends on God being pleased to receive the sacrifice for sin of Christ, and blessed him and received him into his presence because of it, then you are saying, no, no, you can't be doing that.

There's something lacking, there's something needed. But I think Peter, and in fact Paul as well, reminds us that this is the attitude of so many when it comes to reflecting on where we are with regard to God's peace, that we need to remind ourselves of the genuine nature of it, the lasting, secure nature of it.

Peter says, grace to you and peace be multiplied. Why would you want to multiply peace if the peace of the believer is perfect peace, if the peace of the believer is a secure consequence of what Christ has done?

well, we speak of it and we are reminded of it because sometimes we find ourselves not trusting in it as we should.

[33 : 40] And yet this is what Paul is saying to us, winding up this epistle, reminding them of their true possession of life in Christ.

No matter what they encounter, no matter who challenges them, no matter their own experiences which contradict or seemingly contradict the truth of God's word regarding their security, God's peace as it is in Christ Jesus is something that cannot be affected.

It surpasses all understanding, guarding your hearts and your minds. in Christ Jesus. And again we are reminded of that, in Christ Jesus.

It is so important. Take Christ Jesus out of it and you may have peace but it will not garrison your heart.

It will not keep your mind and your conscience free from the turmoils or the challenges. that may be you. I was thinking of this and with this thought I'll just finish.

[34 : 59] church. There were many times and I'm sure some of you who are Christians here tonight may have had that experience. When you were in company with some of God's people in fellowship and as a result of God's spirit being present, you lost sight of time, you lost sight of all external negativity.

You were so taken up with the experiences that God had given to you and those who shared the experience with you.

on more than one occasion we found that to be the case. It's as if you're lifted up out of where you were into a place totally different.

But one thing I found on more than one occasion was when your attention was in some way brought to discover that that had happened.

As if you came to yourself and realized how blessed the occasion was, how wonderful the experience was. It didn't matter how long it lasted or how short lived it was.

[36 : 39] And it was all of a sudden you realized how awesome the experience was. Then the experience disappeared. then the sense of peace diminished.

And I remember thinking about that. I wonder why that happens. And I was taught this lesson by some preacher. And he said this.

when he said, I looked to Christ, the dove of peace flew into my heart. When I looked to Christ, the dove of peace flew into my heart.

But when I looked at the dove, it flew away. Isn't that strange? what was that saying to us? Well, it was saying simply this. What Paul is saying here, our peace is in Christ Jesus. The peace itself is a gift of the Spirit.

[37 : 51] The peace itself is what Christ bestows upon us. The peace itself is the gift of God's, the God of peace.

peace. But when we take our eyes of the giver to the gift, then we lose the true sense and the power of what he has given to us.

Always remember that. The gifts of God are without equal. They surpass any other gift that you can get.

Perhaps some would argue there is no greater gift than the peace of God which passes all understanding. Surely there is no greater gift in the mind of man than the peace, the blood-bought peace that Christ gave to us that allows us access into the presence of his Father.

But in any case, it is what God has given to us to keep us in this world where dangers are many.

[39 : 03] May he bless to us these few thoughts. Let us pray. Heaven blessed God, we marvel at your forbearance and at your goodness to us that sometimes we allow our hearts and minds to be in turmoil when we could be looking to him who has secured lasting peace for all who are found in him.

Bless us together this evening. Bless all we leave in your care and keeping with all their variant needs for our sins. In Christ the Redeemer's name we ask it.

Amen. Our concluding psalm is Psalm 122. We're going to sing from the Scottish Psalter and we're singing the whole psalm.

Psalm 122. I joined when to the house of God go up they said to me Jerusalem within thy gates our feet shall standing be.

Jerusalem as a city is compactly built together and to that place the tribes go up the tribes of God go through to the end of the psalm.

[40 : 17] I joined when to the house of God. I joined when to the house of God go up they said to me jealous and well within thy gates our feet shall standing be.

Cher you slema Sasset the earth O heartly built together unto the place that Christ go up that Christ of God go thither to Israel's testimony thereto God's name thanks to pay!

all thrones of judgment in the thrones of David's house there stay pray pray thou Jerusalem may have peace and felicity let them that love thee and thy peace heart still prosperity!

therefore I wish that be smith still wealth in thy walls remain and ever may thy palaces prosperity!

return now for my friends and brethren sakes peace be in thee I'll say and for the house of God our Lord I seek thy good always now may grace mercy and peace from God the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit rest and abide with you all now and always amen