

Philippians 4:6,7

Additional Bible reading: Matthew 6:25-34

Introduction

This is one of the most comforting and encouraging texts in the Bible. People have gone back to this text again and again to find new help at each turning of life's road. Believers in every age, in every land, in every condition of life, have found renewed strength here. Yet it is good for us to look at it again, because we so easily forget its message. We think we have learnt it one week, but when next week comes with a new crisis and new problem, we have forgotten all about it. We need to be constantly reminded.

It would be marvellous if we always remembered that the peace of God is not a far away dream, but it is within the reach of everyone. We ought to have the confidence that whatever life may do to us there is more in Christ to hold us steady and serene than there is to shake and unnerve us.

Prohibition which is commanded

Do not be anxious about anything (Philippians 4:6). Here is one place where a modern version is most helpful. The A.V. speaks of being careful for nothing – but the concept of being careful has changed its meaning. Nowadays it means to be watchful, e.g. “Be careful not to drop it.” But in 1611, it meant to be full of care. The NIV renders Paul's words perfectly, which literally means do not be anxious about any little thing. He totally forbids anxiety over anything.

This is an extraordinary and astonishing statement in the light of the readers' circumstances. They not only encountered the normal ups and downs of life which anyone goes through, but they had the added problems of being Christians in Philippi, where they really took their life in their hands. There was the constant danger of persecution, arrest, jail and death. These early Christians were under enormous pressures, and so there is much in Paul's letters which is designed to help them cope with their situation.

If these words could apply to the Philippians, they certainly can be applied to us. We do not face the same problems as they did, but we have plenty of other things that make us anxious – our selves, health, job security, loved ones, the future. Paul is not forbidding forethought, or use of common sense and making plans for action. But he is referring to harassing, wearying care which crushes and gets us down, causes us to brood and ponder, lose our sense of the Lord and His presence. When our imagination has free rein, we can suppose the worst, and become utterly panic-stricken and fearful. We cause those who are not Christians to wonder about the profession we make. If our faith makes us react no differently in adversity to them, then what is the point? We are no better off than them, and we do not encourage others to want what we have.

The same teaching was given by Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount. **Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Do not worry about tomorrow** (Matthew 6:25,34). We have a heavenly Father who loves us, cares for us, and is able to help and support us – so why worry? Other passages in Scripture imply the same thing.

At the end of the day, the great question is – what is our faith worth? Does it really make a difference to our lives? Are we different from anyone else? The world is not interested in doctrine, but it sits up and takes notice if it sees faith which makes someone different and able to triumph in life.

Note that this prohibition is not saying, “Pull yourself together”, “Don’t worry, it may never happen”, “Worrying makes no difference” – common platitudes that many come out with. Rather, this passage urges a positive step, talking to God about our selves and our situation. Be anxious about nothing – but be prayerful about everything.

Prayer which is commanded

In everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God (Philippians 4:6). This is a very full statement about prayer. τη προσευχη means a prayerful spirit, τη δεησει c means a sense of need, earnest seeking after God, μετα ευχαριστιας means praise and adoration, τα ατημοτα means definite and precise petitions.

Firstly, there is gratitude. In prayer we come face to face with God. We are grateful for all the mercies of the past, we dwell on all it means to belong to Him, and we are mindful of all He gives us in Christ. It is no use coming with a grudge in the heart, or feeling God is against us.

Allan Gardiner of Patagonia, a missionary who endured terrible suffering and privations, was found dead on the shore beside an upturned boat. His diary found nearby spoke of his hardships, loneliness and hunger. The last sentence he wrote was “I am overwhelmed with a sense of the goodness of God.”

Then we are to use detailed, simple, specific, precise prayer, and do so about everything. In plain English, tell God what is worrying you, what your actual burden is, what you are afraid of. We often fail to do this ourselves, though we might commend it to others. Even in our private prayers we often fall into pious empty jargon and vague generalities. Pray about the smallest thing – it is not unimportant to Him. Pray about the greatest thing – it is not beyond Him. Yes, God already knows our needs, but we must pray to Him as if He does not know. Recall Abraham’s servant at the spring in Nahor asking for specific guidance in finding a bride for Isaac, or Hezekiah spreading the letter of his enemy Senacharib before the Lord in the Temple.

“Rabbi” Duncan of Edinburgh, who went from being an atheist to knowing the reality of the presence of the living God in Christ, and as a result he prayed about everything. “When I mislaid a paper in my office, I would kneel down and pray about it, and then seek for it.” The biography of George Muller records how he prayed over the minutest

matter, e.g. every single dose of medicine was taken with prayer that God would make him better.

We often make the greatest blunders over the more simple things than over the more difficult, because we are too confident of our own wisdom and ability, and we fail to pray. The result can be disaster. Recall how Israel was tricked by the Gibeonites because they wore old shoes and had mouldy bread. At once Israel was deceived, made an alliance with the Gibeonites, which caused trouble in the end. What was the reason for the mistake? "Israel did not enquire of the Lord". They thought they could manage on their own.

If only we would pray first, and make plans second. And if God does not appear to answer the first time, that is a good excuse to knock at the door again. With the prayer comes submission of the whole situation into God's hands, trusting His love, care and wise purposes. Put your concern in His hand, and leave it there. So often there is a civil war in our hearts between God's will and our will.

So in a prayerful spirit, with a sense of need, earnestly seeking God, with gratitude, make definite and precise prayers, and submit the whole situation to Him. This is our privilege - anywhere, at any time, we have this private line to heaven. Heaven's switchboard never gives us the "engaged" tone, or an answer phone message telling us He is unavailable. God is never too busy with something else. Requests can be made immediately, and they are heard immediately.

Peace which is promised

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:7). Note firstly what is *not* promised. We are not promised that the problem which is causing anxiety will go away. It might, and then the anxiety will go too, but the problem might continue, or even worsen. What *is* promised, in either case, is a peculiar kind of peace. It is there, but we cannot understand it.

God is more concerned about us than He is about the problems. It is more important to Him that we should change than that the problems should change. He promises that, whatever the circumstances, whatever happens, we can be maintained by God, kept by Him. Even if the worst comes to the worst, we can be lifted above our circumstances, and experience His peace. The very thing we fear may come to pass, but we are kept.

This does not mean that prayer will have a psychological effect making us feel better, or that it will merely take our mind off the problem. But prayer will cause God to do something and give us something. He will put His peace into our hearts. This peace cannot be understood. We will not be able to understand why we feel so quiet and so different. It is God's gift. We cannot manufacture it, and we do not deserve it. It proceeds from His love in Christ Jesus. His peace assures us that in everything God works for the good of those that love Him. It assures us that nothing in life or death can separate us from His love in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This peace will guard our hearts and minds. $\phi\pi\omicron\upsilon\pi\eta\sigma\epsilon\iota$ is a military term, like a sentry on guard, keeping at bay the enemy which threatens to upset and master us. He walks around the battlements and towers of life, protecting us from harassing cares.

When we are enjoying this peace, we are open to receive every other gift, e.g. guidance about the next step, strength to endure and walk with God. So peace will bring new resources for living, and new experience of God's adequacy. This peace is available to us when we face fearsome responsibility, hours of crisis, times of disappointment and sorrow. It makes us equal to the demands of life. Prayer is the path to peace within and power without.

But is it true and does it work? There are the stories of the martyrs who gave their lives for Christ, who in their darkest hours, faced with pain and death, testified to peace within. 2000 years of Christian history assures us that the peace of God is a reality, and it is still seen in lives today.

John Carpenter, a General in the Salvation Army. He and his wife had to part with their beloved daughter. She was a lovely girl who dedicated her life to foreign mission work in the East. Suddenly she contracted typhoid fever. Her parents prayed, but though they could not understand it and explain it, they could not ask for their child's recovery. They could only get as far as "Thou canst heal if thou wilt". After six weeks the girl died. On that very morning Carpenter said to his wife, "You know, I am aware of a strange and curious calm within." His wife said, "I feel exactly the same. This must be the peace of God." So it was, and it was keeping the heart and mind quiet so that they were not upset.

This is a glorious and mysterious promise. The peace of God where we cannot understand, garrisoning heart and mind – as long as we are open to God and submissive to His will.

But a right relationship with God is crucial. John Bunyan described it in these terms. Mr Peace-of-God was patrolling in the town of Mansoul. Nothing was to be found but harmony and happiness as long as he maintained his office. But when Prince Emmanuel was grieved and went away from town, Peace-of-God laid down his commission and departed also.

Conclusion

This is a promise to be enjoyed by all. Someone may still be thinking, but what about my situation? The peace of God was once a reality, but I have lost it, and it has slipped from my grasp. Remember that the peace of God is not something captured once for all. It requires to be recaptured all over again every day. It is not ours by one great act of a lifetime. There needs to be daily surrender, and a renewed grip of the only hand which can hold us and keep us strong.

Are you unconverted? You have never known this peace at all. You are in a sad and pitiful plight. You are going through life helpless in the face of all its circumstances and trials, without God and without hope – in this life, and in the next. Your first need is to know peace *with* God. This follows from forgiveness of sins, and being made right with God through faith in Christ. Once you have peace *with* God, you can then

go on to enjoy the peace *of* God, day by day. **You will keep in perfect peace him whose mind is steadfast, because he trusts in you** (Isaiah 26:3).