

BROKEN CHAINS
The Philippians Series #12
Philippians 4:4-9

(ADDITIONAL COMMENTARY)

THE PEACE OF GOD

It is easy to be an expert on rearing children when we are talking about someone else's children. All of us have been in situations where we have observed the failures of other parents. We are standing in the check-out line at a store and the four year old child ahead of us is acting like a terrorist. He has to touch everything and demand it be given to him while his mother either ignores him or endlessly repeats, "Don't touch that ... put that back ... no, you can't have that ... I said put it back ... didn't you hear me ... I said stop that ... don't touch ... no ... I said put it back ... because I said so ... okay, just one ... I said just one ... put that down...".

I suspect you did not have to try very hard to create a mental picture in your mind with a child acting like the one I just described. Parenting is not easy, even under the best of circumstances. But there are times when we can observe other parents and we think to ourselves, "Lady, can't you see the problem here? Why don't you fix it?" Like I said, it is easy to be an expert when it comes to someone else's child.

In Philippians 4:4-9, I believe we are being given some insight into the wisdom of the only perfect parent in the universe, our Father in Heaven. As you know, Philippians 4 contains some of the most wonderful promises in the Bible. Philippians 4:7 says, *"And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus"*. Notice that the verse begins with the word, **And**. This is an important word that we dare not overlook or ignore. It alerts us to the fact that God's promise to give us peace is connected to something else. The **And** connects the promise to the commands which precede it. When we understand what this implies we see the great parenting skills and wisdom of God.

God's love for His children is unconditional. His love does not change or run hot or cold depending on what we do or fail to do. However, God does put conditions on how He blesses us. Let me say this carefully so that I make myself clear. God blesses us every day in thousands of ways, far more than we can count or even know. Even the most disobedient and compromised Christian receives blessings from God. Nevertheless, God will withhold the peace spoken of in Philippians 4:7 and we can not simultaneously be harboring sin and still have true joy. Why not?

Because God is too wise to shower us with His peace and joy when we are choosing a path of disobedience. What happens when a parent rewards bad behavior? He or she gets more of the same bad behavior. For God to enable us to continue in disobedience would be unwise and unloving, and He is neither of those.

Do you remember my illustration of the four year old child in the check-out line? He kept defying his mother and kept demanding he be given his own selfish way. If, under these conditions, the mother gives in and gives the child what he demanded and for which he was ready to throw a tantrum, what will the child be likely to do the next time he is in the store with his mother? That's right, he'll try it again because he has learned that by repeated disobedience, defiance and emotional extortion, he can get what he wants from his mother. No big deal? What happens thirty years later when the four year old boy is now a thirty four year old man and instead of manipulating his mother he now manipulates his wife? His marriage is unhealthy because of the things he was not taught and did not learn when he was a child.

God does not manipulate us. When He withholds peace and joy from His children it is not because He is playing mind games with us. Such behavior is beneath Him. When God withholds blessing it is because He is refining us, teaching us and transforming us for our good. He doesn't want us to turn out like the thirty four year old husband who still acts like the four year old child in the store.

When we seek to encourage other Christians by reminding them of the Philippians 4 promises (see 4:7, 4:13 and 4:19) we need to make sure we tell the whole story. If a Christian is wanting to experience these promises but seems to be lacking them even after praying for them, then it is advisable to do an "obedience inventory". Throughout this commentary we have been pointing out the various commands we need to obey and the attitudes we need to change. And remember, the letter to the Philippians was written by a man in prison who faced incredibly tough circumstances, yet he had the joy and the peace and contentment described in chapter 4. The promises of God are not held captive by our circumstances, but they can be hindered by our disobedience.

Notice the commands found in 4:4-6 and in 4:8-9. Rejoice ... be gentle ... do not be Anxious ... be thankful ... present your requests ... think about that which is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent and praiseworthy ... put Paul's teachings and personal example into practice. All of these things are commands. They are not helpful hints or mere suggestions; they

are commands which reflect God's will for His children. Each of them is connected to how we think or view things, and they all boil down to choices we make. If we choose not to think biblically then we have no good reason to expect that we will experience what is promised in 4:7, 4:13 and 4:17. Again, this is not because God is manipulative or plays mind games with us.

God knows that it is more important
that we be holy than that we be happy.
But when we are holy,
happiness, peace, true joy
and **BROKEN CHAINS**
will be found.

What exactly is the peace which is spoken about in Philippians 4:7? Let's begin by explaining what it is not. Peace is not always the absence of difficulty or trial. In Mark 4:35-41 we read about the night the disciples were crossing the Sea of Galilee in a small boat. A furious squall came upon them. Conditions on the Sea of Galilee often generated such squalls, and at least some of the disciples were experienced fishermen. This particular squall was so severe that it unnerved even them. Jesus was asleep in the stern and the disciples awoke Him, asking Him why He seemed not to care that they were about to drown.

*He got up, rebuked the wind and said to the waves,
"Quiet! Be still!"
Then the wind died down and it was completely calm.
He said to His disciples,
"Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?"
Mark 4:39-40*

There is much to notice in this passage, but here is a special truth related to our study in Philippians. The disciples chose to focus on the storm and so they lacked peace. They thought peace depended on the absence of the storm. What it actually depended upon was something they already had; the presence of God with them. Yes, it was a severe storm, but Jesus was in the boat!

Paul promised the Philippians that the peace of God would guard their hearts and minds. As a Jew, Paul was undoubtedly thinking of the beautiful Hebrew word for peace, **shalom**. Of course, the letter he was writing was in Greek, not Hebrew, but I think if we understand the meaning of shalom we will be able to understand Paul's thoughts.

Shalom conveys a sense of wholeness or completeness, a sense of satisfaction we enjoy in the presence of God. In Romans 5:1 Paul said that as Christians, we have peace with God. The enmity between us and God created by our sin and rebellion has been removed by Christ's death for us. Since we have been forgiven, redeemed, justified and sanctified, we have shalom, or peace, with God.

When we tie Mark 4:35-41 and Romans 5:1 into Philippians 4:7, we are being told that no matter how close the storms of life are to us, Jesus is even closer. The peace of God described in Philippians was given in the presence of conflict (Paul was in chains, awaiting trial). When you look at the commands of 4:2-9, do you see how, when we put them into practice, those particular commands draw us closer to God? God is always near (Philippians 4:5). He never moves away from us, it is not an issue of proximity. It is an issue of perception. We often choose to react to our tough circumstances in an unbiblical way, therefore we fail to correctly perceive just how near to us the Lord is (He's in our boat).

Obeying the commands of 4:2-9
enables our hearts and minds to perceive
the Lord's presence in our lives,
and this is the source of shalom,
or peace.

There is so much more than can be said about this passage, but we'll only make one final observation. In speaking about God's peace, Paul said that it would stand "guard". This was a special word in the city of Philippi. The city was home to many retired Roman soldiers, and Philippi's link to Roman military history was why the city has special status as a Roman colony. The term Paul used for guard was a military term having to do with sentries being on the alert. God's peace is keeping guard duty over the hearts and minds of His people. While Paul's language was creative, the truth behind it is very real and is meant to be believed and to be experienced.

Paul was in chains, being guarded by Roman palace guards.
But Paul had joy because he understood that not only was
God with him, the very peace of God was guarding Paul
far closer than the Roman guards could ever imagine.
This can be your experience, too.

BROKEN CHAINS

DIGGING DEEPER

1. The commands found in Philippians 4:2-9 are of vital importance. Count them to see exactly how many there are.

2. Why is it wise for God to condition some of His blessings upon our obedience?

3. What areas of disobedience exist in your life right now that robs you of God's best?

4. Is the presence of God in the life of the Christian a feeling or a fact? What practical steps should you work and think through when God "feels" far away?
