



**Temple Baptist Church**  
Wilmington, North Carolina  
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**The Path to Peace**  
**Philippians 4:4-9**

We live in a world that's at war.

Since September 11, 2001, our nation has been at war with terrorism, first against Al Qaeda, then against ISIS. We've been fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan for years, and on a smaller scale in other countries. And then just this past week, a terrorist used a rented truck to mow down innocent people on a bike path in New York City, killing eight of them.

Now the world is watching North Korea's dictator as he rattles his nuclear saber. Threats of war, particularly against the United States, are a regular part of his vocabulary.

Within our nation there is war—gangs wage war against society and each other, and some of our streets aren't much safer than a war zone. The war on drugs has in some places become a drug war, with drugs, especially opioids, at the root of so much crime in our country.

Even the campuses of our schools aren't immune. Columbine High School, Sandy Hook Elementary School, and Virginia Tech University stand out in our minds, but there have been others—some right here in North Carolina. And mass or multiple shootings at theaters, concerts, and even Walmart seem to happen more and more often.

***Longing for peace . . .***

Now we humans want peace, but it seems so elusive. We long for peace. And even though we know that there will never be complete peace everywhere in this fallen world, we hold out hope for it, don't we?

But doesn't our need for peace go beyond international relations? In the midst of terrorist threats, rampant crime, shootings on campuses or in stores or at public events, financial crises and chaos, and the personal crises we all face, don't we need a more immediate, *personal* peace?

But how can we achieve it? How can we experience it? Where can we find it?

Enter Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ. But he's not where we'd expect to find him. He's in prison, probably in Rome. Though he's hopeful that he'll be released, the very real threat of execution is hanging over his head every single day.

Now I'll have to admit that if I were in that situation, I'm not so sure how upbeat I'd be. I mean, even with the assurance of heaven and the hope of the resurrection, the nagging uncertainty of whether today or tomorrow or the next day the soldiers might walk in and say, "It's time"—that would have to take its toll!

But somehow, in the midst of all this uncertainty and constant threat to his life, Paul is joyful, even jubilant. He is a man at peace. And he calls on the Philippian Christians to share his joy and to walk in this same peace.

Throughout his letter, Paul talks about how God is working even through the bad

circumstances. He shows the Philippians how they should relate to each other with the mindset of Christ, following Jesus' model of self-sacrifice. He writes to them about the presence of Christ in the believer's life and the difference that presence makes. He encourages them to recognize and live out their unity in Christ, and in the verses immediately preceding this morning's text, he deals with a specific conflict between two prominent women leaders in the church that was a threat to the church's unity. So what Paul says here builds on what he's been talking about all along throughout the letter.

I look at all this, and I say, "Paul, how did you do it? How could you be so certain in the face of such uncertainty, and have such peace in the midst of such turmoil?"

### ***What kind of peace . . . ?***

Maybe it would help if we could get a handle on exactly what kind of peace Paul is talking about here. Paul uses the word "peace" (*eirēnē*) twice in this text (4:7, "the peace of God" and 4:9, "the God of peace"). Now we usually think of peace in terms of the absence of conflict or the ceasing of hostilities, and scholars tell us that in classical Greek that's exactly what the word meant. But in the New Testament, which was written in *Koinē* Greek, the common language of the day, the word has been infused in this context with meaning from the Old Testament and is the equivalent of the Hebrew word *shālōm*, which carries a much broader meaning—"wholeness." It has to do with wholeness in our being and in our relationships with others, a wholeness that can exist even in the midst of trouble or conflict.<sup>1</sup>

We often think our lives must be free from any strife or conflict or difficulty to have peace; but according to Paul here in Philippians, Christians can know peace *even in the midst of* conflict or strife! I don't know the source of the statement, but Paul would seem to agree with it wholeheartedly: "Peace is not the absence of strife; it is the presence of God."

So as Paul starts to bring his letter to a close, he again urges the Philippian believers to be joyful, even in the midst of their uncertainty about him and about their own situation. And he bolsters his encouragement by a double promise of peace—that the peace of God that **surpasses all understanding** would guard their hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, and **the God of peace** would be with them.

### ***But how . . . ?***

But how? This kind of peace doesn't just happen, you know. So pray tell, Paul, what is necessary for us to experience it? Well, if we look closely at what Paul says here, his directions are pretty clear:

**Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:4-7).<sup>2</sup>**

Isn't Paul talking here about dependence on God? I mean *total* dependence. Total dependence *in our attitude toward our circumstances*, realizing that our joy is not dependent on what happens to us or around us, but on our relationship with God! So that no matter what we face, even though we may be sad or disturbed or frustrated, we can still rejoice in the Lord. If I'm focusing on *him* rather than on *my circumstances*, won't that make for peace?

Isn't Paul talking about total dependence on God *in our relationships with others*? Shouldn't we *trust him* to help us relate in appropriate ways to other people? So often I'm tempted to look at myself as either inferior or superior in relation to other people, while Jesus wants me to understand and remember that I'm on equal footing with everybody else before him.

I love the little story I heard Dr. Roy DeBrand, my seminary preaching professor, tell some years ago. Some young boys secretly formed a club and built a clubhouse. Their parents didn't even know about it. They decided they needed some rules. So they started making them:

- (1) No girls!
- (2) No cussing!
- (3) No spitting!

And on they went. Pretty soon they had twenty or more rules. There were just too many to keep up with. So they decided on just three rules:

- (1) Nobody act too big.
- (2) Nobody act too small.
- (3) Everybody act medium.

If, by God's grace, I'm acting medium—treating everyone with gentleness, forbearance, self-control, moderation, and sweet **reasonableness**—won't that make for wholeness in my relationships? Won't knowing that **the Lord is at hand** make me more careful in how I relate to others? And won't it remind me that I can depend on him to help me relate to others in gentleness?

And isn't Paul talking about total dependence on God *in our prayers*? If, instead of being anxious and worrying about things, I humbly commit them to God through **prayer and supplication** or petition that I offer in a spirit of thanksgiving that remembers how God has worked in the past and is grateful for his work, won't that bring me confidence and peace in the midst of whatever I'm facing?

But Paul's directions don't stop here. They go on. It's not just about total dependence, is it? Isn't it about *total submission* too?

Oh, how that word grates on our twenty-first century ears, like fingernails on a chalkboard! With our emphasis on radical individual autonomy, we aren't comfortable with having to submit to anyone, *even God*—maybe *especially God*!

But isn't that what Paul is calling for here? *Total submission to God in our thoughts* as we fill our minds with the things that please him and dwell on those things that are **true, . . . , honorable, . . . just, . . . pure, . . . lovely, . . . commendable**, that have **excellence**, and are **worthy of praise**? And total submission to God *in our actions* as we put into practice the things that have been passed on to us as the pattern of the way Christians should live?

When we think God's thoughts and walk in his ways, doesn't it make sense that we would experience *wholeness* in our being, and thus know *God's peace* and be keenly aware of his presence with us?

Maybe St. Augustine was right when he prayed, "You have formed us for yourself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in you."<sup>3</sup>

That's it? It's that simple? In the midst of all the turmoil and anxiety?

Total *dependence*. Total *submission*. Total *trust*. Like two sides of the same coin. Like the

two rails of the same railroad track. Trusting God *completely*.

It's more a journey than a state, more a path than a place. It's a way of walking, the *path to peace*, the way of *total dependence on God* and *total submission to God*.

Years ago, a friend signed an e-mail he sent one day, "Still in One Peace (P-e-a-c-e), Allen." I like that. Maybe he knew what Paul is talking about here.

Catherine Marshall, widow of the long-time United States Senate Chaplain Peter Marshall, tells the story of a king who offered a prize to the artist who could paint the picture that best represented perfect peace. There were many entries, but only two that he really liked.

One portrayed a calm lake. The glassy surface perfectly mirrored the peaceful mountains that towered above it. The blue sky was punctuated with patches of fluffy white clouds. It was a picture of absolute tranquility.

The other picture had mountains, too—rugged rocky mountains under an angry stormy sky. Tumbling down the side of the mountain was a rushing waterfall, looking so real that you could almost hear its thunderous roar. Nothing peaceful about this one, except . . .

When the king looked closely at every detail, near the waterfall was a bush growing out of a crack in the rock. And in the bush, just out of the waterfall's reach, sheltered from the storm and from predators, and watched over by the heavenly Father without whom not even a sparrow falls, sat a mother bird, perched on her nest, head pitched and beak open as though she were singing her heart out—in perfect . . . *peace*.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> C. L. Mitton, "Peace in the NT," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 3 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 706-707.

<sup>2</sup> Scripture quotations are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version® (2011 text edition).

<sup>3</sup> *Confessions of St. Augustine*, Book 1, Chapter 1.

<sup>4</sup> Adapted from Catherine Marshall, "Perfect Peace," in *Stories for the Heart*, compiled by Alice Gray (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1996), 239.