

Philippians 4:5-4:9

1. You've been a Christian for a while, and this isn't your first rodeo. When you hear "the peace of God which passes understanding will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus," what does, and has, that meant to you?
2. In this brief passage Paul exhorts the Philippians to rejoice, to thank God, to cast their anxieties on God (to use the language of 1 Peter 5:7), and to bear in mind whatever is true, honorable, just, and to not worry¹. In doing so, Paul says the peace of God will guard (lit. "garrison"; v. 7) their hearts and minds.² Here are three things to consider when interpreting this passage:
 - i. When Paul first visited Philippi, Paul freed a slave girl from demonic possession and was beaten, jailed and asked to leave the city. As he writes he is chained to a Roman soldier facing the possibility of death (Cohick 226). As we've observed before, sometimes God springs Paul from prison, and sometimes he uses him in prison.
 - ii. Philippians is rich with emotion, and despite being known for its joy, not all the emotions are easy: Paul *longs* for them (1:8); he is *hard pressed* between desire to live to serve or die and be with Jesus (1:23); he is *anxious* about them (2:28); he is brought to *tears* thinking about those who don't know Jesus (3:18); and as you would expect of someone in a Roman jail, he is *distressed* (4:13).
 - iii. A promise of peace can mean many things. For the Stoics it meant a perfect indifference arising from self-mastery (Cohick 221); for the Buddhist peace comes from the calmness of mindfulness meditation and emptying one's self. Neither of these appears to describe either Paul or Jesus.

Given the rich context of Philippians, Paul's (and Jesus') promise of God's peace is both less and more than we might think. What does it mean? And does it still have meaning even for those who are naturally anxious?

3. If we don't experience the "peace that passes understanding," we may easily fall into cynicism, doubting the promise, fatalism—it works for some people, but not me—or guilt that we don't trust God enough. Read the quotes from Cohick on giving God our worries (see reverse side). Setting aside the guilt and cynicism and fatalism, what can we learn from Cohick and her friend's experience?
4. We are right to read this passage about peace (*eirene*) as beginning in each of our hearts. We may also see flowing from this the peace (*shalom*) which comes to the *community* when its members have peace. Watch the Bible Project video on *shalom*. Have you ever seen this at work in Christian groups you've been a part of?

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Fun fact: Paul tells them to show "gentle forbearance" to everyone (5). Fee (174): "*Gentleness* is used by Hellenistic writers and in the LXX primarily to refer to God (or the gods) or to the 'noble,' who are characterized by their 'gentle forbearance' toward others. That is most likely its sense here, only now as the disposition of all God's people."

Be still and know that I am God,
be still and know that I am God,
be still and know that I am God.

In thee, O Lord, I put my trust,
In thee, O Lord, I put my trust,
In thee, O Lord, I put my trust.

¹ Jesus would add, to know peace, remember that **God is your papa**, and cares for you so, so much (SOTM: Mt 6:8-13; 25-34), and that he (Jesus) **sent the Spirit** to bring us peace (Jn 14:25-27). No wonder Paul says peace is a "fruit of the Spirit" (Gal 5:22-23).

² Note: In prov 4:23 we are told to guard our hearts as the wellspring of life. Here, Paul promises God will guard them for us!

Quote from Lynn Cohick on giving God our worries:

Denise, a close friend of mine, captured Paul's meaning well as she talked about her long battle with cancer. Often one feels alone in the struggle and it is easy to worry about the "what ifs." If I die, what about my three school-aged children? What about my husband? What about my aging mother? Worry is a signal that our gaze has shifted to the swirling clutter of events at our feet. We must lift our head and raise our eyes to the throne of God, to the figure of Jesus present with us. **This act of faith must be repeated and strengthened.** [Emphasis added.] My friend spoke words like these to me when I expressed my fear of flying on a transatlantic flight. Her words brought me up short; I was allowing my mind to cycle through imagined scenarios rather than live in the present moment, where God is sovereign.

...

The phrase "whatever is true" has personal meaning for me. Right after my sister died, a friend quoted this entire verse to me as a reminder that believers are never separated from God's love (cf. Rom 8:38-39). I was to cling to that hope by continuing to think about and renew my mind on the completeness of the gospel. I confess that all I could remember was this line, "whatever is true." I would repeat this numerous times a day, willing myself to see beyond the moment to the eternal truth of the resurrection that is truer than my present grief. Paul notes to the Corinthians that love rejoices in the truth (1 Cor 13:6).

Leader's Intro:

Now we are getting down to the home stretch. The repeated themes and rhythms of the letter, and the ways in which it is unique, have made themselves known. Paul's head is on the block and he's gotten word from Epaphroditus, who almost died to deliver the message, that *the* church Paul had chosen to enter a friendship relationship with (characterized by mutual support) was thinking of dealing with external pressures by putting on the sheep skin of Jewish observance. Paul says in no uncertain terms not to; it's a slippery slope at the bottom of which is legalism and the false righteousness which bought the nation of Israel hundreds of years of prophetic silence and exile.

But Paul doesn't just say no, he provides another path. THE path which will "garrison" their hearts and minds, which will provide unity, which will form them into a phalanx which can resist what the Roman world is going to throw at them and resist the disease of disunity from within: adopting the mind of Christ. And this is deceptively simple. It's not some secret passed down from guru to guru and it's not a miraculous spiritual gift available only to those who have sojourned to the highest heaven. It's simply this: consider others before yourself. The mind of Christ, who had everything and deserved it and put up with a life of injustice, setting aside his prerogatives in order to accomplish his mission. That's what we need to do. And if that seems impossibly simple, the engine which makes it possible is God's Spirit (2:13).

On a mundane level, the letter ends with two Pauline regulars, the paraenesis and the greetings, plus an unusual element, about friendship reciprocity. In these few verses we see the paraenesis, the exhortations. These include two famous passages: do not worry about anything... and whatever is true... These culminate in a profound statement about the peace of God, which a few verses later will be echoed by Paul's famous "I have learned to be content with whatever I have" (NRSV). In the final study on Philippians we will do a survey of the letter as a whole and see if we can say with confidence we know Paul's "secret" (4:12). For now, we will do our homework and see how "do not worry about anything" and "think about these things" fit into the logic of the letter.

From a practical standpoint, the promise regarding the peace of God is provocative, and should be taken in the context of Paul's story. We know from Acts that his time in Philippi included beatings and imprisonments—and of course, now Paul's very life is in danger, chained as he is to a Roman soldier, and facing trial. So as we read his breathtaking promise Paul's experience of it will help us understand what its scope is.

Another aspect which should be brought out is the communal nature of this passage. Modern Christians are right in seeing it first as personal: we focus on God in thanksgiving and rejoicing; we focus on those things which are lofty and true; we cast our cares before God; we faithfully follow Paul's guidance and example; and these will foster peace within. The added dimension which is sometimes missed is the communal *shalom* which follows the individual peace. When the small group or church are all keeping Christ's truth front and center, it doesn't just mean serenity for the individuals—it also means unity in community, and the fruit of this is the "gentle forbearance" of 4:5.

Consider asking question #1 before doing the inductive study. The goal of that question is to give the greatest opportunity for reflection on the sometimes careless way in which this powerful passage is taught and these verses memorized.

Note added after the discussion: Again, I ended up pushing several questions to the following week, since the four listed above easily took up our hour and a half.

Extra questions and observations:

1. The "everything"s in 4:6-6 affirm that there is nothing too small to bring to our heavenly Father. What things do you feel are too small or irrelevant or selfish to pray about? Is there *anything* you feel you shouldn't bring to God?
2. A repeated theme in Philippians is joy and rejoicing (e.g. 3:1; 4:4). As Fee points out,

This may seem like a strong framing device within which to speak to a controversial matter; but for Paul it is the only way. Not only does he focus them again on *the Lord*, but he does so in the language of both

the laments and the praise psalms, so as to set their focus above themselves and their sufferings by active participation in singing and praise to Christ. (Little Fee, 130)

Does worship help you refocus? Do you ever worship in your personal devotions?

3. If you sense in the discussion those who don't experience peace and feel guilty about it, but it might be worth quoting Cohick (221) to reinforce that, just because it's a fruit of the Spirit, doesn't mean it doesn't take practice to develop this peace:

Denise, a close friend of mine, captured Paul's meaning well as she talked about her long battle with cancer. Often one feels alone in the struggle and it is easy to worry about the "what ifs." If I die, what about my three school-aged children? What about my husband? What about my aging mother? Worry is a signal that our gaze has shifted to the swirling clutter of events at our feet. We must lift our head and raise our eyes to the throne of God, to the figure of Jesus present with us. **This act of faith must be repeated and strengthened.** [Emphasis added.] My friend spoke words like these to me when I expressed my fear of flying on a transatlantic flight. Her words bought me up short; I was allowing my mind to cycle through imagined scenarios rather than live in the present moment, where God is sovereign.

Cohick (224) later adds, regarding "whatever is true..." in v. 8,

The phrase "whatever is true" has personal meaning for me. Right after my sister died, a friend quoted this entire verse to me as a reminder that believers are never separated from God's love (cf. Rom 8:38-39). I was to cling to that hope by continuing to think about and renew my mind on the completeness of the gospel. I confess that all I could remember was this line, "whatever is true." I would repeat this numerous times a day, willing myself to see beyond the moment to the eternal truth of the resurrection that is truer than my present grief. Paul notes to the Corinthians that love rejoices in the truth (1 Cor 13:6).

Where we put our minds is a choice God allows each of us. If we do the hard work of focusing on what is true, we will experience the benefits. But it will not be without struggle, and the struggle is greater for some than for others.

4. Fee (176) is right in saying that the peace which "passes understanding" is not some sort of mystical thing, so much as a peace which the world, not knowing Christ, doesn't get.