

The Peaceful Presence of God Soothes the Anxieties of Man

Philippians 4:4-7

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⁴ Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice. ⁵ Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand; ⁶ do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.
(Philippians 4:4-7, ESV)

In 1948, poet W. H. Auden won the Pulitzer Prize for his poem, “The Age of Anxiety”. Set during World War II, it is Auden’s attempt to capture the mood, or anxiety, of that period. Between bombings, deaths, and the imbalance of world powers—there were reasons enough to be anxious in the 1940s. A more recent writer has wondered if Auden’s catchy title, “The Age of Anxiety”, might not make a proper bumper sticker for the modern world at large.¹ It seems the more we have, the more we know, and the more we can interact—the more reason we find to be anxious. Anxiety is no respecter of persons, nor ages—but can dog us all.

When I’m out and about these days, I sense an underlying anxiety in our social fabric: things are sort of back to normal, and yet the world feels like a different place. A sense of social anxiety surrounds us, only making worse our own struggles with stress and unrest. Added to this are unexpected and uncontrollable events of nature, such as the tornadoes this past weekend that created devastation and death in at least six states. There are reasons enough to be anxious.

But God doesn’t want His children to be anxious—it makes them miserable and makes Him look bad, like He cannot be trusted. The Bible is clear. God wants us to be free from anxiety. Jesus instructs His disciples, “do not be anxious about your life” (Matthew 6:25); “do not be anxious about tomorrow” (Matthew 6:34).² In today’s passage from Philippians 4, Paul echoes Jesus’s words in addressing the Philippians “do not be anxious about anything” (Philippians 4:6).

Along with the command not to be anxious, does the Bible give us guidance on how to fulfill it?

What is the antidote to our anxiety?

According to Scripture, the antidote to anxiety isn't the absence of trouble or troubled temperaments; rather, it's the presence of something stronger. Our passage, Philippians 4:4-7, concludes by calling readers to move from the storms of anxiety to the rock of God's peace. In these four verses, Paul's larger aim is to firm up his Christian friends in Philippi—who have reason to be anxious and fearful. The firm ground Paul sets before them is the peace of God which surpasses all understanding. For Paul, the antidote to anxiety is the peace of God. I want to make three observations about this peace, specifically asking how it relates to our own anxiety. We'll note the Presence of Peace, the Maker of Peace, and the Pathway to Deeper Peace.

I. The Presence of Peace

Peace is more than circumstance or constitution

Auden was writing "The Age of Anxiety" after the war had ended. He found, surprisingly, that with the cessation of war soldiers did not experience a cessation of anxiety. As they settled back into so-called normal life, there were the new questions of vocation, relationships, life purpose, and meaning.

"Let Ares doze, that other war
Is instantly declared once more"³

Another writer, Hannah Arendt, who knew Auden,

describes the sense of emptiness, the loss of meaning, experienced by those who had resisted the Nazis once the Nazis were defeated. The enemy vanquished, the anxieties remain, and are thereby revealed to have their source in something other than the immediacy of wartime fears.⁴

We tend to think that the causes of our anxieties are circumstantial or constitutional. We are uneasy because of our unfavorable situation. Or we are uneasy because of our unfavorable temperament. Such factors do affect emotions. But in our passage, the alleviation of anxiety doesn't depend on the absence of trouble or altering of underlying temperaments. In fact, Paul implores his friends not to be anxious despite circumstances—Paul's in jail (1:13); he's told them they live in a "crooked and twisted generation" (2:15), and that they're appointed by God to suffer for Christ (1:29-30).

Anxiety is assuaged, Paul reasons, not by the absence of trouble, but by the presence of something altogether stronger. We see what this is at the opening of verse 7.

The peaceful presence of God

Notice the phrase that opens verse 7, “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds...” (4:7). What defeats anxiety is the presence of the peace of God. The Bible talks often about peace in relation to God. Sometimes the language suggests that peace is something God gives to us, which we then possess. Paul writes to the Colossians, “Grace to you and peace from God” (Colossians 1:3). He writes later in Philippians, “The peace of God will be with you” (Philippians 4:9). However, the phrase in verse 7, “the peace of God” (which occurs only here in the Bible), suggests something a bit different. This peace is not a medicine God mails to us from heaven—like spiritual ibuprofen we take whenever we feel nervous. Rather, the peace of God is *the presence of God*. The peace of God is God’s person and power, covering us like a shelter in a storm.

Peace is not something abstract we hold on to;
peace is the presence of the God who holds onto us.

Perhaps you can relate to an experience I often have. I have an older and much wiser mentor. He happens to be an unusually calm and confident Christian—he’s been pastoring for several decades, has been through the ups and downs of life, and is strong in his faith with eyes set on heaven. When I am near this person, when I feel their presence in my life, I share in their peace. Their presence is peace for me.

The presence of God’s Providence

Paul further explains how God’s presence creates peace when he adds, “The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding...” God’s peaceful presence guards our hearts and minds because—in God’s presence—we sense that God is in control. His governing of our lives is purposeful and good—no matter how things may seem. When we rest in God’s peace, we rest in His providential care and plan for us. This recalls the image David uses in Psalm 131:

O LORD, my heart is not lifted up; my eyes are not raised too high; I do not occupy myself with things too great and too marvelous for me. But I have calmed and quieted my soul, like a weaned child with its mother; like a weaned child is my soul within me. (Psalm 131:1-2)

A toddler lacks the ability to understand things as their mother does—but because she trusts her mother, she’s at peace. The distance between a wise adult’s understanding and God’s understanding is infinitely greater than that distance between a toddler and a mother. In the peaceful presence of God, we are reminded of His powerful providence: “Whatever the Lord pleases he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps” (Psalm 135:6). “[God] works all things according to the counsel of his will” (Ephesians 1:11).

We rest when we are close to God because what we don’t understand, He does; what we can’t control, He can; where we have failed, He can redeem.

This is what Paul has in mind in Philippians 4: the antidote to anxiety is not the absence of trouble; it’s the peace-bearing presence of God. Having said this, we don’t always feel worthy of God’s presence—and certainly don’t feel that we would find peace if we—as sinners—were near Him.

Do not presume upon God’s Peace

In our modern-day, we have shifted away from a biblical understanding of access to God and replaced it with a relativistic, therapeutic one: *God loves everyone, no questions asked, and no conditions required; anyone and everyone enjoy unhindered access to God’s blessings and peace.* But what do we make of passages like Psalm 95:10-11, when God states that because of His people’s sin they will not enter into His rest, His peace:

¹⁰ For forty years I loathed that generation and said, “They are a people who go astray in their heart, and they have not known my ways.” ¹¹ Therefore I swore in my wrath, “They shall not enter my rest.” (Psalm 95:10-11).

Sin separates us from the peaceful presence of God

Sin creates a roadblock between a person and the peaceful presence of God. Each turning away from God, every act of rebellion against God’s design, every dark thought and motive towards the people and place God has created, sets us in enmity against God.

When we casually speak of peace and reconciliation between people and God, we need to be careful. If a person remains in sin—and as we will see in a moment, remains without Christ—then they are not at peace with God nor are they reconciled to Him. We know this from human relationships. Say two friends have a major falling out. Years go by. They then reconnect and start to hang out. But if there

hasn't been a real dealing with the underlying hurt—if there has not been admittance of wrong, forgiveness offered, and amends made—their relationship is not deep, but superficial—there is not a deep peace between them.⁵

What we need is not only to know about the peaceful presence of God, but we need someone to make peace between us and God, so we can run towards this peace. This brings us to our second observation—the Maker of Peace.

II. The Maker of Peace

Twice in our passage Paul speaks of God's Son, Jesus Christ—who we will see is the maker, the bringer, or peace: First in verse 7, notice where the verse ends: "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." The peace of God guards us ... in Christ Jesus.

Earlier in verse 5, Paul interjects that "the Lord is near," another reference to Christ. Paul here refers to something Christ has already done for the Philippians—He has died for their sins and therefore offered them forgiveness. And, with "the Lord is near," Paul likely has in mind Christ's return, when He will finally establish the peace of His Father's Kingdom fully here on earth. And this is our second point about the peace that is stronger than anxiety: Jesus is the bringer of peace. Jesus is the Prince of Peace. We need to reflect on this for a moment, as it tells us much about the character of God.

Perhaps the most important passage in the Bible for understanding how Jesus is the bringer of peace is Romans 5:1-11. We can only read part of it here and offer a quick summary:

¹ Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ....⁶ For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly....⁸ God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us....¹⁰ For if while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life.¹¹ More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation. (Romans 5:1, 6, 8, 10-11).

We have peace with God because Christ died for us while we were estranged from God in our sins. This passage further explains that peace is synonymous with "reconciliation"; peace is a reconciled

relationship with God. Jesus is the only way we can get all our sin and failings out in the open before God, have them forgiven and removed, and then be invited by the very hand of Jesus into the peaceful presence of God.

And therefore, what we learn through Jesus, is that God takes the initiative in bringing us peace—God makes the first and decisive move. *Why?* Because God loves us—as Paul says in Romans 5:8, “⁸ God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us....” While we were still sinners, God acted to invite us into His sweet and eternal rest, His soul-healing peace.

There is no peace without the cross of Jesus Christ. There is no real, soul-healing reconciliation, without the blood of Jesus Christ. In Advent, we ponder the coming of Christ. In Advent, we speak of the Messiah, Jesus, as “The Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6). Jesus brings peace because Jesus reconciles sinners to God.

The antidote to our anxiety is the peaceful presence of God, and we have access to this by the bringer of peace, God’s Son, Jesus Christ.

If God has done what is necessary from His side of the street (so to speak), what is left for us to do to enjoy this peace? Here we come to our third and final point: Paul sets forward a few techniques for the pathway to a deeper experience of this peace.

III. The Pathway to Deeper Peace

Drawing from the few commands in our passage, here are a few techniques—or ways of Christian living—that help us, day by day, more deeply rest in the Peace of God.

1. Rejoice

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice” (Philippians 4:4). Paul calls the Philippians, in any and all circumstances (hence, “always”) to choose rejoicing rather than grumbling. Later he will add that they are to pray always “with thanksgiving” (4:6). The mood of our time feels cynical and disdainful. At times and in degrees, being frustrated with the ways of the world is justifiable. The Bible calls this lamenting.

However, the Bible doesn't tutor us in grumbling, but rejoicing. It wants us to lift our eyes away from what frustrates us and set them onto the glories of God—His Creation, His Gifts, and Most significantly, His Son. One path to deeper peace is learning to rejoice and give thanks to God, instead of complaining and practicing cynicism.

2. Reasonableness

Then in verse 5, "Let your reasonableness be known to everyone" (4:5). The word⁶ here carries the idea of gentleness, kindness, and courtesy. It carries the idea of not insisting on every right of your own—bearing with others patiently. Paul is wise. He knows that if we are critical and merciless in our dealings with others, it will affect our enjoyment and experience of the mercy and grace of God. Pastor and commentator Earl Palmer notes,

A negative attitude toward others and an unwillingness to treat them with gentleness will keep us focused on the negatives and captive to our own resentments and hurts. It will not allow us to be free to rejoice in the Lord, to enjoy the freedom we have in him.⁷

Our experience of the peace of God is not unrelated to our peacefulness towards others.

3. Not Anxiousness but Prayer

The third aspect of the path to deeper peace involves and negative and a positive: "do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God" (4:6). Anxiety conveys the idea of harassing care—dread and worry about the future. Peter says, "Cast all your anxieties upon the Lord, for he cares for you" (1 Peter 5:7). Here, Paul shows us how to do this—how to cast cares upon God: we do so through prayer.

I am not an easy-going, carefree person. My nature is to be anxious, to worry, to overthink things. I've found that it's practically helpful to journal my concerns to God. In the morning, I write down my prayers in a journal—I specify what I am fearful or worried about in writing, then I write something to the effect, *"God, I give these to you. You carry them. You deal with them. Please take the burden off me and instead direct my eyes toward the things you want me to focus on today."* This practice helps me not be anxious, but to make my requests and concerns known to God.

During the Christmas season, many experience old wounds and deep causes for sadness and anxiety. Paul would say to us—not that these factors are not real and present—but that something greater is here for us. Through Jesus Christ, we have access to the peaceful presence of God. Let us draw near to Him, and rest in His providential and loving care for us. Amen.

Endnotes

1. Daniel Smith, "It's Still the 'Age of Anxiety.' Or Is It?" The New York Times, *Opinionator*, Jan. 14, 2012. Find online here: http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/01/14/its-still-the-age-of-anxiety-or-is-it/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0
2. In the OT, the Psalmist writes, "When anxiety was great within me, your consolation brought me joy" (Psalm 94:19, NIV).
3. W. H. Auden, "Under Which Lyre: A Reactionary Tract for the Times." Auden wrote this shorter poem while working on *Age of Anxiety*.
4. So writes Alan Jacobs, "Introduction," in W. H. Auden, *The Age of Anxiety: A Baroque Eclogue* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ), xv; Jacobs is referring to Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (1954).
5. At times God's leaders tell God's people they are on good terms with him—without pointing out the sin that separates them from God. Such was the case with many of Israel's prophets in the days of Jeremiah: "from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. ¹¹ They have healed the wound of my people lightly, saying, 'Peace, peace,' when there is no peace." (Jer. 8:10-11).
6. "ἐπιεικής," BDAG, 371. Not insisting on every right of letter of law or custom, yielding, gentle, kind, courteous, tolerant.
7. Earl Palmer, "Integrity: A Commentary on Philippians" (Regent College Publishing, 2000) p. 159.