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this way forward

FINDING PEACE: IN THE BIBLE

Philippians 4:4-9

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Dr. Thomas E. Evans

This month we will be chasing the ever-elusive goal of peace. We will be looking through a Biblical lens to learn:

- ... how to have peace with our past through not holding the mistakes of our youth against us and not harboring resentment for those who did us wrong, in a word... forgiveness;
- ... how to have peace with the present through accepting the blessings we do have while learning not to constantly grasping for more, in a word ...contentment; and
- ... how to have peace with the future through a clear-eyed understanding that history is in the hands of God and that His power is sufficient, in a word... faith.

Striving for peace is a deeply Biblical endeavor. In the King James version of scripture, the word appears 429 times! The more things change the more they stay the same. Peace will always be on the top of humanity's needs and the Bible tells us how to find it!

Paul devotes a lot to talking of peace because he knew, more than most, what it was to be at war...

- ...at war with himself, the ever-present demon of temptation in the side of his flesh;
- ...at war with his past, his murderous actions against his fellow Jews that professed Christ;
- ...at war with his kin, his fellow converts who rejected his authority;
- ...at war with the government, though a citizen of Rome, they imprisoned him, beat him, and ultimately killed him.

But, in Philippians, Paul is telling us peace is a choice, despite what you have done or has been done to you.

First, Paul recognizes that we have these natural worries in life about food and shelter. He encourages us not to shrink from these worries but take them to God in prayer, so he says, "Let your request be made known to God".

As a younger person, I might lay awake for hours staring at the ceiling worrying about the bills, about Liz and Matthew, about the upcoming Session meeting. O, would I worry about the Session meetings! Inevitably, I would go over the same terrain in my mind about all my worries again, and again, and again – getting nowhere. But I would remember, 1 Peter says, "Cast all your anxiety on him because he cares for you."

So I would offer a prayer to God:

Please God make the roof stop leaking; keep Liz's heart from breaking; and let there be no querulous, carping, cantankerous, censorious, or complaining people at the Session meeting tomorrow!

Clearly my prayers needed some work. But they were honest. Surprisingly (not!), they did little to bring peace. My prayers were insufficient because I failed to heed Paul's advice. I left out the thanksgiving. He didn't simply tell us to go to God in prayer, but to do so with thanksgiving.

It puts a frame on our requests. Otherwise prayer might become a long list of complaints. If we shape our prayer requests with thanksgiving, it helps us to realize how much God has already done, giving us confidence and patience with our new requests.

Through taking these worries and shaping them **with thanksgiving**, our mind becomes balanced and centered, so I tried again:

Dear God, thank you for my family, my house, and my church...so now, could you please fix it all!?

Clearly, my prayers still needed work. And it became clear that peace also requires a measure of patience and practice. But I assure you, overtime, as I worked on it, adding the thanksgivings truly did help.

I slept better at night, was more resolute to do my part and, as Paul promised, I felt the peace of God, the sense of holy contentment, a feeling of blessed warmth.

But this is only part one of peace. Ultimately, God and Scripture have higher aims for peace than a good night's sleep. This leads us away from the self-focus of verses 4-7 and into the communal focus of verses 8-9.

In this section, Paul is calling us to turn our mind to noble thoughts. He has moved us away from our own worries into thoughts that take us beyond ourselves. In the first section it was "let *your* requests be made known to God". In this section he calls for our thoughts to be focused on that which is true, honorable, and just.

The deeper peace is not about us as individuals, but about our connections to God and one another.

Peace is such an elusive concept because we have allowed our quest for it to be defined too narrowly. For a greater grasp and a firmer Biblical foundation, we need a clear understanding of just what the word "peace" means.

In Latin, the word is *pax*. This is largely understood as the absence of conflict, as in a truce. During the Roman Empire, the period between 27 BC to AD 180 was marked by a long period without major wars and is known as the *Pax Romana*. But clearly for the Jews and the Christians it was not a time a peace. Jesus was crucified, Christians were fed to lions, and the Jewish temple was destroyed. Biblical peace is a much richer concept than the mere absence of war or a feeling of calm.

In the New Testament, εἰρήνη (*eirene*) is drawn from the verb *eiro* meaning to draw together, to tie together into a whole.

The goal of peace is not simply the absence of conflict, that is two warring parties stepping away, but rather coming together in a new, powerful way.

This is what is missing from our quest for a more just and peaceful society – coming together in the name of God. For, by stepping away, we will always be a part – literally, socially, and spiritually.

In this quest, Paul promises us something even more than the peace of God. If we seek this type of reconciliation, he promises the God of peace.

At the end of the first section, when we offer our requests to God, we are given a wonderful peace from God. But, at the end of the second section, it is not a feeling we are left with but rather the very presence of God.

Perhaps the best visual in all the Bible that captures Biblical peace is that of the prodigal son and the running father, uniting in an embrace of reconciliation and love.

Charles Mackesy painted the son as one being held up by the father. He believes the story would be better named as the running father. For the father runs to the son to embrace him, to create Eirene, that is a tying together, in a new powerful way, with the wayward son.

Biblically, peace is not a feeling; it is not the absence of conflict. It is the powerful love of Jesus Christ who ties us together to God the Father with bonds that can never ever, ever, ever be broken.

The most powerful moment of the prodigal son story is that moment of embrace. It does far more to convey the depth of love than words ever could. And at that moment he knew peace, true Biblical peace.

As you look at this painting, you can't make out the face of the son or of the father. But the embrace is clear. The love is clear, and the tying together is unmistakable.

I don't think we should simply consider that embrace as metaphor.

As you consider those you are estranged from, make this embrace your goal. What would need to happen to bring you to this moment with your enemies? – with those you fear? – with those

whom have wronged you? – or with those you have wronged? Work towards this moment.

Imagine giving that kind of embrace. Imagine receiving it from your Lord. Even as I consider it, a profound peace washes over me. A peace like a river running through my soul.

Amen.