

The Fruit of the Spirit is Peace: Philippians 4:4 – 9

One of my favourite children's books is a story called *Peace At Last* by Jill Murphy. It tells the story of a bear who goes to bed after a long hard day but finds that when he closes his eyes the volume of Mrs Bear's snores keeps him awake. He decides to sleep in Baby Bear's room, but Baby Bear is playing with his aeroplane and soldiers. He heads to the lounge but the noise of the clock and a hamster wheel robs him of sleep there as well. So finally he creeps back into his own bed and finds that Mrs Bear has stopped snoring and as he closes his eyes he says "Ah! Peace at last!" At which point the alarm clock goes off and his peace is shattered.

Finding a place of peace and quiet is pretty hard these days, but there are some kinds of peace which are even harder to find. I'm talking about that inner peace, an absence of anxiety or worry, a place of perfect contentment where not even the toughest circumstances can disturb your heart. I wonder; do you long for that kind of peace within?

Or what about peace with others? I speak to so many families where arguments or events, sometimes from years ago, have robbed them of peace between one another. And the same is true in churches as it is with society as a whole. Do you long for peace with those around you, an acceptance of one another, the ability to get on and even enjoy one another's company despite differences of opinion? Do you long for peace without?

Both peace within and peace without flow from the work of the Holy Spirit as we mature as Christians, but neither of those two kinds of peace are possible without first having peace with God. So that's where we're going to start today before looking at how we might enjoy more peace within and peace without.

Peace with God

The first thing we need to realise is that in our natural state we do not enjoy peace with God. In fact our state is quite the opposite. Colossians 1:21 tells us that we are "*alienated from God, enemies in our minds because of our evil behaviour.*" A lovely little children's song puts it this way: God is a holy God. We can't be friends because of our sin.

That's why when Isaiah saw the glory of God, he fell on his face in fear, because he recognised that he was a man of unclean lips who could not live in the presence of a holy God. It's what Peter said too in Luke 5:8 when he saw Jesus' power at work: "*go away from me Lord, for I am a sinful man!*"

Because God is holy and pure and righteous, because he stands opposed all sin and evil, we cannot be friends with him as we are. He is the rightful King and we are rebels at war with him and there is nothing we can do to create terms for peace.

But that children song goes on: Jesus died to wash us clean, and when we put our trust in him, God opens his arms and welcomes us in. You see whilst Colossians 1:21 tells us that we are alienated from God because of our sinfulness, verse 22 goes on to say this: "*but now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation.*"

Because of the cross, those who are enemies of God, rebels against his rightful rule and deserving of his wrath, can be washed clean. And when that happens we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. You see, whilst there can be no peace for the wicked, those who remain in their sin outside of

Christ, for those washed clean by the blood of the lamb God's peace reigns, and he is now *for us* and not *against us*.

But it isn't just an end to the enmity between us and God, as if he now simply tolerates us. No! Peace with God means full forgiveness, adoption into his family as his beloved children, the promise of eternal life and the presence of his Spirit with us always. The God who created the world from nothing becomes our father. The son who died on the cross for us becomes our brother. The Holy Spirit who descended on Jesus becomes our spirit and our comforter. Peace with God means we are brought into a relationship of love, joy and close fellowship and it is a beautiful thing. What's more; because Jesus' death and resurrection were events in history this peace with God through faith in Christ is also an objective reality, no matter how we feel or whatever our doubts.

Do you have that peace this morning? Do you know that you are at peace with the Almighty and holy God? You can, through faith in Jesus. And it's when and only when we have peace with God that we can start to experience the peace within and the peace without that we crave.

Peace Within

As I've got older I have started to enjoy times of real peace and quiet, the kind of thing that Mr Bear was after. But living on North Road there are plenty of things that disturb that quietness and peace: traffic, schoolchildren, the constant flow of ambulances, drunken revellers returning from the clubs and pubs of the High Street on a Saturday night and at the moment, the chorus of birds who seem to start singing at about 4 AM!

But there are also plenty of things that disturb our peace within. We live in an uncertain world, don't we, a world where accidents happen, terrorists roam, sickness strikes and where the decisions of business leaders or bureaucrats can turn our world upside down in an instant. In Isaiah 54 the picture is of a people afflicted, storm tossed, and struggling with the realities of life in a broken world. And that is often how life feels isn't it? However much control we think we have over our destiny, we often feel like ships without rudders, being driven this way and that by circumstances beyond our control towards the rocks that we are certain lie beneath the waves.

And as I said last week, this shouldn't surprise us. Jesus himself said that in this world we will have trouble, and we do. But the trouble, these worldly troubles often rob us of the peace which Jesus promises to us. You see, Jesus doesn't just say in this world you will have trouble – so get used to it and put on a happy face. He says in this world you will have trouble, but I leave you my peace.

And this is no empty gesture; the peace that Jesus gives is the kind of peace that the world cannot give. We may feel more peaceful when we have the right amount of home or life insurance or have a safety deposit box at the bank where our valuables are guarded day and night, but the peace Jesus offers is far greater than that. Insurance companies can go bust, banks can be robbed, but the peace Jesus offers us cannot be overcome, no matter what the circumstances.

In our reading from Philippians 4 Paul calls it "*the peace of God which transcends all understanding.*" That doesn't mean that we can't understand it, it means that it can't be explained away. God's peace is supposed to be so visible within Christians that when we exhibit this kind of peace even in the fiercest storms, those around us will marvel at the peace we experience even as the mountains of our life crumble, and they will want it too.

Wouldn't it be great to know that kind of peace? Wouldn't it be great to never worry or let circumstances rob us of the joy we spoke of last week? Wouldn't it be great to not just know in our heads that God is with us, but to enjoy the reality of the God of peace giving us his glorious peace day by day? Of course it would! And that is what God offers us. This peace isn't just as something to believe in, but to experience as a living reality. God promises to guard our hearts and our minds so that we are not blown away by the winds of circumstance; he promises to help us stand firm and have peace even in the fiercest storms.

And as Christians, as children of the living God, that should be our experience, but so often it is not so. I know of many Christians who are happy to cry out for God's help in times of calamity but who keep silent and try to muddle when their lives are blighted by what we might call low level disturbers of the peace. Think for a moment about the things that you worry and fret about. What are the things which cause you inner anguish but don't bring to God because they don't seem big enough? If you are like me there are many – but when I keep hold of them and try to muddle through on my own I deny myself the true and perfect peace that could be mine.

So how can we know this kind of peace within? Like the other fruit of the Spirit God's peace does not come automatically. Like the fruits in our gardens the fruit the Spirit grows in us need to be tended and watered and cared for and nurtured.

So firstly we need to make sure that our relationship with God has its rightful place at the top of our agenda. We don't get God's peace without getting God drawing closer and closer to him. That means taking seriously the call in Philippians 4 verse 4 to rejoice in the Lord always because of all that he has done for us, and to strive with God's help to live holy and godly lives as we seek to please him. One commentator said this: *"if we ignore the laws of God we must be prepared to forego the blessings of God."*

Secondly, we need to make sure that we are trusting God in all things. Philippians 4 verse 6 commands us not to be *"anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, send your request to God."* You notice it says in every situation; the big things and the small things; with your family and your car; with your health and your holiday; with your finances and your pets. And the result if we do that is there in verse 7: *"and the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts in your minds in Christ Jesus."*

So often our doubts about God get in the way of us experiencing God's perfect peace. We know that God sees when the smallest sparrow falls to the ground, but we doubt that he knows where our missing luggage has gone. We know God had great power to save in the Old Testament but we're not sure about today. We know that the Bible says that he is good, but we wonder why a good God would allow these things blight our lives. But as we actively come to God in prayer and faith, bringing every circumstance to him, we are acknowledging his power and authority and sovereignty over all things and find that he is able to do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine.

That's why thirdly, we need to prize the truth. The more we know of God through the scriptures, the more we understand about his mighty power, his perfect goodness, and his amazing love and glorious grace he showers upon us through Jesus, the more we will be able to trust him and hold on to his glorious promises in every single circumstance.

This is where we also need to make sure that we aren't slipping in to a prosperity gospel mindset. If we will only be satisfied by complete deliverance from our problems then we will never know peace until heaven because in this life we will have trouble. But if we are seeking God's peace-bringing presence then

we will be satisfied when rather than calming the winds and the waves he comes and stands alongside us in the storm.

To have that peace within need to have our relationship with God at the top of our agenda; we need to actively trust him in all things, and we need to prize the truth and teach ourselves the truth so that we are ready to trust him when the storms come. If we do that, then we will know his perfect peace within.

But finally, what about **Peace Without?**

As a teacher training days were wonderful because you could get so much work done without the children being there! The trouble is, schools only make sense when there are children, and so despite the noise, the mess and the problems they cause, you had to find a way for peace to reign in the classroom if you were going to teach.

The same is true with churches. Without difficult people churches would be wonderful wouldn't they! The problem is of course, that it isn't just those others who are the difficult people. We are the problem as well! We may not feel that we are annoying or selfish or unkind or rude, but so often we are. None of us are perfect. All of us are sinful, rector's included. There are no perfect churches because there are no perfect Christians, at least this side of glory.

And the church in Philippi was no different. In chapter 4 verse 2 Paul pleads with two godly women called Euodia and Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. Earlier in chapter 2 he has to encourage the Philippians to become more like Jesus in their humility and then tells them to stop grumbling and arguing, because that is exactly what they were doing.

I suspect if you're honest that there are some people within the church family here that you find it hard to love and who you don't enjoy spending time with. That may be to do with their character, or it may be to do with yours, or more likely, a combination of the two! But peace between Christians is part of the fruit of the Holy Spirit at work in us. It goes with our love for one another as a sign to the world that we truly belong to God. As we'll see over the next few weeks there are plenty of building blocks along the way which will help us become those who can live at peace with each other; things like patience, kindness and self-control. All of those things are vital. But so is peace.

In Matthew 5 Jesus said that the peacemakers will be called children of God because God is a God who makes peace. And of course the way God made peace with us was very active. God didn't stay where he was in Heaven and simply command peace; he rolled up his sleeves, came and lived among us and died on the cross in our place that we might know him and share in his peace.

And likewise we too must be those who pursue peace with one another. Romans 12:18 says this: *"if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone."* Hebrews 12:14 says this: *"make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy."* And 1 Peter 3:10 – 11 says this: *"whoever would love life and see good days must keep their tongue from evil and their lips from deceitful speech. They must turn from evil and do good; they must seek peace and pursue it."* Peace without is achieved by purposeful activity. If we are to enjoy this kind of peace then like God we must roll up our sleeves and do what we can to build bonds of peace between ourselves and others.

We do that by remembering that we are members of the same body; 1 Corinthians 12:12, and that we belong to each other.

Secondly, we do it by remembering that this body of which we are a part is actually Christ's body for which he died. So if we devour one another, if we refuse to be at peace with others within the fellowship of believers, then we are damaging the body of Christ.

Thirdly, we need to have the humility to admit that often the cause of any discord lies either partly or wholly with us and to go and make that first move. That's a hard thing to do, but that is exactly what Jesus did for us, so how can we do anything less?

Of course, that search for peace is not always effective. A number of times in those verses the point is made that we are to pursue peace as far as it depends on us. Peace between two people needs two people to make it. Sometimes, for whatever reason, the other person will not budge, but that should not mean that we do not try or that we slam the door in their face.

In some ways that's especially important when the person you have offended is not a Christian. Sometimes it is even harder to admit your fault to someone who you are not sure will forgive you, but if you do not make that move and apologise then you are not just damaging your own relationship with them, you are also damaging the reputation of Jesus and putting a stumbling block in the way of them coming to faith.

And one final thing to say: if they do refuse to make peace, we are never, ever to seek revenge, even in our minds. When the Bible tells us to leave vengeance to the Lord is not so we can comfort ourselves rather smugly with the thought that God will zap them in the end, it's so that we can push all thoughts of vengeance and retribution to one side and still reach out in love and mercy to win them for the Lord.

There's been a lot of media talk lately about war and terrorism and whether being part of the EU hinders or helps those wanting to cause division amongst people from different backgrounds and religions and races. But I know for certain that without peace with God there can be no perfect peace within and no real peace between people. But when the gospel of God breaks into our lives, when we have peace with God won for us by Christ, then we not only know the peace of God in the midst of even the fiercest storms, but we see the barriers between people of different races and backgrounds and religions come tumbling down as one by one they are adopted into the family of God through faith in Christ.

That's what happened in the early church as the barriers between the Jews and the Samaritans and the Gentiles came tumbling down. And that's what is happening today in our church, in churches across the country and right across Europe and the world as people from Muslim backgrounds and Hindu backgrounds and atheist backgrounds come to find true and lasting peace with God through Jesus Christ.

May we all know more of that peace here; may it still our faithless hearts and our restless souls; and may it shine through us as a witness to the glory of God. Amen.