

The Peace That Passes Understanding

In his letter to the Phillipians the Apostle Paul urges that Christians ought to be able to rejoice in the Lord. Then, after counseling them to forbear and to have no anxiety, he closes the main part of his letter with these words: "And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus." All of us have heard those words spoken over and over again. But perhaps you have wondered, as I have, what kind of peace it is that passes understanding. In one sense that seems to be a contradiction, for it appears that the peace of God and understanding would be the same if ever we could attain them. What kind of peace is God's peace if we can't understand it?

In these troubled times men seek feverishly for peace of mind. (Two books which enjoyed long stands atop the best seller lists were "Peace of Mind" by a Jewish Rabbi and "Peace of Soul" by a Catholic priest.) Surveys have shown that what people expect to find most in their religion is peace of mind. And yet the acute lack of this peace is reflected by the results of a recent Gallup poll. In the spring of 1950 men and women throughout the U. S. were asked: "Do you think the human race is getting better or worse from the standpoint of health? Knowledge? Moral conduct? Faith in religion? Peace of mind? Inner happiness? 62% reported that they thought the human race is getting worse from the standpoint of peace of mind. Only 17% felt that the general peace of mind was getting better.

Could it not be said that we live in a panic stricken time? Someone has said that our lives are lived in "a constant state of seige." Peace of mind eludes our grasp. It is something we know not how to achieve. It is something that is in fact beyond our understanding. Must the peace of God, too, be forever beyond our understanding? I think not. Let us this morning inquire into this peace. Perhaps we can understand it better by first discounting two things that it is not. Then, in the third place, we can discover how it may be achieved.



For one thing the peace of God is not based on indifference. (If that is the kind of religion you seek you had better go to India and become a Buddhist.) That religion consists of an escape from the world in which the devout person ~~seeks~~ seeks to make himself utterly indifferent to the weal and woe about him. His peace is largely that of indifference. But that is not the kind of peace that comes from Christ.

The peace of God that passes understanding does not anesthetize its recipients to the raw life of the world. Christianity has no spiritual morphine with which to deaden our awareness of the pain and sorrow and tragedy in the world. Whatever God's peace is it does not rest on indifference.

Sometimes in deep contemplation about the overwhelming troubles of the world I am tempted to wish that I could take my family and fly away to some distant island in the farthest sea, there not to be troubled by the turmoil and tragedies that play all around me here. There, it seems, we could find our peace apart from the world, utterly oblivious to its raucous cries. But always this mental flight strikes against the realization that whatever peace I would find on some lonely shore is would not be the peace of God. For God does not send his peace to the indifferent.

Recently I noticed an advertisement for a book called "There is a Safe Place to Hide." I was urged to read this book to "see if it doesn't take the load of fear and worry off your mind. This restful, pacifying book also contains 16 other simple talks . . . These 16 beautiful talks also make the heart relax from anxiety and sigh with relief. Send \$1.00 for this nerve-soothing book entitled, "There is a Safe Place to Hide." If you abide by it, you will live in peace." I have not read that book but I know that it does not refer to the peace of God that passes all understanding, for, in God's peace, there is no safe place to hide!

I heard Dr. George Buttick say quite positively recently that as a Christian living in a time like this he did not want peace of mind - not the kind of peace that the world seeks and offers. For how, he declared, can a Christian indulge himself in the peace of indifference when all about him the world groans in travail?



Several days ago I was on a ~~xxxx~~ night train traveling through Texas. Late at night the train stopped at Marshall, Texas, and as I looked out of the window I caught a glimpse of a tragic scene. In a few moments there flashed upon my vision a military cortege carrying a flag draped coffin through the depot. At the rear of the procession a young woman walked grimly in her grief. Evidently that military party had just gotten off of the train on which I was riding, though I had not seen them. Then it occurred to me why it was so. The soldiers in that party, and the young woman had skins of black. You/ see this was Texas and I was riding on a Jim Crow train and it was not expected that I should be concerned about the grief of those who rode in another compartment. The train was warm and comfortable and it was easy for me to roll up again in my seat and relax in sleep. But somehow I could <sup>not</sup> regain the peace I had felt before I saw that little procession with the flag draped coffin - probably a black soldier boy fallen in Korea - and the young woman who walked quickly ~~behind~~ behind, her face drawn in grief.

No, the peace of God will not come in/ this world because we are indifferent and insensitive to the human tragedies that are being enacted about us. It has not been so with God's great saints who have known His peace. Kagawa, the great Japanese Christian has written: "The more I feel the love of God, the more I feel responsibility for the weak, the oppressed and the poor, for that is the way through which Christ has shown me the love of God, our Heavenly Father." (motive, Oct. '51, p.8)

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Neither will the peace of God come without struggle. ~~Rex~~ The peace of God is not the result of inactivity and easy living. God's peace passes understanding because at the very center there is a cross.

The movie actress, Linda Darnell, reported recently that she got through one of those terrifying hurricanes in Florida "on scotch and a prayer". In this rather loose fashion people identify peace of mind. Some seem to think that by knocking out their senses during a nasty time they can escape the struggle. And they think they have "peace of mind" when the storm has passed. Stalwart souls pray their way through a time of struggle, but they don't rely on scotch.

One of my favorite writers, Howard Thurman, has written:

There is the peace that comes when sorrow is not relieved  
 When pain is not quieted,  
 When tragedy remains tragedy, stark and literal,  
 When failure continues through all the days to be failure.  
 (DEEP IS HUNGER 208)

This is indeed the peace that passes our feeble understanding. Furthermore how can we know what Jesus meant when he said, "Do not think I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword. If there is the real peace of God it is hard for us to understand, for it does not come in the absence of struggle. It comes through the struggle of the soul.

Halford Luccock has scored the numerous cults these days that keep telling us we must learn to relax. "We will soon have a rewritten gospel," he writes; 'If any man would come after me, let him keep down his blood pressure'; 'Go ye into all the world and relax'. (and yet) there can be no true Christianity without tension. Take the tension out of the mainspring of a watch and you have beautifully 'relaxed' steel; you also have a useless piece of junk. A person can become so relaxed, so free from all disturbance about anything, that he likewise is a useless piece of junk." (Christ. Cent. March 9, '49, p.297)

There is a trenchant line from T. S. Eliot's play "The Cocktail Party", a line spoken by a wise man to one who is deeply troubled: "Your business is not to clear your conscience, but to learn how to bear the burden of your conscience." The true Christian who is involved in the struggles of the world, who understands the common sin of humanity, will never be able to clear his conscience. His own guilt will be too great. He will be too heavily involved in the life dramas of sorrow and tragedy. But, by the peace of God, he can learn how to bear the burden on his conscience.

We think of religion as providing "comfort" for the distressed and bereaved. That it surely does. But the word "comfort" implies, not easy contentment and soft reclining, but "strength". The person who is truly "comforted" by God is strengthened to do all things through Christ.

Harry Emerson Fosdick once defined trouble as a trust, just like great wealth



or talents. "Christ took trouble as a trust. He made it the most impressive spiritual force in human history. They handed him a cross as a disgrace and he took it as an opportunity, saying, 'I, if I be lifted up from the earth, will draw all men unto myself!'" (Clark's TODAY IS MINE, p.294)  
His peace came through the struggle of the soul, and it is he who gives that peace to us - the peace that passes understanding.

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The last, but most important thing I can say about God's peace is that it cannot be suddenly acquired when it is needed most. No one who possesses the peace of God ever bought it ~~xxxxx~~ cheaply or earned it easily. If it is to come it must be prepared and sought for. Those who have it have constantly cultivated it in the gardens of their hearts.

It is said that in the Sahara Desert there are trees growing in the midst of the heat and wind. On the surface their source of moisture ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~ seems a mystery. But the secret is this: the long, tenuous roots of those trees grope deeply beneath the hot sands, down into the heart of the earth, for the deep flowing rivers of rich chemicals that give them life. Fed ~~xxxxxxxx~~ from those deep ~~xxxxxxxx~~ springs they have developed a strength that no desert storm can break. So it is with the peace of God that passes all understanding. The sturdy soul that possesses this peace does so in spite of the storms that rage about him. Though beaten ~~byx~~ about by the storms he is never defeated because the ~~xxx~~ roots of his life go down deeply into the heart of God where God's peace sustains him.

It is not so with those whose roots wither in shallow soil. They have no depths. Shallowness never makes for peace. ~~Last summer~~ <sup>and</sup> I was told that Lake Erie is the most turbulent of the Great Lakes because it is the shallowest. Its waters, which are not greatly deep, are easily whipped into fury by the lashing winds. And the human children of God, whose lives are shallow, never know his peace.

The peace of God will not be found on a psychiatrist's couch, nor in a vial of morphine, nor a sleeping pill; indeed it will not be found behind what seems to be ~~xx~~ impregnable barriers erected against the intrusions of the world; indeed it will not be found in the cheap advice of a best selling book. Do you want to know where it will



be found? I think I can tell you: it will be found in the person and presence of Jesus Christ. When God sent his Son to reconcile the world unto Himself, he sent His peace for all men to share. Hence no man can understand or possesses that peace without understanding and sharing the life of Christ. When we seek daily to live in that presence, when we seek to know him, whom to know aright is life eternal; when we study his word and his life; when we seek to walk as his disciples in the daily path - then the peace of God descends upon our hearts. This peace never comes to those who take him lightly, who never bother to seek his way and truth and life. But when it does come it is the great beneficent grace of God poured out from on high. This is not the possession of the world to give. When our hearts are consecrated to Christ and his way of life they are guarded by the peace of God which passes all understanding.

I can tell you a true life story of how the peace of God comes into human lives. One of the men I admire most in the Christian Church had a son. This son, with his brother and sister, enjoyed the beauty and depths of a Christian home. After graduation from college this son took a job with a company that operated a burglar alarm system for stores and factories in Nashville, Tenn. During one night when he was on duty at the central ~~xxxxxx~~ office where the signals from the various plants employing this service were observed on a huge electric board, it was noted that the night watchman in a certain laundry had not signaled at the appointed hour. A phone call was immediately put through to the watchman at the laundry. There was no answer. Then this man's son was dispatched in a company car to go to the laundry to investigate. Quite <sup>some time</sup> after he left the central office the ~~xxxxx~~ long expected signal from the laundry appeared. The man ~~left~~ on duty in the central office, ~~quickly~~ sensing danger, quickly put in another call to the laundry to inform the watchman, who had evidently awakened from a sleep, that an inspector would be making a check of the building. The night watchman this time answered the phone. "An inspector is on his way to check on you," he was told. ~~xxxx~~ Then over the phone these words came from the man at the laundry: "It's too late! I've just shot him!" At that moment, the young man lay on the floor of the laundry, having been killed instantly by the watchman who had seen his shadow and taken him for a burglar. The burglar alarm system had failed. How do you suppose my Christian friend and his family reacted to this accident

and tragedy? At the laundry that night the twin brother of that dead boy was summoned to make the identification. Questioned by the police he was asked in a state of intense anxiety: "Do you think your father will sue the company?" "No," replied the ~~griefstricken~~ twin, "I don't think my family will be inclined to retribution." After the first clouds of grief had lifted somewhat many of us received ~~xxxx~~ this little booklet which has these words:

The Family of Robert D. Bollinger  
Acknowledges with Grateful Appreciation  
the Kind Expression of Your Sympathy.

Therein was contained their testament of faith:

We, the family of Robert Bollinger bear no malice in our hearts or ill will toward the man who killed our son and brother. Human beings are frail and we recognize that mistakes are made. We are Christians and our thinking is entirely in the framework of the Christian faith. We believe that it is not God's purpose that a person should die. We believe it is God's will that people should live and live life in its fullness and completeness. We are not fatalists. We do not believe that a person dies "when his time has come." In the case of Bob, we think that God would have wanted him to live; the human frailty of another person took him.

We believe that God's purpose is manifest in the framework and pattern of the universe. Therefore, each human event from our viewpoint must be seen in the light of that pattern and that purpose. In this sense, therefore, we understand Bob's passing. We know that when there is birth and life there is likewise eventually physical death. The span of life between birth and death is sometimes short but the worth of living is the manner in which the days are spent. We are most grateful to God for the twenty-three years of Bob's life.

What do you suppose the cynic would say or that? I defy him to scorn it! What would the sophisticate think of it? I defy him to match it! ~~What would~~ How would the indifferent, the non-believer treat it? I defy him to explain it on his own terms! Indeed none of these can understand it, for here is a testament of faith that is rounded on the peace of God that passes understanding. Where did it come from? It came from lives that together sought for the presence of the living Christ. For that faith is the actualization in life of his own benediction: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid."