

Our Patient Peace
December 13th, 2015

Philippians 4:4-7
Advent 3 C

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Does anybody else here remember how painful the wait for Christmas used to be? As author Jean Shepherd once said, Christmas is the holiday around which the entire kid year revolves. As soon as the stores and the radio stations bring it back to mind, suddenly it's all you can think about. That great day when you get a bunch of great new toys. It's agonizing to wait for it when you're so young, it's the kind of thing that makes you want to desperately go to bed at 3pm on Christmas Eve just to make that day come faster. After all, what great stuff is there to pass the time between now and Christmas when you're little? Christmas parties? Oh, sure, Mom and Dad talk about boring adult stuff with boring adults and you have to be quiet and behave yourself. And you still have to put up with school and homework and memorizing your part for the Christmas Eve service so you don't embarrass yourself.

Sure maybe I felt that way at 5 or even 10, but as you grow you find more to enjoy in the Christmas season and Christmas Day itself becomes special for different reasons. As we grow, as we learn, our focus shifts and so does our attitude. I bring this all up because I think that is sort of a small-scale example of what the life of Christian can feel like. After all, what are we doing here but waiting for the great culmination, the great end that is promised us? Once you know the forgiveness of sins that Jesus offers, once you trust in him for eternal life, well, at that point you are ready to go home to be with him. For you, there's no more reason to be here, nothing unfinished that will make a lick of difference once you're with your Father in heaven. Obviously, though, our Lord keeps us here for some time after we come to faith, and so we wait patiently for the day when our faith is fulfilled in a sense.

Of course, the time is not pointless, we know there are other reasons why God has us remain, of course, and those reasons are for the sake of other people. God wants to work through you to help someone else reach that same heavenly home you will receive. But at times, when we know that we're ready to go, even while we have things from God to occupy us in the meantime, this life can sometimes feel like an excruciating drag, just waiting and waiting for the grand celebration at the end, just like Christmas when we were five years old.

And let's face it, the circumstances are not ideal while we wait. Sure, it's not like we're left just sitting, staring off into the sky waiting for that end. God has given us plenty of direction about how he wants us to live our Christian lives, plenty of tasks we are to carry out to his glory and for the sake of others. There are things we can do to strengthen our own faith and to reach out and encourage the faith of others or to help others come to faith. There's plenty to do, but there's lots of stuff that can get in the way, lots of unpleasantness that can keep us from enjoying the season of our lives and keep us from joyfully doing what our Father asks.

And the distractions are hard to ignore. The devil tries to turn every event in our lives into an opportunity to steal our focus away from our God and our work for him. Seemingly endless responsibilities to our family and work, health troubles, car troubles, national crisis, finances, whatever! They don't stop coming and sometimes we reach a point where we just wonder how much longer do we have to put up with this before we can just leave all this behind! It can be difficult, especially when we focus on these distractions. Difficult to wait for that grand day when we will be at real peace. But there is hope even in this life, as Paul offers us today from our reading in Philippians: <Read text: Philippians 4:4-7>.

This here is the key difference for a Christian. The peace we have access to is beyond what we could ever understand, especially in this life. It is a peace that is able to overcome and carry us through the worst of the trials, a peace that holds no matter the situation or the circumstances. It's the kind of peace that gives us clarity of thought, allowing us to choose the right priorities, lets us ensure that the spiritual well-being of ourselves and our families takes priority over everything and still does not neglect our other responsibilities.

All the unpleasantness between now and the celebration comes from one source, sin. The only thing that really keeps us from having peace on this earth is sin. It causes conflict wherever it goes and it is at war with God himself. That is a war we cannot win. But our Savior Christ has won us peace. His death stops the conflict between us and heaven and removes the guilt of our sins. This truth, so simply expressed, can carry us through any amount of distress in this life: that we are forgiven for our crimes and will live forever with our God in paradise. With this truth firmly before our eyes, nothing else that happens is more than a minor inconvenience. Whatever it is, it's not going to follow you to heaven and it's not going to stop you from getting there! We can't stop the annoyances from coming, but the peace of God changes how we react to them. Imagine that being your reaction to the next disaster you face, whether personal or national. Imagine that as you stare down it with despair welling up in your heart, these words come to you, "I am a

forgiven child of God; I will live forever with my Lord in paradise.” What a change, what a shift in perspective that brings that causes us true peace.

It’s a question of where our focus is. When we keep our eyes on God, on the cross and all the promises that pour forth from it, then the obnoxious troubles that try to steal our peace can go unnoticed. The clarity of perspective that comes with having our eyes focused on Jesus brings us that peace that is unmatched. And the better we see, (or to put it plainly, the deeper our understanding) the stronger that peace holds in any circumstance.

Now, this is an amazing blessing to the Christian, one that the world doesn’t have anything close to. But this peace that can overcome anything only really works best when our eyes are properly focused. It only holds when we can see Christ clearly. What happens when we let our gaze slip? How do we keep that from happening? Because certainly, when we’re focused on Christ and keep a “big picture” perspective of our lives with eternity in mind, it’s easier to ignore the stings of this world. To remind ourselves and others that whatever it is that’s bothering us, it’s not going to change the heaven that’s waiting. But what happens when one of the distractions gets you and you find yourself sucked in by its draw, staring at it without being able to look away? What happens when a sting of the devil succeeds at drawing your eyes away from the cross and gets you to focus on the pain it caused?

Clearly at that point we lose the full peace that God has built up for us. Suddenly the trial, the difficulty, the pain, whatever it is, is all we can think about and we lose our perspective on it. It doesn’t even have to be anything major, it can be just the day to day routine of life that we get so wrapped up in thinking is so absolutely *essential* that we let it overshadow any possibility of us thinking about our Savior. This isn’t to say we lose faith or forget what Jesus has done, but it’s not at the forefront of our minds anymore because of these distractions the devil lines up, and through that he manages to rob us of the peace we should have while we handle these difficulties.

Paul tells us what to do in these situations. Just as our greatest need was taken care of by God, he tells us to look to God for all our needs. Allow me to render the English of this passage a little differently as Paul says to us, “Do not have anxiety, but in everything, with prayer and petition, with thanksgiving make your requests known to God.” (v6). Whatever it is that is seeking to distract you from him, whatever trouble or care or responsibility you’re worried about, don’t give in to anxiety about it, but rather take it and place it at the one place you can be sure you don’t have to worry any longer. Lay it at God’s feet. Now, this is not a license for laziness or neglecting our God-given responsibilities. It is freedom from needing to *worry* about it. The Lord will see to it. He may use you to see to it. He may use a method we hadn’t thought of. He may take care of it in a way we disagree with! But when it is in his hands we have confidence that the results will be for our eternal good.

So whatever worry tries to tear you away from keeping your focus on God lately, whatever it is disrupting your Christian peace, take it up to him and leave it there. In that peace we are able to operate as Paul instructs us here. We can be gentle to all. Or maybe to better understand the core idea of this word, “yielding”. With heaven won for us, we can give up any notions of pride or saving face that only limit us. We don’t need to win every argument or even make an argument every time. (I’m speaking here of matters God hasn’t spoken on of course, when it comes to his word of course we’re obligated to speak and defend.) But for our own sakes? Not so much. With the peace of Christ it’s so much easier to just let the little stuff go. And outside of matters God has spoken on, it’s all little stuff.

We really can rejoice, no matter the circumstance. As we wait for the grandest celebration of all, we have been blessed by God with everything we need to be joyful in the meantime. We can enjoy the season of our lives while we wait. Our God really is near. Not just in the sense that he’s coming again soon, but that he’s right here with us all the time. He is present everywhere and wherever he is, he is there completely. He’s done everything for you that you need and he continues to give well beyond our worth. That’s cause to rejoice while we wait.

Our joy and our peace during this time of waiting are directly tied to how well we see our Savior through the eyes of faith. It’s directly correlated to whether or not we keep him in the forefront of our minds and our lives at all times. To see him better, to strengthen our focus, we need his help again. He provides these things to us through his Holy Word. The better we know him from his word, the more complete our joy and peace are while we wait. Everything we learn about him there helps. Every example of his goodness and kindness that we study and remember serves to strengthen our own trust in what he does for us. Every new promise we learn or understand better is a blessing to us in our lives to build that joy.

Look for him in the Word. See him better every day. Study his image in the Word by yourself and with your fellow believers as often as you are able. Make the most of every opportunity to know your God better, to increase your vision of him and strengthen your focus on his image. With our eyes constantly on him and every detail of himself he offers, we truly can have a patient peace, no matter the surroundings. Amen.