

Thinking, Thanking, Loving¹

The apostle Paul was one of Biblical characters who experienced a great deal of innocent suffering. Even at the point of his initial calling (Acts 9:15-16), God said, “I will show him how much he must suffer for my name.” Paul himself states (Acts 14:22) that is only “though many tribulations that we may enter the kingdom of God.” Six different times Paul catalogues his suffering (Rom 8:35; 1 Cor. 4:9ff 2 Cor. 4:8-9; 6:4-5; 11:23-39; 12:10). Together these experiences cover an enormous range of physical, emotional, and spiritual hardships, including hunger, imprisonment, and betrayals. He was flogged (39 lashes) five times (2 Cor. 12:25-29) and concludes, “Who is weak, and I do not feel weak?”

How did Paul handle these troubles and maintain a positive ministry? Paul himself confessed that “the troubles we experienced were a great pressure, far beyond our ability to endure, so that we despaired of life itself.” But he concludes that these things happened “that we might not rely on ourselves but God.” (2 Cor. 1:8-9). Paul saw a purpose in these afflictions, stating that God “comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God.” (1 Cor. 1:4) So if we want to know how Paul succeeded, we should study the instructions he gave to others in difficulty.

The Peace That Passes Understanding

One important passage in this regard is Philippians 4 (esp. vv. 4-12).

What is the “peace of God” he describes? This passage describes two elements of this peace. In verses 11-12, Paul states, “I have learned the secret of being content in every situation.” This means he was the same in one situation as in another. We may be facing bills or difficult boss; Paul was facing torture and death. If we read these verses carefully we don’t read the words of a tough guy, “I can handle it. I’m a man of steel. I was born for trouble.” Instead Paul states, “I have *learned* this.” It was not natural to him. This peace of God does not come naturally to any of us either. We can learn to face any situation with equilibrium.

The other thing element of this peace is that it is not an absence of something—it is a presence of something. Paul is not saying he was not afraid, but that in the midst of all these things he felt a presence; he was protected. The word translated “guard” (v. 7) means to completely surround and fortify a building or a city to protect it from invasion. Many modern strategies for facing anxiety involve *removing* certain thoughts: “don’t think negative thoughts, control your negative thoughts.” The peace of God is not the *absence* of negative thoughts, it is the *presence* of God himself. “The God of peace will be with you. (Phil. 4:9). Christian peace does not start with ousting negative thoughts or refusing to see how bad things really are. You might be able to achieve some measure of calm by refusing to see the situation realistically. But this will be a short-lived peace. It is not that you stop facing the facts, but you get a living power that comes into your life and enables you to face those realities, something that lifts you up over and through them.

True peace does not come from positive thinking or willpower. It is a sense that no matter what happens, everything will ultimately be all right, even though is not right at the moment. No matter what is thrown at you, you know it will not make you lose your footing. Paul is the classic example. He experiences wave after wave of affliction, and yet—there he is still. “I have found a way to be completely poised under any and all circumstances.” Paul states that this was not a natural talent, he learned it and we can also. Christian peace is an inner calm and equilibrium but also a sense of God’s presence and an almost reason-transcending sense of his protection.

What are the disciplines needed to achieve this peace? While these are not intended as a pat formula, Paul gives us three types of disciplines to build God’s peace into our lives.

The Discipline of Thinking

In Philippians 4:8-9, Paul instructs us to think on noble and pure things. Most commentators agree that Paul is not directing us to meditate on the “lofty thought for the day,” but rather on the specific teaching of the Bible about God, sin, Christ, salvation, the world, human nature and God’s plan for the world—the plan of salvation. Paul uses the word

¹ Material taken/quoted from Tim Keller, *Walking with God through pain and suffering*, chapter 15.

logizdomai, a word taken from accounting, sometimes translated “to reckon” or “to count up.” Paul is saying if you want peace, think hard and long about the core doctrines of the Bible.

Modern society says “Are you stressed, unhappy, or anxious? Let’s practice relaxation or work-rest balance. Go sit on the beach and think positive thoughts.” Western secular culture answers in this way because it is perhaps the first society that operates without any answers to the big questions of life. If there is no God, we are here essentially by accident, and when we die, we are only remembered for a little while. If this is true then it is not surprising that secular books on stress never ask the big questions like “what are we here for.” Instead we are encouraged not to think hard and just relax.

This is not the way of God’s peace. Paul is saying that Christian peace works in almost exactly the opposite way. Christian peace comes not from thinking less but thinking more, and more intensely about the big issues of life. In Romans 8:18 Paul uses *logizdomai* again, “I reckon that our present sufferings are not worth comparing to the glory that shall be revealed in us.” “Reckon” means to count up accurately. You don’t get this kind of peace by relaxing, jogging or shopping. It means “Think it out! Think about the glory coming until the joy begins to break in on you.”

Some might object, “I don’t need lessons on doctrine, I need comfort!” But wait! The Bible teaches that Jesus came into this world, suffered and died so that one day he will wipe away every tear. If you truly believe this then this is the greatest possible comfort you could obtain. If you don’t believe this than you are stuck here for 70 or 80 years to suffer and you must grab all the happiness you can while you are here. If suffering takes away that happiness, you have lost it forever. Either Jesus is on the throne ruling all things for you or this is as good as it gets.

If you are a Christian today and have little or no peace it may be because you are not thinking. Peace comes from a disciplined thinking out of the implications of what you believe. We climb to the top of a mountain to get a true perspective of the country, to see the relationships. In the same way, we are called to think big and high. Realize who God is, what he has done, who you are in Christ, where history is going. Put your troubles in perspective. You could say that there is a “stupid peace” and a “smart peace.” Stupid peace refuses to think about the situation, instead drink up, sex up or shoot up and try not to think about the grand scheme of things. Smart peace comes when you think about the big picture and as you do, you are going to find peace.

The Discipline of Thanking

In Philippians 4:6, Paul says, “Don’t be *anxious*, but make requests to God with *thanksgiving*.” Paul is not saying be thankful after you know the response to your request, but thank him *as* you ask. Why should I thank God ahead of time? Paul is essentially calling upon us to trust God’s sovereign rule of history and of our lives. He is telling us that we will never be content unless, as we make our heartfelt requests, we also acknowledge that our lives are in his hands and he is wiser than we are. You are thanking him for whatever he is going to do with your request.

This is the essence of Genesis 50:20 and Romans 8:28. In Romans 8:28, Paul is not saying that everything has a silver lining or is good if you look at it correctly. What he is saying is that all things—even bad things—will ultimately *together* be overruled by God in such a way that the intended evil will, in the end, only accomplish the opposite of its design—a greater good and glory than would otherwise have come to pass. Because God is sovereign we are to thank him—we are to live thankfully because we know he is like this. We are to thank him beforehand, we are to thank him for whatever he sends to us, even if we don’t understand it. We believe that God will always give us what we would have asked for if we knew everything that God knows. To the degree that we believe that, we will have peace.

The Discipline of Loving

In Philippians 4:8, Paul asks us to ponder “whatever is lovely...” Something “lovely” is something that is not only true but it is also attractive. Paul is urging his readers not just to order the thoughts of their mind but to engage the affections of the heart. To keep our equilibrium in the rough seas of life, it is not enough to just *think* the right things, it also important to *love* the right things.

The ancient Greek philosophers (esp. the Stoics) sought the way to live a life of contentment, to be independent of circumstances. But they also understood that if you love things you are not in control of, your contentment is not guaranteed. They suggested that you only love things under your own control; they suggested you love only your own virtue. However they were mistaken, because you do not control your own virtue. Augustine rejected the Stoic approach and argued that “only love of the immutable can bring tranquility.” Your own virtue, your career, your family, your fortunes will change. The reason we don’t have peace is that we are loving *mutable* things, things that circumstances can take away from us.

God, his presence and love are the only truly *immutable* things. He does not change. Your poor performance cannot change it. Even the worst possible trouble, your death, will only enhance God’s love in your life! Thus Augustine says, “[God alone] is the place of peace that cannot be disturbed.”

Does this mean that I should no longer love my family or even material comforts? No. Your problem is not so much that you love your career or family too much, but that you love God too little in proportion to them. C.S. Lewis stated, “...it is the smallness of our love for God, not the greatness of our love for the many that constitutes inordinacy.”

Relocating Your Glory

In Psalm 3, David is in a dire situation, surrounded by enemies and his people are whispering that God has deserted him. Yet David is able to lie down and sleep with contentment (v 5). How does he accomplish this? In verse 3, he states that God lifts up his head, God is his glory. Glory speaks about the source of David’s confidence and self-esteem. David realizes that he cannot obtain his “glory” from his people’s approval and praise. He had walked with head held high because of his acclaim and popularity but that doesn’t last through adversity. Now in the middle of adversity, he understands that *God* is his only glory.

In suffering something is taken from us. Inside, we are disproportionately cast down because the suffering is shaking out of our grasp something that we allowed to become more than just a good thing to us. It has become too important spiritually and emotionally. We looked at it as our honor and glory—the reason we could walk with our heads held up. We may claim Jesus as our savior but functionally we got our self-worth from something else. In suffering these “something elses” get shaken.

In verse 3 David renews his commitment to God as his primary source of “glory.” Because of God’s great grace, we can lift our heads up confident in His love for us that will never change. When we suffer we must examine ourselves to see if our suffering has not been unnecessarily intensified because there are some things that we have set our hearts and hopes upon too much. We must relocate our glory and reorder our loves. Suffering almost always shows you that somethings you thought you couldn’t live without, you *can* live without if you lean on God. As we make God our source of glory, we find that suffering can sting and cause pain, but it can’t uproot us or overthrow us.

The Horrible, Beautiful Process

Suffering is like a furnace—painful, searing heat that creates beauty and purity. Here we see one way this works. Suffering puts its fingers on good things that have become too important to us. We must respond to suffering not by loving those things less, but by turning to God and loving him more and by putting our roots deeper in him. You never really understand your heart when things are going well. It is only when suffering comes that you realize who is the true God and what are the false gods of your life.

The Secret of Peace

So how do we love God more? You can’t do it by working directly on your emotions. Instead let your emotions flow naturally from what you are looking at. You have to look at Jesus and what he has done for you. Isaiah 57:20-21 says that those who do not love God have no peace. The natural consequence of centering your life on something other than God is a deep restlessness. By looking at the person and work of Christ you will come to love the immutable and find tranquility.