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SERMON IX.

THE PEACE OF GOD KEEPING THE HEART.

PHILIPPIANS IV. 7.—“The peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”

WE all need something to keep our hearts. We are living in a changing world, and its changes are often deeply affecting us; and that not merely in our affairs, and homes, and outward comforts, but within, in our inmost souls. The world itself too is exercising over us an almost unceasing influence by the things that are in it. It is crowded with objects congenial to our earth-born nature, so adapted to its desires and wants, that we might as well attempt to live beyond the reach of the summer's heat and the winter's cold, as to live among them and remain strangers to their power. And more than this—these hearts of ours are naturally restless hearts. There is a self-disturbing energy within them, a principle of disquietude, which we can neither root out nor subdue.

The result is, that even in a calm, in a state of outward ease and quiet, our minds are continually shifting; but what, when the storm beats on him, is feeble man? “A reed shaken with the wind;” a bark at the mercy of the gale, yielding to every gust and disquieted with every wave; “afflicted, tossed with tempest,” and but little comforted.

It is plain then that we need something to steady us. We require to be brought under the control of some principle that, without hardening the heart, will govern the heart. It may allow troubles to grieve and sins to weary us, but, to meet our wants, it must defy any of the changes of life to sway us, or any of the earth's temptations to unsettle us, or any of our own corruptions to lead us captive. And where shall we find this? Plainly not in the world; as well might we look to the hurricane itself for repose. And as plainly not in ourselves; for what have we ever looked for there, save misery and sin, and not looked in vain? The apostle shows us in this text the blessing that we need. He points out to us, first, its nature— it is “peace;” secondly, its Author—it is “the peace of God;” thirdly, one of its properties—it “passeth all understanding;” fourthly, one of its effects—it “shall keep your hearts and minds;” and then lastly, the source whence we receive it, and the instrumentality by which it works—“ through Christ Jesus.”

I. We begin with *the nature* of this defending principle. And how comforting is the word which the Holy Spirit has employed to describe this! It is not self-denial, not painful exertion or watchfulness, that is here said to keep the heart; it is peace. It is enjoyment, and repose in that enjoyment. It is a

calm spread over the soul, which not only quiets it amid the tumult of the storm, but keeps it quiet, and refreshes and gladdens it.

But what peace, it may be asked, can there be to a being like man? a creature at war with his Creator? In his natural condition, none. There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked." "The wicked are like the troubled sea when it cannot rest." This peace is the result of a change in man's state and character; it is the effect of a reconciliation between him and heaven. Its foundation is laid in that transaction which takes place between God and the soul, when the soul feels itself guilty, and polluted, and desolate, and casts itself, in all its wretchedness, on the free mercy of its Lord. The hour of its birth is the hour when a man sees his baseness, when he feels his misery and madness, and cries aloud with all the energy of a breaking heart, "God be merciful to me, a sinner!" In that hour, the Lord has mercy on him. He reveals to him the treasures of grace he has stored up for sinners in Christ Jesus; he enables him to embrace by faith his offers of pardon; he unites him to the Saviour appointed for him; and then where are all his transgressions and sins? They are buried in "the depths of the sea." An act of oblivion has cancelled them. There is peace between the man and his God; and the consequence is, now, for the first time, peace springs up in the man's own perturbed heart. It flows from this reconciliation with heaven. It consists mainly in a sense of reconciliation, in a discovery to the soul of its own special interest in the divine forgiveness. The sinner feels himself pardoned, and his fears are scattered; he sees himself adopted and loved, and he is comforted. He now looks on his God as his friend. As such, he trusts him and hopes in him. He regards the promises of his word as his own. In temptation, he expects a victory; in perils, a refuge; in weakness, strength; in affliction, comfort; in death, safety; in eternity, heaven; and in heaven, God, the presence of God, the enjoyment of God, the very likeness of God.

But this is not all. His faith and hope purify, while they cheer him. At first perhaps he is unconscious of their holy energy; he feels them only laying to rest his apprehensions; but they are secretly bringing about within him a great and lasting change; plucking up those roots of bitterness from which much of his former disquietude proceeded, and implanting those affections and tempers which are the elements of all real blessedness. "Being justified by faith," he has first "peace with God;" then he "joys in God by whom he has received the atonement;" and then he enters into that "great peace" which they have, "who love God's law." Taught to long, and pray, and labour, for conformity to its holy precepts, he finds that "the fruit of righteousness is peace, and the effect thereof quietness and assurance for ever."

And this is the Christian's peace. It has as its basis forgiving mercy; it is connected with a discovery of this mercy; it proceeds from a conviction of a real and peculiar interest in it; it is established, and enlarged, and sweetened, by that purification of the mind, which is the work of the Holy Ghost.

We are not however to suppose that every pardoned sinner lives in the full enjoyment of this blessing, or that any pardoned sinner enjoys it uniformly or constantly. Ignorance, self-righteousness, unbelief, in some cases, keep it long out of the heart; and when there, a multitude of human infirmities are continually operating one after another to weaken or disturb it. But, in spite of every obstacle, it is experienced, it is enjoyed. In some happy moments, in some happy hearts, it “flows as a river,” making affliction light, duty easy, mercy sweet; turning the house of mourning into a house of praise, and filling the parched wilderness of life with wells of consolation. There is communion with heaven connected with it. It comes down from heaven. It is the overflowing, the running over, of the blessedness of heaven.

II. Consider *its Author*.

It is “the peace of God.” And it is called his peace, because that work of saving mercy on which it rests, is his work, entirely and only his. It had its origin in his own free, spontaneous love. The plan of it came out of his unsearchable wisdom; and not a part of it has been carried into effect, which his own right hand has not accomplished. He provided the Peacemaker; nay, he himself came down from the skies with his own offers of reconciliation. It was he, who took on him the likeness of our sinful nature, obeyed in that likeness his own holy law without transgressing one of its precepts, and then endured its curse as though he had broken them all. It is he, who still sits in the same form on the throne of heaven, and still carries on there the same work. When sinners are brought to his feet, they come to him because he has drawn them. If they cry for mercy, he has first “poured out on them the Spirit of grace and of supplication.” Not a tear of contrition do they ever shed, which he does not cause to flow; and not one of them all has ever believed and embraced one of his promises, to whom he has not first given the gift of faith.

And not only this, he himself communicates that peace of mind, which flows from a sense of pardon and acceptance. It is not the mere result of self-examination or reasoning within our own minds; it is the gift of God; and it is called his peace, because it is his property and bestowed by his hand. He reveals to the soul in his own way and time, by his own Spirit, the love he bears towards it, the mercy he has prepared for it, perhaps the work he has wrought in it. He shows it in the blood of Christ, its freedom from condemnation; in the obedience of Christ, its “robe of righteousness;” in the purifying Spirit, the gifts and graces, of Christ, its “garment of salvation;” and in the promises and life of Christ, its safety. He unfolds, as it were, the book of life; he shows to the wondering sinner his own poor despised name shining there; and the consequence is—and how can it be otherwise?—he is “filled with all joy and peace in believing;” he “abounds in hope through the power of the Holy Ghost;” “the peace of God rules,” presides and reigns, “in his

heart.”

III. A peace thus divine in its origin must partake in some degree of the lofty nature of its Author, and in that degree it must be incomprehensible to any earthly mind. The apostle accordingly goes on to describe *this property of it*. “It passeth,” he says, “all understanding.”

We may attach two meanings to this language.

1. *This peace passes altogether the understanding of such as are strangers to it*. They who have never experienced it, know nothing of its character, nor can they. It is above them; in its very nature, it is out of their reach. Not that there is in it anything visionary or enthusiastic. It is real, it is solid, it is rational; so rational, so well founded, that the wonder is any pardoned sinner should be for one moment destitute of it; so rational, that no other peace will bear thought, and reflection, and examination, like it; nay, there is no other peace that will bear serious reflection at all. But then it is not so much the intellect, that is occupied about it, as the heart. It is a matter not of science, but experience. It must be felt to be understood.

And this is not a peculiarity confined to this or any other spiritual blessing. It is common perhaps to every pleasure we know. The man of intellect, for instance, may talk of the delight he experiences in the workings of his mind, in the acquisition of knowledge, the discovery of truth, the soarings of the imagination, the conscious expanding of the soul; but his words convey no distinct idea of these things to his ignorant neighbour; they excite only his wonder. We may tell the deaf man again of the harmonies of music, or we may discourse to the blind man of the beauty of this heaven-built world; we may reason clearly and eloquently about them; but what has our reasoning done? It has done nothing. The blind man knows no more of the rainbow’s splendour, or the landscape’s richness, or the heaven’s glory, than he knew before; the deaf man is as much a stranger to music and its powers. Just so is it with this peace of God. A knowledge of it is not to be gained by speculation. If we want to comprehend it, we must seek it, we must acquire it, we must enjoy it. In the strong language of the apostle, we must “taste of the heavenly gift;” we must “taste the good word of God and the powers of the world to come.” Our religion must be more than a form or a creed; it must be a work in the heart.

2. And even then this peace will still “pass all understanding,” for *they who enjoy it the most, cannot fully comprehend it*. It is a mystery to the man who possesses it. He is sensible of its existence; he finds his heart quieted and purified by it; he sees and delights in its effects, and he can give us a plain, intelligible account of them; but how did it come into his heart? How is it kept there? Why is it at times so unspeakably sweet, so amazingly strong? To what height of blessedness can it rise? These are questions to which he can give no distinct reply. All he can say is, “the peace of God

passeth all understanding.” And perhaps an inhabitant of heaven could say no more. It may pass even an angel’s comprehension. It is “the peace of God,” it is “the joy of the Lord;” his own peace, his own joy, and none but his own infinite mind can fully understand its nature and extent. We may all however comprehend its effects.

IV. *One of these effects* is brought before us in the text. “It shall keep your hearts and minds.”

By the “heart” we are to understand our affections; by the “mind,” our intellectual faculties, the understanding and judgment. The peace of God, we are told, keeps both these. Its influence extends to every part of the soul. And thus our church explains this scripture. The well known benediction in which it is introduced, speaks of “the knowledge and love of God;” it prays that his peace may keep our hearts and minds in both, evidently referring “the knowledge” of him to the mind, and “the love” of him to the heart.

The word too which we render “keep,” is peculiarly significant. It means to defend as in a garrison; so to fortify and preserve, that no invading enemies can come nigh to harm. It implies danger, but it promises us safety in the midst of danger. It assures us of security, not in a peaceful heaven, but in a world of foes and conflict.

But how, it may be asked, does the peace of God effect all this? In many ways.

In temptation, it secures the heart by satisfying the heart. It triumphs over the pleasures of sense by communicating higher pleasures. It purifies and elevates the taste. It destroys the love of the world by making us partakers of a blessedness which we could never wring out of earthly objects, and which we are now sure these objects can never give. Will a man labour to fill himself with the husks of the earth, who is living on the bread of heaven? Will he sigh for the damps and twilight of a dungeon, who is warmed and gladdened by the midday sun?

And it keeps the heart in affliction. It is a pledge of the special love of God to the soul; and as such, it begets confidence in him, so that the soul can stay itself on his promises, and encourage itself in his faithfulness, and look to his care and power for a happy issue out of all its troubles. It both begets hope and strengthens hope; and he who is going full of hope to heaven, is not easily shaken or depressed. With a crown of life before him, he feels that he can afford to bear the light affliction of the way that leads to it. Besides, it leaves us something to fall back on, when other props, and refuges, and consolations, are withdrawn. Let a worldly man lose his earthly comforts, and he has lost his all; but let a man of God lose what he may, his main support, his chief treasure, is yet safe. Put this peace into his heart, and then place him where you will, on the bed of sickness, in the house of mourning, by the grave of his best, and dearest, and only friend; strike him where you may and

how you may, he can bear the blow. He grieves, grieves perhaps more than other men, for his religion has enlarged his powers of suffering, it has extended his view, it has deepened his feelings and refined his heart; but he is not moved; no practical, no abiding impression is made on him. He may weep for an hour, but he will soon take up the language of the destitute Paul, and say, "I have all and abound; I am full. None of these things move me; nay, in all these things I am more than conqueror through him that loved me."

The peace of God keeps the mind also. It settles the judgment. Just as it raises the affections by imparting higher pleasures than the world can give, so it informs and elevates the understanding by showing it, in the light of spiritual blessedness, the meagreness and poverty of all temporal good. It does not tell us how to acquire wealth, or consequence, or honour, but it does more; it teaches us how to do without them. It strips these things bare; it takes the shining cloak off them; it enables us, if we have them, to hold them loosely; to esteem them unworthy of any eager pursuit, if we have them not. It shows us things that are more excellent, riches that are more durable, an honour that is more glorious, a happiness that is divine.

And it keeps the mind by keeping folly, all new and strange notions, all sceptical doubts, all error, out of the mind. The man who has this peace of God within him, "has the witness in himself," a witness and evidence of the truth, which neither enthusiasts nor scoffers can silence. Tell him that his Bible is not true, that his beloved Saviour has no existence, that his religion is a fable and his hope a dream—while you are talking and reasoning, he is feeling the power of all these things, he is experiencing their truth, and reality, and blessedness. His religion has ceased to be a subject of speculation; it is become a matter of sense. You might as well tell him in the broad light of day, that there is no sun in the heavens to shine on him; or that he himself, living, breathing, and acting, has no existence. A heart happy in its God is a safe heart. "The joy of the Lord will be its strength." It wants no new doctrines, no fresh revelations, no discoveries. It has found what it needs, and it enjoys what it has found, and is content.

V. One part more of the text still remains to be noticed. It points out to us *the source whence we obtain this peace of God, and the instrumentality by which it works.*

In the preceding verse of the chapter, the apostle had been inculcating on the Philippian converts a freedom from all anxious carefulness, and a constant referring of all their wants, with prayer and thanksgiving, to a gracious God. "Be careful," he says, "for nothing, but in everything, by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving, let your requests be made known unto God." And then he adds, "the peace of God shall keep your hearts." But lest he should be understood as ascribing the efficacy of this peace to the prayer which precedes or attends it, lest that which is little more than its companion,

should be mistaken for its source, he turns away their thoughts in a moment from the duties he has been urging, and fixes them on the Lord Christ. "The peace of God," he tells them, "shall keep their hearts and minds through Christ Jesus." And an experienced Christian can enter at once into his meaning. He knows that there can be no peace such as he is enjoying, in a heart corroded with worldly anxieties or destitute of a spirit of supplication; he feels that faith and prayer are as necessary to its existence, as though it owed to them alone its origin; but then he knows also, that these things have no more power in themselves to quiet a perturbed soul, than to calm a tempest. Our peace will ever on this side of the grave be connected with faith and prayer, it will seem to rise out of them, its strength will generally be proportioned to their strength; but if we want its source, if we would discover the secret spring whence its energy is derived, we must look higher; we must not stop short of the Saviour's throne.

The peace of God has God for its Author and its Giver; but it flows to us through the mediation of his dear Son. It is one of the blessed fruits of his obedience, and sufferings, and continued intercession. We should never have known what it is, never in this world of guilt have even heard of it, had he not made reconciliation for our iniquities, and opened a way first for grace, and then for peace, to flow down from a righteous God among wretched men. It dwells also in him as the great Head of his church, as the royal treasury in which all the precious gifts designed for sinners, are deposited. It is dispensed by him; and when received from his hand, it is through the agency of his own Spirit on our souls, that it becomes our protection; that it keeps, and holds, and blesses us.

On these accounts it is that peace is so often connected with Christ in the scriptures. He is called "our peace;" he is said to "have made peace." Before he entered our world, he was announced as "the Prince of peace;" when he was born in it? the song of "Peace on earth" filled the skies; and when he went away from it, peace was the legacy he left behind him.

And now at last, brethren, let us turn to ourselves. I may have spoken of this peace, and you may have heard of it, as though it were a matter in which we have little personal interest; but is it not grievous that such a blessing should have so little power to affect or attract us? With hearts ever aching for rest, eager in the pursuit of it, fastening themselves on every trifle that seems to offer even the chance of it, is it not sad that when the Bible speaks to us of rest, we refuse it even a thought? If we listen to it at all, too often we listen as to a tale or a dream; just as though it told us, not of a peace to be obtained and enjoyed by ourselves in this miserable world, but of a happiness situated out of our reach, in the sun or the stars.

Treat it however as we may, the concern we have in this thing is close and deep. There is more involved in it than a little temporary relief in our

trials. It is mixed up with eternal joys and sorrows. It is “the peace of God;” it is the effect of reconciliation with him through the Son of his love; it is connected with that faith in his promises, which saves the soul alive; it is the result of his sanctifying operations in man’s polluted heart. To be a stranger to it, and to continue always and entirely a stranger to it, is therefore nothing less than ruin. It is to be a stranger to that pardon, that holiness, that mercy and grace, on which the safety of every sinner that breathes, depends.

O ask yourselves then what you know of this peace of God; why you have so little of it; why perhaps you have none of it; why, it may be, you have never even sought or desired to have it. And then ask yourselves what those empty things are worth, which you prefer to it. And then look forward, and ask again what you will do without this peace when sickness enfeebles you, when death comes into your families, when that which you love the best, lies far away from you in lonely darkness. And ask yourselves one question more. Enquire what substitute you can find for this peace of God on your own dying bed. I know that there are substitutes for it; thousands are creating and trusting in them every hour; but no matter what our dependence is, if God is not the author and Christ the sole foundation of it, we shall find it fail us. It fails us now. It keeps neither our hearts nor minds. It leaves the world in full possession of both. It does not bar the love of the world out of the one, nor the wretched principles and spirit of the world out of the other. It offers us no defence against the assaults of temptation; it abandons us to the power of sin. What then can we expect from it in trouble, in death, in judgment? And what is such a peace worth? a peace that can do nothing for us, that will not bear examination, that, when brought to the test of God’s word, disappears? O value not so delusive a thing. Seek something better. Seek that peace which flows from a confidence in pardoning mercy and redeeming love. And why should you seek it? That you may bear the troubles of life more patiently? that you may weep over your losses less bitterly? that the anguish of a wounded spirit may be felt by you no more? For a higher end. Heaven is connected with this thing. It is a peace which is an earnest of heaven, which preserves the soul for heaven, and makes it meet for it, and ends in its joys. Blessed as it is now, compared with what it will be, it is as nothing, no more than a drop to an ocean, twilight to noon, time to eternity.