

A life full of peace: victory over anxiety (II)

In the first part of this article we considered three steps on the road to peace: its entry door, joy; its visible expression, gentleness, and its main enemy, fretting. Now the text in Philippians 4:4-9 leads us to *the final two steps* and reaches its climax with a peace that «*transcends all understanding*».

4. Prayer overcomes anxiety

«...present your requests to God» (Phil. 4:6).

Paul returns to a positive exhortation. He goes on to present the antidote to existential anxiety. Prayer emerges in the text like a spring of water that refreshes us along the way.

The apostle is very realistic again and his approach helps us to keep our feet on the ground. Certainly the *ideal attitude* is «not to be anxious about anything», but when this is not possible, when something troubles your heart «present your requests to God in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving». If our gentleness must *be evident to all*, likewise our concerns and burdens must *be presented to God* (the verb used in the original Greek comes from the same root meaning “to make known”).

Every cause for worry must be turned into a cause for prayer. We are here before a key spiritual exercise in our progress towards peace. It is something similar to a translation exercise. What are your reasons to be anxious or worried today? Identify them and make a translation: turn them into prayer requests. Thus *the language of worry* will be replaced by *the language of trust*.

In our devotional journal there should never be a section called “reasons to be worried”. Replace this heading with “burdens to present to God”. **Turn your worries into prayers.** You will discover how this is one of the most therapeutic exercises both spiritually and emotionally.

Again Paul's emphasis calls our attention: «*in every situation*». Notice how often in the text he uses absolute expressions like “all”, “always”, “every”, “anything” or “whatever”. It is very significant that the Word of God uses these absolute terms when referring to peace and anxiety. For example, «you will keep in **perfect** (complete) peace those whose minds are steadfast, because they trust in you» (Isa. 26:3); «Cast **all** your anxiety on Him...» (1 Pet. 5:7). In matters of trust and peace the believer cannot settle for half measures, we must aim at the maximum.

Prayer is to anxiety what water is to fire: it extinguishes it and generates peace. This happens because prayer places us in the very presence of God who is the source of all peace and rest: «My Presence will go with you, and I will give you rest» (Exod. 33:14).

5. Good thinking, cleansing of the mind

«Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable -if anything is excellent or praiseworthy- think about such things» (Phil. 4:8).

The last step on the journey to peace is to **think what is good and noble**. There is a logical correlation in the text. Prayer leads us naturally to a specific way of thinking. During prayer, the Holy Spirit performs in us a cleansing of thoughts, something like a mental *toilette*. This is an important step because thoughts can be either a stumbling rock or a stimulus on our way to peace.

If we compare our life to a painting, thoughts become the colour we give it. We can paint our life with dark colours or with vivid and bright tones. Let's look at some dark ones first:

- **Being hypercritical.** There are people who go through life with the eyes of an auditor, always looking for what is wrong and for mistakes to correct. We should remember Spurgeon's advice to his students to “go to church with one ear and one eye plugged”. Seeing and hearing only half of everything helps us to control our tendency to judge others. Some people do the exact opposite; instead of covering their ears and eyes, they hold up a magnifying glass. A hypercritical attitude colours our life black. The “auditor syndrome” is a stumbling block on the road to peace. It is not for us to judge.
- **Murmuring.** The word murmuring in the original Hebrew means “speaking leprosy”. When I am murmuring it is like I am spreading leprosy. So important is the way we use our tongue that Jesus himself warns us that you can kill with the word (Matt. 5:21-22). The word that insults or slanders, or simply the word that does not edify is a great obstacle to peace.
- **Chronic complaining.** It is very hard to live with someone who is always complaining. Like a drip that erodes the stone, it destroys the resistance of the strongest. The chronic complaint usually ends in bitterness and destroys your own life as well as that of those around you.
- **Self-pity.** It is usually the natural outcome of permanent complaining. Self-pity leads us to say: “How unfortunate I am! Look how well life is going for others and how badly for me! I take all the blows”.

All these shades of black quench the joy and hinder our journey to peace. This was the great mistake of the people of Israel: they coloured their pilgrimage through the desert with negative thoughts and attitudes. This greatly delayed their arrival into the Promised Land.

What are those things we have to think about? Paul mentions eight moral qualities that fill our lives with light. We emphasize the word *moral*. **Thinking good thoughts is more than the “positive thinking”** of modern psychology. Positive thinking only affects *the mind*. The good thinking that the Scripture speaks of is **upright and correct thinking**. It reaches *the heart*. There is a clear moral connotation in the qualities mentioned by Paul.

The benefit of *positive thinking* is above all emotional; the benefit of *good thinking* is emotional and also ethical. It affects my behaviour, my way of living as much as my emotions. In a hedonistic society it is important to remember that **our priority is not to feel good, but to do what is right**; living happily is inseparable from living righteously. The author of Hebrews accurately reminds us that peace and holiness go together (Heb. 12:14).

The peace of God, end of the road

«And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus» (Phil. 4:7).

Now the desired goal, peace, appears embedded like a pearl in the middle of the text. Let's see the highlights of this peace:

Its divine origin: «A peace that transcends all understanding»

Peace comes from God, it is supernatural. It is impossible to achieve it by merely human resources. Our mind cannot produce it because it goes beyond our finite thought. It is in this sense that it «transcends all understanding».

The peace of Christ cannot arise from a mental technique but only from a personal relationship with Him. In this relationship God has provided two resources through which peace flows to us:

- A position: to be in Christ.
- An action: the work of the Holy Spirit.

The grace of Christ gives us access to this position (Rom. 5:1) and the work of the Holy Spirit produces peace as part of its fruit. “Grace and peace” is much more than a formal greeting at the beginning of the epistles, it is the summary of the entire Gospel; it encompasses the heart of God longing to “reconcile the world to Himself”.

Thus, **the source of our peace is not in what happens to us today** -our circumstances- **but in what happened one day in history**, the victory of Christ on the cross, and what will happen in the future with his second coming. The resurrection and the Parousia (the return of Christ) frame our peace and our hope. It is very significant that the first words of the risen Jesus to the group of his disciples were «Peace be with you!» (John 20:19).

This forces us to look up to Heaven. The peace of Christ requires an adequate vision, like the shepherds who «when they saw the star, were overjoyed» (Matt. 2:10). It is the vision of faith that «set its mind on things above, not on earthly things» (Col. 3:2).

Its purpose: «It will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus».

As we said in the first part of this article, the peace of God does not exclude feeling good -the calm lake- but this is not its main purpose. **The goal is not tranquillity but security:** «He will guard you in Christ Jesus». Keeping our position in Christ is more important than feeling a fleeting emotion.

The verb here alludes to the soldiers guarding a position. As a zealous sentinel, peace watches over and guards our thoughts and our hearts so that they remain firmly anchored in Christ. Its goal is that our whole person -mind and heart- remains attached to faith in Christ as the bird remains on the branch in the midst of the dangers of the waterfall.

The peace of Jesus does not exclude the still lake but longs for the safe refuge. It is no accident that Jesus associated his teaching on peace with warnings about persecution and tribulation. He told his disciples: «Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you», but he immediately added «Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid» (John 14:27). «I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world» (John 16:33).

The peace of God is much more than an emotion for today, it is a position for all eternity. Nothing and no one can take away this position from us because «our life is now hidden with Christ in God» (Col. 3:3).

As the little bird feels safe in the midst of the impetuous waterfall, so the believer has peace sheltered in Christ. In Paul's memorable words, our peace comes from the fact that «we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life... neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord» (Rom. 8:37-39).

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