

A Prescription for Peace

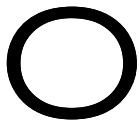
How to Learn the Peace of God

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One of my favorite authors writes: "Pain and suffering are inevitable, but misery is optional." If you want to meet a man who had every earthly reason to be miserable, open your New Testament and read the writings of the Apostle Paul. Talk about pain and suffering! In his second letter to the Corinthians, the great apostle opened a small autobiographical window into his daily quality of life as the greatest missionary ever in the entire history of the Church of Jesus Christ, when he wrote:

"I have worked harder and been put in jail more often than anyone I know. I have been whipped times without number and faced death again and again and again. Five different times the Jews gave me their terrible thirty-nine lashes. Three times I have been beaten with rods. On one occasion, I was stoned by a mob and left for dead (Acts 14). Three times I was shipwrecked; once I was in the open sea all night and the whole next day (Acts 27,28). I have lived with weariness and pain and sleepless nights. Often I have been hungry and thirsty and have gone without food; I have shivered with cold, without enough clothing to keep me warm" (2 Corinthians 11:23-27 Living Bible).

And yet, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote that even in the context of his difficult experiences he had peace... a peace of God that *"transcends human understanding,"* or a peace that doesn't make good sense—a supernatural peace. A careful study of Paul's letter to the Philippians will show us that this peace Paul was experiencing was a peace that was also laced with joy. In fact, even though his letter to the Philippians was written while he was in prison, that letter is called "The Epistle of Joy" because it mentions joy seventeen times!

If you are like me, you might read through Paul's account of these hardships and ask, "How in the world could he have been at peace while he was experiencing all that turmoil?" We should all be grateful that the Holy Spirit led Paul to leave us an inspired answer to our question. His answer is found in the fourth chapter of his letter to the Philippians. In that chapter, Paul writes what I call "A Prescription for Peace," which not only explains how he was able to be at peace despite his circumstances, but prescribes that quality of peace for you and me—no matter what our circumstances may be.

Before we look at his prescription, I want to make two observations about the peace Paul is prescribing: it is a peace that is learned and it is a peace that is conditional.

A PEACE THAT IS LEARNED

As you read Paul's letter to the Philippians, be sure to make the observation that he tells us he has learned this peace. He writes: *"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances may be. I have learned the secret of facing plenty or poverty. I now know..."* Apparently he did not always know how to have peace when he was enjoying plenty of everything or facing poverty. But he writes that since he has learned this peace, he can now say essentially, "I am ready for anything. No matter what comes, I am ready for it!"

It is exciting and comforting for me when I read that this peace can be learned. I am greatly encouraged when Paul writes to the Philippians: "Model your conduct on what you learned from me, what I have told you and shown you and (then) you will find that the God of peace will be with you" (Philippians 4:9). If the kind of peace Paul experienced can be learned, then I can learn to have this miraculous peace. No matter what my circumstances may be, for me, misery can be optional.

I learned this prescription for peace while I was experiencing the greatest personal crisis of my life. As a "type A" workaholic, obsessive-compulsive, driven pastor, I was enjoying a decade of fruitful miracles in my ministry, when my health forced me to give up that ministry. While a disease of the spinal cord was making me a quadriplegic and confining me to a wheelchair, I found Paul's peace prescription in the fourth chapter of Philippians. I memorized the chapter and prayed myself to sleep at night, while meditating on Paul's prescription for peace.

In the King James Version he is translated: *"Everywhere and in all things, I am instructed."* I cannot help but wonder, what were the things he learned, and who instructed him? Have you ever asked yourself this question: Who were Paul's mentors, and how did he learn all the profound truths he shares with us as he writes half the New Testament? As we will see later in this booklet, according to Paul, his Mentor was the risen Jesus Christ.

THREE KINDS OF PEACE

The Bible profiles three kinds of peace. First, there is world peace. Christmas cards like to remind us that the angels proclaimed, *"Peace on earth, good will toward men."* Those angels were not announcing world peace that first Christmas Eve. Revised translations will show

you that the words the angels actually proclaimed were: *"Peace on earth among those with whom God is pleased"* (Luke 2:14 RSV).

The Bible does not promise world peace. In fact, it promises the opposite of world peace. Jesus warned us that there will be wars and rumors of wars (cold wars), and that He, Himself, would be the cause of strife and division in this world. *"Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I came to set a man against his father, and a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; and a man's enemies will be members of his own household"* (Matthew 10:34-36).

If you read church history and the secular history of this world, you will discover that more people have died for Jesus Christ than for any other cause and more people have died for Christ since the end of World War II than in all the rest of church history. If you are well informed about current events as they impact believers, you will know that believers are suffering from severe persecution in many parts of the world today.

A second kind of peace found in the Bible is *"peace with God."* The Apostle Paul writes: *"Being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (Romans 5:1). The author of nearly half the New Testament also says that when Jesus died on the cross, God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself. He then pleads with us to accept our peace with God and be reconciled to God through faith in Jesus Christ.

Our peace with God has been in place ever since Jesus Christ died on the cross, but we do not have peace with God until we personally place our trust in the Gospel of the death of Jesus Christ for our sins and then become personally reconciled to God (2 Corinthians 5:17-6:1).

Paul prescribes a third kind of peace for us in this fourth chapter of his letter to the Philippians. This is a state of personal peace called

"the peace of God." Paul writes that God can keep us in this state of peace. However, this peace is a peace that can be learned, and it is a conditional peace.

A PEACE THAT IS CONDITIONAL

According to Paul, the first thing those who are willing to learn this peace need to know is that the peace of God will only be the experience of spiritual people who meet certain specific conditions. If you meet these conditions, then you can expect God's peace— a peace that is miraculous and not controlled by circumstances. We can even be coping with circumstances like Paul's (which very few of us are), and still experience this peace of God.

I find twelve conditions for the peace of God in the fourth chapter of the letter of Paul to the Philippians, which are either directly stated or implied. These conditions are clearly focused in several verses, especially as the Phillips translation expresses the heart of Paul. I have quoted these verses for you in that translation that you might read through and reflect on them. As you read, I challenge you to see if you can spot these twelve conditions for peace.

⁴"Delight yourselves in the Lord; yes, find your joy in him at all times. ⁵Have a reputation for gentleness, and never forget the nearness of your Lord. ⁶Don't worry over anything whatever; tell God every detail of your needs in earnest and thankful prayer, and the peace of God, which transcends human understanding, will keep constant guard over your hearts and minds as they rest in Christ Jesus. ⁷Here is a last piece of advice. If you believe in goodness and if you value the approval of God, fix your minds on whatever is true and honorable and just and pure and lovely and praiseworthy. ⁸Model your conduct on what you have learned from me, on what I have told you and shown you, and you will find that

the God of peace will be with you. ¹⁰It has been a great joy to me that after all this time you have shown such interest in my welfare. I don't mean that you had forgotten me, but up till now you had no opportunity of expressing your concern. ¹¹Nor do I mean that I have been in actual need, for I have learned to be content, whatever the circumstances may be. ¹²I know now how to live when things are difficult and I know how to live when things are prosperous. In general and in particular I have learned the secret of facing either plenty or poverty. ¹³ am ready for anything through the strength of the One Who lives within me" (Philippians 4: 4- 13, J. B. Phillips translation).

Paul's First Condition

Don't Worry Over Anything Whatever (Verse 6)

If you want to have this peace Paul is prescribing, this is the first condition you must meet: *"Don't worry over anything whatever."*

There are people who have not really studied the writings of Paul carefully who say that Paul contradicts the teaching of Jesus. That reveals a shallow understanding of the letters of Paul. Paul is consistently careful to build on and affirm the teaching of Jesus. Jesus taught the same thing in the sixth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew: *"Therefore I say to you, do not worry ... Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?"* So then, Jesus and Paul both taught: "Don't worry!"

Neither of them told us not to worry because they had nothing to worry about. If you are familiar with their lives, you know they both had plenty to worry about. Jesus taught us not to worry about the things we cannot control. They told us not to worry because worry is not only

nonproductive it is counterproductive. Worry simply doesn't accomplish anything, and worry uses the emotional and spiritual energy we need to cope with our problems.

The bottom line is, that by being anxious, we simply don't solve our problems. Therefore, Paul and Jesus agree that we should not worry about anything.

Paul's Second Condition

Pray About Everything! (Verse 6)

In his peace prescription, Paul also writes: *"Tell God every detail of your needs in earnest and thankful prayer."* It is easy to say, "Don't worry," but what are we going to do about our problems if we don't worry about them? Paul does not leave us in a vacuum here. His exhortation that we are not to worry is merely the first of his twelve conditions for the peace of God. He goes on to prescribe: *"Pray about everything!"*

The Word of God exhorts us to pray when we are in crisis situations. The New American Standard Bible has a beautiful alternate reading for the first verse of Psalm forty-six. The verse reads: *"God is our refuge and strength. A very present help in trouble."* But, if you check the alternate readings suggested in the margin, the first verse reads that our God is *"abundantly available for help in tight places."* As a result of our prayers, God can deliver us from tight places.

Paul was delivered from many, many tight places. For example, he asked the Philippians to pray that he might be delivered from prison. They prayed, and he was delivered from the imprisonment he was experiencing when he wrote this inspired letter to them. We should

therefore always pray in a crisis. Someone has said, "When it is hardest to pray, pray the hardest!"

However, from personal experience Paul knew that God does not always take our problems away. He had a physical condition, which he described as "a thorn in the flesh." Three times he asked God to take it away. This man saw many people healed as he ministered the healing power of the Holy Spirit to them. Yet, when he asked God to solve his own health problem, three times God said, "No. No. No." Essentially, God said to him, "Tell you what I'm going to do, Paul. I'm going to give you the grace to cope with your health problem" (2 Corinthians 12).

When God did give Paul the grace to cope with his problem, he not only accepted his physical problem—he gloried in it! He discovered that the power of Christ was upon him in such a mighty way that he essentially said, "I would rather have the power of Christ upon me than to be delivered from the problem!" So Paul not only accepted the will of God regarding his thorn, he gloried in the whole experience of learning that the will of God will never lead us where the grace of God cannot keep us. He explains that his weakness became a showcase in which the strength of God was exhibited.

Paul learned from his own personal experience that, while worry is not productive, and even counterproductive, prayer is always very productive. Prayer may deliver us from our problems, or it may give us the grace to cope with our problems. But, in any case, pray. Always pray!

I like the Phillips translation of these words of Paul: *"Tell God every detail of your needs in earnest and thankful prayer."*

Paul's Third Condition

Think About All the Good Things
(*Philippians 4:8; Isaiah 26:3*)

Paul and Jesus agree that we should think our way to peace. Jesus said (my paraphrase), "You can have a body filled with darkness or a body filled with light. It depends on how you see things" (Matthew 6:22,23). When Jesus said this, He was talking about how we think and how we look at things—our mindset, or our outlook. According to Jesus, one of the most important questions we ever ask and answer is the question, "How do I see things?"

Paul gives us precisely the same counsel here in his prescription for peace. In essence, Paul and Jesus are telling us that our thoughts are like sheep and we are the shepherds of those sheep thoughts. We can decide how we are going to think and how we are not going to think.

I have been told that: "Five percent of the people think, ten percent think they think, eighty-five percent would rather die than think, and the ten percent who think they're thinking are merely re-arranging their prejudices and not really thinking at all!" In his prescription for peace, Paul is challenging us to join the five percent and decide to think. He also prescribes precisely how we should think.

If you study these words that tell us how we should think, you will see that he instructs us to think about the things that are true, honorable, right, pure, lovely, and those things that are good news. How much time do we spend thinking about things that are untrue, dishonorable, unjust, impure, ugly and all the bad news we have heard lately?

Some scholars believe this part of Paul's peace prescription is a paraphrase of a sermon preached by Isaiah: *"You will keep him in perfect peace whose mind is fixed on You because he trusts in You"* (Isaiah 26:3). According to Isaiah, if we will keep our minds fixed on the Lord and if we will trust in the Lord, God will keep us in a state of perfect peace. Make the observation that this peace is perfect, and since God can keep us in this state of peace, it is perpetual. Since Isaiah also calls this "the peace of God," scholars believe Paul was quoting and applying this teaching of Isaiah when he wrote this part of his peace prescription.

Paul and Isaiah agree that if the trust is always, the peace is perfect and perpetual. If the trust is spasmodic, then the peace is imperfect and spasmodic. If the trust is up and down, the peace is up and down. If there is no trust, there is no peace, because the peace of God is essentially conditional. We must keep our minds continuously fixed on God and we must continuously trust in God to have and maintain this state of peace according to Isaiah and Paul.

What does it mean to keep our minds fixed on God? Well, for starters, it could mean that we should think about Who God really is, or what we call His attributes. These concepts Paul prescribes for our spiritual discipline and thought life are all attributes of God.

There is a story about Peter recorded in the Gospels that is a good example of what it means to keep our minds fixed on the Lord. Jesus challenged Peter to walk on water in the middle of the night during a terrible storm. As long as Peter kept his eyes on the Lord, he walked on water! When he took his eyes off the Lord and saw the wind, he began to sink (Matthew 14:28-30).

We read that Peter "saw the wind." Since we do not really see wind, this may apply to the strange reality, that when we take our eyes off the Lord in a crisis, we sometimes see things that are not really there. We "see the wind."

When Paul wrote to these Philippians he was in prison. He actually spent much of his dynamic life in prison. The imprisonment from which he wrote this letter is described in the last chapter of the book of Acts. Although this is considered his mild imprisonment, and he was treated relatively well, he was chained between two soldiers twenty-four hours a day. Those guards were changed every four hours. That means he never had one minute of privacy. Would that arrangement have challenged your state of peace?

One benefit of that arrangement was that he witnessed to those soldiers and led many of them to Christ, impacting the whole palace guard of Caesar. Paul probably thought of this as "a chain reaction." Although he was the prisoner, he more than likely considered these guards to be his captives. If you were chained to the Apostle Paul for four hours every day, do you think you would know the Gospel?

Since these Roman soldiers were probably profane men, Paul had to practice this condition for peace continually: *"Fix your minds on whatever is true and honorable and just and pure and lovely and praiseworthy."* He literally writes that if we will think this way, then *"the peace of God, which transcends human understanding, will keep constant guard over your hearts and minds as they rest in Christ Jesus."* (Just like these soldiers who were guarding Paul).

Paul's last imprisonment was in a horrible dungeon in the Mamertine prison in Rome, where he spent his last days on earth before he was decapitated. In that dungeon, this condition for peace probably became his personal prescription for sanity. I have visited that prison in Rome, which has been restored to be like the dungeon where Paul spent his last days. That is when I realized this prescription for shepherding our thoughts would have helped Paul preserve his sanity.

In the context of our own experiences of terrifying stress, like combat, being violated by crime, a terrible accident, surgery, prison,

the news that we have a malignancy, or the final stages of that malignancy, this prescription can preserve our sanity—and give us peace.

Paul's Fourth Condition

Do All the Right Things (Verse 9)

Paul is essentially prescribing: "Do all the right things." The Old King James Version makes that clear: *"Those things which you have learned and received (believed) and heard and seen in me, do, and (then) the God of peace will be with you"* (4:9). Is there anything we can do to attain and maintain the peace of God—especially when we are facing one of life's storms? Oh, you bet your life there is!

Paul agrees with Jesus again when he prescribes right action as part of his prescription for peace. When Jesus gave His prescription for anxiety, He said, essentially, "Don't worry. Simply seek first the kingdom of God and what He shows you to be right, and then all these things you are worrying about will be provided by your heavenly Father" (my paraphrase—Matthew 6:33). In other words, "Don't sweat the small stuff, sweat the big stuff." The big stuff is your commitment to God as your King, and what He wants you to do. The small stuff is what you need to do the will of your God.

According to Jesus and Paul, if we will put God first, let Him show us the right thing to do, and then get on with doing what God directs us to do, He will provide all those things we are worrying about. Jesus agreed with Paul that the best way to address our anxiety is to do the right things. We might call this constructive and productive worry.

OFFER THE SACRIFICES OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

Sometimes the "peace thief" robbing us of our peace is the hard reality that we are not doing what is right. In the fourth Psalm it is obvious that the psalmist is not able to sleep because he is struggling with some hard choices. He can do the right thing, but if he does, he believes he is not going to make it through the crisis he is facing. He can do the expedient thing—that is what almost everybody does. But the psalmist is a man of spiritual integrity who has decided to do the expedient thing, and so he cannot sleep. He is not comfortable with the give-in, compromise mindset of expediency and he is suffering from guilt.

My years as a pastor have convinced me that God does more work in the lives of people in the hospital waiting rooms in our communities than He does in the sanctuaries in our communities. God also does more work in the lives of people in the middle of the night when they can't sleep than He does throughout the busy hours of their working days.

You have probably heard about the man who dreamed he swallowed a ten-pound marshmallow and when he woke up he couldn't find his foam-rubber pillow! Another man said he slept like a log—in fact, when he woke up, he was in the fireplace!

It seems as if the author of the fourth Psalm is having that kind of night. In the middle of the night, after hours of intense moral conflict, the Lord shows him how to resolve his divided mind with this command: *"Offer the sacrifices of righteousness and put your trust in the Lord"* (Psalm 4:5). In other words, in the middle of the night, the Lord makes him know that he is to make whatever sacrifices he has to make to do what is right, and then trust his God to see him through what he perceives to be his hopeless banquet of consequences.

His motivation for doing right is that he is surrounded by people who are looking for something good. People are always looking for

someone who is willing to do what is right— even if it costs them everything!

When he begins his Psalm, as a consequence of his moral and spiritual schizophrenia, he is so uptight he cannot sleep. But, after he resolves that awful dichotomy over what is expedient and what is right, he exclaims that he will now lay down in peace and sleep! We can assume that his emotional and spiritual climate was transformed because the peace of God and the God of peace were now with him.

I believe this summary of Psalm Four explains another reason why Paul's prescription for peace involves doing the right things.

This counsel of Paul and of our Lord is the best peace therapy I have discovered as a bedfast quadriplegic. Most of the quadriplegics, stroke victims, and retired people I know and sometimes counsel, do not have meaningful work. Their disability or retirement means that they cannot, or do not work, and as a result they feel useless and worthless.

God has greatly blessed me with a radio studio in my home in which I have made hundreds of radio programs that are being translated into twenty-four languages all over the world. I also have voice-activated computer software, which makes it possible for me to author written materials that supplement those radio broadcasts. I find that doing this meaningful work is very effective peace therapy for me. When I am involved in productive ministry, I have no time for a pity party, or to think about the disease that keeps coming on with its relentless symptoms. I am so fulfilled and excited about producing radio programs and written materials like this booklet, I cannot wait for the alarm clock to sound in the morning.

Although I realize that my circumstances are the exception and not the rule, how I wish that every person who lives with the limitations that challenge me every day, or with depression rooted in boredom, could find some kind of meaningful work. That is at least one reason

why Paul and Jesus, as part of their peace prescriptions, both say to us, *"Do all the right things!"*

Paul's Fifth Condition

If You Value the Approval of God! (Verse 8)

When Paul presents six examples of the good things we ought to think about, the motivation he gives us for thinking that way is: *"If you value the approval of God."*

When he prescribes that we should address our peace vacuum by doing all the right things we have been taught, have seen modeled, and believed to be right, he is really challenging us again to value the approval of God. God approves of right thinking and God approves when we do what is right. When we wrestle with the dichotomy of doing what is right and what is expedient, we should be motivated to offer the sacrifices of righteousness unto God, and trust God because we value the approval of God.

Have you observed that Jesus asked a lot of questions? The Gospel of Matthew records Jesus asking eighty-three questions. The Gospel of John records Jesus asking the religious leaders a profound question. He asked them, "How can you believe since you look to one another for approval and are not concerned with the approval that comes from God?" (John 5:44 Jerusalem Bible)

God told Abraham: *"Walk before Me"* (Genesis 17:1). How many of us do that? Do we really walk before God, all day long, every day? Have we ever actually moved through a twenty-four hour day holding in focus how God feels about who we are, what we are and all the things we are doing—or are not doing?

There are times in this life when we simply cannot have the approval of God and the approval of man at the same time. There are times when we are not able to explain to people what is going on in our lives. When those times come, if our peace depends on the approval of people, we will discover that the foundation of our peace is very fragile.

More than one hundred and fifty times, these three words are found in the New Testament: "*In His sight.*" That concept should be very important to us in this life. One day when we all face the certainty of judgment, the way we have lived our lives in His sight will be the only thing that matters.

Paul's Sixth Condition

*Learn to Rest Your Heart and Mind in Christ
(Verses 7 and 13)*

As Paul promises the peace of God for those who think about all the good things, he slips in with that promise another condition for attaining and maintaining the peace of God: "*Rest your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.*" He writes: "*The peace of God, which transcends human understanding, will keep constant guard over your hearts and minds as they rest in Christ Jesus.*"

What does it mean to rest in Christ Jesus? What does it mean to be in Christ? To be in Christ is the favorite way the authors of the New Testament describe those who are the authentic followers of Jesus Christ. Nearly two hundred times they make reference to those who are "in Christ." Paul does it ninety-seven times in his writings.

The expression means that we are in union with Christ, as a branch is in union with a vine. To be so aligned with Him means that

we are in fellowship with Him. To be "in Christ," means that we can draw from Him, the Vine, all the life-giving spiritual power we need for everything we do for Him, with Him and through Him, as we rest in Him. It also means to rest in His power to do the things He calls us to do, all day long, every day. Sadly, there are many people today who are in church, or even in the ministry, but they are not "in Christ."

I have tried to convey what it means to be "*in Christ*" by wrapping the concept in a package I call, "Four Spiritual Secrets." I could not function as a human being, as a pastor, and, as a bedfast quadriplegic, I could not possibly be broadcasting the Bible all over the world in twenty-four languages, without these insights.

FOUR SPIRITUAL SECRETS

"I'm not, but He is,
And I'm in Him, and He is in me.
I can't, but He can,
And I'm in Him, and He is in me.
I don't want to, but He wants to,
And I'm in Him, and He is in me.
I didn't, but He did,
Because I was in Him, and He was in me."

When good things happen because He did something in and through us, we must always remember this last spiritual secret: It was not what we did, but what He did.

That is my way of expressing what it means to "*rest in Christ Jesus*." So much anxiety, and perhaps the greatest "peace thief" devout disciples of Jesus experience, comes from thinking we must do the work of Christ in our own strength. If we are in the will of God, then all day long we are going to be faced with things we cannot do,

because they are His works and we cannot do His work, but we can be vehicles through which He does His work. When we lose sight of the fact that it is His work, if we think it all depends on us, we lose our peace, big time!

In the sixties, I had an old elder in a church in Florida who was a very godly man. Because he loved me, he would sometimes wait after a Sunday worship service until everyone had left. Then with a solemn expression on his face he would say, "You were laboring today, Richard. You were laboring!" He did not have to tell me that because I was exhausted. There is nothing more exhausting than trying to do the work of God in your own strength.

But then, once in a while on a Sunday morning, he would wait until everybody had left and he would come to me, smile, hug me and say, "He was laboring today, Richard! He was laboring!" He did not have to tell me that, either, because when He was laboring, it was as if I began my message tired, or even exhausted, and then it was as if the wind of the Spirit was in my sails. I was energized by the message. My message was energized and those who heard the message were energized!

I discovered that when I was resting my mind and heart in Christ, rather than finishing exhausted, I was greatly strengthened. My elder pointed me to a verse of Scripture that makes the observation: *"For whoever enters God's rest also ceases from his labors as God did from His"* (Hebrews 4:10 RSV).

We must acknowledge that we can't but He can, as we rest our hearts and minds in Christ and in what only He can do. This is true for every believer every day. However, this is intensely true for those who minister gifts of the Spirit, like the pastor/teachers, evangelists and missionaries who bring people to faith and edify those new believers.

Overwhelming physical and emotional problems that are crushing the life out of us— terminal or chronic illness, difficult relationships and

all the challenges of everyday living—will only be manageable when we realize that facing them is not a matter of who and what we are, or what we can or cannot do. They are simply an opportunity to prove and demonstrate Who and what He is and what He can do.

Enormous stress relief will be experienced as we serve the Lord if we will learn to cease from our labors and rest our hearts and minds in Christ and in what only He can do.

Paul's Seventh Condition

Be Thankful! (Verse 6)

Be sure to make the observation that Paul prescribed *"earnest and thankful prayer."* Do you know what thankful prayer is? My definition of thankful prayer is "grateful worship." I have found very effective peace therapy in a litany of thanksgiving that has evolved in my devotional life over the last twenty years while I have been praying through Paul's peace prescription.

When we are thankful, we automatically move our minds from the negative to the positive issues of our lives. When suffering from a condition or illness that is causing us to lose our faculties one by one, we have two choices: we can continuously think about what we have lost, or are losing, and be depressed about it, or we can think about what we still have and be thankful!

I have experienced the gradual loss of my physical faculties since 1980 and have personally found the second option to be an effective part of Paul's prescription for peace. When I think about it, I have so many blessings for which to be thankful. I discover regularly that when I begin to focus on them, I have moved my mind from the negative to the positive—and the peace returns! I highly recommend this

thanksgiving therapy, which is a vital part of Paul's prescription for peace.

Paul's Eighth Condition

Be Patient! (Verses 11 and 12)

As part of his prescription for peace, Paul prescribes patience. Throughout the history of the church, patience has always been considered a great virtue by spiritual heavyweights like Augustine, Thomas a Kempis and Francis of Assisi. Why is patience such an important virtue? For starters, patience is one of the nine fruit of the Spirit we find profiled in Paul's letter to the Galatians (Galatians 5:22,23).

In our relationship with God, we might call patience "faith-waiting." In the Bible we are exhorted to *"wait on the Lord"* (Psalm 27:14; 37:7). It takes more faith to wait than most of the real life situations that challenge our walk with God. There are few spiritual disciplines that will focus our faith like those times when all we can do is wait on the Lord. When we are praying for something and receiving no answer, God may be teaching us that there are times when faith waits.

In our relationships with people, patience could be called, "love-waiting." I had no idea how selfish I am until I got married. I had no idea how impatient I am until I became a father and found myself waiting for teenage children to grow up. I have found that the Lord wants to grow two dimensions of patience in my life: He is growing what I call "vertical patience" by teaching me to have a faith that waits on Him, and He is growing "horizontal patience" in my experience of life by teaching me that in relationships, love waits.

You may be asking, "How does patience relate to a prescription for peace?" To answer that question it may help if we think of the opposite of patience, or impatience. I once heard a father give this advice to his son who was leaving home for the first time: "Remember, son, if it doesn't go your way, force it!"

We all eventually find ourselves facing circumstances beyond our control. When that happens to us, how much peace will we gain because our philosophy of life is "force it?" Imagine Paul chained in that awful prison in Rome. Would he find and maintain the peace of God if his formula for peace was to rattle his chains and "force it?" Biblical patience is the opposite of what that father told his son. That is especially true of the patience, which is the supernatural fruit of the Holy Spirit, and gives us the grace to accept the things we cannot control.

Patience is the virtue God plants and grows in our lives while He is teaching us to wait on Him and trust Him to do what only He can do about those things we absolutely cannot control.

Paul's Ninth Condition

Have a Reputation for Gentleness (Verse 5)

When Paul writes of having a reputation for gentleness, he does not mean weakness, or milquetoast gentleness. The Greek word for gentleness here is actually the word meekness. Meekness is not weakness. Biblical meekness is closer in meaning to tameness. When a powerful stallion is broken, finally takes the bit, and yields to the control of the bridle and the rider, it is not weak. That powerful animal could be described as "strength under

control." That is what the biblical word "meek" means and that is the essence of this concept of gentleness.

When Saul of Tarsus met the risen Christ on the road to Damascus, Jesus essentially asked him, *"Why are you persecuting Me? It is so hard on you!"* The Old King James Version reads: *"It is hard for you to kick against the pricks,"* which means "It is hard for you to pull against the bit." ("It is tearing up your mouth," is the implied meaning). When Paul asked his great question, *"Lord, what will You have me to do?"* he took the bit in his mouth, so to speak (Acts 9). That is when Paul became meek, and that is what he means when he exhorts us to be gentle.

When I was still active and mounted a horse I would always ask, "Is this animal gentle?" Now, I did not mean, "Is this a weak, milquetoast animal?" Instead I meant, "Does this horse submit to the control of the bit, bridle and rider?"

Gentleness is also listed as one of the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22,23). Another word for biblical gentleness is acceptance. Paul teaches us by precept and example that we must accept the discipline of the will of God until we are so meek we experience the gentleness of a horse that is broken and tame. The essence of Paul's peace prescription here is, "Don't pull against, or fight the will of God for your life."

UNCONDITIONAL SURRENDER

This means that two more words which summarize the essence of this condition for peace could be: "Unconditional Surrender!" There are times when the peace of God will flood our hearts because we rest in the assurance that if He had wanted to, God could have prevented our circumstances. We will experience the peace of God because we surrender to and accept issues and circumstances that must at the very least be the permissive will of God. The well-known

serenity prayer then becomes an expression of this condition for the peace of God: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

In perhaps the most misunderstood and misapplied verse written by the Apostle Paul, he writes: *"Moreover we know that to those who love God, who are called according to his plan, everything that happens fits into a pattern for good"* (Romans 8:28 J. B. Phillips). This verse only applies to those who love God and demonstrate that love by being surrendered and called according to His plan for their lives.

Paul is not suggesting that everything that happens to those who love God is good. There may be nothing good at all about many of the things that happen to believers. His claim is simply that God will fit everything that happens to devout believers into a pattern for good, if we love God and are called according to His good plan for our lives. If we show our love for God by being called according to His plan, the only good that interests us is His good. That's why the closing words of this peace prescription say:

"I have learned to be content, whatever the circumstances may be.¹² I know now how to live when things are difficult and I know how to live when things are prosperous. In general and in particular I have learned the secret of facing either plenty or poverty.¹³ I am ready for anything through the strength of the One Who lives within me."

Paul is content regardless of his circumstances. He knows how to live when things are difficult or prosperous, whether he is facing plenty or poverty, because he has learned a secret. What was that secret? We can only speculate, but I believe that secret was that God fits into a pattern for good everything that happens to those who love Him and are called according to His plan. Paul had learned that it is safe to surrender unconditionally to such a loving God. Therefore, this word

"gentleness" or meekness is actually prescribing unconditional surrender to and acceptance of the will of God, one circumstance at a time.

Paul's Tenth Condition

*Never Forget the Nearness of the Presence of the Lord
(Verse 5)*

When he was experiencing his last horrible Roman imprisonment, visiting him was very dangerous. The Romans might chain you next to Paul if you came to see him. And nobody did. He writes: *"They all forsook me. May God not lay it to their charge."* But he also writes: *"Nevertheless the Lord stood by me and ministered to me"* (2 Timothy 4:16,17). That is what he means when he prescribes: *"Never forget the nearness of the presence of the Lord."*

A PEACE THAT IS RELATIONAL

Another condition for finding and sustaining this peace of God is what I call "the relational dimension of the peace of God." A personal relationship with the Lord is an absolute if we are serious about understanding and applying Paul's prescription for the peace of God. The Presbyterian catechism, which millions of believers learned as children, states that the chief end of man is not only to glorify God, but also to enjoy Him forever. You cannot enjoy the Lord if you do not have a relationship with Him.

Paul has a relationship with the risen Christ. This is always his explanation for the dynamic of his life. He writes to the Galatians that, immediately after his conversion on the road to Damascus, he spent

three years with the risen Christ in the desert of Arabia. The Apostles had their three years with Jesus, and in the first two chapters of his letter to the Galatians, Paul essentially writes: "I had my three years with Him too."

In this great peace prescription of Paul, he is telling us that the risen Christ continued to teach him many wonderful truths, including this prescription for peace. When we read of how the other apostles endorsed the ministry of the Apostle Paul, we should realize that they were acknowledging the great miracle that he indeed had been instructed by the risen Jesus Christ.

In another inspired letter Paul writes: *"Now the Lord of peace Himself give you peace all the time and in every way"* (2 Thessalonians 3:16). In the upper room discourse, Jesus told the apostles: *"Peace I leave with you; My peace I give unto you"* (John 14:27). Paul knows that the Christ Who lives in those to whom he is writing will give them and keep them in this state of perpetual peace. There is therefore a very real sense in which Christ Himself gives this peace of God to those who have a relationship with Him.

Paul has a relationship with the risen Christ. As a by-product of that relationship he can write, *"I am ready for anything through the strength of the One Who lives within me"* (Philippians 4:13). He assumes that the people to whom he is writing also have a relationship with Christ. This peace is only possible for those who will open the door of their lives to Him (Revelation 3:19,20). If you do not have a relationship with Christ, follow His directions. Open the door of your life and invite Christ into the center of every meaningful area of your life.

Jesus was speaking about a relationship with God when He taught: *"Ask and keep on asking and it shall be given you; seek and keep on seeking and you shall find; knock and keep on knocking and the door shall be opened to you. For every one who asks and keeps*

on asking receives; and he who seeks and keeps on seeking finds; and to him who knocks and keeps on knocking, the door shall be opened" (Luke 11:9,10 Amplified Bible).

Paul's Eleventh Condition

"Delight Yourselves in the Lord; Yes, Find Your Joy in Him at all Times" (Verse 4)

I began this booklet with the quote that even though pain and suffering are inevitable, misery is optional. Those words were written by a man who lives with excruciating pain every day. How is it that misery can be optional for someone in pain? How is it that Paul can mention joy seventeen times in a short letter he writes from prison? The explanation is that for those who are expressing the fruit of the Holy Spirit, and a relationship with the risen, living Christ, there is a joy that is not controlled by their circumstances.

The peace Paul experienced and prescribes for you and me can be called "the peace that doesn't make good sense." Paul writes that it is a peace that *"transcends human understanding."* The joy of which Paul writes can be called "the happiness that doesn't make good sense."

What is the foundation of that joy and peace? According to Paul, that foundation is a relationship with the Lord. We are to delight ourselves in the Lord and find our joy in Him at all times. What is the foundation of your serenity and joy? If the foundation of your serenity is your spouse, your children, or some special human being with whom you have a relationship, the foundation of your serenity is very fragile because there is no relationship on earth you cannot lose.

If the foundation of your peace and joy is your health, or your athleticism, I can bear witness to the sad reality that you have an extremely fragile foundation for your peace and happiness. Many thousands of people, who had a physical orientation around which their lives revolved before an illness or an injury destroyed that foundation, will join me in warning you that health, athleticism and youth are fragile foundations for joy and happiness.

Jesus commended Mary when her sister Martha was upset because she chose to sit at His feet and hear His Word rather than help with the dinner preparations. With as much love for Martha as He had for Mary, Jesus said to Martha, *"Mary has chosen the good part that will never be taken away from her"* (Luke 10:38- 42).

When he writes these words, Paul is agreeing with what Jesus told Martha about Mary, and he is directing us here to a foundation for peace and joy that is not fragile when he writes: *"Delight yourselves in the Lord; yes, find your joy in him at all times!"*

Paul's Twelfth Condition

If You Believe in Goodness (Verse 8)

These words focus on another "peace thief," especially in the lives of devout believers who have invested four or five decades of service for the Lord without receiving any recognition or expressions of gratitude for their faithful service.

As a young social worker, I visited with an elderly couple who had spent fifty years as missionaries in China, were in poor health and were living in welfare housing for indigent people. As these dear white-haired saints (who were what I consider "spiritual nobility"), reflected on what they had to show for their lifetime of sacrificial

service, they were discouraged. They were beginning to doubt the value of all the good they had done for Jesus in China.

I will never forget the way their example inspired me. I shared this part of Paul's prescription for peace with them. Since the truth I am persuaded Paul wants to convey here is expressed in his other writings, I am convinced that Paul is teaching here that our good works are not always rewarded in this life, but all the good works of the believer will be rewarded in the eternal state (1 Corinthians 3:11-15).

I also shared with them a story I had heard of another elderly missionary who returned from half a century of service in Africa. He had buried his wife in Africa and was returning home alone. Not one solitary soul was there to welcome him home. On that same boat, Teddy Roosevelt was returning from a safari in Africa. Hundreds were there, including a brass band to welcome Teddy Roosevelt home from his hunt. But there was absolutely no one there to welcome the missionary home from fifty years of faithful service for the Lord.

Very discouraged, from a small rented room, that night he called an old friend who had returned the year before to a similar lack of welcome. After some conversation and a commitment to meet the next day, the man who had been called said to his fellow missionary, "We're not home yet, George!"

Paul certainly could have identified with this dear couple and with these two servants of God, who realized their welcome home and "Well Done" would be waiting for them in heaven. From the time of his conversion, when Paul met Jesus on the road to Damascus, he had committed himself to doing what was good. He had completely dedicated himself to the work of Jesus. And what did it get him? Prison after prison, each one worse than the last. Most of them were foul smelling dungeons. And yet, he writes that he experienced peace and joy in those prisons.

Paul is not presenting goodness here in the context of salvation by good works. The emphasis that we are not saved by good works was one of the first theological priorities of this great apostle. In his prescription for peace, when Paul writes, "*If you believe in goodness...*," I am convinced that he is focusing on the lifetime of goodness faithful servants of the Lord have invested for their Lord.

Discouraged servants like those I have described are tempted by the evil one to doubt the worth of the good they have done. This part of Paul's peace prescription addresses that "peace thief." He includes this condition in his prescription for peace because he would spare the spiritual nobility of the Church of Jesus Christ the loss of peace they may suffer if they forget, that even though they may not be rewarded for their faithful service in this life, their reward is waiting for them in the eternal state. They are to value the approval of God in this life and they may be certain they will have his approval in the life to come.

A PRAYER FOR THE PEACE OF GOD

As a pastor, I have known many believers who were so ill or distraught they were not able to concentrate or focus their thinking enough to grasp these conditions for peace as I have tried to present them in this brief booklet. I have therefore expressed these twelve conditions of Paul's prescription for peace in a peace prayer.

If you are seeking the personal, perfect and perpetual state of peace the Bible calls "the peace of God," I invite you to pray this prayer with me.

"Father, you tell us in Your Word that You can keep us in a state of perfect personal peace if we will meet your conditions for that state of peace. Because I seek this peace in my life, give me the wisdom to worry about nothing, and the faith to pray about everything.

"May I have the spiritual and mental discipline to think about all the good things, and the moral integrity to do all the right things. Give me the incurable optimism that believes in goodness, and such an insight into what You have been doing and what You are now doing in my life and in my world that I will remember to give thanks always, and if not for, then at least in all things.

"May I never try to push You or run before You but always wait on You, experiencing and expressing the gentleness and patience that are the fruit of Your Spirit living in me. As I sort out my priorities, may I always value Your approval of who and what I am and what I do, and not walk before men to be seen of men, or to please men. Never let me forget how near You are to me as I draw near to You, worshipping and enjoying You each day and forever.

"And finally, Father, realizing that it is not who I am, but Who You are that's important; acknowledging that it's not what I can do, but what You can do that really matters; agreeing that it's not what I want, but what You want; and remembering that in the final analysis it will not be what I did, but what You did that will have lasting eternal results, give me that absolute trust in You and that total dependence on You that will truly rest my heart and my mind in Christ.

"Enable me to meet these conditions of personal peace in the name of Jesus Christ, for my peace and for Your glory. Amen."