

A Peace that Only Jesus Can Give

Philippians 4:4-9

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October 11, 2026

By chance, have you noticed God's peace take hold of you in a most difficult time? If so, you are not alone. Today, our closing hymn is *It is Well with My Soul*, by Horatio Gates Spafford. Spafford was a lawyer and Presbyterian elder, whose tragic life experiences helped inspire this beautiful hymn. After the death of his son and loss of investments during the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, a shipwreck with two steamships colliding took the life of all of Spafford's daughters. His wife Anna was the lone family survivor of the wreck. Horatio and Anna traveled near to the scene of the accident, and there, Spafford penned the words to *It is Well with my Soul*. How shocking it is that these words of God's peace within came out of such a tragedy.

I imagine that many of us have felt a sense of peace at some point in our lives as we continue to attend church. Who knows? Maybe someone here is still searching. However, sometimes in the most difficult moments, such as in the life of Horatio Spafford, that peace that passes understanding comes as a gift from God. In the case of our text for this morning, we have Paul writing from a place of hardship, uncertainty, and while imprisoned. Paul writes to the church in Philippi, which he considers his personal community of faith. The distinction of the Philippians epistle is that Paul is writing to his own church community rather than to others. Paul loves these people and he knows they love him. I am blessed enough to know what it is like to have a truly beloved community of faith. I can imagine Paul's concern for his people's concerns. Paul petitions his church to give their worries and anxieties over to God.

That chapter begins as Paul refers to the church in Philippi, as his brothers and sisters, his joy and crown. He encourages them to stand firm in the Lord and for them to help Euodia and Syntyche, these two women who have stood beside Paul in proclaiming the gospel.

Paul's joy does not come from comfort or success, and certainly not from favorable circumstances. Rather, Paul's joy is in his beloved community and in the hope of Christ's lordship over all things. Paul ponders his privilege to participate in God's redemptive work in the world, even in a state of imprisonment. Paul is optimistic of the future with God's help.

Paul offers some guidance to the community. He suggests a gratitude practice, to rejoice in the Lord, and to extend their love and gentleness to all people. I do love these words in vv 4-7. Some years ago I used those often as I volunteered for Guideposts on what was a telephone prayer line and often recited these words to those who called in. "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

Paul was on to something. I am not sure what data Paul drew from, but today we know that gratitude practice is very helpful for our mental health. Paul knows that gratitude is part of joy. When we pray, offering thanks is an important step. That does not mean that a prayer to ask for help is not enough sometimes. Giving thanks helps our perspective. It reminds us of what God is already doing for us. Paul is thinking about the work he has been able to do for the gospel and how God might even use his dire circumstances to advance the gospel more. Paul also realizes that his co-workers are still out there, like Clement, Euodia, and Syntyche still doing the work. Paul wants his community to remember to support them.

Going further, Paul reminds his church that their purpose goes beyond their own and encourages them to share their gentleness to everyone. This gentleness is graciousness, generosity, all of the things we practice as people who live and proclaim the good news. It is meant to be shared.

Paul proclaims that the Lord is near, a reminder of Christ's presence within the community. Rejoicing is both about the joy of being in the presence of God and also may refer to reconciliation. The community is to maintain their unity through their identity in Christ. That is not necessarily uniformity. It is okay to have differences. Unity in Christ is what holds the community together.

Look at the language of the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding. A peace that guards the hearts and minds of the people in Christ. So, what is the peace of Christ? We pass the peace at every worship service, at least, that is if we don't get confused and start a conversation. It is important to differentiate passing the peace with coffee hour. It is more than a greeting-- it is a blessing. Have you ever felt the peace that only Jesus can give? It is a peace that takes over perhaps in the midst of heightened anxiety or stress. You do not have to be in dire circumstances to feel it, but sometimes that is where it meets you. Again, in every worship service we have an opportunity to offer a little bit of that. Recently, I was walking through Walmart after worship and received the peace from a stranger. Among the pros and cons of wearing a clerical collar, that is one of the positives, as without it, I might not have received it.

I wish I had words to share that peace. But something that surpassing understanding is hard to articulate. It is like a turtle trying to explain dry land to a fish. It needs to be experienced. I know of people who even wondered if they were dying when they felt it. For it is almost a feeling of touching eternity while being mortal. To share it with others comes with giving thanks, having Christ as our center, and by sharing our gentleness with everyone within and outside of our community. May the peace of Christ be with you, always.