

## 2CH Sunday at 7.30

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Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

# God's peace: Beyond understanding but not beyond reach

Presented by Graham Agnew

### 1. Introduction

Here's a Trivia question: What do New York City drivers do almost constantly, but Sydney drivers do very rarely? Answer: Blow their horn!

This is an observable phenomenon in the two cities. Mind you, when we do blow our horns in Sydney, there's usually a fairly serious reason, that can involve a bit of road rage.

I had occasion to blow my horn recently when a guy stopped suddenly, almost causing an accident. Unfortunately, he went berserk and started driving wildly in pursuit of me – weaving in and out of the traffic until he drew alongside and started yelling abuse at the top of his voice. It was a bit unnerving and it made me realise, there are a lot of people out there who lack inner peace ... who lack composure and self discipline. They live on a knife edge and the slightest incident can spark them right off.

At the other end of the spectrum are people who seem very peaceful and very composed. Nothing seems to disturb their sense of wellbeing. They are living examples of the kind of person Paul talks about in his letter to the Philippians Chapter 4, verses 6 & 7:

*Don't worry about anything, but in all your prayers ask God for what you need, always asking Him with a thankful heart... and God's peace, which is far beyond human understanding, will keep your hearts and minds safe in union with Christ Jesus.*

Wouldn't it be great to have that sort of peace all the time?

### PART 1

Peace seems to be a rather elusive commodity in our world today. There are so many world conflicts ... so many rival groups (even in Australia) vying for supremacy in areas of our society ... there's political rivalry ... ethnic and racial tensions ... and violence seems to be on the rise ... There are many courses, books and seminars designed to give people inner peace.

In the minds of most people, "peace" (as it relates to individuals) is a state of tranquillity, a state of serenity, the removal of all stress, the absence of all conflict.

When you say: "Ah, peace at last," where are you and what are you doing?

Maybe those rowdy relatives have just gone home or you've managed to finally get the kids into bed. Perhaps you've just flopped back into an easy chair overlooking the beach somewhere or maybe you've been successful in resolving a huge argument.

That's the world's view of inner peace but Jesus introduced a new dimension to the meaning of this elusive quality. In John 14:27 He said: "Peace is what I leave with you, it is my own peace that I give you. I do not give it as the world does."

You see, with the world, peace is the removal of stress ... the absence of conflict. However, in our journey with Jesus, peace is far more than the mere absence of conflict.

One of the titles for Our Lord is "Prince of Peace" and yet there was hardly a time in His entire ministry on earth when He was not embroiled in conflict:

- Conflict with the authorities
- Conflict with the Church's hierarchy
- Even conflict within the ranks of His own disciples.

And yet, He could truly lay claim to the title "Prince of Peace" because He never appeared phased by situations; He was a man of composure and serenity for the most part.

So why the apparent paradox? One the one hand Our Lord's ministry was never far from conflict and turbulence – on the other, there was always the semblance of peace, poise and serenity in His actions and demeanour.

For the explanation, I think we have to go back to Philippians 4: 6 & 7. Paul writes "don't worry about anything but in all your prayers ask God for what you need, always asking with a thankful heart. And God's peace (here it is) *which is far beyond human understanding* will keep your hearts and minds in union with Christ Jesus.

When it comes to God's peace, we're talking about something that defies description... something that is beyond human understanding – but here's the great news: The peace of God may be beyond understanding, but it is not beyond reach. You and I can receive this peace; we can experience it and (very importantly) we can spread it around – we can make a difference in our world.

## **PART 2**

The peace of God is beyond understanding but not beyond reach. We reach up to receive God's peace. It's there... it's available and it comes through obedience and trust as we (figuratively) reach up to receive it.

The Psalmist writes, in Psalm 85 v. 10: "Love and faithfulness will meet; righteousness and **peace** will embrace." In the version of the Bible known as *The Message*, "righteousness" is rendered as "right living". In other words there is a definite link between the extent to which we are obedient to God (in how we live our lives) and the extent to which we experience true peace.

Here's how it works: The person who knows they are running from God is not likely to be experiencing the peace which is beyond human understanding.

The New Testament character Saul (who was later to become Paul) is a classic example of this. He's portrayed in the Bible as an angry, vengeful and violent man – hell bent on the destruction of the fledgling Church of Jesus Christ. But then he has that Damascus Road encounter – it's recorded in Acts 9. It's a spectacular demonstration of God's power ... a bright light from the sky and even a voice from Heaven asking a probing question: "Saul, why do you persecute me?"

In other words: "Why are you fighting against me; why are you flouting my will; why are you choosing to totally ignore my plan for your life?" Saul had no peace because he wasn't being obedient to the call of God on his life.

There's a quaint story from Norman Vincent Peale's childhood about a time when young Norman found a cigar and decided to try it out. He was coughing and spluttering his way through the cigar when suddenly his Dad appeared around the corner on his way home from work. Young Norman quickly hid the cigar behind his back and greeted his father as normally as he possibly could. There was a huge sign nearby advertising that the circus was coming to town. "Can we go Dad, can we go to the circus?" pleaded Norman hoping to divert his father's attention from his misdemeanour.

The father bent down to Norman's height, looked into his eyes and simply said: "Norman, never make a request while trying to hide a smouldering disobedience".

We all know the inner turbulence and lack of peace associated with unconfessed sin; wilful rebellion against God... smouldering disobedience. We all need to reach up and receive God's peace. And we need to reach inward to experience God's peace.

It's one thing to believe God's peace. It's one thing to receive God's peace (we pray to do that every time we say "may the peace of God be with you"). But to really experience that peace we have to reach inward and ascertain the extent to which we are at peace with ourselves.

God wants to give us His peace – it's freely available, but it can't find lodging in a person who doesn't like themselves – in a temperament that is edgy – in a heart that harbours resentment, bitterness and a critical spirit.

Close to 30 years of pastoral counselling has shown me time and time again how difficult it is for some people to accept who they are – to stop comparing themselves with others – to build on their strengths and not always focus on weaknesses – to stop mercilessly beating themselves up over past failures. Self acceptance and self awareness are critical factors in experiencing "the peace that passes all understanding"

### **PART 3**

We reach inward to experience God's peace and, believe it or not, that involves a decision. Are we going to allow God's peace to come into our lives... are we going to open up our heart and be receptive or are we going to remain closed and self reliant?

Look at the contrast between two of Jesus' followers – both of whom committed terrible sins against their Master and were left broken and totally devoid of any inner peace. I'm referring to Judas and Peter. In the case of Judas, he betrayed Jesus for 30 pieces of silver, while Peter denied Jesus at a time when the Master needed all the friends He could muster.

And in the wake of their terrible deeds, both of these men would have experienced a huge drop in self esteem – inner turbulence would have been at an all time high, inner peace would have been at an all time low.

But look at the contrast: Judas, tormented and tortured to the point where he took his own life but Peter, following the bitter tears of remorse – there was a breakthrough: a willingness to open up to the love, the forgiveness, the peace of Jesus. A willingness to reach inward and get involved in a bit of self examination. He was beautifully restored to a position of great influence in the early Church; a man who was to write in verse 2 of his first epistle: "May grace and peace be yours in full measure".

Yes, experiencing God's peace involves a decision.

Tony Campolo, the famous American author and evangelist tells of the time when he was conducting a series of meetings in a large American city. At the close of one of the meetings a woman brought her wheelchair-bound husband forward for healing. Campolo says it was obvious that the man was extremely ill but he prayed for him, that he would know God's peace, strength and healing.

Two weeks later the wife tracked Campolo down at another of his meetings, only to announce that her husband had died the day before. Tony was a little flustered but managed to get out an expression of sympathy and a partial apology that his prayer had not been more effective.

"Oh no," the woman said emphatically. "Your prayer was effective... my husband was healed. You see, for the last couple of years he has refused to accept the severity of his illness. He's been bitter and angry and made life hell for all of us who were close to him. From the very moment of your prayers two weeks ago, a peace came over my husband... he stopped being angry and bitter... he began to allow those of us close to him to reach out and minister to him. Mr Campolo, he died peacefully and I'm thanking God for that."

The peace of God... beyond understanding but not beyond reach. We reach up to receive it... we reach inward to experience it and... we reach out to spread God's peace. We reach out to those whom we can influence... those whose lives may be negatively affected by tension, stress, conflict – all the things that rob people of inner peace. There's an old saying: Hurt people hurt people; calm people calm people.

In Galatians 5:22 Paul writes: "The Spirit produces love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self control ..." These qualities represent the fruit of the Spirit... the evidence that our lives have been touched by Jesus... the proof that we have received... have experienced and are now seeking to spread the peace of God. It doesn't mean that there will never be conflict and tension but it does mean that the peace of God will be the over-riding feature of our lives.

There's an ancient Franciscan blessing that seeks to hold tension and peace in a delicate balance. It says:

"May God bless you with discomfort at easy answers, half truths and superficial relationships, so that you may live deep within your heart. May God bless you with anger at injustice, oppression and exploitation of people so that you may wish for justice, freedom and peace. May God bless you with enough foolishness to believe that you can make a difference in this world, so that you can do what others claim cannot be done."

## CONCLUSION

Inner peace ... an elusive quality of life for many people in our troubled world. But it need not be so. The Bible teaches that inner peace is not merely the absence of conflict and tension, but the ability to rise above these difficulties and draw deeply on the strength of God.

The First Century Christians in Thessalonika were facing all kinds of persecution and hardship when Paul wrote (in his second letter, chapter 3 and verse 16), “May the Lord Himself, who is our source of peace, give you peace at all times and in every way ...”

Father we open our lives this day to experience your peace ... thank you.

In Jesus Name, Amen.