

## Galatians 5 v 22 The fruit of the Spirit is peace

### Introduction

In the mid 1980s while spending a summer working at an American summer camp there were a couple of particular occasions in which I certainly was blessed by experiencing the peace of God and which I can recall to mind all these years later. Neither situation was one I had sought but with total sincerity I had committed them to the Lord and felt His presence with me in a particular way. The first was during a lunch-time on a day when no children were on site as it was between two camps –only staff members were present. We were informed by one of the senior staff members that a tornado warning had been given and that either in that valley or a neighbouring one there might be a tornado passing through in the next hour or two. We were all asked to remain in the dining room until the all-clear was given. In that rural setting we were normally blessed by the sounds of birds chattering in the trees but the absolute silence that day both inside and outside the hall was almost tangible. A short time later some started up singing Andrae Crouch's popular Christian song: 'Soon and very soon we are going to see the King'. Most of us who were present were Christians and sang the song with conviction –some other faces turned decidedly pale. Not everyone present had made any preparations for eternity. I can honestly say I did not feel at all nervous, but simply left the matter in God's hands whether we would all be fine in a short time to continue our plans or whether the outcome might be very different! I can honestly testify that I felt a real sense of the peace of God in that situation. I am sure that many of us here as Christians can recall difficult situations which we had not sought in which, even despite the circumstances, we experienced God's peace with us.

Peace in its biblical meaning is something more substantial than the common usage of the word in our country today. Jeremiah, living through a period of endless military conflict in the Middle East, cried out these words with which many people in that region of the world today could also identify. He was speaking with reference to the leaders of his nation, including religious leaders. He declared: *They dress the wound of my people as though it were not serious. "Peace, peace," they say, when there is no peace* (Jeremiah 6:14; 8:11). Listening to the international news on any given day would easily confirm that in too many parts of the world no solution was in sight to resolve a variety of forms of violence and war. The majority of times this word passes people's lips it is viewed as the cessation of hostilities in a conflict zone. It might even be a weary parent asking for a bit of 'peace and quiet' from some noisy children! However, the Greek word for peace (eirene) is very similar in meaning to the Hebrew word 'Shalom' which means 'wholeness'. 'It describes the state of integrity, harmony and completeness, of a person in community, and of a community of persons in right relationship with one another and with God.' (Stephen Winward, *Fruit of the Spirit*, p. 99) This wholeness that we wish for other people includes good mental and physical health, the ability to enjoy refreshing sleep, safety and security and generally for a fulfilling and enjoyable life. Words like 'serenity' or 'tranquility' come to mind. It speaks of a person at ease with who they are and who has come to terms with their lot in life. It describes a person who can sincerely look others in the eyes as they walk down the street, because there is no-one they are consciously avoiding because of broken relationships. In Isaiah 32:17 it states: *The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence for ever.* When this is not our experience, as sadly is the case on occasions, we need to make every effort to resolve whatever it is that is hindering us being in that place where what God has planned for

us becomes more of a reality to us in our daily lives – yes even sometimes despite the circumstances!

## 1. The Nature of Peace

(a) **Peace comes from God** I have already quoted the despairing words of Jeremiah about the absence of peace in the lives of the Jewish people of his day. However, this was not what God had planned for them. While confined in a prison and knowing that the outward circumstances of many of his fellow Israelites at home or exiled in Iraq had deteriorated significantly as well, God revealed to this prophet what He had planned for their future. Jeremiah 33:6-9 states: <sup>6</sup> “*Nevertheless, I will bring health and healing to it; I will heal My people and will let them enjoy abundant peace and security.* <sup>7</sup> *I will bring Judah and Israel back from captivity and will rebuild them as they were before.* <sup>8</sup> *I will cleanse them from all the sin they have committed against Me and will forgive all their sins of rebellion against Me.* <sup>9</sup> *Then this city will bring me renown, joy, praise and honour before all nations on earth that hear of all the good things I do for it; and they will be in awe and will tremble at the abundant prosperity and peace I provide for it.*” Remember that the Hebrew word for peace is shalom, which we have already defined as the state of integrity, harmony and completeness, of a person in community, and of a community of persons in right relationship with one another and with God. It speaks of an assurance that God can not only be trusted to ensure that our essential needs for survival are provided, but that we are enriched by additional blessings as we live for Him. It is tragic in the Western world that human lives are so often defined by a person’s social status or material wealth. God defines wellbeing and prosperity in terms of the kind of person we are in relation to God and one another. This subject is also significant in this New Testament with a number of references to it. In Philippians 4:6-7 Paul wrote these familiar words: *Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.* <sup>7</sup> ***And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*** It is a gift to be received before we experience it in daily life. I will come back to the obstacles hindering our experience of God’s peace, but at this point to note that this fruit of the Spirit comes from our relationship with God. It is not something we work up through our own mental exertions! It is something God intends for the people He has created. In the message of the angel to the Shepherds in Bethlehem two thousand years ago it included these words: *Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom His favour rests.* (Luke 2:14); there are some things in life, like certain talents or gifts that only a few people have, but there are other things clearly intended for us all. God’s peace falls into this category. It can be experienced equally by someone relatively rich or poor; or in a wide range of life circumstances, because they are not defined by their circumstances but by their relationship with the Lord.

(b) **Peace given by Jesus to us** (i) **An inner experience** It is so important to emphasize that this is not dependant on outward circumstances. If we take a moment to reflect on the life and ministry of Jesus it is very easy to see how difficult His outward circumstances were on occasions. A short time after His birth, Mary and Joseph with this young child had to flee for their lives as asylum-seekers to Egypt for possibly around four years. The early loss of Joseph, the one providing materially for this family, left a widow with mostly younger children and Jesus as the eldest boy in the household having to take on responsibilities at a younger age than would have been normal at that time. In His ministry as you read through the Gospels there was constant criticism of His sermons or actions (for example, Mark 2:6-7; 3:6; 6:1-6;) and His lifestyle by

Jewish religious leaders- some of whom would later conspire in the plan which at the human level led to His crucifixion. In addition, the response of the crowds could be very volatile. The days covered in John chapter 6 shows the reactions from those who wanted to declare Him the Messiah and overthrow the Roman authorities, supposedly hanging on His every word; but later in the same week His preaching was deemed so unhelpful by many –the majority- of those who claimed to have been His followers that this section is concluded by these words. *From this time many of His disciples turned back and no longer followed Him.* <sup>67</sup> *'You do not want to leave too, do you?'* Jesus asked the Twelve.<sup>68</sup> *Simon Peter answered him, 'Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life.'* <sup>69</sup> *We have come to believe and to know that You are the Holy One of God.'* <sup>70</sup> *Then Jesus replied, 'Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!'* <sup>71</sup> *(He meant Judas, the son of Simon Iscariot, who, though one of the Twelve, was later to betray Him)*(John 6:66-71). The difficulties not only continued throughout the more than three years but culminated in the events of that first Easter weekend. The night before the most significant day in human history Jesus, at the Last Supper, said these words to His first disciples: *Peace I leave with you; My peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid* (John 14:27). The inner sense of tranquility in the life of Jesus was based on the secure grounding of His identity in His relationship with His Heavenly Father. Both the praise and the criticism of other people did not move Him from remaining faithful to the calling entrusted to Him by His heavenly Father. It is a pointer to how we ought to live as well, but very difficult to follow at times in practice. (ii) Associated with obedience Philip, one of the disciples asked Jesus if they could see with their physical eyes God the Father. He and other disciples genuinely wanted to have a relationship with God like they had seen in Jesus' life. Jesus said: *Anyone who has seen Me has seen the Father. How can you say, "Show us the Father"?* <sup>10</sup> *Don't you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in Me? **The words I say to you I do not speak on my own authority. Rather, it is the Father, living in Me, who is doing His work.*** <sup>11</sup> *Believe me when I say that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; or at least believe on the evidence of the works themselves.* <sup>12</sup> *Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in Me will do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things than these, because I am going to the Father.* <sup>13</sup> *And I will do whatever you ask in My name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son.* <sup>14</sup> *You may ask Me for anything in My name, and I will do it* (John 14:9-14). The peace of God is experienced by the people of God in proportion to our obedience to the revealed will of God for our lives. A child of God is a member of His family by grace alone received through faith alone for eternity; however, our experience of the blessings of being in His family is dependent on how well we are living in relationship supremely with our Lord, but also secondarily how well we are seeking to live and serve in relationship with His people. Jesus has modeled for us what this looks like in humble service (John13); based on a gracious attitude portrayed so clearly in Philippians 2. Looking in the mirror of the words of Philippians 2:1-5 how Christ-like am I at this time? Our experience of the peace of God is most significantly determined by the kind of person we are – much more than the things that we do for Him. A servant heart will be one that desires to serve and as a result in proportion to our obedience to Him we will experience His peace in our lives.

## 2. Obstacles and opportunities for Peace

(a)Sin and Confession The biggest hindrance to experiencing the peace of God in our lives is unconfessed sin. *For this is what the high and exalted One says – He who lives for ever, whose name is holy: 'I live in a high and holy place, **but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit**, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.* <sup>16</sup> *I will not accuse them for ever, nor will I*

always be angry, for then they would faint away because of me – the very people I have created.<sup>17</sup> I was enraged by their sinful greed; I punished them, and hid my face in anger, yet they kept on in their wilful ways. <sup>18</sup>I have seen their ways, but I will heal them; I will guide them and restore comfort to Israel's mourners, <sup>19</sup>creating praise on their lips. **Peace, peace, to those far and near,' says the Lord.** 'And I will heal them.'<sup>20</sup> But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. <sup>21</sup> **'There is no peace,' says my God, 'for the wicked'** (Isaiah 57: 15-21). It is no accident here that this message includes a reference to God favouring those who are *contrite and lowly in spirit*. The humble person will want to deal with any sin in their life. If there is an issue between them and the Lord or them and another person they will want to get it resolved as soon as possible. However, it is human pride that says I'll not make the first move; or I'm not willing to address what needs to be done to put things right. We need to be very clear that we will experience little of the peace of God to the extent He desires for us if we are unwilling to address sin issues in our lives. It is seriously alarming how many people- even some Christian people- are willing to go for years without resolving issues between themselves and the Lord or themselves and other people. The consequences can sometimes be truly devastating. May God help us be determined to address issues that arise as quickly as possible and keep our hearts right before the Lord.

(b) **Worry and Prayer** Jesus knew how often His followers were anxious about things going on in their lives. He sought to reassure them that there was a different way to live. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus included these words: *'Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?'* <sup>26</sup> *Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?'*<sup>27</sup> *Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?...* <sup>31</sup> *So do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?"'*<sup>32</sup> *For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.* <sup>33</sup> ***But seek first His kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well*** Matthew 6:25-27, 31-33). American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote this now famous prayer to go with a sermon he preached at a church in 1934. *God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, Courage to change the things I can, And wisdom to know the difference.* This is important. There are often things we can do to help address our circumstances, but equally much we cannot do. The challenge and the opportunity is to do what we can and bring the rest to God in prayer. Paul addressed this issue directly in Philippians 4:6-7: *Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.* <sup>7</sup> ***And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.*** The prize for getting this right is the priceless blessing of the peace of God in our lives.

(c) **Ambition and Contentment** How many colleges or other institutions of learning offer courses in greater humility compared to those offering them in building self-esteem? I suspect that the answer is probably zero. In our culture at the present time the Christian values of servant leadership; humility and self control to name but a few will be laughed at by many people as things that cannot work in the real world. People are applauded for wanting to get to the top, for example, of a business or an educational career. But is it really sensible for every person working for a business to have the goal of being the managing director or every teacher to want to be a head-teacher? Or the equivalents in other careers; I don't think so. A far greater achievement is accomplished when any given person recognizes their skills and abilities and is able to attain the level of work or other sphere of service where what they have to offer is effectively and

appropriately deployed. The apostle Paul who accomplished extraordinary feats in his service for God and in many respects through incredible self-discipline endured hardships that would have crushed the vast majority of other people also wrote these words in Philippians 4:11-13: ***I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances.*** <sup>12</sup> *I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.* <sup>13</sup> *I can do all this through Him who gives me strength.* This was not a one-off. He wrote something similar to Timothy, his protégé, the young pastor of the congregation in Ephesus in Turkey. *But godliness with contentment is great gain...* <sup>8</sup> *But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that.* In other words it is not wrong to want to improve ourselves or to have goals in life, but underlying any such aspirations is a contentment concerning our lot in life (I Timothy 6:6, 8). Why is this important? If we allow ourselves to grow resentful of other people who have had opportunities we might reasonably have had or allow our frustrations at things not developing in life as we hoped then we can lose any joy or any sense of fulfillment in what we are currently doing which unchecked will result in a pretty miserable life. A person seeking to be Christ-like will aspire to be content with the blessings and opportunities in their current circumstances, yet if the Lord wills, is open to further doors of opportunity, if the Lord provides them. A person in this position will experience more of the peace of God than someone lacking a godly contentment with their circumstances. [Illustration given by Paul in I Corinthians 7:20-24: ***Each person should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.*** <sup>21</sup> *Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you – although if you can gain your freedom, do so.* <sup>22</sup> *For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave.* <sup>23</sup> *You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings.* <sup>24</sup> *Brothers and sisters, each person, as responsible to God, should remain in the situation they were in when God called them.*]

(d) **Over-working and self-discipline** We live in a culture where in some cases companies have a philosophy that your whole life should belong within the company. You work together, socialize together and in some cases even go on holiday together! I worked for a time for a company like that. With hindsight it was a good experience to gain as I had to work out a Christian response to the demands placed upon me as an employee. I could have done better in the way I spoke to one manager at the time, but overall I managed to negotiate my hours and work routine in a manner consistent with my Christian principles. However, for those of us who are conscientious and work hard we can over-work and fail to get a balance with our lives; other people fail to get a balance with time for hobbies and interests allowing that to crowd out time for God and church or their families. We will never get the balance totally right here, but if there is no attempt at self-discipline with our routines we will get so stressed that any sense of peace or tranquility in our lives will seem like an impossible dream.

### 3. **Peace in each area of our lives**

(a) **Peace in the home** The desire for God's peace and wellbeing applies in each area of our lives. It applies in marriage and family life. I Corinthians 7:15: *God has called us to live in peace.* That is, a quality of relationships with one another investing in each other's lives. What does *peace* or 'shalom' look like in practice? It is a wholeness that includes good mental and physical health, the ability to enjoy refreshing sleep, safety and security and generally for a fulfilling and enjoyable life. Words like 'serenity' or 'tranquility' come to mind. This will impact our attitudes towards one another; the words we use in conversations both with and about our siblings or our

spouses or whoever it may be? Are the words I want to say grace-filled? If not –don't! The critical factor here in terms of whether we succeed or not may be our time investment. Decisions taken under great pressure run a greater risk of being the wrong ones. Do I need to improve in some aspects of my relationships within my family? Do I need to repent of an attitude or words or do I need to show greater love towards someone? Allow the Lord to prompt us –if that is required.

(b) **Peace in the Church** In the New Testament world the biggest issue was Jew-Gentile relations in the Church. Two groups of people who consciously avoided one another, would never have considered sharing a meal together or doing anything in common. Now Christian congregations have begun and things have to change and are doing through Jesus. In Ephesians 2:14, 15b-18 Paul wrote: *For He Himself is our peace, who has made the two groups one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility... His purpose was to create in Himself one new humanity out of the two, thus making peace,*<sup>16</sup> *and in one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which He put to death their hostility.*<sup>17</sup> *He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.*<sup>18</sup> *For through Him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.* In 2002 I had the privilege to visit Pakrac Baptist Church in Eastern Croatia, a town devastated by the civil war in the former Yugoslavia. The text over the door of that church was Mark 11:17b *My house will be a house of prayer for all nations* (Jesus quoting Isaiah 56:7b); through the darkest days of that war the only place in that community where both Serbs and Croats were equally welcome was in that congregation. It was only of my greatest privileges to meet the pastor and his family who at great cost stood firm on that principle. Our calling as Christians is to: *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.* (Ephesians 4:3) We again need to ask ourselves –am I doing that? Have I done that? Paul said this to the Church in Colossae: *Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace* (Colossians 3:15). This is everyone living under Christ's rule, being willing to lay aside personal preferences if that is what is needed in a situation. Am I willing to do that?

(c) **Peace in the world** Why is there so much conflict in the world? Paul says this amongst other things of those he describes as 'unrighteous' in Romans 3:17b *...and the way of peace they do not know.* In Hebrews 12:14 the author gives clear guidance to these young Christians. *Make every effort to live in peace with everyone...* advice not easy to follow when they were being treated unfairly in Italy.

(d) **Peace with God** This is the most important relationship we need to commence and maintain. Paul in Romans 5:1-2: *Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ,*<sup>2</sup> *through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.* Have you taken the necessary step of faith and committed your life to God through trusting Jesus as your Lord and Saviour? If you have not done so then I urge you to do so today;

The fruit of the Spirit is peace with God and with one another. This *peace* is a state of integrity, harmony and completeness, of a person in community, and of a community of persons in right relationship with one another and with God. May that be our experience both personally and collectively, for Jesus' sake, Amen.