

Series: Christmas at Grace 2021

Sermon #1

Peace in the Pit

Isaiah 9:2, 6-7

David Thompson – November 28, 2021

Well, good morning, Grace. My name is David Thompson. I'm the pastor of adult discipleship here at Grace. And it is good to be with you this morning. I am reminded that we are in the last week of November, after Thanksgiving, which means that December is here. And we are decorating, and your homes are probably being decorated. And it tends to be that kind of year that evokes a couple of emotions: one, we become even more joyful, or maybe sometimes maybe holiday seasons are a little bit tougher because of some event or something that has happened in our lives. And so, I know it's a good season, and I pray that you will experience that as you join us this month. We're in for a special treat with our services and even our Christmas Eve time together in a couple of short weeks.

Well, in preparation for the message this Sunday, I knew it was going to be Thanksgiving weekend, and so I thought to myself, *What could I say that would make an impact—something that would last, something that, yes, you'd hopefully remember in the weeks to come and not just forget, like "Okay, that was cool—I'm leaving."* But I just couldn't come up with something that I felt would stick enough. So, I thought, *Maybe I'll come up with three simple ways to have more thanksgiving this season.* That just seemed kind of tacky, and that's a blog post anyway. What could I share this morning with all the current events and everything that is going on in our lives that is all-consuming? What could I share with you that would be something that would stick and something that would last?

So, after several failed attempts and crumpled up paper—yes, I still use paper—I threw them away and just said, "God, okay, whatever You want to say, I'm going to say." What an idea, right? It works every time. All of a sudden it hit me—it's Thanksgiving. And we kind of

limit thanksgiving to around these holiday seasons—*Oh yeah, I'm thankful to be thankful, or, I'm thankful for Jesus, or, I'm thankful for His resurrection. I'm thankful for whatever it may be.*

But you and I have a 24/7, 365-day-a-year reason to be thankful. And do you know what that is? You and I have peace with the living God. I don't know how often that's on the forefront of your mind, but I know in seasons when there's struggle or something happens, then eventually we get there and say, *Okay, you know what? God's in control. I am loved by God. I am saved by grace, there is faith. God is good.*

But we wrestle with peace so much. And so, finally when I figured out—*Okay, peace*—I'm thinking about this word “peace.” And so much is coming up in my heart and in my life. We like peace. We like when we're at peace. We like when we're at peace with other people. We like the peace that comes along with the holiday season. And so, *Okay, God, I'm going to work this idea of peace.*

So, after I finally figured that out after several hours—I know—lame—I spent several hours just to figure that out—but that's how long it takes me sometimes—I said, *Okay, I need a well-deserved break.* So, I gave myself a break. So, what do I do on my break? I take out my phone. I start looking at some of the global news headlines just to stay up with current events and what's happening in our world. *Okay, that's not very encouraging.* So, then I looked for some local news, what's happening in Austin and surrounding areas. *And, well, that's not very encouraging either.*

And so, then I get on Facebook where Facebook is all things truthful, and I start reading that, and I think, *Well, that didn't really lift me up at all.* I just found out I want to talk about peace and now I'm feeling everything but that. And as I'm scrolling, I'm beginning to read the things that my friends are going through—the marriages that I thought were more solid than anything have begun to crumble; friends in ministry are leaving because it's too hard, or maybe because they stopped caring about the people God had called them to shepherd. Then I see some of the political and social polarization that is happening. Then I start to read about leaders who have fallen out of ministry for various reasons, and then I began to read more about the pandemic and some of the issues and the health concerns and the cancer and the struggles and the persecution of brothers and sisters in Christ all over the world.

And then I start to become anxious about everything. *God, wasn't I going to talk on peace? I don't feel much of that anymore.*

So, what do I do? Well, I put the phone away, for one. Enough of that. And I grabbed the Word. I said, “God, I need Your strength. I need for You to lift my soul out of the pit that I find it in right now, and I know that only You can do that, because it’s easy for me to get sucked into this [holds up phone]. I want to be consumed with this [holds up Bible].”

So, I start thumbing around and saying, “God, point me to a passage that’s going to make sense, something that’s maybe new or something that may be fresh and encourage the body of Christ this weekend.” I find myself in the Book of Philippians. I come across these words:

“Rejoice in the Lord always. And again, I will say rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to all men. The Lord is near. Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication, with thanksgiving”—remember that—hold onto that phrase—“let your requests be made known to God.” And here it is: “And the peace of God which surpasses all understanding will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Okay, now I’m coming back down. *Okay, God, I get it.*

Now I want you to remember with me that this is the Apostle Paul writing and penning this letter to a church that he longs to visit, though he can’t, because he is in prison in chains. And I imagine as he’s writing this letter that he hears the chains clanging around his hands and his feet, which remind him that he is no longer a free man. The guards at his door are a constant reminder that the church that he longs to see, that he longs to visit, that he longs to fellowship with—he can’t. The conversations, I’m sure, with the guards mocking Paul and saying, “Paul, is your message of the good news of Jesus that you claim as good news—is it really good news? Because look where it has you. I don’t even want to be here, but I’m here because of you. Are you sure it’s worth it? Give it up. Crawl out of this place.”

What does Paul do? He continues to preach to them. “Well, if you’re here with me, I’m going to share the good news with you too.”

Here in these four short verses that I want to look at with you this morning Paul reminds us of where true strength and ultimate peace come from, that is only found in Jesus Christ, the only one who could sustain him in his pain and suffering, and the same God, the only God, who could sustain you and me in the times of suffering, in hardship, in trials that we go through or that we will continue to go through in this earthly life.

The peace that Paul speaks about is divine. It comes directly from God. This isn’t any human made-up thing. This peace is from God himself. And you and I, Christians, you and I,

church, have not only peace *with* God; we have the peace *of* God readily available at all times. Will you take it?

See, it's here in these passages that Paul encourages these early Christians to be living and active in demonstration of what the peace of God looks like, no matter the circumstances that they may find themselves in or even will eventually find themselves in.

See, peace is not just something internal that we think of as being calm and tranquil and just being still. No, peace is also action. Peace we experience from God is visible, not only in the church as we worship and we praise Him as we'll talk about in a minute; but also, in the ways that we just go through hardships and trials, and we just have this strength about us. It's visible to the outside world as well. And as peace sustains us and encourages us and motivates us and helps us to continue pushing on, times are at their toughest.

So, from our passage this morning I want to encourage you with three things to do when you find yourself in what I call "pit experiences" in life—when you're just down and anxiety and fear and the worry or the persecution or the suffering—when these things come knocking at your door. Out of this passage I just want to direct you to three simple things that I want you to do. I want you to praise Him. I want you to imitate Him. And I want you to think.

Praise Him When You're in a Pit

So, let's look this morning—praise Him. Paul writes in chapter 4, verse 4, "Rejoice in the Lord always. And again, I will say: Rejoice!"

There were many issues that Paul addressed in this Philippian church, but none more than this idea of joy. Sixteen times throughout this book he speaks of this idea of having joy, reminding them, *Yeah, I'm in prison—I have joy. You're facing persecution—have joy.*

Joy and rejoicing in what? Paul, are you crazy?

No, rejoice in the Lord, in the Spirit of God, in the salvation that you received that will carry you through, in the new life that you have been given because of the precious blood of Jesus. Rejoice in that, no matter pains, no matter persecution, no matter suffering, no matter chains. No matter what it is in your life, you can rejoice in the Lord. And that you can do always, at all times, anytime that you want to do it.

There are no excuses. We may try to find some, but there are no excuses. We rejoice in the Lord always.

See, Paul presents us with two very important things: one, the privilege, and two, the duty of rejoicing in the Christian life. Do you have this view of rejoicing in the Lord as a privilege, that we can rejoice in the Lord because of what He's done for us? I was an enemy of God and now I am a friend of God. I'm loved by God, I'm saved by Christ. I can rejoice that God has given me a way to just praise Him in the moment. What a privilege!

We have freedom to rejoice always. Do you realize that there are a lot of people right now who don't have the freedom to rejoice? Or maybe you find yourself in a workplace or an environment that doesn't give you the freedom to rejoice whenever you want. So, what do you do? Do you make up for that when you're outside? We have the privilege to rejoice. Let's not contain it. Let's have that overflow in our lives.

But also, it's our duty. It's not a chore. It's not a burden. It's our duty as new creations in Christ to rejoice in the Lord, to worship the Lord, to praise the Lord. It's who we are. We've been set apart for a purpose. Our citizenship is in heaven. We're aliens, strangers, pilgrims in this land. We are destined one day for eternity with the Savior. Come what may now, because I know what will come later. *So, God, it's you and me. Holy are You, and I will praise You in the storm.*

See, Paul uses this word "rejoice" to mean a state of happiness and well-being—literally, to rejoice and be glad. It's the same word that he uses in Colossians 1:24 when he said, "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake."

Here's why the Apostle Paul could rise above the circumstances that he so often found himself: because he came to understand and live by the truth that true and lasting and satisfying joy can only come through Jesus Christ. That's why he writes "in the Lord."

My circumstances will change, but the Lord is unchanging. New and daily pressures will try to come in and pressure me, crush me, but He is my source of strength. Chaos and crisis will come, and it will come often. But He is my refuge and my hope. Friends will turn on me, but He will never leave me or forsake me. The enemy will try to seek, to kill, to destroy me, but Jesus said, "I have come that you may have life, and may have life in abundance"—for the here and for the later. This is the well that Paul was writing from, that he shares with this church and he shares with us. Don't look externally to find your joy and your happiness, because it will be awfully hard to find. Look inside to the new person that you are, to what the Savior has done, to the Word of God. And find continued strength that you need to praise Him in the moments.

See, Paul didn't write for them to rejoice in what they were dealing with, for he knew that really wouldn't be possible. That's hard. *God, thank You that I'm miserable right now. Thank you that my relationships are fractured. Thank you for this horrible thing I'm going through.* No, it's not that. See, we don't rejoice in the event itself; we can rejoice in what the event can produce in us that only that thing could do. And we rejoice in the fact that God wants us to use that moment, that trial, that affliction, for His glory. But do you believe that He is good? Do you believe that He will use that for His glory? That's where the rejoicing comes from.

In John 15:11, Jesus says, "These things I have spoken unto you so that my joy"—not anyone else's joy—"my joy may be in you and that your joy may be made full."

When I was a college pastor back in San Diego I knew a young man who would come to me and just wanted to serve. He was looking for a place to plug in and just serve Jesus. Cool.

"So, man, what do you want to do?"

"Well, I love running sound."

"Great, I don't have a sound guy. You get up there and do it."

He said, "Cool."

I found out he drove one hour each way to come and serve at the church. I got a call from him one day and he sounded a little down. And he said, "Hey, Dave, can you drive me to my hospital visit?"

"Sure, I'll be right there."

A long story short—I found out that this young man went to dialysis three to four times a week. And on top of that he had three or four other doctor's appointments because he had an incurable disease that they didn't have any cure for. I didn't know it. I looked at him one day and said, "Why didn't you tell me?"

He said, "Well, years ago the doctors told me that there's nothing they can do, so I decided one day that I can either walk around and be miserable, or I can rejoice in the time that I still have in this world."

Okay, I'm convicted. It was his faith that mattered, not the fading of his body. The source of strength came from Jesus.

I want you to look at this quote with me. It says "The joy that Christ gives is for time and eternity, for soul and body, for adversity and prosperity. It's for all times and all seasons."

Charles Erdman summarizes what it doesn't mean and much as what it does mean. He says, "To

rejoice in the Lord does not mean that a man is insensible to sorrow and distress, to suffering and sin, whether in his own life or in the lives about him. But it does mean that these dark realities will not be allowed to master him or to blind him to the radiance which streams from the face of his loving Lord.”

Faith in Christ and obedience to Him are the sources of abiding joy, and blessed are those who realize that true joy cannot be found aside from Him and His holy will. So, maybe putting this verse into practice just simply means, “God, I want You to show me how to rejoice in this moment. And I’m going to trust You and I’m going to follow You, and I’m going to be obedient. Show up when You want to show up. But I’m going to praise You.”

My friends, when things don’t make sense, that’s when faith kicks in, because it helps you to live as though it does. When things don’t seem to come together you can trust that God’s got all things worked together and He’s going to show you, and you can live as if life just makes sense.

Imitate Him When We’re in a Pit

So, not only do we praise Him when we find ourselves in those pits of life; we imitate Him. Jesus was our greatest example of what to do in the midst of trials and troubles and how to keep continued peace in our lives when things just don’t go our way.

See, the word here—“gentleness”—he says, “Let your gentleness be known to all men, for the Lord is near.” It suggests this moderate, nonretaliatory spirit. And maybe some of us need that more than others. We find ourselves in every disagreement that we can find, every argument that we can find, because we like to quarrel and stir the pot a little bit. And Paul is saying, *Do away with that. There are enough things to keep the Church divided. Let’s not continue to add to that.*

There are more things that we can come together on than need to divide us. And it centers around the Gospel, it centers around the goodness of Jesus Christ who gave everything for us. He’s saying, *Guys, stop getting caught up in the things that stoke fire and division in the Church, and unify yourselves around and imitate Jesus Christ.*

You want to experience more peace? Imitate Jesus. Look at these verses. Hebrews 12: “Consider Him who endured such hostility by sinners against himself so that you will not grow weary in doing good.”

1 Peter 2: “While being reviled, He did not revile in return. While suffering He uttered no threats. He kept entrusting himself to the one who judges righteously.”

Spiritual gentleness and graciousness don't mean that we're weak and don't mean that we suppress the truth. It's just the opposite. It takes great restraint. It takes great strength to restrain yourself from sometimes saying the things that you want to say. How is our testimony? And as we live our life and we're kind and consider the needs of others as he addressed just a couple of chapters earlier, that we look to Jesus Christ as our example, when people see you, when people see me, do they see Jesus? And it's especially in those moments of hardship and struggle that people are looking to us and saying, *Okay, how are they going to handle it?* Do they see Jesus? Do they see you imitating Him?

Thank Him When You're in a Pit

And then when you find yourself in those pits of life, thank Him. Thank Him. Literally, the passage tells us, “In nothing are you to be anxious about. But instead, give it all to God in prayer.” Present it to Him. Cast it at His feet. Stop trying to wrestle with that and figure that out yourself. Work together with the one who's got all things worked out in the first place.

Can we become less anxious in life? Yes, absolutely. Why? Because God tells us so. He gives us His word. “Cast your cares upon me, for I care for you.” He loves us. He wants those things that we hold onto. He says, *Just give it to me. Don't be anxious about it. Let it go. Let me replace that with something that is so much better. What is it? My child, that's me. What eternal value is that going to have? Let me give you more of myself.*

What do you have to lose if you practice a little more being anxious for nothing? I mean, think about it. What do you have to lose if you practice a little bit more being anxious for nothing? Actually, a whole lot: the burdens that you carry; the fears that you carry; the striving to find the answer in the hurry and busyness of life—*I've just got to figure this out.* God's got it. The weight and the guilt and the shame—all those things—God, I'm not going to be anxious about it.

You know what it does. It spurs you on. See, this isn't passive. This isn't a forgetful thing. *God, I may need to seek restoration with that person so that I'm not anxious in this*

moment. I'm going to do it now, I'm not going to put it off until tomorrow. Give me the strength to do it.

God, I'm going to stop worrying about tomorrow and just trust that You've got it under control and do what I need to do today, and trust You and be obedient to You today. And when tomorrow comes, should it come, should I wake in the morning and breathe and again, I'll do the same thing again. I'm going to trust You, I'm going to be obedient, I'm going to walk today. And I know that You're going to work it out. I'm not going to carry that on myself.

Jesus said in John 14, **"My peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give. DO not let your hearts be troubled, nor let it be fearful."**

John Stott summarizes this wonderful idea of prayer and says, **"The purpose of prayer is emphatically not to bend God's will to ours, but rather to align our will to His. Prayer is the very way that God himself has chosen for us to express our conscious need of Him and our humble dependence upon Him."**

So we've got **"Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving"**—see, here's the kicker to peace in the prayer life. See, with thanksgiving—when we talk about God with the spirit of thanksgiving, we give God the recognition that He deserves. He gets the credit for the outcome, not me, not us. He does. And He gets the credit even when the situation and the outcome are unseen.

Here's what I do. *God, I'm not going to be anxious about this situation. I'm going to present it to You. I'm going to talk to You about it. And God, I thank You that You have me in the palm of Your hands; that You have my best interest in Your hands; that You care enough about me to walk with me in this situation.* He gets the credit. *God, thank You.*

See, praying with thanksgiving shows a believer's peace, because I don't need to see the results to prove that God is gracious, that He is good, that He is kind. No, I trust Him in it beforehand.

See, as we pray with thanksgiving it builds a barricade in our mind against anxious thoughts. *God, I thank You. I'm going to set up a fortress around my mind, which is guarded by Christ. And I am not going to let these things come in.* Because fear, anxiety, worry, doubt—all those things will get as close to you as you let them. They've got no problem crawling into your life and just latching onto you.

So, we have got to build and fortify our faith and build a barricade around it. And this is what thanksgiving does. It's an action of trust in God.

See, a thankful spirit that is tied to our circumstances will often be abandoned. But a thankful spirit that is tied to our faith, Church, will thrive. It will thrive. If I'm only thankful because I can see the outcome, then I'm not going to be thankful a whole lot. I'm going to find myself wondering and doubting the goodness and graciousness of God. But when it's tied to my faith, *that I trust You, I'm going to follow You, I'm going to be obedient in all the things that we've talked about*—then I'm going to soar. I'm going to smile when there's no reason to smile. Because Christ is enough for me. And I can thank Him for dying on the cross for me, for paying the penalty of sin for me. *Thank You, Jesus, that You love me.*

What is it that keeps you from coming to Him? What is it that keeps you from thanking Him?

I'll never forget—I was sitting on the couch one day with my son, who's four years old, and we were reading some Bible stories, and we're talking about the love of Jesus: "We just have so much to be thankful for—He loves us and He cares about us." And we're reading all these Bible stories—"And you know, you can come to God at any time, any moment that you want. I know sometimes that you want to come to Daddy for things, but I hope that one day you'll learn to go to Jesus for some things in your life." And I was just kind of prepping him for life.

And I think he was getting this idea that I was going to give him away or something, because he just looks at me and he says, "Stop reading." And he puts the Bible down. And I'm thinking, *Whoa, dude. Where'd you come from?*

And he says, "Daddy-O"—I know, pretty cool right?—He said, "Daddy-O, do you love me?"

How dare you ask that, son—no, I didn't say that to him. I said, "Son, yeah, of course I love you. I love you more than—well, I love your mom more—well, I love you just the same—whatever this works out—I love you more than anything. I would do anything for you. I would die for you, son. This is Jesus." (I'm not saying I'm Jesus, of course.) I'm saying, "This is Jesus."

Maybe sometimes we're wrestling with whether or not God loves us. He's saying, *Yes, just come to me and talk to me about it. I love you more than anything. I sent my Son to die for you to prove my love for you. Just come to me. Be with me. Spend time with me. Trust me.*

Rejoice in me. Imitate me. Follow me. And just thank me that I know what you need at the very moment you need it.

Can God be trusted, Church? Yeah. Is He good all the time, or do we just say that when someone else says, “God is good all time; all the time God is good”? Do we just say it? Or do we believe it?

See, every day that you wake up, there’s a choice that is presented to you. We can spend more time worrying about everything and thanking God less, which has the potential to ruin you, discourage you, keep you depressed, keep you anxious, drag you and others down around you. Or, just maybe there’s a better way. We can pray about everything and thank God more, which has the potential to develop you and cultivate in you the very things in which God desires to build you up and use you for, for His glory and His purpose. Which one do you want to choose? Because that choice is yours.

Maybe a better way to say this verse is, “There is nothing at all that you should be anxious about. Instead, just give it to God. Talk to Him about it, thank Him for His goodness and faithfulness in your life.”

Troubles are always going to be at your front door. Don’t let them in. Praise Him, imitate Him, thank Him.

Philippians 4: “Any my God will supply all your needs according to His riches and glory in Christ Jesus.”

1 Peter 5: “Cast all your anxiety on Him, for He cares for you.”

Psalm 147:5: “Great is our Lord and abundant in strength. His understanding is infinite.”

And I could go on with verse after verse after verse about the strength and the goodness and the peace and the kindness and the gentleness that is found in Christ, that is available to you. But you’ve got to get up. You’ve got to take it, and you’ve got to decide that you’re going to replace this stuff which is tearing you up--the answers that you don’t have, replace them with the answers that you do have. And then, as you can trust in Jesus, know that He is good.

We can praise Him. We can imitate Him. And we can thank Him, Church.

Application

So, how do we keep these things mentioned and focused while we’re in these pits in our life? See life, all of life and everything that comes with life, as a gift from God. If there is

something that God is doing in you to refine you or to take away and rid you of so that He can shine through; the struggle—whatever it is that you’re dealing with—maybe it was getting the news of some diagnosis that there’s nothing you can do or no answer for it. Are you going to begin to doubt God, or are you going to trust Him?

Maybe there’s fractured relationships in here this morning. And God’s just saying, *I want you to mend those, so my peace can be at work in you.*

See, it’s not so much about what we’re experiencing while we’re in the pit that matters; it’s how we respond to it. These are the responses. Paul is saying, *Listen, if you rejoice and if you imitate Christ and if you thank Him, it will produce peace in you that is unexplainable, and the world is going to look and they’re going to want this, because this doesn’t make sense. But somehow, this makes sense.*

Part of me wanted to entitle this message—because we’re in the football season—“Three Ways to Stiff-Arm Peace.” Right? Keep complaining, keep preoccupied, and keep God on hold. You want three sure ways to make sure you don’t have peace in your life? Just do those things: keep complaining about everything. Be anxious all the time. Stay so preoccupied with the problems and the answers that you don’t have that you just think, *Where is God in this?* Stop talking to God and thanking Him for His goodness and faithfulness, and I promise you that you’ll experience peace a whole lot less in your life.

It’s kind a simple formula that helps me to remember this. See, if we rejoice less and we’re gentle less and we’re praying less and we’re thanking less, then no wonder that we’re going to have peace less.

If you find one or maybe all three of these areas to be a struggle in your life, let me encourage you—don’t try to tackle them all at once. You will fail. I’ve tried. I’ve been there. I’ve tried to do that. It doesn’t work.

In an attempt to make it easy for you to remember this, I talk about these experiences of being in the pit. And maybe some of you have captured this. But the first letter of each of the main points coincides with this idea of pit: P – praise Him; I – imitate Him; and T – thank Him. And I hope that this helps you as you go about your week; that as you find when the anxiety is coming or the fear is coming or when the worries are coming or when the troubles are coming—*God, I’m finding myself in the pit. I’m going to praise You. I’m going to imitate You. And I’m going to thank You, and know that You are good.*

And then just watch what the peace of God will do in your life as you trust Him.
Is God good? I like it. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we just come before You and we thank You for Your goodness and Your faithfulness, Father. We can't overstate that enough. You are sovereign and You are in control. And Father, life has a way of bringing its discouragement. We're in a fallen and broken world and we can easily find ourselves caught up in things that just don't matter. And Father, we may receive news or be discouraged by the things that are just continuing to fill our minds. And it's in those moments, Father, that I pray that we would find ourselves coming out of these pits, and that, Father, we would praise You and imitate You, and we thank You all the more.

Would You be our source of strength? Would you be our encouragement as we enter into this Christmas season? Father, I pray that our hearts would be prepared for what we're going to celebrate, and that is the coming of Your Son Jesus, as a baby, into this world. The Word became flesh and dwelled among us.

Father, thank You that You make yourself available to us, and that You love us and You care about us. You never leave us, even when life is hard. Father, You're right there, ever near, reminding us of Your presence.

So, Father, would we give You the things that we need to give You, and would we find the time to spend with You? And would we make it our mission, Father, to grow in our faith; that we just see our praise and our thanksgiving grow all the more? In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.