

“The Pursuit of God’s Peace in an Anxious World”

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The world we live in is an anxious one, rife with fear and doubt. Economic markets rise and fall, employment fluctuates, conflict erupts in unexpected places, and each year seems to bring a threat of some new virus that threatens mankind. We are all continuously faced with events outside of our control. As time passes the future takes on greater uncertainty. Indeed, it is often our struggle with uncertainty that plagues our spiritual life and gives birth to fear and worry.

Our society today has seen a dramatic spike in what the field of psychology calls anxiety disorders. Many who struggle with these conditions struggle with trusting, not having control, and tolerating uncertainty. However not all who struggle with fear and worry have a “disorder”, for such a struggle is universal and comes with living in the world. There are many secular treatments and potential remedies for being anxious. As Christians we have all these remedies and much more at our disposal in our fight against fear and anxiety. When facing the conundrum of not having control, we have the ultimate answer and solution and that is God who is in control. For those who deny God’s existence or who do not turn to Him in their life, deny themselves the greatest treatment for fear, anxiety, worry, and doubt. Our God offers us something that the world cannot give us and that is His peace.

In the gospel of John, our Lord tells us during the last supper, “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you, not as the world gives do I give to you, let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid”. God’s peace is real and tangible. It is there for all who desire it. Jesus identifies His peace as being the opposite of fear and that His peace counters fear and a troubled heart. We also know that God’s peace has protective qualities to it. St. Paul writes in Philippians 4:7, “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, shall guard your minds and hearts through Jesus Christ our Lord”. God’s peace is a gift of God and part of His grace. The peace of God is more than just a mere feeling, it is something given to those who genuinely desire God and a life in communion with Him. The peace of God comes from continual awareness of God, of His presence, and from communion with Him through prayer. It is a quiet contentment and joy that that comes from knowing that God is present. However to completely define God’s peace would be an impossible feat as confirmed by the Apostle Paul.

The peace of God and fear, anxiety cannot coexist. Fear, doubt, and mistrust are of the devil. As Christians we may fluctuate with having and preserving God’s peace inside of us, only to let ourselves lose focus on God and become filled with fear and doubt. It is a struggle but there are steps one can take to obtain and preserve the peace of God in their

hearts. Indeed, the peace of God must be desired, pursued, and maintained.

Prayer is the single most important activity we can do to obtain, reacquire if lost, and maintain the peace of God inside of us. When we go into our room, close the door, and genuinely seek God, we are opening ourselves for an encounter with the peace of God. Our God is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. The events in the world and at times even in our life may seem chaotic and out of control but they are not, for there is a beginning and an end. He is in control. When we bring ourselves into contact and dialogue with God we are bringing balance and stability into our life, however that balance and stability must be maintained. St. Isaac the Syrian often made analogies between how a ship sails from island to island taking on supplies and how we pray. We go through our lives sailing from prayer to prayer until we reach our destination. Each time we pray we are taking on the peace of God which gives us balance and stability. Archimandrite Sophrony, a student of St. Silouan the Athonite, speaking of prayer said, "Prayer affords an experience of spiritual liberty of which most people are ignorant. The first sign of emancipation is a disinclination to impose one's will on others. The second is an inner release from the hold of others on oneself." It could be stated that Archimandrite Sophrony is speaking of the effects of the peace of God on one's soul. The peace of God has a liberating effect, for to allow oneself to care or live in function of what others think or to be driven to impose our opinion or will on others is to lose our spiritual and emotional balance. Indeed, the peace of God has a balancing effect on our lives as well.

One step we can take to preserve the peace of God in us is to be cautious about what we allow ourselves to be exposed to. As a society we have become increasingly dependent on the media to keep us informed. However we are depending on a media that exploits our fears in order to boost ratings. It is to the media's benefit to create fear, doubt, and worry. To be dependent upon an institution that encourages fear and uncertainty is disastrous for our spirituality and brings us much unnecessary struggle. As Christians it is good to be informed, however we must stay balanced and beware of the phenomenon where one falls into fear and worry and then repeatedly returns to the news seeking reassurance when they will only find more reinforcement for their fear. If we find ourselves stressing about something on the news it is important to only give ourselves small doses, remembering always to turn it over to prayer. If a potential danger resolves itself, the media will not offer reassurance, but will often simply cease to report on the topic as it has then become insignificant. As part of maintaining God's peace we do not want to feed our fear.

Another step to preserve the peace of God in us is to walk and live according to God's will, not just following His commandments, but also walking the path that He calls us to walk. Like a car when it starts going off the road, we hear noise, so it is in our life when we stray off the path that God has prepared for us. The noise in this case would be the loss of God's peace. We then reacquire it once we have corrected our straying or wandering. Our work here is twofold, first we do our best to flee away from sin moment to moment in our life and second we keep our life on the path that is according to God's will. When we sin it is like the car going off the road, however we can also lose our way

completely and begin heading down a path that can lead to us becoming completely lost, such is the case when we try to live a life that is other than what God called us to live. We need to strive to live in a state of being constantly and genuinely attuned to and open to God's will, such an open heart would readily become a dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, and not be subjected to any distress from a lack of direction.

Finally, especially in today's world, we need to work on giving up control, trusting God more, and tolerating uncertainty by being at peace with not knowing all the details. If we have difficulty tolerating not knowing the future, then it will be a constant source of fear and anxiety for us. Many times we have a hard time letting go and trusting God; we instead try and control events in our life, even ones we clearly have no control over. Indeed, the more we try and control things we cannot control then the more out of control we feel. This is one of the fastest ways to lose the peace of God in our hearts. Many feel that by worrying they are somehow doing something about the problem or dilemma and as a result get a false sense of control through their worrying. However in the end, the worrying leaves them exhausted and void of God's peace. The peace of God is a beautiful thing, it is there for each one of us if we so desire it; for just assuredly as we miss the sound of a gentle wind blowing through the trees during a busy day, so we miss and take for granted the peace of God that is all around us. Pray in silence, flee from sin, stay on the path that is according to God's will, guard our senses, and allow ourselves to give up control and trust God. Truly then we can have the peace of God which surpasses all understanding and which will fill our minds and hearts.