

I. Intro.: Like some of you, I enjoy word plays, when people do clever little things by changing around the order of words

A. E.g. I once came across a prayer in a worship resource book with a section that went something like this

Lord, lead us ever more fully to worship you in *the beauty of holiness*, so that some *holiness of beauty* may be seen in us. (source unknown)

1. That's not exactly a pun, but reversing the order of 2 words can surprise us into hearing something in a whole new way
2. Here are a few other examples of switching the words on either side of the word "of":
 - a) Listen how the meaning turns about 180° if we start with talking about "*the politics of death*", but then we refer to "*the death of politics*" ...
 - b) If you're a Harley-Davidson enthusiast, you may like producing "*the sound of speed*" but that doesn't always mean you want to ride at "*the speed of sound*"
 - c) Returning to the realm of specifically faith language, I would say you may be following Christ for "*the journey of joy*" we have as Christians, but I hope you are also following him for "*the joy of the journey*"
3. So can you guess where I'm going with this, regarding our Dwelling in the Word text?

B. As I read & worked at memorizing the whole passage recently, my eye was caught by Paul's use of just this kind of wordplay

1. In verse 7 he talks about "*the peace of God*" which surpasses all understanding. Then at the end of the passage, his reassurance to the Philippian believers is that "*the God of peace*" will be with them.
2. *The peace of God ... and the God of peace.*
 - a) That's not just a matter of how scholars made their English translation from the Greek. That same wordplay shows up right in the Greek NT, by switching around the same 2 words
 - b) In other words, I think Paul knows exactly what he's doing with this choice of words
3. Further, I think it's worth our looking a little more closely at these phrases, because their uses in this passage are not merely random, nor are they just clever for the sake of cleverness

II. First comes "the peace of God" in v. 7 – It's no accident that Paul uses the language that he does to describe where Christian's security will come from in anxious times

A. As Pastor Katie noted 2 weeks ago this letter was set in the context of the powerful Roman Empire spanning over 3500 miles

1. That imperial dominance was maintained by a robust military presence ... a military trying to unite hundreds of thousands of diverse people under a common identity with Rome at the center
2. To maintain that unity, the Romans had a strong propaganda campaign throughout their territory

- a) In those days, everywhere you went in the Empire, you always heard about the Pax Romana ... “the peace of Rome”,
- b) The propaganda spread thru stories of all the victories and the benefits that came through the virtuous deeds of the Emperor
- c) In reality, it was not so benevolent, and “the peace of Rome” became code language & justification for its military conquest of foreign lands.
- d) As Rome conquered other nations, it loudly proclaimed to its subject peoples “the gospel of Augustus” or the good news of the Emperor –

This so-called good news was the peace and prosperity Rome would bring if the people did not resist

With a sword at their throats, the message people heard was, “Don’t worry. Everything will be fine! We’re bringing the peace of Rome!”

B. So when Paul uses the language of the “peace of God” he is directly contradicting the imperial message that touts the “peace of Rome”.

1. He is making a very political statement to the Philippian Christians about where their peace & security ultimately lie
2. I wanted to put this reality into some contemporary terms but I struggled with that

- a) It’s hard to come up with an exact equivalent today of the effect of Paul’s words from 2K years ago, but let me make a feeble attempt:
- b) For a moment, imagine with me, very hypothetically, that last week the head of our denomination sent out a letter to all the Mennonite Churches with a new slogan we would use for the next few years ...

This slogan would help give us our identity ... it would provide words to encourage us in the face of a powerful national leader whose motto can sound thrilling but is based on half-truths: “*Make America Great Again!*”

Now imagine if the bulletins and the websites of Waterford and other Mennonite churches all carried the following reminder, something meant to refocus our minds and hearts --

Here’s the new slogan – “*God has always been great!*” (repeat)

c) Let me be very quick to add that this is only hypothetical

I recognize our political system is not just like the Roman Empire, and the position of the President is not equivalent to a Caesar

Executive Director Glen Guyton has NOT sent out any such instructions to MCUSA congregations, nor would he have the authority to require its usage

I am also not suggesting now that Waterford should post this phrase in our communications pieces

3. What I AM trying to give us all is a faint glimpse of the political implications when Paul uses those simple words “peace of God” ... there’s a lot more power packed in there than we usually see

C. Another example of the military imagery Paul is using in v. 4 is when he says this peace of God will guard their hearts & minds

1. That word “guarding” is also military language ... the same verb used for soldiers standing on guard

a) The Philippian Christians were very aware of the presence of a garrison of Roman soldiers right there in the city of Philippi

b) To the church’s unbelieving neighbors, that garrison is what stood between the people of Philippi and the evils around them

2. But Paul is telling them that in every situation, even times of persecution or high anxiety, it is the peace of God that will deliver them in the battle of hearts & minds (not the peace of Rome, not the local soldiers)

3. Again, Paul uses military imagery to emphasize that our security as citizens of heaven truly resides in our hearts and minds. It doesn’t reside with the soldiers and weapons of the national government

D. So “the peace of God” is the first half of Paul’s wordplay in Phil. 4

III. The 2nd half is his reference to “the God of peace”

A. Let’s remember this whole section of chapter 4 is an exhortation to a congregation that has some internal conflict between 2 of its leaders

1. In v. 9 Paul is closing out this exhortation ...

a) First he urges them to be reconciled, to ground their lives in prayer and to model their lives of discipleship on what they heard and received from him personally as the church’s founder,

b) Then he leaves them with another reassurance: “the God of peace will be with you”

2. I think the Philippians would have noticed this wordplay, this switching of the word order. They would have heard himm going from “the peace of God” to “the God of peace”

B. But there’s more than wordplay going on here ... that’s not all that would have gotten their attention ...

1. First, with these words “God” and “peace”, Paul sticks in another parody, another jab at the Roman peace propaganda ... it’s another reminder that their true security as Christians will not be found in the “peace of Rome” but only through “the God of peace”

2. Second, this phrase “God of peace” is a hallmark of Paul’s letters, especially how he often signs off

a) There are 7 other times in New Testament letters that this “God of peace” language is used, & 5 of those times are closing benedictions at the end of sections of the letters

b) Listen to how some of the closing blessings sound from others of Paul’s New Testament letters:

Rom. 15:33

2 Cor. 13:11

1 Thess. 5:23

c) So this closing phrase is not just any old language that the Philippian Christians receive. Paul also signs off his letters to the congregations in Rome, and Corinth, and Thessalonica with the same words

d) It’s sort of a trademark of Paul’s, and the Philippian believers would have recognized it and been reassured that this message indeed comes from the missionary apostle himself.

3. In fact, other than calling God “Father”, “the God of peace” is the most common title Paul uses for God in all his writings

a) “the God of peace” is a central image for who God is to Paul

b) It’s also central for how Paul views what God’s doing in the world

IV. Conclusion

A. So as we close out this Dwelling in the Word series from 4th chapter of Philipians I’m reminded of the times we live in

1. Our situation is not exactly like those early Christians in Philippi two millennia ago, but it’s also not as different as we may think:

a) We live in the most powerful nation on earth, with one of the largest and most expensive military infrastructures ever known

b) For centuries, as this military economy was being built up through our taxes, our national leaders from various parties assured us we would be secure as they pursued what they called “peace through strength”

This particular language shouldn't be surprising to us, as it has a long history dating back not only to George Washington but even to, yes, the Roman Empire:

About 70 years after Apostle Paul wrote this letter, the Emperor Hadrian was using the phrase “peace through strength”

(https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peace_Through_Strength)

c) And although we are not being actively persecuted for our Christian faith ... beliefs and practices that actually follow Jesus of Nazareth are becoming rarer and rarer in our country

2. For many believers it's easy to feel discouraged about the world we live in, with all the injustices and natural disasters assaulting us on the news
3. What I love about this passage is how ready-made it is for giving us a simple primer for responding to such discouraging times.

B. The imperatives Paul gives us are the best conclusion I can think of. So listen close, Waterford:

1. “Rejoice in the Lord always.” And since that's so hard for us to do sometimes facing the sad and challenging things we face, Paul sees fit to repeat it, for good measure: “Again I will say it, rejoice.”
2. “Let your forbearing clemency be known to everyone, because the Lord is near.” Let it be your reputation that you don't take vengeance, because you trust the Lord to do that, in His time
3. “Don't be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.”
4. “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” Not American “peace through strength”. It's the peace of God that does that.
5. And then there's that wonderful list of “whatevers”: the true, the honorable, the just, the pure, the pleasing, the commendable, the excellent & the praiseworthy. When the daily news has got you down, do yourself a favor: Turn off the TV or your cell phone, and instead take to heart Phil. 4:8, to get yourself refocused
6. And finally, “Keep on doing the tried and true Xian practices that the Bible, the Holy Spirit, and the faith community have been teaching for centuries.”
7. Because if you hold fast, you know what the outcome will be, right? “The god of peace will be with you!” Amen & Hallelujah!