

Christmas Peace?

The season of Christmas is supposed to be about peace, isn't it? Christmas is supposed to be a time that we lay aside our difference or our conflicts for a brief moment, to show love and peace toward all mankind. That's what we hear on the radio, isn't it? That's what we read in Christmas cards. That's what we see in the holiday movies. That's what Christmas is all about – peace on earth, right?

So, then why does it always seem to be the opposite every time we enter another Christmas season? Why does it seem that we can't always find that peace? For many, the Christmas season seems to be the most depressing time of the year. We have this picture in our minds what Christmas should be like – the whole family sitting around the fireplace under the glow of the Christmas tree. One of my favorite movies is *Christmas Vacation*. Poor Clark Griswold tried so hard to have the perfect family Christmas. The harder he tried the worst it got. The tree didn't fit the house. A squirrel comes in with the tree. His cousin shows up in a trailer. The 25,000 lights on the house don't work at first. Clark falls through the ceiling in the house. His boss doesn't give him the usual Christmas bonus. Eddie takes his boss hostage. The whole police force storms Clark's house. It is one thing after another that seems to go on.

I think that one of the reasons that many find humor in the movie is that all of us have been there. We have this picture of Christmas peace in our minds. Yet, so often, that isn't the picture of reality. With presents to buy, cards to write and activities to attend, it seems like Christmas is nothing like peaceful.

As we get closer to Christmas, let us hear what the Apostle Paul has to say about the peace and joy that Jesus brings as we prepare to celebrate his birth. We do that by answering the question: ***“Christmas Peace?”***

Paul begins: **“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”** Paul had every reason to not rejoice. When Paul writes the words of our text he is writing them from a prison cell. Death may be near for him. His remarkable career of proclaiming the message of the Christ-child is drawing to a close. Yet, in spite of the difficult situation in which he finds himself shouting out: **“Rejoice!”** Paul had endured riots. He was shipwrecked three times. He lived under constant threat of people who wished to kill him. He worked without food and water at times. Paul had so many reasons to not be at peace, and, yet, he says: **“Rejoice!”**

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” It is easy to do that when things are going well. But, how about when things aren't? As we face all the worries, the concerns, the temptations, the frustrations, the harsh realities of everyday life. But there's that one word, staring at me, standing out like a blazing torch on a pitch black night ...**“ALWAYS.”** I struggle to see how God can be so cut and dry when he says: **“Rejoice in the Lord ALWAYS.”** There are very few things in life that we can say **ALWAYS** about.

An author once wrote about the difference between happiness and joy. He said: *“Happiness is based on one happening or another, usually beyond the Christian's personal control. Scripture, however, advocates not happiness, but joy and rejoicing. Whereas happiness is elusive and often impossible due to suffering circumstances, the joy of salvation that God restores in us through Gospel of Christ survives and even thrives, in spite of unhappy circumstances.”*

Paul's point here is that the outward circumstances do not and should not determine the condition of a believer's heart. Even when everything else around a Christian seems to be dark, there still can be joy within. We can be joyful because of our oneness with Christ. For it Christ who fills our hearts with that joy of forgiveness, the joy that our Lord is coming again to take us to Him, that joy of knowing that the Lord is near. God tells us to rejoice at a baby being born in a dirty cattle stall two thousand years ago. That peace is almost impossible for us to comprehend. For in the Lord, we have a peace that **“transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”**

It is that peace that has an effect in OUR lives. Paul writes: **“Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.”**

God's peace is the peace that counts. It is beyond the grasp of human intellect. There is absolutely nothing else that can give the believer the serenity that our faith in Jesus gives us. God's peace is also a peace that will guard us. The Philippians would be familiar with the picture of Roman centurions standing guard. In that way, God's peace stands guard at the door of the believer's heart. It is that peace that keeps us in faith. It is a peace that completely protects us. It is that peace that keeps us from worrying. It is that peace that fills us with joy and gentleness. That small child lying in Bethlehem, whose birth we are going to celebrate soon, is the guarantee and the proof of God's peace. This is a peace that goes beyond all understanding. That is what Christmas will bring to us.

Have you ever flown on a commercial airliner as it is coming in for a landing in the fog at night? You look out the window and all you can see is the white light from the plane reflecting on the clouds. You know that the pilots are landing the plane with instruments. You know that they will bring you safely to the ground. But there is a little part of you that thinks: *“What if the instruments are wrong?” “What happens if they can see the ground moments before they land?”* Then you feel the wheels touch the runway. No worries. They brought you safely back home.

We may always be able to see the direction that God is taking us in this life. But he will bring us safely home. With Him in control, we have a peace beyond any peace in this world. We have a peace that moves us to be gentle to all who are around us. We have a peace that helps us to set our anxiousness aside.

May **“The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”**
Amen.