

INCONCEIVABLE

The Book of Philippians #32

The Princess Bride is one of my favorite movies. When it first came out we rented it so many times that I decided it was cheaper to buy it than continue to rent it. It was the very first movie that we bought and it was only available on VHS Tape. That tape has since worn out has been replaced with a Blu-ray disc.

There are many memorable lines from that movie that are frequently quoted; Lines such as, *“Hello! My name is Inigo Montoya! You killed my father! Prepare to die!”* Or the one by the impressive clergyman who said, *“Mawage. Mawage is wot bwings us togeder tooday. Mawage, that bwessed awangment, that dweam wifin a dweam... And wuv, tru wuv, will fowow you foweva..”* There are a few shorter ones as well such when Miracle Max examined someone and said, *“He’s not dead. He’s just nearly dead”* and his wife who yelled *“Humperdink, humperdink, humperdink”* at him. If you have not seen the movie these quotes will seem ridiculous or meaningless and certainly taken out of context not funny. But for those of us who enjoy the movie they are priceless.

My favorite quote from the movie is the one word used over and over again by Vizzini and that is *“Inconceivable”*. Vincini was a clever man who tried very hard to outsmart the Dreaded Pirate Roberts who is chasing him. He is attempting to rescue the princess whom Vincini and his cohorts have kidnapped. Every effort Vincini makes to distract and prevent the pirate from following them is to no avail. Every time the pirate succeeds Vincini says, *“Inconceivable.”* In fact he says it so often that his friend and co-conspirator Inigo Montoya finally says, *“You keep using that word. I do not think it means what you think it means.”*

So what does “inconceivable” mean? It means unthinkable, unimaginable, unbelievable, incredible, implausible, mind-blowing, and mind-boggling. It is something that is beyond comprehension, beyond understanding. Vincini cannot understand how the dreaded Pirate Roberts is able to foil all his plans. It makes no sense to him. To put it in modern terms, it does not compute. Yet it consistently occurs. There is no rhyme or reason why Roberts is able to defy Vincini, but defy him he does and this makes no sense to him.

Vincini is not able to understand why Roberts is able to overcome his traps. And the fact that it happens with such regularity surpasses his comprehension. The supposedly foolproof strategies of Vincini have proved to be useless against the better schemes of the dreaded Pirate Roberts. And this to Vincini is *“inconceivable”*.

The Bible too has some things to say that are inconceivable. Things that make no sense, that are beyond comprehension because they go against the logic of our earthly existence. They are in essence beyond human understanding, inconceivable if you will. We find three of these things in the fourth chapter of Philippians, verses four through seven. The first is found in verse 4.

PHILIPPIANS 4:4-5

“Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your gentle spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near.”

We spoke of this the last time we were in the book of Philippians and I spent a great deal of time contrasting the difference between happiness and joy. So I simply intend to review this section. Here, in a

nutshell, is what I said.

Happiness is temporary. It derives its energy from what we are experiencing in the present and as a result ebbs and flows throughout our life. But joy sets its sights on what awaits us rather than on what we have. Joy derives its energy from the eternal and not earthly things which fade and lose their importance. That's why happiness can come and go but joy is able to remain constant in the midst of instability. Joy is able to pass unchanged and unharmed through the fire of loss and despair.

Happiness is vividly and easily seen in the outward expressions of excitement, laughter and smiles, but joy is not always expressed outwardly. Joy is more of an inward strength that stabilizes the individual. That is not to say that joy cannot be outwardly expressed, but rather the outward expression of joy is seen most frequently in strength of character, in having hope in the midst of difficult circumstances and in the overcoming of fear while dwelling in the heart of the unknown.

That is why Paul can tell us to rejoice in the Lord always. Earthly circumstances will change but the Lord Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever. He and His kingdom are eternal and as long as we place our hope and faith in these eternal things we will find reason to rejoice always. We cannot always be happy in all things, but we can always rejoice in all things because we are placing our hope and drawing our energy from that which does not fade or lose its importance over time. Let me give you some examples of what I mean.

We mourn the loss of a loved one knowing the happiness we experienced with them is no longer possible. But if they are saved we rejoice in the midst of that loss because we have the hope of seeing them again. Their earthly body is temporary but their soul is eternal. Their body may lie dormant in a grave for a time but their soul is currently active and enjoying the presence of the Lord (1 Corinthians 5:6-8). And one day that active soul will unite with a resurrected body that will never die. When that day comes we too will be united with them and together we will always be with the Lord. And that is why we do not grieve as some grieve (1 Thessalonians 4:13-17) but have joy in the midst of our loss. This circumstance does not make us happy but it does give us cause to rejoice.

Here's another example. We experience uncertainty when we lose our job. We wonder if our money will last until we find another job; and if that process takes a while we wonder how will we eat, how will we pay our bills. Will the power be turned off? Will the bank foreclose on our home? All legitimate concerns. But we can find joy in the midst of uncertainty because we know who holds the future and we know we can cast our cares on Him because He cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). When we, by faith, believe this to be true then we have no need to be anxious.

To have moments where the future is in doubt, where even the next moment can be in question is not unusual. To feel worried, concerned, apprehensive and fearful over what may or may not happen is a natural response to uncertainty. These moments are common to all who live and breathe. The future can change on a dime – an accident occurs, a diagnosis is made, a child rebels, a spouse is unfaithful, a job is lost, savings are embezzled, a fire destroys a home, a thief steals everything including our identity. There is much to be anxious over if we were to dwell on that "what ifs" of life.

We can choose to live in a state of anxiety caused by a perceived danger or misfortune because we believe the future depends on us - our strength, and our wisdom. Or we can live without worry or fear because we know the future does not depend on us but rather on the One who holds the future. It is how we respond to each situation that will determine the strength of our faith. And here is where Paul's

further instructions come into play and where the second and third inconceivable thoughts occur.

PHILIPPIANS 4:6-7

“Be anxious for nothing but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension (understanding), will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Paul tells us to “*be anxious for nothing*”. The word translated as “nothing” literally means nothing and can also refer to nobody and no one. So there is not anything over which we are to be anxious – absolutely nothing and nobody that we are to be fearful, worried, or concerned about.

To never be concerned may seem contradictory to all who would look out for their future. After all everyone’s future is a cumulative result of what they have acquired in each previous day. A nest egg is built upon a consistent savings strategy starting as soon as we have the ability to put money aside. A child’s education is paid for by a consistent monthly amount put aside for such an occasion. A down payment for a car is compiled over a series of months until the dream becomes a reality. A budget is followed because we are concerned we will overspend.

Even home ownership is based on one’s ability to bank on the foreseeable future and the ability to make monthly payments for 15-30 years. None of us can be certain that we will have a steady income for 30 years but we believe that will be the case when we sign the loan papers. Is this presumption or good planning? Is this foolishness or sound judgment? Isn’t our concern about the future and our ability to pay for college, to make monthly payments and to have enough money to retire the driving force behind our monetary stewardship? If we don’t concern ourselves about these things and plan accordingly who will?

Stewardship is a good thing and it comes out of a concern for the future. Even Jesus warns about building a tower or going to war without first counting the cost to ensure you can complete the task or win the war (Luke 14:28-32). And He applies this to being His disciple. If you want to be prepared for what lies ahead think through the cost first before committing. So concern can be a good thing and a motivating factor in our lives for good. It’s when this concern turns to anxiety that we get off track.

Back in the early 70’s I was driving a 66 passenger school bus for Walnut Creek Christian Academy. We were newly married at that time and our finances were very slim. Oftentimes there were more bills than money to pay them. I remember feeling very anxious one afternoon after dropping off all my students. I was alone on the bus headed back to the school and I just yelled out to God in that empty bus, “God, You say we are not to be anxious for anything, but how can You say that? There are plenty of things to be anxious about.”

Then I started to list all the things that were causing me anxiety – we didn’t have money for rent, we had very little food, our car was always in need of repairs which we could not afford. Even the jobs we had were not sufficient to pay our expenses. Checks were going to bounce and we could be kicked out of our rental home. I could find nothing over which I had peace. Everything was causing me anxiety. And I was upset with God for telling me that I had no right to be anxious over these things. I felt He was being unfair and asking too much.

In my innocence and ignorance I felt morally superior to God, so I challenged His righteousness and fairness. Thankfully He did not send a lightning bolt to strike me dead for my insolence. Instead He gently led me to the truth about why He could ask me not to be anxious for anything. He agreed that, yes,

there were plenty of things in life to make me concerned and fearful. The fact that they were uncertain times was not in question. We were in complete agreement on that issue. What we disagreed on was what was consuming my mind. I was consumed with anxiety and fear over these issues. He was telling me not to be anxious and never to be fearful over anything that life would bring my way.

Was I worried over what we were going to eat or what we were going to wear? Here was His answer.

MATTHEW 6:25-34

“...Do not be worried about your life, as to what you will eat or what you will drink; nor for your body, as to what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, that they do not sow, nor reap nor gather into barns. And yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not worth much more than they? And who of you by being worried can add a single hour to his life?”

“And why are you worried about clothing? Observe how the lilies of the field grow, they do not toil nor do they spin, yet I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory clothed himself like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the furnace, will He not much more clothe you? You of little faith!”

“Do not worry then, saying, ‘What will we eat’ or ‘What will we drink?’ or ‘What will we wear for clothing?’ For the gentiles eagerly seek all these things; for your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.. So do not worry about tomorrow; for tomorrow will care for itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.”

The word translated as “worried” here is the same word translated as “anxious” in Philippians. So when he says not to be worried as to what you will eat or what you will drink or what you will wear, he is also saying do not be anxious over what you will eat or what you will drink or what you will wear. These were the very things I was anxious about.

And what was His cure for this worrisome anxiety? *“Seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things (money, food clothing) will be added to you.”* He knew I needed food and clothing. He was not opposed to me having these things. But what I needed to do was to redirect my thoughts. I was consistently dwelling on what I did not have and my personal inability to provide these things. He wanted me to direct my thoughts to the consistency of God and His ability to provide for His own.

I was anxious because I knew I could not provide for my family with what I had. There was too little money and too many bills. My mind was dwelling on the money well that was constantly running dry. But God said I needed to redirect my thoughts and dwell on His kingdom and His righteousness instead of my insecurities and my inadequacies. Though my supply was scarce, His supply was endless.

God told me I had a choice to make. I could trust in myself or I could trust in Him. Where I placed my trust would either bring anxiety or peace. I was currently making the wrong choice. Instead of choosing words of complaint coming from an anxious heart I was to choose words of thanksgiving through prayer and supplication so that I could experience the peace which comes from trust. Just as a lifetime of worry had been built up over the course of each days concerns so also a lifetime of peace

could be built up over the course of each day's decision to trust.

This is not to say that we can't feel anything other than peace; that we will never experience fear or anxiety or some aspect of uncertainty that causes us to feel uneasy and unsure of what tomorrow holds. There is a time for concern and for planning for the future. We are not to be unprepared or ignorant of what may occur. It is not a sin to have auto or health or life insurance or to contribute to a savings account. It is an act of wisdom not worry that compels us to make sure we can survive the inevitabilities of life. Even Paul said that he was genuinely concerned for the welfare of the Philippian church and as a result he sent Timothy to learn of their spiritual condition (Philippians 2:19-20).

The knowledge that life will throw us a curve ball can cause us to be concerned. But that knowledge does not have to lead to anxiety. It's what we do with that knowledge that will determine our emotional and mental state. If we let it, concern can turn to worry but we can also choose to let concern be a driving force for good. Concern for our safety can compel us to make sure our cars have four good tires before it rains, that the roof on our home is replaced before it leaks, and the doors to our homes are locked when we go to bed. Concern causes us to visit the doctor when things seem "off" and to place our children in car seats to ensure they have the best possible chance of surviving an accident. Our concern causes us to be prepared for the possible without knowing the reality. We can let concern lead us into anxiety or we can let it lead us to trust in the Lord through preparation, prayer and thanksgiving.

The events of life never occur on a flat line. There are always rises and falls in life. The Scriptures tell us that there is an appointed time for everything under heaven to occur. But even in the midst of all these events it never says there will be a time to fear or a time to be anxious.

ECCLESIASTES 3:1-8

"There is an appointed time for everything. And there is a time for every event under heaven – A time to give birth and a time to die; a time to plant and a time to uproot what is planted. A time to kill and a time to heal; A time to tear down and a time to build up. A time to weep and a time to laugh; A time to mourn and a time to dance.

"A time to throw stones and a time to gather stones; A time to embrace and a time to shun embracing. A time to search and a time to give up as lost; A time to keep and a time to throw away. A time to tear apart and a time to sew together; A time to be silent and time to speak. A time to love and a time to hate; A time for war and a time for peace."

From these verses we recognize the events in our own lives that have weaved their way through our experience. Perhaps you remember the times you have put down roots in a town only to be uprooted from your home because of a change in your job or your health, or even the political climate; there were times where you have rejoiced over a birth and mourned over a death; wept over a loss and laughed over a child's silly antics; a time when you held on to possessions and a time when you purged everything you no longer needed; a time when you welcomed an embrace and a time when you simply wanted to be left alone.

These are the ebbs and flows of life. And they can easily lead to anxiety for the one whose mind is centered on self. But to the one whose mind is stayed on the Lord, God Himself promises to keep him in perfect peace (Isaiah 26:3). The world cannot give this type of peace. This peace comes only from the Lord and it is a by-product of abiding in the Spirit (John 14:27; Galatians 5:22).

But this peace is also a by-product of trust which comes from a deep understanding of God's unshakeable and steadfast love for His children. And this is key to our understanding of how we are able to live in this world without letting anxiety rule over our hearts.

1 JOHN 4:16a (NASB)

"We have come to know and believe the love which God has for us."

1 JOHN 4:16a (NLT)

"We know how much God loves us, and we have put our trust in His love."

This is the bottom line; here is where the rubber meets the road. We put our trust in God because we know and are certain of His love for us. There is no room for doubt, no apprehension that he will give us a snake instead of a fish or a stone instead of a loaf of bread (Matthew 7:7-11). There is no fear in this love, no place where anxiety can penetrate because we are certain of His love for us.

We have no concern over punishment because we are convinced that His sacrifice was sufficient. His love has overruled our sin and our faith has been accepted as righteousness. We have no concern over mistreatment or neglect because He is good and His love endures forever (1 Chronicles 16:34). We have no concern over false statements because He is truth and nothing false comes from the truth (1 John 2:21). All the utterances of His mouth are righteous and there is nothing crooked or perverted in them (Proverbs 8:8).

We can freely approach His throne of grace with confidence because we are intimately acquainted with the One who gave Himself for us – the One who has been tempted in all things like we are yet without sin. He knows our faults and weaknesses because He experienced them firsthand Himself. And He did so because of His great love for us.

Because of this great love we know we will receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need (Hebrews 4:15-16). The scriptures say the one who fears God's punishment is not perfected in love (1 John 4:18). Whether out of guilt or unbelief, anxiety will overrule our faith if we are not perfected in love, because we are told that perfect love casts out this fear and when it does, anxiety goes with it.

So the key to preventing anxiety from getting a hold on your mind and emotions is to dwell on the love God has for you and to put your trust in that love. Doing this will lead to a dialogue with the living God through prayer, supplication and thanksgiving, for you will no longer dwell on the problem but rather on the One who has the solution. And you will no longer keep your troubles to yourself where they can grow and fester, but will freely share them with the one who is eager to hear what you have to say.

Paul concludes his thoughts on anxiety with the final inconceivable thought – the ability to experience peace when peace makes no sense.

PHILIPPIANS 4:7

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

So what is this "peace of God which surpasses all understanding"? And how does it guard our hearts?

Anyone who has experienced this peace understands what Paul is saying. It is something deeply felt in the inner man, at the heart and root of the soul. But for the sake of being united in our understanding let me just say this. When we have peace in the midst of turmoil it does not “make sense”. How can our hearts and minds remain firmly planted when the world around us is spinning out of control? How can we remain upright when everything around us is falling apart? How can those who experienced tragedy in Paris or San Bernadino or Columbine or Syria ever expect to have peace in the midst of sudden loss and unspeakable terror? Where is the joy in such a loss? Where is peace to be found in the center of these storms?

In America we are more fortunate than most in that we have a say in how our future unfolds. In a democratic society we have unlimited potential with unlimited options to pursue. But choice only goes so far. We are still subject to things beyond our choosing. We cannot pre-determine everything that will happen to us or to our loved ones. Tragedy can invade our tranquil lives in an instant and change everything about our present and our future. These things are beyond our scope of influence and out of our control. But what we do have control over is our response to the circumstances of life.

As with joy we can choose to not be anxious for anything. We can choose to take our concerns to the Lord through prayer and supplication with thanksgiving. And when we do the promise of the Lord is that the peace of God, which makes no sense in these types of circumstances, will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus.

But we must know and trust in God’s love if we are to do so because it is the love of God which brings the peace. It is the certainty that God will provide, that God will heal the hurt, that God will revenge the wrong, that God will comfort the brokenhearted; that God is near and has not abandoned us, that God is not ignorant of the present or future event that threatens to undo us, that we will see our loved ones again; that God will provide when we have lost everything and that God knows our sorrow and saves each and every tear in a bottle (Psalm 56:8). And that one day God will wipe every tear away and there will be no more death, no more mourning, no more crying or pain.

Anxiety comes when we focus on the present which, like happiness, comes and goes as the circumstances of life run their laps around our hearts. But the peace of God which surpasses all comprehension will, like joy, remain because it is centered on the eternal and not the temporary.

After letting God know of our request through prayer and supplication with thanksgiving the second and final thing that Paul says is that “*the peace of God will guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus*”. What does Paul mean by this? What kind of guard is this and what does this guard do?

I have spoken of this guard before so I won’t spend a lot of time on it here. Suffice it to say the definition of the word translated as “guard” is to protect by a military guard, either to prevent hostile invasion, or to keep the inhabitants of a besieged city from flight. This guard has a dual purpose. It prevents the peace we have been given from leaving our hearts and minds, but it also prevents anxiety from penetrating the peace which is now within us.

We are told that greater is He that is in us than he that is in the world (1 John 4:4). As long as we allow God to stand guard over our hearts and minds, the peace He has given to us will not leave and nothing and no will be able to enter and take it away. The thief will come and attempt to steal and destroy this peace (John 10:10) but God will not allow it as long as we remain willing to trust in His

love and provision for us.

Anxiety, worry, fear – these are all unwelcome visitors that, like pesky flies, keep swarming around the doors of our hearts and minds waiting to enter and wreak havoc with our trust. Given an inch they will take a mile. But the flyswatter for these pests is trust in God’s love for us and that nothing in all creation is able to separate us from this love.

ROMANS 8:35, 37-39

“Who will separate us from the love of God in Christ? Will tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? ...But in all these things we overwhelmingly conquer through Him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other created things, will be able to separate us from the Love of God, which is in Christ Jesus.”

Isis, Al-Qaida and other extremist groups are terrible enemies who seek to wipe out all those who believe in Christ. The body they may kill, but God’s truth abides still. One little word of faith is sufficient to replace anxiety with peace. It is incomprehensible, even “inconceivable”, but it is true nonetheless. The peace of God which surpasses all understanding will, in the midst of terrible evil, guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. It was true of the disciples who were martyred for their faith; it was true for those believers thrown to the lions in the Roman Coliseum and for those who were burned at the stake for daring to publish the Bible in plain English. It can also be true for us no matter what transpires in the future.

Even though evil may triumph for a season, a day of reckoning for all is coming. The lives of all are in His hand. We have limited options in determining our future. But we can determine our reaction to it. We can choose each day to trust our future to Him. Anxiety, worry fear; these will continually knock on our door. We have a choice to open that door or to let the One who guards our hearts keep them out. Will we fear or will we trust? Will we experience anxiety or will we experience peace? As Joshua said to the people of Israel, *“Choose this day whom you will serve.”* (Joshua 24:15). Will we serve anxiety or will we serve the God of peace?

We choose whom we serve by placing our trust in either ourselves or in a higher power. We can choose peace by letting our requests be made known to God through prayer and supplication with thanksgiving. It is through this act of trust in God’s word and His love that the promise of peace will come. And this peace which passes all understanding will guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Inconceivable? Perhaps. But true nonetheless. It is a choice. Let us LET the peace of Christ rule in our hearts for it is something to which we have all been called to do.

COLOSSIANS 3:15

“Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.”

And the fact that this peace is “inconceivable” to the mind of man makes it all the more true. For God has said:

ISAIAH 55:8-12a

“For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways,” declares the LORD. For as the

heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways and My thoughts than your thoughts. For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.

“For you will go out with joy and be led forth with peace.”

We may not know what tomorrow will bring but we can bring into tomorrow our trust and faith in the One who holds that future. And we can also choose to bring into the future the joy and the peace that He will provide if we choose to trust in His unfailing love. He is a mighty fortress who will guard and protect our hearts and minds from all that comes our way. But to experience the joy and peace which comes from Him we must trust that God loves us and will never leave or forsake us. To trust in Him leads to peace. To trust in anything else leads to anxiety. Each day we choose whom we will serve. Who will you serve today?

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