

December 9, 2018
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THE PARABLE OF THE ALARM
Proverbs 19:21

We have some extremes in our family. My wife and my daughter, Carissa, share a common trait. They can't sleep unless it is totally dark. Carissa has gone to great lengths to guarantee that no light can sneak into their bedroom through the windows. She takes blackout curtains to a whole new level. Laurie is the same. We have a television in our bedroom that used to be connected to a cable box. The digital numbers on the box were too bright for Laurie. Every night I had to put something in front of that box or she wouldn't be able to sleep. At the extreme opposite end of that spectrum is our granddaughter, Ella. She insists on having the lights in her bedroom on all night. She wants brilliant light to sleep in.

As a kid I was a little closer on the spectrum to Ella than to Carissa and Laurie. I did not have a phobia about darkness. I didn't freak out about monsters in the closet. But the ideal for me was to be able to see some light. I wanted to have lights on in the house and the door of Jerry's and my bedroom open a bit so I could see the light. My parents were smart. They used to put some music on the stereo out in the living room when we were going to sleep. We could hear the music and see the lights, and that helped me go to sleep. I liked that because it meant there was someone awake in the house. It made me feel safe and secure, and that enabled me to sleep. I needed to know someone was on watch and was protecting me for me to be able to rest.

Oddly I realized recently that though it's not a big thing for me and it doesn't affect my sleeping patterns at all, there is still a tiny component of that somewhere in my heart. We were staying in a large hotel, and I woke up in the middle of the night. I had to go to the bathroom, so I took care of business. On my way back to bed for some reason I decided to look out the window of our room. I peeked out, and everything looked fine, but I noticed a couple of hotel employees working out on the grounds. I reflected on the fact that there were people working all night in the hotel. There were people at the front desk, there were security people, there were maintenance people and others. I got this small sense of comfort. I realized that it sort of comforted me that there were people out there on watch, making sure we were safe.

I'm a little weird, so I think about things like that. But I realized there is a far more significant issue there. I realized that there is something that affects all of us. It is that we will only be at peace, we will only truly rest, to the degree that we feel safe. A lot of that sense of safety will be determined by whether we think that someone is on watch, someone out there is looking out for us. Let's take a look at Proverbs 19:21 to get some perspective on this matter.

TO MASTER LIFE WE MUST HAVE PEACE

Let's envision various possible lives that lack only peace. Suppose that you were a ridiculously successful entrepreneur, possibly one of those online geniuses that became fabulously wealthy by the time they were 30 years old. You have more money than you will ever be able to spend. And imagine that you were not at peace. You know something is missing in your life and it eats at you. You worry all the time. There is always a sense of disquiet in the background. Would you like to have that life? Would you consider that mastering life?

Imagine that you have become famous, that you have hit the top of a public career, perhaps in sports or entertainment. You can't go anywhere without people recognizing you, wanting your autograph or to take your picture. But you don't have peace inside. You fret over small things, you worry over big ones, and it never goes away. Would you like to have that life? Is that mastering life?

In his book, *The Culture Of Narcissism*, Christopher Lasch wrote of celebrities in our culture, "Those who win the attention of the public worry incessantly about losing it." He said it is common that famous people gnaw from within with self doubt, addiction and wanderlust. He said that fame today is corrosive to the self. Dr. Charles Figley, psychologist at Florida State University, did a survey of top celebrities. Here is a list of symptoms they reported they have, "depression, loss of sleep, crying over nothing, bad moods...lack of concentration, stomach problems, paranoia, overspending, lack of trust and self hatred." That hardly sounds like mastering life to me.

16th century Catholic Francois de Sales said, "Do not lose your peace for anything whatsoever, even if your whole world seems upset." Current Jewish artist Roz Fruchtman said, "Inner peace is priceless, as it sprinkles everything you do with joy." Actor Denzel Washington said, "For me, success is inner peace." To my surprise former football player and coach Mike Ditka says the same thing. Writer Frederick Buechner wrote that peace is the thing we seek above all else.

PEACE IS RARE IN THIS WORLD

As I contemplated this verse and its implications I realized that there are at least 3 things that frequently disrupt our peace.

Guilt

Unfortunately even if we could somehow have everything go our way, we would still lack peace. We all carry guilt. That's because none of us lives up to what we know we want to be and ought to be. We feel guilty about the many ways we fail to measure up. Psychologists tell us guilt exists in us all and it is a huge problem. Today supposed experts make a lot of effort to tell us we need to just love ourselves and accept ourselves for who we are. The problem is that doesn't make the guilt go away, and we can not have peace when we feel guilty. That guilt nags at us. It may be at a low level, but it is enough to make us feel continually uneasy.

Lack

There are several areas where we experience lack that destroys peace. The first is being connected to God. Colossians 1:16 says of Jesus, "In him all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him." Notice the last 2 words. All things were created for him. You and I are among the "all things." Why were we created? For him! We were made at his pleasure, for his reasons, to be in relationship with him. When we are not connected to him we know there is something wrong. Something will be off. Life just won't work right. We will sense it. That lack disrupts peace.

Recently we were setting up for Sunday morning. We have in ear monitors for the musicians so they can hear exactly what they are playing without the monitors creating havoc with the sound in the chapel. I got all set up. The system was up and running, but I couldn't hear anything in my earphones. The monitor was on, the volume levels were all set but nothing was working. Everyone else said they could hear fine. I was about to tell the sound people my unit had a problem when it occurred to me that maybe I ought to recheck the jack. When I did I learned it wasn't pushed all the way in. It wasn't connected. When I pushed it in, voila, I could hear perfectly! When you are not connected to God you are like those earphones. You're going to know something isn't quite right. You will lack peace.

Another lack that can cause problems is in the area of personal security. When we are not secure in who we are, confident of our worth in God's eyes, we will be desperate to somehow fill that lack. We will try to find a sense of worth and security somehow, but it will never be enough. That lack absolutely ruins peace.

Another lack has to do with hope. That can be hope for there to be some meaning, some fulfillment in this life, and even more, hope for what happens after we died. If we lack hope there will never be peace. Hope is essential to peace.

Fear

Of course we know that when we fear there is no peace. While we were on vacation Laurie and I both had to go to the doctor. The nurse, as they always do, took my temperature, measured my pulse and my blood pressure. When she was done she said to me, "Are you an athlete?" I was a bit nonplussed by the question. I stopped myself just before I said, "Do I look like an athlete to you? I'm old!" I was able to give a little more polite response and said, "Well, I try to stay in some kind of shape." She shook her head and said, "Well your numbers would make 18 year olds jealous." Well, that's encouraging. I was on vacation and was relaxed. Contrast that with early in the year when I had to get a biopsy done. I felt like I was calm about the whole thing, even though I knew they were looking for cancer and the test was not going to be fun. I believed I was calm, but my blood pressure was 160 over something. It was 60% higher! No 18 year old is jealous of that. There was some fear in there, and I could tell myself that I was calm and at peace, but my body wasn't buying it.

The problem for us is that we don't control everything that has to do with those disruptors of peace. We can't control guilt because we aren't perfect. We are far from it, and no matter how hard we try to ignore it, that lack causes guilt. We don't control the many things we fear or whether we have hope. The result of this is that it is not possible for us to have enough control to create true and lasting peace in our souls through our own efforts.

PEACE DOES NOT COME FROM CONTROL BUT FROM TRUST

Proverbs 19:21 says, "Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails." Man does that prove true in our lives. Laurie and I over the years have come up with a number of different plans, and often our plans fall apart in fairly short order.

Military planners say that no battle plan survives first contact with the enemy. We've experienced that a lot. We were talking recently about when Carissa was about to graduate from high school and we were faced with the ominous prospect of college expenses. We didn't have the resources to afford college, but we patched together a plan to at least get close to getting her through one year. We figured we'd deal with each year as it came. We knew our plan was flimsy. It required a

whole bunch of things to go right to even come close to working. The plan didn't survive first contact with college. Within two months everything that had to go right had gone wrong. Our hearts had a plan. It didn't work. To our great relief, God has his own purposes and plans, and somehow Carissa and Toby both made it through college. It wasn't because of our plan. We were talking about that because we also have had the rudiments of a financial plan for the next few years of our lives. Admittedly it is flimsier than our plan for college. We were talking about our plan and we discussed how usually when we have a plan in fairly short order it blows up. Sure enough, recently our financial plan ran into reality and suffered a big setback. This verse is a hugely important one. Yes, many are the plans in the Myatts' hearts, but it is the Lord's purpose that prevails. That's what gives us hope.

Proverbs 16:9 has the same message. It says, "In their hearts humans plan their course, but the Lord establishes their steps." We plan where we want to go, but the Lord decides where we actually end up. These verses are asserting the sovereignty of God. They claim that God rules in this world in everything. Proverbs 16:4 says, "The Lord works out everything to its proper end, even the wicked for a day of disaster." In other words, people can oppose God, determine they absolutely refuse to do his will, but somehow they end up doing what he decides.

No one is exempt from God's rule in this world. The English Standard Version of Proverbs 21:1 says, "The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord, he turns it wherever he will." In his commentary on Proverbs Duke University prof Dr. Roland Murphy wrote that when Proverbs was written kings were the considered the greatest, the most powerful of humans. This verse says the most powerful people on the planet are within God's control, for he can turn them where he wants.

We think often that the key to real peace is having control, which means being able to determine the outcome of events. We want to be able to make people do what we want and events go the way we want, and if we can exert that kind of control then we can relax. That's when we can be at peace, and not until then.

When I was in my 20's there was a period where following the lead of my brother I and a number of friends decided we wanted to play ice hockey. But to play ice hockey you had to learn how to ice skate. So we started working on ice skating. I recall one evening where we were at an ice rink and were trying to learn how to do hockey stops. That's where you jam your skates on the ice sideways, perpendicular to the direction you are traveling. We were not attempting this at a high rate of

speed. Nevertheless, one of my buddies tried it, but instead of successfully jamming his skates so they slid sideways causing him to stop, he just ended up turning in a tight circle and falling over. He slammed down face first on the ice, broke his nose and cut his forehead. That process of learning to skate as an adult goes slowly. You start off sort of scooting along, not wanting to get too far from the boards. You don't want to go very fast, because when you get up even a little speed you feel out of control. When you are out of control you are fearful. You are not at peace. Contrast that with the guys you see playing in an NHL game. What they do on the ice is amazing. They are totally confident, completely at ease on the ice because they are in control. That's the issue in life. When we are in control and have the power to determine how everything turns out, we are confident, at ease, at peace. But when life is out of our control we are fearful, anxious, the farthest thing from at peace.

The problem for us is, for the most part control is an illusion. Our efforts to grab control of people and circumstances cause relational problems and they end up frustrating us because we can't control what people do and how things go. The control freak will never really be at peace in this world, because control is not possible for us.

A couple of weeks ago our son, Toby, got some sad and upsetting news. One of his college friends had died. Toby and this friend were in a fantasy football league. He was in contact with his friend about possibly doing a trade of players. Everything seemed fine. Two days later his buddy died of kidney disease. He was being treated, and they thought it was under control. How can you have peace in a world where a 34 year old man dies, seemingly with almost no warning?

The message of Proverbs 19:21 is that peace isn't found in having the power to control everything. It is found in knowing that God controls things. This gives us peace because God is good and can be trusted to do what is for our good. Peace comes through trusting his control, not ours. Proverbs 19:21 reminds us that real peace comes from being connected to God, knowing our worth in him, knowing he has a purpose for us, and trusting in his plan and purpose for our lives. That's when we can be calm, secure and at peace.

APPLICATION

To truly experience peace:

WE MUST VALUE GOD'S PURPOSES ABOVE OURS

We want control so that we can make things go the way we want. Ceding control to God can be a bit unnerving. We've been hearing about a future with self driving cars. Talk about unnerving. You have to let go and trust a machine, believing it can drive the car better than you, that it will get you to your destination more safely and efficiently than you could. Wow, that's a lot to ask. I try to envision myself taking my hands off the wheel and my foot off the pedals. I don't know about that.

This Proverb encourages us to do the same thing with God. Take your hands off the controls, sit back and relax. Leave the driving to God. Yeah, but what if God's purposes involve me getting ruined? Let's remember a truth we considered recently. God is good, and everything he does is good. His purpose for us is good. Romans 12:2 tells us to not be conformed to the world around us, not be pressured into its ways, but to "be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is, his good, pleasing and perfect will." Never forget that last part. His will is good, pleasing and perfect! His purpose in your life is good.

Yes, at times it may involve disappointment and even pain. We live in a fallen world, and because of that we see a principle at work a lot, that almost everything good is developed through work, stress and hardship. So we ask, was God's purpose for Joseph good, pleasing and perfect when he was sold to slavers by his brothers and when he was falsely accused of sexual assault and thrown in prison? It sure didn't feel like it. It wouldn't to me, at least. But all of that had to happen to get Joseph to the place where he became the second most powerful man in the world at the time, and was able to save his own family from starvation.

Writer and journalist Nicole Cliffe led what she described as "a very pleasant adult life of firm atheism." She said, "The idea of a benign deity who created and loved us was obviously nonsense." She went on to say, "I had no untapped, unanswered yearnings." But one day she was worried about her child and out of the blue, to her own surprise she said to an empty room, "Be with me." Almost unbidden, her mouth had just uttered a prayer. She said it was embarrassing. But the situation that provoked that outburst resolved and she brushed it off, not thinking of it again. But some time later while she was reading an obituary of Christian philosopher, professor and writer, Dallas Willard, she burst into tears. Later that day it happened again. Then it started happening when she brushed her teeth, took a shower, fed her kids. She had a Christian friend and set up a phone call to talk about this with her friend. She says, "But an hour before our call, I knew: I believed in God. Worse, I was a Christian." She was crying because she knew Jesus was who he said he was,

and that she knew God was real and loved her. She became a follower of Jesus. She says, “My conversion has granted me no simplicity. It has complicated all of my relationships, changed how I feel about money, and messed up my public persona. Obviously, it has been very beautiful.”

I love what she said. Her conversion to faith in Jesus and his purposes has turned her life upside down. It has made it way more difficult. And it has been beautiful. That’s what the Scripture says will always be true when we trust in God’s purposes for us. It may not be easy, but it will be good.

WE MUST DO LIFE GOD’S WAY

We will have to fight the tendency to grab control back, to stop trusting God and to do things our way. When we do that we start interfering with our connection with him, we make bad choices and we pile up guilt in our souls. All of that disrupts peace. The simple truth is you will never be at peace by disobeying God.

This is not hard to understand. When we disobey God we may try to quiet the voice inside but we know somewhere in there we aren’t doing what we should. That causes dissonance. It causes guilt that eats at us no matter how much we try to suppress it. Laurie had a conversation with a friend who grew up knowing the gospel, but who has rejected God’s rule in his life in some significant ways. He is still quite religious and insists that all is good with him. He even has a leadership role in a ministry. He refuses to acknowledge his rebellion or admit all is not well. But in an honest moment he said, “One weird thing is I can’t pray.” Well sheesh. Why do you think that might be? It’s because he’s not at peace with God!

In Psalm 32:3-4 David wrote of a time when he disobeyed God and didn’t deal with it. “When I kept silent my bones wasted away through my groaning all day long. For day and night your hand was heavy on me; my strength was sapped as in the heat of summer.” That is not peace! The best way to create turmoil in your heart is disobey God. Those who disregard God will never find the true peace they long for.

I recently encountered an interesting example of that. It had to do with whether couples are going to do things the world’s way and live together as the world says should be the norm, or do what God has instructed and wait until they get married to live together. The world tells us that living together is reasonable, makes sense and is no big deal. But there was an interesting study recently published in the *Journal of Environmental Psychology*. Scientists at Temple University and the

University of Utah wanted to test to see if there were any differences between women who were cohabiting with a man and those who were married. The test involved administering a small electric shock to their ankle. They were offered a choice. They could hold the hand of a stranger, they could hold the hand of their significant other, or they could go it alone as the shock was administered. As the researchers administered the shock they were doing an MRI of the brains of the women. The married women's brain showed they were experiencing great comfort from their husbands as they prepared for the shock. The women who had live in partners all said they felt commitment from the partner, but their brains did not register that comfort the married women felt. They actually registered the same level as women who were holding the hands of strangers, and it was significantly less. In other words, they claimed the same comfort the married women had, but their brains showed the truth. They did not, in fact, experience that comfort. It was a reminder that you can tell yourself doing it your way is fine, but reality tells a different story.

My point here is, if you trust God, you will do what he says. And doing what he says will be a source of great peace. Refusing to trust him and do what he instructs will make peace impossible. It disturbs our lives.

WE MUST TRUST EVEN WHEN IT DOESN'T SEEM TO BE WORKING

The first weekend in November was a bit crazy for Laurie and me. Laurie had to go to the women's retreat and lead music there on Friday and Saturday. She came home Saturday night. We had the time change that night. Sunday we had church, which is exhausting for us. We had a man in our house that day doing some work. Then we had to pack for a vacation that began with a flight very early Monday morning. We had the first flight out that morning, which meant we had to wake up at 3:30 in the morning in order to pack those few last things, get ready, get a bite to eat and then get to the airport in time to catch the flight. We didn't get to bed as early as we would like. And for some reason, when we have to get up for a flight that early I don't sleep that well. But somewhere around 12:30 I finally fell into a deep sleep. It didn't last. I was rudely awakened by a panicked Laurie, shaking me and saying, "Rick, it isn't working! The alarm you set isn't working. It's 3:45 and the alarm didn't go off. We're behind schedule. We've got to get moving right now!" Remember I said the time changed Saturday night. In all the packing I hadn't had time to reset the clock on my nightstand. I set the alarm on my phone instead because it automatically adjusts to the time change. Wearily I said, "Laurie, dearest, I haven't reset that clock. It's 2:45, not 3:45. Everything's fine." We still had some time to sleep. She went back to bed, I settled down, and managed to drift

back off to sleep. Not for long. Suddenly Laurie was shaking me and saying, “It’s not working,” again. I said, “What?” She said, “The alarm didn’t go off. It’s already 3:20. We have to get up.” I said, “Laurie, the alarm hasn’t gone off because it’s set for 3:30. That’s when we figured we need to get up, remember?” Unfortunately, there was no point in trying to go back to sleep for a few more minutes. We just got up and got on with the day. Wow, was I tired that day.

There absolutely will be times in your life when you will think, “It’s not working!” What you are experiencing does not feel like the good and perfect will of God. It feels like a train wreck. Hebrews 10:35-36 addressed people who were right there. They put their faith in Jesus, sure that they had found their Messiah, and expected to experience the blessings that they had been taught Messiah would bring. But they had gotten hardships, rejection, loss, hatred, opposition and relentless persecution. At first, knowing Jesus had warned about this, they stood strong. But it never got better. It never let up, and now they were starting to cave in. Weary of all the difficulties they were tempted to give up and quit believing in Jesus. The writer said, “Do not throw away your confidence, it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God you will receive what he has promised.”

We need to remember Abraham and Sarah. God promised them a son. Great, that’s what they wanted more than anything else in the world. Now God was going to give them a baby. And nothing happened. Years went by, no baby. Decades passed, nothing. There were a couple of occasions where Abraham and Sarah said, “It’s not working!” But just like the alarm was working just fine that night, God’s plan and purpose was just fine. They waited until the opportunity to have a child had passed. It was no longer possible. It wasn’t working. And then God gave them a son.

Joseph, as previously mentioned, had a similar thing happen. Sitting in a prison, falsely accused, totally abandoned, I suspect there were days where he said, “It’s not working.” But God’s plan was working the entire time, even though it didn’t feel like it. Just like Laurie needed to wait, to trust the phone’s alarm would work, so God’s people, including us, need to learn to wait patiently, knowing God’s purpose will happen.

WE MUST BELIEVE IN THE PRINCE OF PEACE

Luke 2:14 says the angels announced the birth of the Messiah with the words, “Glory to God in the highest heavens and on earth peace to those on whom his

favor rests.” Isaiah said he would be the Prince of Peace. In Ephesians 2:14 Paul said of Jesus, “he himself is our peace.” In Colossians 3:15 Paul instructed, “Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.”

It is through Christ’s love, grace and presence that we will experience peace. He gives us forgiveness to deal with guilt. He gives an open, living connection to God and he gives us security, for nothing will ever separate us from his love. He gives us hope for eternal life, and even now for every moment of life for he will be in all that happens and will make it all meaningful, will bring good out of all of it for us.

These are the necessary foundations of peace. Jesus promised he will never leave us, and that he has real, powerful peace that can flood our souls no matter what may be happening in our lives. The fundamental issue for us is can we trust that God actually is at work in this world? Is he really working for our good and actually affecting things in our daily activities? The Bible insists he is. He is real, he is here, he is good, and he is active. He has the power to work in our daily lives, and he will do so.

I want to tell you a story that reminds us of the amazing nature of our great God. It is a story of something that happened to Christian professor and author, Tony Campolo. He was invited to a Christian college to speak at the school’s chapel service. Before the service began a group of faculty members took him aside to pray for him. They had him kneel down, they all laid their hands on him and they began praying. He said they prayed for a long time. He began to get impatient as their prayers went on and on, but it got really bad as they prayed for things that had nothing to do with him or the chapel service. At one point, one of the professors started praying for some man named Charlie Stoltzfus, whom Campolo had never heard of. It got ridiculous when the prof prayed, “Lord, you know Charlie Stoltzfus. He lives in the silver trailer down the road a mile. It’s down the road on the right.” Campolo was thinking, “You have to be kidding me! Do you think you have to give God directions?” But the man went on. He prayed, “Lord, Charlie told me this morning he’s leaving his wife and 3 kids. Please step in and do something. Please bring that family back together.” Mercifully the guy eventually stopped, the prayer time ended and Campolo gave his speech. After the service he got in his car and got on the Pennsylvania Turnpike to drive home. He noticed a hitchhiker and felt compelled to pick him up for some reason. He stopped, the man got in his car and they headed down the turnpike. After a few minutes Campolo said, “My name is Tony Campolo. What’s your name?” The guy answered, “It’s Charlie Stoltzfus.” Campolo was so startled by this revelation he almost drove off

the road. He managed to control himself, but took the next exit off the turnpike. He got back on the turnpike headed back the opposite direction. This made his passenger quite nervous and he asked, "Hey, what are you doing? Where are you going?" Tony said, "I'm taking you home." Charlie, now suspicious, said, "How do you know where to go? And why are you taking me home?" Campolo said, "You've just left your wife and 3 kids, right?" At that point Charlie plastered himself against the passenger door as far from Tony as he could get, clearly concerned about what was going on and what this guy might do. Tony, after the prayer time, knew the directions, so he drove right to Charlie's silver trailer. That really finished poor Charlie off. His eyes got huge and he said fearfully, "How did you know I live here?" Campolo said, "God told me." It was an unusual way, but he felt God had told him. When Charlie opened the door to the trailer his wife burst into tears, crying, "You're back, you're back!" Charlie began whispering in her ears, keeping his eyes on Tony the whole time, and the more he talked the bigger his wife's eyes got. Tony said, "You two sit down. I'm going to talk and you're going to listen." He said, "Man, did they listen." That day he led them to faith in Jesus Christ and they began a new life together.

God works out everything for his purposes. He is working in your life and in mine. The only true source of peace, peace that can sustain us when there is tumult in our world, is to know with certainty that God is good, he is at work, and we can trust his good and perfect will.