

Stand Firm

Philippians 4:1-9

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

October 11, 2026/Twentieth Sunday After Pentecost/Thanksgiving Sunday

Last week, I clicked on an article about the late Canadian rock star Sass Jordan.

I'm not exactly sure why—I was never really much of a fan of hers. I hadn't even heard her name in decades, but I remembered that she was a relatively big name when I was a teenager. I suppose the music that was in the air in our formative years never really leaves us.

At any rate, a few sentences into the article, I was struck by a quote from her one-time manager Jake Gold:

She believed in positive energy and spreading love... She was in tune with the universe in that way.¹

I paused and pondered that statement. Particularly that last part. *She was in tune with the universe in that way...*

It's probably not realistic to expect too much philosophical or theological sophistication from the manager of a rock star.

¹ <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/culture/music/article-montreal-rocker-sass-jordan-made-us-believers/>

But does “the universe” care about positive energy and love? What might it even mean to speak of “the universe” having values and moral preferences?

We use the word “universe” to refer to all existing space, time, matter, and energy combined into a single, massive whole—stars, planets, galaxies, dark matter, dark energy, and empty space. All of it.

Does this whole package prefer positive energy (as defined by human beings) or love (again, as defined by human beings)?

Like last week I poked a bit at expressions like “be authentic” or “be true to yourself.” This week I’m doing it with “the universe.”

I think the expressions we use in our culture speak volumes about our assumptions and about the shape of our hopes.

It seems to me that many in our culture increasingly use “the universe” as a substitute for “God.” I regularly read or hear expressions like:

- **The universe has a plan for you.** The universe apparently directs our lives toward a particular destination.
- **The universe gives you what you need, not what you want.** The universe takes on the role of a wise teacher who knows what's best for us.
- **The universe is redirecting you.** A disappointment or closed door becomes a purposeful intervention rather than simply an unfortunate circumstance.
- **Trust the universe.**

It seems to me that in a world where many people increasingly find the idea of a personal God who created us and the world, who makes claims upon us, and who is guiding it toward a destination hard to believe in, “the universe” fills the gap.

“The universe” is something we say to avoid speaking of God.

We want to preserve the idea that there is some force out there that has our best interests in mind, but we’d prefer to get rid of notions of a personal God who intervenes in history or who can demand things of us or hold us accountable.

I don’t think this works (obviously). Either the universe was intended or it wasn’t. Either the universe points to a someone or *wanted* the world to be and has moral purposes to its creation, or some combination of time + chance is the brute fact behind the universe.

There seems to be no avoiding this basic choice, in my view. And if we get rid of a personal God, it seems like time and chance are what we are left with.

And if the universe just *is*, it’s hard to imagine why we would imagine spreading positive energy or love would represent an alignment with it.

The words we use betray the stubbornness of our hopes. Even if many would say there is no God out there who cares about us, we still cling to this idea that love and positivity are part of the fabric of reality. Somehow.

Even if we can’t coherently say how.

///

Well, on this Thanksgiving Sunday, we are obviously thinking about gratitude.

And in a similar way to it making no sense to imagine love and positivity as aligning with “the universe” unless the universe was made to reflect these things, I think it

makes no sense to speak of “gratitude” without presupposing someone to whom this gratitude is owed.

For the last three Sundays, we’ve been in the book of Philippians.

Paul wrote this letter from prison cell, mostly likely in Rome around 60 A.D. And yet it is his most joyful book. The prospect of his death looms large, and yet he is animated by a confident hope.

We might say that Paul’s letter is full of positive energy and love, despite circumstances that to all outward appearances would not obviously be calling these things forth.

The reason for Paul’s gratitude, joy, and hope in the face of suffering is quite simple. He is not aligning himself with an impersonal universe. Rather, he has anchored his trust in the promise of the God made fully known in Jesus Christ.

This is what grounds the words he begins this chapter with: “Stand firm in the way of the Lord, my beloved” (4:1).

This is followed by these delightfully specific references to Euodia and Syntyche, two prominent Christian women (and leaders) in the church who were apparently disagreeing about something.

We know next to nothing about these two women or the nature of their conflict. But it is one of many reminders that the bible is not an abstract repository of theological principles and doctrines, but a story full of real people, real churches, real conflicts, real stories. This is where God is to be found.

(And I can't help but note that despite Paul at times getting a bad rap for some of what he says about women, it seems clear that even a few decades after the death and resurrection of Jesus, women were clearly playing an important leadership roles in the early church!).

And then, a few verses later, what I think is one of the most beautiful and hopeful verses in all of Scripture:

And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7).

This verse is a promise that has sustained followers of Jesus from the Apostle Paul down through the ages. These words have been experienced to be true by Christians in all kinds of circumstances, including deep suffering.

The peace of God, standing guard over our hearts and minds. What an image! What a promise.

And yet, the peace of God can often seem elusive.

"Peace" is one of those words like "hope" and "love" (or "universe")—they roll off the tongue easily, but sometimes we barely know what they mean. Or they seem far from reality, always eluding our grasp.

The peace of God can be elusive. There's so much out there that wars against an experience of the peace of God, whether it's big stuff like anxiety about the future of the planet or political strife that seems to have no end, to "ordinary" personal suffering that we all go through.

What do we do with these words about the "peace of God?"

Well, I learned long ago that bible verses should always be read in context. And so, what is the context of Paul's words about the peace of God guarding our hearts and minds?

Right *before* this verse, Paul says this:

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in every situation, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God (Phil. 4:4-6).

Joy, gentleness, prayer, thanksgiving. Important dispositions, these, particularly on this Thanksgiving Sunday where we are reminded of the importance of gratitude.

Surely lives devoted to these things are lives that are well-positioned to experience the peace of God. I seem to encounter three articles a week advocating the importance of gratitude and focusing on the positive for mental health.

And then the words immediately *after* verse 7:

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things (Phil. 4:8)

This is more undeniably good advice, surely, for those seeking the peace of God. It is undeniably true that what we choose to focus on affects our mental and spiritual well-being.

We have the choice of what we will attend to. We sometimes forget this.

We can be led around by hysterical headlines or the endless suggestions from Amazon or Google or social media. We can allow our attention to be colonized by massive corporations that have a vested interest in keeping us anxious, restless, and afraid. This is easy enough to do.

We can feed the things that make us anxious and afraid.

But we can also choose to pay attention to what is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy. We can attend to what is right and hopeful and good in the world and in our lives.

All of this is good advice and we know intuitively that Paul is right. These are all good things that would contribute to more tranquil minds and more settled experiences of the peace of God.

But there's a question lurking in the background here, isn't there? If this is God's peace, why does it seem like I have to do a whole bunch of things to get it?

Is Paul giving us a moral checklist here? Is he itemizing all of the character traits, dispositions, and disciplines that are the prerequisites for experiencing the peace of God?

Is Paul saying that if we can just summon up the right combination of joy, gentleness, gratitude, prayer, and positive thinking that this will unlock the gates of blessing and the peace of God will descend upon us?

Is the "peace of God" is just another way of describing the outcome of a formula or a list of techniques that are up to me to do well enough?

What if we don't feel up to the task? What if we can't actually bear the thought of one more thing to do? What if life seems to be crushing us at the moment?

What if what we long for is for the peace of God to stand guard over hearts and minds that are actually feeling kind of heavy and uncertain and weak?

And if it's all about us and what we have to do, how is it the peace of God? Isn't it just the peace of... us?

///

Very often, when I'm struggling with something Paul says I go to Jesus to sort it out.

This is a classic Mennonite move, I know. Historically, we are people who kind of camp out in the gospels and the clear teachings of Jesus rather than the dwelling with Paul's letters. Paul can be confusing, after all. Jesus is clear, direct, straightforward, right?

I went to the gospel of John, to a moment in the story of Jesus surely characterized by heightened anxiety and a decided lack of tranquility—the moments Jesus spends with his disciples right before he was led out to his execution.

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid (John 14:27).

We return to this idea of peace as a gift. Something we don't create or conjure up. Something that is settled, secure. Something that doesn't depend on how the world or our lives are going at any given moment.

Something that is given to us by Jesus Christ. The peace of God is inextricably tied to the God of peace.

Not an impersonal “universe,” but the God who created us the world as an expression of love, whose love sustains it moment by moment, and whose love will ultimately redeem and renew it.

The peace of God proceeds out of this bedrock trust that God is sufficient.

Nothing bad that we endure or that we do is final. No suffering is the last word in our story or the story of those we love.

And nothing good is lost. No joy or beauty or love or truth will fade into nothingness. We don’t have to grasp and cling to these things before they drift away forever because they will be part of the new world God promises.

Of these things, I am deeply convinced. There is peace in this realization.

And there is a profound sense in which the things that Paul mentions in Philippians 4 – gratitude, gentleness, prayer, and joy—are the means by which we position ourselves to experience the peace of God.

It is true that choosing to think about those things in our world and in our lives that align with God’s purposes for us are part of the means by which the peace of God comes to be experienced in our lives.

Paul makes an undeniable connection between the peace of God and our cultivation of specific disposition and disciplines.

Jesus does the same thing. In the chapter immediately following his promise of peace, he gives the metaphor of the vine and the branches, and about how we will only bear fruit—including the fruit of peace—if we abide in him.

We have something to do. We are not passive spectators but active participants in the drama of God's story and in the shape and quality of our own lives, including our experience of the peace of God.

Why would we expect anything else? The Christian faith never leaves us uninvolved in any of God's good gifts.

Forgiveness must be accepted and extended.

Joy must be cultivated and practiced.

Gratitude must be chosen.

Mercy must be received and extended.

In none of these areas do we sit passively by and expect God to download goodness into our lives. All gifts have to be accepted.

///

But in the end, I do love this image of the peace of God standing guard over our hearts and minds. There is great comfort in this.

Even when our present experience is hard, by faith we believe that the peace of God surrounds and sustains us, silently protecting, preserving, beckoning us ever deeper into trust, and into faith, hope, and love.

On this Thanksgiving Sunday 2026, there may be any number of things warring against peace and gratitude in your hearts and minds.

Maybe you're worried that AI is taking over the world. Maybe it's the upcoming Alberta referendum and all the polarizing political tumult around it. Maybe it's the price of groceries.

Maybe it's something more personal and painful. A fractured relationship. A loved one in crisis. A diagnosis that seems bleak. An addiction that won't let go. A future that seems very uncertain.

Whatever might be troubling you today, my prayer for you is a simple one: that you would experience the peace of God that transcends human understanding.

I repeat: that *transcends* human understanding... that exists beyond the rational, the measured and calculated and calibrated... Beyond the natural and logical response to the quality of our circumstances.

That you would experience the peace that stands guard over our world and over our hearts and minds.

My prayer is that we would learn what it means to rejoice always because the Lord is near. And that we would stand firm.

Amen.

