

Reflecting on
THE SERENITY
PRAYER

PHILIP
ST. ROMAIN



THE SERENITY PRAYER

God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference—
living one day at a time,
enjoying one moment at a time,
accepting hardships as the pathway to peace,
taking, as he did, this sinful world as it is,
not as I would have it,
trusting that he will make all things right
if I surrender to his will—
that I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with him forever.



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PREFACE

*God grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

This short prayer has become one of the most cherished in America, if not the whole world. It can be found in forms as diverse as bookmarks, wall plaques, bumper stickers, and collections of inspirational poetry. Millions pray it each day in Twelve-Step recovery meetings, and millions more use it to help sort through the stressful issues in their lives. It summarizes timeless wisdom in just a few words, thus helping both mind and spirit to move more surely into deeper union with God.

Occasionally, one will find a longer version of the prayer:

*Living one day at a time,
enjoying one moment at a time,
accepting hardships as the pathway to peace,
taking, as he did, this sinful world as it is,
not as I would have it,
trusting that he will make all things right
if I surrender to his will—
that I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with him forever.*

Because these lines don't fit on a bumper sticker, they are not as well known. They are harder to remember and pray than the shorter version. When I first read the longer

version, I was immediately struck by its insightfulness and wisdom, so I committed it to memory.

During the past year, as I have written these short chapters, I have done extensive research in libraries and on the Internet, but have yet to come across the full story of this prayer. It is attributed to Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971), a Protestant theologian who taught for years at Union Theological Seminary. The opening lines of the prayer form the basis of a homily he gave in 1934. As far as I know, this is the original version of the prayer:

*God, give us grace to accept with serenity
the things that cannot be changed,
courage to change the things which should be changed,
and the wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.*

I have not been able to find out how the prayer evolved from this formulation (which I like better than the one more commonly used) to its present, simpler wording. Neither have I learned about the origins of the second part of the prayer, which constitutes the so-called longer version.

Nevertheless, my appreciation for this prayer is enormous. After the Lord's Prayer, it is the one that I rely upon most to guide me on the spiritual journey. For this reason, I am happy to help others encounter the wisdom and riches of the Serenity Prayer. May these meditations and the disciplines they suggest lead you to deeper peace and happiness.

PHILIP ST. ROMAIN
October 16, 1996

Chapter One

GOD, GRANT ME THE SERENITY

SERENITY IS SUCH a very nice word! It suggests peace, calm, tranquility, and much more. In the Bible, it is *shalom*, a word that is usually interpreted as *peace* but that also connotes *wholeness*, or *fullness of life*. Everybody wants this, but how do we get it?

As the epigraph from John's Gospel affirms, peace is a gift that Christ promises to his followers. Saint Paul also considers it one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (see Galatians 5:22). Why, then, do so many people seem to lack peace?

I think it is helpful to note that Jesus makes a distinction between two kinds of peace. There is a peace that the world gives; let's call that worldly peace. Then there is the peace that he gives—spiritual peace. Worldly peace is the uneasy truce with fear struck in our hearts when we finally get enough money or gain the approval and admiration of others. It is largely about having and getting. Since it seems that we can never really have absolute financial or relational security, however, worldly peace is always bracketed with anxiety. Even when we come close to realizing it, our minds are still agitated by the thought that we could lose it somehow. Worldly peace can be taken away, and we know it. That is why Jesus contrasts it with spiritual peace, the peace that the world cannot take away.

ALL IS WELL

What, then, is this spiritual peace, shalom, or serenity?

Put simply, it is a deep, inner sense that all is well. The experience goes beyond our systems of emotional or rational intelligence. Rather it is an intuitive or spiritual knowing that produces in us the inner experience of calmness, clarity, and awareness. In serenity, we can live more fully in the now moment, perceiving in acceptance the reality presenting itself without wanting to control things to gratify our selfish desires. There is no need to have or get anything more than what the moment presents; living in serenity itself is sufficient.

Let us consider briefly the powerful testimony of a man who came to know serenity. His name is Bill W., one of the co-founders of Alcoholics Anonymous. Having tried everything to be cured of his alcoholism, he lay on his hospital bed, hopelessly disillusioned about ever feeling well again. His physician, Dr. William Silkworth, had told him that some people he knew were delivered from this addiction through religious faith, but Bill W. was an agnostic who believed that faith in God was incompatible with reason. Besides, he was a stockbroker, a practical man, who knew for a fact that "God helps those who help themselves." Nevertheless, Bill could do nothing more to help himself.

My depression deepened unbearably and finally it seemed to me as though I were at the bottom of the pit. I still gagged badly on the notion of a Power greater than myself, but finally, just for the moment, the last vestige of my proud obstinacy was crushed. All at once I found myself crying out, "If there is

a God, let Him show Himself! I am ready to do anything, anything!”

Suddenly the room lit up with a great white light. I was caught up into an ecstasy which there are no words to describe. It seemed to me, in the mind's eye, that I was on a mountain and that a wind not of air but of spirit was blowing. And then it burst upon me that I was a free man. Slowly the ecstasy subsided. I lay on the bed, but now for a time I was in another world, a new world of consciousness. All about me and through me there was a wonderful feeling of Presence, and I thought to myself, “So this is the God of the preachers!” A great peace stole over me and I thought, “No matter how wrong things seem to be, they are all right. Things are all right with God and His world.”¹

The experience of Bill W. reminds me of a central theme in Dame Julian of Norwich's visions (or showings, as she called them): all is well. In one of her visions, which were given to her by God, God speaks to her: “All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well.”² All is well in God's world and always will be.

Of course, we know that there is a level at which all is *not* well. People are starving, gangs terrorize our cities, the nations feud, we become sick with all kinds of diseases, we get old and lose our powers, we die. It would be dishonest to deny these realities, and it would be ridiculous to say that they are wonderful. Strategies to obtain worldly peace focus on overcoming these problems or defending ourselves against them somehow. There is no harm in doing everything we can to promote justice and health, of course, just as long as we know that our efforts toward these ends will not give us the peace we

so desire. Anything gained through our efforts can be lost in a moment, and we know it. That's why anxiety is never really overcome using strategies for worldly peace.

A TASTE OF HEAVEN

Spiritual peace, then, is not the absence of problems, for we will always have problems. Neither is it the absence of emotional pain, nor the assurance that our prayers will be answered as we would like. As Bill W. and Julian of Norwich show us, spiritual peace is the experiential realization that, amidst the pain and brokenness of our lives, all is well. Our lives are unfolding as they should if we are seeking to walk in union with God. Spiritual peace is the experience of our connection with God whose reign already exists in heaven, even though it has not yet been fully established on earth. Serenity is a taste of heaven on earth: through it, we experience the Spirit of God dwelling in our hearts, giving us the energy to stand on our own two feet and break free from the need to succeed, to impress, to gain power, or to have security. Such peace is the foundation of true love and joy, enabling us to give of ourselves with no thought other than the joy of seeing another grow.

How do we come to know serenity?

The answer is spelled out clearly in the rest of the Serenity Prayer. Serenity is a gift given to us by God, and so it comes to us through our faith relationship with God. Without faith in God, we cannot open ourselves to receive the gifts of God. Faith is more than belief; it is opening ourselves in trust to the One who has created us. It is doing what Bill W. did, as we set aside our pride and rationalism, inviting God to be God for us.

All is well in God's world. When we realize this through our faith connection with God, we experience

serenity. We can lose serenity, however, by neglecting to nurture our faith. During such times, we are thrown back upon our own resources. Anxious preoccupation returns along with the willful desire to manipulate the world and other people to conform to our own deluded model of happiness. We need to see how we do this, and we have to give up on worldly peace. We need only return to God, entrusting our lives to God's care, and peace will return in short order. If we do this daily, serenity will grow.

Do not worry about anything, 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 understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus (Philippians 4:6-7).

