

THE GIFT OF PEACE

John 14:27-31 ESV

{Jesus said:} *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. Not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid. You heard me say to you, ‘I am going away, and I will come to you.’ If you loved me, you would have rejoiced, because I am going to the Father, for the Father is greater than I. And now I have told you before it takes place, so that when it does take place you may believe. I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no claim on me, but I do as the Father has commanded me, so the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us go from here.”*

Peace is what we want. Stillness. Quiet. Calm. For the Roman soldiers who walked the streets of Jerusalem during Jesus’ lifetime, and for the ancient Greeks before them, “peace” meant the temporary absence of war. We, too, would love that kind of peace. But that’s not all we want. We want the noise to stop. We want everything to slow down to a reasonable speed. And then we want our racing hearts to ease back, our worried minds to cool off, and our troubles made small enough to sort through and work out.

They say that 21st century American culture is the craziest, busiest in all history. No country works longer hours or takes fewer vacations. If you’ve traveled or lived abroad, you know this. London is as mile-a-minute as any American city – Tokyo, too, I am told -- but in other world capitals the pace of life is noticeably slower and less tense. In France and Italy no one is *ever* in a hurry, ever. In Germany the average work week is 34 hours and the entire country takes the month of August off. Sandra, Julia, Debbie and Christine report that the lifestyle of Kenyans and Ugandans is almost lackadaisical. Not so in the USA. We are infected with “hurry sickness” and our symptoms are worsening. Peace is the cure. Peace is what we need. But we settle for its most alluring counterfeit: leisure.

We’re willing to pay for leisure, and for its busy cousin, recreation. If we work harder than most people, we play harder, too. Americans spend so much money for so many toys and gadgets to fill up our leisure time that we have to rent extra storage space for them. Leisure and recreation, we tell ourselves, provide time and space for peace, but our vacations fairly wear us out! Travel trailers, second homes, timeshares and cruise ships all stand as testament to our belief that peace is a destination, or an activity.

As I say this some of you are thinking, “Hold on a minute. My life is so out of whack right now that leisure time or a vacation are the last thing on my mind.” For you, peace would be a job, or a better job, or at least some financial stability, or a little money in the bank. How can you even think about spending money on gadgets or vacations when you are sweating out the monthly bills? For you, peace would be the absence of anxiety over the future, the same kind of peace sought by the neighbor who is suffering from a life-threatening illness, or by the wife who suspects her husband is unfaithful, or by the mother whose child is seriously sick, or by the father who’s lost his job and can’t find another one.

You, too, want peace. You long for it, weep for it. Your wish for personal peace shapes your prayer life, which has become distilled down to one or two requests, repeated over and over again, like some kind of mantra: “Please, Lord, get me out of this.” “Deliver me. Save me. Save now. Hosanna!”

That’s what the crowds at the city gates had cried out to Jesus just a few days before this time in the Upper Room. Their hurrahs had been mixed with hosannas, and their shouts still rang in His ears. What they really wanted was deliverance, and they thought Jesus – as king or as warrior Messiah -- could bring it off by changing their socio-economic circumstances. That would be peace enough. And that’s what you, too, may be praying for. Deliverance. Time or money enough. Hope enough, or love enough. Any of these, we pray to God, will bring peace enough.

If so, dear friend, what you are praying for is what Jesus called peace “as the world gives.” In our text passage Jesus offers a completely different kind of peace, peace “**not** as the world gives.” He knew, and our heavenly Father knows, that true peace is not merely the absence of hostility, the release of pressure, or a safe place to get to. Peace, Jesus declares, is a *gift*, one which He alone can bestow. His peace, He says, will consist of more – far more – than smooth sailing, or physical wellness, or making our ends meet. The peace He offers, He tells the gathered disciples, will exceed their fondest hopes, which were, in all likelihood: (1) that He would not leave them, (2) that He might convince His heavenly Father to drive the hated Romans out of the country, and (3) that the legendary age of peace and prosperity which, they had been taught, had existed under the rule of King David, might return to Israel. His peace, Jesus countered, would be greater.

The fondest hopes of some of Jesus’ 21st century disciples, including some in this room, might include:

- a positive change in someone else,
- a miraculous healing,
- provision for or protection from an upcoming crisis,
- relief from personal pain and distress , or
- a significant improvement in our present circumstances.

His peace, Jesus is telling us, will supercede all that. Do you believe this?

Peace has long been for the people of God a key blessing of their covenant relationship with Him.

- The Benediction we often use to close our services here dates back over 3,400 years to **Numbers 6:24-26**, where God commands His priests to bless His people with it:

*The Lord bless you and keep you;
The Lord make His face to shine upon you
and be gracious unto you;
The Lord lift up His countenance upon you,
and give you peace.*

- One of the **Psalms** composed by King David for use in Temple worship includes these beloved lines, which suggest that authentic peace has little to do with one's outward circumstances, and everything to do with trust in the goodness of the God who is sovereign over all things:

*There are many who say, "Who will show us any good?"
Lord, lift up the light of Your countenance upon us.
You have put gladness in my heart,
More than in the season that their grain and wine increased.
I will lie down in peace, and sleep;
For You alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety. (**Psalms 4:6-8**)*

- Isaiah, the old covenant prophet – crazy as a loon, some thought – who predicted that God's Messiah would be called (among other things) the "Prince of Peace" (**Isaiah 9:6**), included these lyrics in his "Song of Salvation:"

*You will keep him in perfect peace,
Whose mind is stayed on You,
Because He trusts in You. (**Isaiah 26:3**)*

For Isaiah, as for David, *authentic* peace is seen as by-product not of happy circumstances, but of a focused, by-faith relationship with God.

So, perhaps, it should not surprise us to find Jesus – the Chosen One, the Messiah – re-affirming, as it were, what had been promised about Him: that He would bring true peace – the Peace of Christ.

And before we consider what this Peace of Christ is, let us consider briefly what it is not.

(1) The Peace of Christ is not a universal “good will toward men,” as so many of the Christmas cards (and the King James version of the Bible) have it. I take you to **Luke 2:14**. When the angels announced to the frightened shepherds the birth of Christ, they sang praise to God. The lyrics of their song have been more accurately captured by more recent English translations of the passage:

*Glory to God in the highest,
And on earth peace to those on whom His favor rests.* (NIV)

The Peace of Christ, or the Peace of God made accessible through Christ, is limited to a specific people: “*those with whom God is pleased*” (ESV).

(2) The Peace of Christ does not create some sort of “brotherhood” of all men. Nor does it make families more peaceable. Consider these troubling words of Jesus, as recorded in **Matthew 10:34-38**:

“Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn

*‘a man against his father,
a daughter against her mother,
a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law –
a man’s enemies will be the members of his own household.’*

“Anyone who loves his father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves his son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me; and anyone who does not take his cross and follow me is not worthy of me.” (NIV)

Yikes! But before you tear that page out of your Bible, let me assure you that Jesus in this passage is speaking of the offense of the Gospel message, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God. It would, He correctly predicted, create divisions among people and even among family members. Those called to follow Him would do so despite the pleas and threats of their parents and their in-laws.

(3) The Peace of Christ does not free even “those on whom God’s favor rests” from the pain, trouble and injustice of the fallen world in which we live. Jesus Himself, only a few days before His promise of peace was offered to His disciples, confessed that He, too, was in distress due to the certainty of His death:

“Now my soul is troubled, and what shall I say? “Father, save Me from this hour”? But for this purpose I came to this hour. Father, glorify Your name.” (**John 10:27**, NKJV)

When we return to our text passage, we are reminded that Jesus made His promise of peace while predicting that the “ruler of this world” – that would be Satan – “is coming.” That fact would, He will later admit to them, lead to a world of total opposition to the message of the Gospel:

“If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you.” (John 15:18-19, NIV)

“All this I have told you so that you will not go astray. They will put you out of the synagogue; in fact, a time is coming when anyone who kills you will think he is offering a service to God.” (John 16:1-2).

Yes, we know that all of this *was* and *is* part of God’s eternal plan for the universe, and we know that Jesus also promised to send His followers powerful help – in the form of the Holy Spirit – to enable us to withstand the slings and arrows of the Prince of this World.

But sometimes, even often, we find our faith wrecked by our circumstances, and the Peace of Christ, whatever it is, seems either long ago or far away.

No one understood this more fully than the Apostle Paul. We do not know how trouble-free and peaceable his pre-Christian life as a Pharisee may have been, but the Scripture record indicates that his Christian life was pock-marked with pain and suffering: imprisonment, beatings, shipwreck – not to mention criticism, threats, and some sort of “thorn of the flesh” – before it ended with his martyrdom. Yet Paul begins and ends his letters with an enhanced version of his culture’s ancient word of salutation and farewell: “*Shalom*” (“peace”). He never fails to add that the peace he wishes to pass along to his readers comes from God the Father and from Jesus Christ.

Jewish folk around the world still greet one another with “*Shalom*,” which, we are told, is a sincere wish for its recipient’s highest good. For Paul *shalom* was no longer a sincere wish, but a present reality, one realized by him in the midst of his busy, difficult life of ministry, one available to all who trust Christ. What, then, exactly *is* the Peace of Christ?

One writer describes it as “the restoration of the equilibrium and richness of humanity’s relationship with God” (Gary Burge). That may be a mouthful, but it is right on the money.

The world is fallen – placed under God’s curse. Its fallen-ness, the result of the sin that runs rampant through it, manifests itself in evil: suffering, poverty, injustice, hatred, greed, exploitation, lust and violence wrought in peoples’ lives. We who are Christians are not immune to this. Born in sin and born into this fallen world, we, too, suffer in it and will die from it.

Yet, at the same time, those who are in Christ may refuse to let the circumstances of their imperfect lives define them. The world is no longer our sole resource; the love of God brought to us and set in us by faith in Jesus Christ is. The “equilibrium and richness” of the Christian’s relationship with God has been restored through Christ. Through Him we can live “kingdom lives” in this fallen world, rising above whatever unhappy or unpleasant or life-threatening circumstance may befall us.

The Peace of Christ is, on the one hand, our “personal” peace, but it is also intended by God to be expansive and enriched as it is experienced and shared in the midst of the people of God.

So Paul, from his prison cell in Rome, awaiting trial for his life, can rightly encourage the people of God in Christ with these sincere exhortations:

*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 everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. (**Philippians 4:4-7** NIV)*

As God’s chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with one another and forgive whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity. Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members of one body you were called to peace.

(Colossians 3:12-15 NIV)

Think on these things, Beloved. And go in the peace of Christ.

Amen.