

Peace...All Times, All Ways • II Thessalonians 3:16-18

Last Sunday afternoon I was sitting in our den when the phone rang and I received a telephone call from a lifelong friend who now lives in Tennessee. He and I went through school together, traveled Europe together as collegians and have kept contact off and on through the years, although it's been some time now since we last talked.

I asked him how things were going because I know that four years ago he left a significant executive position with a national company in order to venture out and start his own business. I asked him if he was making his projections and if the company was yet profitable. He said that it had been a tough four years. He shared some of the business struggles, family stresses and changes in his church. Then he said, "Leith, it's like the parable of Jesus where the farmer sows the seed and some of that seed started to grow and it was choked out by thorns. Jesus said that the thorns are the cares of this world." Then he said, "I've learned about what it means to be choked by the cares of this world."

Well, my friend is not alone. Whether in the hills of Tennessee or the plains of Minnesota, the cares of this world seem to flourish and to choke lots of lives. I'm not so naïve as to say that we are the only generation that has had such difficulties because you don't have to do much reading or research to discover that that is simply not the case. But it does seem to me that we live in a particularly problem-productive generation. Change is rapid and significant. Fifty years ago who would have guessed that a then unknown disease called AIDS would be rampant today? Or that the law enforcement officials of America would say that the tidal wave of illicit drugs in our country has reached a point where they are simply unable to stop it? Or that there would be so many fractured families and divorces today?

The result is a generation of people in des-

perate need of help. If ever people needed inner peace, surely it has to be now. We need a good word. A "good word" in Latin is called a "benediction." And that's what we've got at the end of the second letter to the Thessalonians. II Thessalonians 3:16-18 includes a benediction and a personal sign-off by St. Paul who had dictated the rest of the letter and then a closing greeting. He writes:

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.

I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand, which is the distinguishing mark in all my letters. This is how I write.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

I especially draw your attention to the benediction of verse 16. There are actually two good words in this benediction — very good words: peace and presence.

Peace is inner confidence from God. It is not the absence of strife. The dictionary definitions of peace are not the same as the peace of God. Dictionary definitions define peace as the absence of conflict, the absence of strife or the absence of war. There is nothing positive about it. It is simply the absence of something else.

A historian did a lot of figuring and came up with some not surprising statistics. Analyzing the previous 3,100 years of recorded history there were only 286 years without wars. Less than ten

percent of the years had peace. And during that time there were 8,000 treaties established that were broken, even though

their original intent had been to bring peace to the world.

Ten percent peace isn't much, but it sure beats war! However, there are two very large problems defining peace as the absence of war. One is that most of history, and some would say most

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of life, is war. Ninety percent of history is war of some sort or other. But even more than that, there must be something more to peace than just the absence of war. A good marriage has to be more than not fighting. Or relationships at work have to be better than merely not arguing with the boss. God wants far more and far better than just “no strife.”

And so God offers us divine peace. Divine peace is a deep inner confidence in God. In fact, it is possible to have the peace of God even in the midst of war. Divine peace is not dependent on outside circumstances. It can flourish even when external circumstances are absolutely the worst that they can be.

Jesus demonstrated divine peace before he died. The authorities turned against him, his own disciples abandoned him and he was tortured by pain when the soldiers crucified him. I think it is impossible for us to imagine any worse circumstances than those experienced by Jesus and yet he demonstrated an internal peace that came from God that got him through.

Paul and Silas were first century missionaries who went to the Greek city of Philippi. There they were arrested, illegally beaten and thrown into a dungeon. Circumstances couldn't have been worse but they sang hymns and praised God, giving encouragement to the other prisoners who were in the jail. They demonstrated this amazing peace of God.

It's not an easy thing to describe. The peace of God is a focused conviction that God is in charge and that God is good. It is knowing that he truly is sovereign and that our relationship with God is a million times more important than anything else.

Sometimes it seems that we best understand God's inner peace against the backdrop of adversity. There are those times when things are not as we would choose. Some go through a time of extended unemployment. Others are facing chronic illness, mental illness or a strained relationship. There are the unfulfilled dreams of the infertile couple yearning for a baby, of the entrepreneur who stepped out in enormous faith with

every bit of appropriate planning to begin a new company but sees that it's not going to make it.

There are many things in life that we would not choose but deep inside there comes a confidence that in spite of all these things, God is there. He makes this amazing difference. The conviction that he loves us and that he will make all things good carries us through. He promises that he will walk with us on the highest mountaintops but he also will trudge with us through the worst of swamps and will take us even through the worst of all — the valley of death. That confidence is called the peace of God.

Some years ago you may recall there was a massive earthquake in Soviet Armenia. Large apartment buildings crumbled like sand castles. There was enormous loss of property and great loss of life. Rescue workers came from around the world to help. When everything finally settled down and the bodies were buried, an analysis was done. They concluded that the reason the tragedy was so great had to do with the construction of the buildings. The earthquake probably could not have been predicted and surely it could not have been prevented. However, the construction of the buildings was without reinforcing steel; it was simply concrete. It looked fine and worked fine when the earth was stable. But when the tremors came, those buildings made simply of concrete could not endure the trauma and they begin to crumble. There were no steel rods running through the concrete to hold it together when the earth shook.

The peace of God is the steel reinforcement of the Christian's life. You can walk into a group of people and probably not tell the difference in external appearance between a Christian and a non-Christian. The “concrete” on the outside doesn't look a whole lot different whether a person is a follower of Jesus Christ or not. But the difference comes when the earth shakes and the tremors are frightening. Then, and sometimes only then, we discover whether or not we have the peace of God that is the reinforcing steel that holds us together in the earthquakes of life.

However, the peace of God is not something

that we simply conjure up and decide that we're going to have. We cannot suddenly decide, "I want to have those rods of reinforcement running through me so that when the tough times come I will be able to stand solid and firm." Frankly, it's not our choice to make. The benediction of II Thessalonians 3:16 explicitly says that this is a gift from God. *"Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way."*

It is God who gives us confidence in himself. It is God who gives us confidence in objective ways all the time, through the Bible, and through our life experiences and those of people around us. There is a continual flow of evidence that God is trustworthy.

But he also gives us a mystical shot of peace to fit our current need. When we are told that he gives peace *"at all times"* it refers to the different occasions of life. I take that to mean that in any of the different circumstances of life, when we desperately need that reinforcement, he provides it appropriately at that occasion. And he provides it *"in every way."* The particular Greek word that Paul uses here means "at every turning."

When you drive the roads of western Colorado over the Rocky Mountains the terrain changes frequently and you have to be an attentive driver. Sometimes the road goes through green valleys and the road has wide shoulders, but soon there is a steep upgrade with hairpin curves and switchbacks. You may find yourself at the edge of a road where there is no shoulder or even a barrier and a thousand foot drop on the other side. It's a precarious place to be.

Life is a lot like that. There are all kinds of different terrains and different turns in the road. What God gives to us is a peace that is for "all times and for every turning." It is a peace that enables us to soar to the highest heaven and not be proud. And it is a peace that enables us to walk through the deepest hell of circumstances and not fall into despair.

Peace is the first good word in this benedic-

tion. The second good word is presence. *"The Lord be with you all."* When Jesus promised that he would be with Christians he was not using simply some figure of speech. He was not simply giving us verbal comfort. He really meant it.

Jesus is with us as "really" as we are with each other. He is "omnipresent" or able to be all places at the same time. This had to be hard for those before the twentieth century to understand and believe. In earlier generations it was thought that the only things that were real were those things that could be experienced by one or more of our five senses. But we know better. We know, for example, that it is possible for radon gas to come up through our basement and expose us to danger, in spite of the fact that it cannot be seen, smelled, tasted, touched, heard or felt. Even though you can't see it, it's real. We know about gravity, but we can't see it except in terms of the effect that it has.

We know that reality is not necessarily tied

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to the experience of our five senses. With our understanding of modern science it is probably easier for us to understand the re-

ality of the invisible God being with us and giving us peace even when we cannot touch him, see him or hear him.

But there is an inadequacy to the analogy to radon gas or gravity because they are natural phenomena and Jesus Christ is supernatural! He is not limited in what he can do. He is God! And it is because he is supernatural that he can give supernatural peace. He can give peace inside when we are scared outside. He can be the steel reinforcement in our lives when all the earth is shaking around us. He can do in us and for us what naturally cannot be done. He is supernatural and he is present.

I grew up not far from the Atlantic Ocean and to this day I dearly love the sea. And while I think that Minnesota is a wonderful place to live, in fact I would not choose any other place in all the world, I still say that if God were doing it

over again I think that he should have a sea rather than Wisconsin on our eastern border!

As a boy I often went to the beach. I learned the joys and dangers of the ocean at a young age. It is fun to float in the Atlantic. It's different than floating in a lake, for the salt water gives you a buoyancy that simply isn't there in fresh water. The waves come one after the other and you can jump into them and have the froth of the sea all over you. It's an exciting experience but there are also some dangers that come with it, for there are undercurrents that can carry you out to sea. You can be playing in the waves and then an unexpectedly large wave comes and bashes against you and it takes your breath away. Like life, the ocean is fun and frightening at the same time.

One of my favorite boyhood memories was swimming in the ocean with my father. It was a completely different experience than swimming alone. Somehow the fear wasn't there. When he

came with me we could go out far over my head. We could ride the waves and still be safe. I didn't think at all about the undercurrents. That which otherwise might be fear was changed to laughter. I can even now remember the feel of his strong body with my arms tightly wrapped around his neck. His presence did not eliminate the dangers, but his presence gave me peace!

“Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you.” Amen.

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