

I WANT PEACE

Psalm 29:11

When I was a boy my mother would often say, “All I want is a little peace and quiet.” I didn’t understand what she was talking about. It made no sense to me. I thought things were already pretty peaceful and a little bit too quiet. But as I grew older I came to understand what she wanted. We all want peace, but we often find peace difficult to get.

Wars have been fought throughout all of history; yet for most of us it is not military actions that steal peace but rather personal circumstances. It is family, co-workers, neighbors, bosses, teachers, coaches, students, children and parents who are the center of our conflicts. And when it is not people, the war is fought over money, illness, schedule or the twists and turns inside of our own heads.

If this is a bleak perspective on our lives and surroundings it is meant to be. Peace is neither normal nor common. The more usual state of human experience is turmoil. Life is frequently conflicted. That is why we want peace so much, why peace is so important. We all want “just a little peace and quiet.” We want calm days at work. We want worry-free days of health. We want days with no worries about money. We want days at home when we all just get along. We all want peace.

And God wants the same thing because he is a God of peace.

The word “peace” appears 276 times in our English Bibles. The Old Testament Hebrew word for peace is “shalom” and appears in various forms 350 times. The New Testament word is “eirene” and appears 90 times. The basic idea is the same in both words: “completeness”. Peace is when everything comes together and hangs together. Peace is when things are the way God designed and wants them to be. That peace may be personal peace or community peace. For example, Jews and Christians have long prayed for the “peace of Jerusalem” (Psalm 122:6). In this case it refers to safety in Jerusalem, that Jerusalem may be a safe and secure place.

Peace is such a frequent theme in the Bible because it reflects the nature of God. In Romans 15:33 we find “the God of peace”. Philippians 4:7 says, “. . . the peace of God . . . transcends all understanding.” In other words, it is such a wonderful, powerful peace that we are incapable of fully understanding it. We may experience it but we will never understand it.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is the greatest example of God and peace. The essence of the gospel is that God was brokenhearted over the alienation between us sinners and himself. In order to bring us to peace he sent his Son Jesus to die on the cross to pay for our sin. When we accept Jesus as Savior from sin we come to peace with God. In other words, **God was willing to sacrifice his own Son to get peace with us.**

Whenever we want peace let us always remember that God is on our side. God loves peace. God wants peace. God is at work in our lives to give us peace. God and peace go together.

However, God never agrees to peace at any price. He is never a God of cheap peace, temporary peace or sinful peace. But he will fight for right to get a good and lasting peace.

How does all this work? We live in a world where circumstances constantly surround us with the sights and sounds of war. God calls us to peace. But what kind of peace are we after?

There is a wonderful old story about an art contest to find a canvas that best would depict peace. The judges narrowed it down to two finalists. One painted a serene lake scene as tranquil and idyllic as any you have ever seen. That painting came in second.

The winner was a painting of a raging storm. Looking at it you could almost hear the wind howling. You could see the driving rain and the effects of the storm. Everything was bleak and tumultuous. But if you looked carefully, you would see a bird sitting on a nest tucked in a crevice in a cliff in the midst of the storm. The bird was at peace.

The point of the story is simple: **peace is not the absence of problems or conflict; peace is calm in the midst of the storm.** If we get this point we have a shot at peace in our lives. If we miss this point we are doomed to a lifetime of turmoil. In this life we will *never* escape the storm. But, peace can be ours *in* our storm.

There are different types of peace. Factual peace is the hard solid truth of God. God takes care of us. God is on our side. He provides for us. He protects us. God keeps us safe. We can have complete confidence in God's peace in our lives. We are the birds in a safe nest while the storm rages.

Here is what Jesus says to Christians. In John 14:27 he says, "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." He adds in John 16:33, "I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

What Jesus asserted is expanded in the rest of the New Testament. Romans 5:1 tells us, “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.” And in Philippians 4:7, “The peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

The fact is that our peace comes from God. We are safe. We are secure. We have certainty and predictability in our lives and in our future. God himself is watching out for us. We are absolutely safe in the hands and protection of God.

One day it was my privilege to attend a meeting in the White House. I carried an attaché case in with me and left it at the White House coat check, well inside the secured area of the East Wing. Apparently I showed some concern about leaving it there because the attendant behind the counter said to me, “Sir, if there is any place in the world where your case is safe, it is right here right now.”

The fact is that if there is any place in the world you and I are safe and secure it is in the hands of God right here right now. We may be surrounded by threats, frightening circumstances and bad people, but we are immediately and ultimately safe with God. God is the total basis of our peace. But just because we have peace doesn't mean that we experience what we have.

As we continue in our Christian lives we experience the peace of God. God gives us peace at times and places where we would never otherwise have it. Not because we have great faith or have people all figured out. God just gives us peace.

It has happened to me. Charleen and I have been caught in overseas wars where people were being shot and killed around us and the threats we faced were very real. We experienced supernatural peace on the inside while war raged on the outside.

It happens all the time to Christians as they face the threat of death, loss of job, serious illness, national crises or tragedy at school. God is there for you. It's supernatural. He sees you through. Over and over I've heard amazing accounts of God taking care of Christians and giving peace when you would expect fear.

Let me tell you what is supposed to happen. Once we have experienced God's care and peace in the past we are supposed to have stronger faith and trust God for his care and peace in the present. The more we see God's faithfulness the more we expect God's faithfulness; the more we expect God's faithfulness the more we have peace.

This was the repeated point in the Old Testament for the Hebrew people. God rescued them from slavery in Egypt, preserved them through a wilderness journey and brought them to the Promised Land. After that the Bible is loaded with reminders of the good God did. The whole idea was that experience should be their teacher and peace of heart and mind would come from the memory of God's past care.

All of this is to say that multiple experiences in the Christian life grow our basis for peace. Every one of us has one or more personal examples of the good God has done in our lives. Get peace now from our own personal proven experience with God in the past.

The problem is that our emotions don't keep up. We have the facts from the Bible and experiences from our history. Those are a solid foundation for present peace, but emotions jerk us around.

I'll make this into a personal confession. This past week I have been preparing for this teaching about peace. I've read articles and books and lots of the Bible.

And I've had a bunch of upsets this past week. They have included family, finances, job issues, health, decisions, schedule and a few other issues that were big at the time but that I can't remember right now. I became upset and worried. I prayed for peace. I wanted peace. I even decided that I had peace. But I still didn't feel peace.

One day I was praying as I was driving. (I know you're not supposed to talk on the cell phone while driving, but I think it's still legal to pray and drive.) I pulled over to the side of the road and told God that I just wanted to feel the peace I'm supposed to be talking about this weekend. It's embarrassing to tell people to have peace when you're upset.

The problem is that our emotions are slow. They often don't keep up with facts or faith. Even if it's true that God is there for us and has given us peace we don't always feel the truth of it as we would like. Our emotions are like those Japanese soldiers who hid out on Asian islands for 25 years after World War II ended convinced that the war was still going on.

It isn't easy. But there are some things we can do to travel the path to personal peace. First comes truth. The truth is that God is there for us and that God takes care of us whether we feel peaceful or not. **Peace comes when we are settled on the inside regardless of what the circumstances are on the outside.** It is a combination of internal contentment, tranquility and certainty whether our external situation is good or bad.

The truth is that God gives us peace because God gives us certainty. God promises to take care of us. We may not feel it, but it's true. Let's see what it says in the Bible:

God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." So we can say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?" (Hebrews 13:5-6)

My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. (II Corinthians 12:9)

God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear. But when you are tempted, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it. (I Corinthians 10:13)

These are the truths of God. These are the facts. This is reality. God is there for us and he will provide.

Second on the path to peace is righteousness. Righteousness is doing what is right. We should not expect to do what is wrong on the outside and experience peace on the inside. Psalm 85:10 tells us that "righteousness and peace kiss each other." And Isaiah 32:17 says, "The fruit of righteousness will be peace; the effect of righteousness will be quietness and confidence forever." When we do what is right we may not get the results we want but we have taken a major stride down the path to peace.

A third step is to pray for peace. Ask God for peace in your own life and in the lives of others. There is a direct connection between prayer and peace. According to Philippians 4:6-7:

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.

An essential step on the path to peace is trusting God. Trust is the deep conviction that God cares for us and that we can relax and depend on him.

Jesus taught that God watches over the birds of the air but that we are far more valuable to God than any birds. Jesus said in Luke 12:24, "And how much more valuable you are than birds!" If God takes care of the birds, he certainly will take care of us!

The most common time for Christians to trust God and experience the peace of God is in the most extreme circumstances of life. It is when we are broke, sick, desperate, totally frightened or completely helpless. When we have no resources of our own we fully trust God.

Strange as it may sound, **we need to learn to trust God for the small stuff in life if we want to have peace because most of life is made up of the small stuff.**

One more valuable step along the path to peace is peacemaking. Some people are peacemakers and some people are troublemakers. Troublemakers not only cause misery for others, they almost always lack peace in their own lives. They may never personally experience peace until they decide to make peace. According to Romans 12:18, “If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” **Be the kind of person who always goes first and farthest in making peace with others. It will grow peace in your own heart and life.**

While preparing to talk about peace I received e-mail from Karen Lindholm, a pastor’s wife from Fargo, ND. Her husband, Ray, had been diagnosed with ALS, better known as Lou Gehrig’s disease. It is a frightening disease that takes away all body movement but leaves the mind bright and unimpaired. It is a difficult journey making most of our troubles seem small.

In the e-mail Karen described what life is like. Ordinary tasks take hours. It takes an hour to get ready for bed at night. Constantly plugged into machines. Four hours to get ready to go to church services. Imagine yourself in the same situation and what it would be like.

Here’s what Karen wrote:

Ray is weakening so quickly we can hardly keep up with all the changes. And yet our lives are grinding along in really slow motion at the same time. He is virtually unable to do anything for himself any longer, and a simple thing like going to bed can take up to an hour before we have every limb in place and no leaks in his breathing system. We spend four hours getting ready for church on Sunday.

He is still able to speak and swallow relatively well, for which we are thankful. We just got a motorized wheelchair and are having Ray’s breathing machine wired into the chair battery so he can venture away from electrical outlets more often. We still have the little problem of getting clothes on him, but hopefully, some kind of lift is in our future to help with that.

Through all of this, God has been our constant strength, meeting our needs in unimaginable ways. God is so good and gives us great peace in the midst of overwhelming loss.

And then she quotes from II Corinthians 4:16-18:

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

How did she put it? “God is so good and gives us great peace in the midst of overwhelming loss.” That is what the Bible is talking about when it says, “the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”