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The same night Jesus was taken by the soldiers of the high priest, He said something important about peace. In His last moments with the disciples in the upper room 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" (John 14:27).

People use the word *peace* in a variety of ways. In this last conversation with His disciples, however, Jesus took special care to distinguish between the varieties of peace that might be experienced. He took care to isolate what kind of peace the Spirit of God brings.

Peace Related to Others

Often, people think of peace in terms of their relationship with other people. On the small scale, peace might relate to the people with whom we come in contact from day to day. On the large scale, peace becomes a matter of relationship between nations. War is the ultimate example of the absence of peace. Between individuals, fighting or arguing represents the absence of peace. Typically, peace means the absence of violence or conflict for most people.

A few years ago the relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union was described as "peaceful coexistence." Nikita Khrushchev enjoyed using the term. That relationship was also called the "cold war." The relationship between the two countries had an absence of killing, but there was an intense conflict marked by high anxiety over the threat of war: the possibility that war was just a button push away. I remember people building bomb shelters. I remember that we started digging one but were too lazy to finish. A family I knew had planned to put in a swimming pool, but instead they built a bomb shelter. High anxiety and fear of what might come marked the age.

In Jesus' time a comparable relationship existed between the Jews and Rome. The Roman Empire spread out and engulfed an area that included what had been the ancient kingdom of Israel. The Jews were not at war with Rome, but at the same time they were hardly at peace. An intense alienation existed between the Jews and the Roman army that occupied Judea. The temple represented the alienation in graphic terms with its inner court for the Jews and its outer court for the Gentiles. A decided mark, a line of demarcation, separated the two groups. Rudyard Kipling expressed the same sentiment in the opening lines of his poem "The Ballad of East and West": "Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet."

Somehow we can persuade ourselves that some other person, or perhaps some other nation, is our enemy whether we are fighting or not. Anxiety and fear about that enemy haunts us every day. We even use terms such as "traditional enemies" in international relations. This term marked the attitude of the French and Germans toward one another for centuries. They were enemies as a matter of policy. The Irish and the English are traditional enemies. People become used to being enemies out of habit and practice. If traditional enemies are not currently killing each other, we may call that peace.

Peace Related to Ourselves

Jesus told His disciples, however, that He was not giving peace the same way that the world gives it. His peace begins not with others but with ourselves. Peace is a dimension of spiritual life to be experienced within. The Jesus that promised His peace is the same Jesus who promised there would be war until He returned again. Therefore, His promise of peace was not a promise that there would be no conflict. His promise of peace was not a promise that there would be no war. Jesus did not define peace as the absence of conflict. We must face conflict all our lives; however, Jesus promised freedom from fear and anxiety in the face of that conflict.

Jesus said, "Let not your hearts be troubled" (John 14:1). Jesus meant for us to have the freedom to face conflict with a quiet resolve, knowing that what we do is right, even if it brings us into conflict with people.

The desire for freedom from anxiety has produced several major industries in the United States. People live with anxiety day in and day

out in one way or another. Consider the advertisements on television for aspirin and pain medications. The drug industry thrives on offering something to relieve anxiety. It does not make the problem go away, but it claims to make the tension bearable. For many people, drinking provides a way of coping with anxiety. Alcohol does not make the source of the anxiety go away, but it seems to dull the pain.

Oddly enough, anxiety and fear actually lead to conflict at both the personal and international level. Our imaginations, or as Paul said in Galatians "our passions," flare up, and we wonder what people think about us. We wonder what someone has said about us. We wonder what people do when they are away from us. Our imaginations run wild. Our anxieties and fears take hold of us and actually create a state of conflict that marks the absence of peace.

In the book *The Camp of the Saints*, a French novelist has argued for the West to carry on a great war against Third World countries before they get too strong.¹ Fear compels this Frenchman to want to fight a war. His compulsion does not come from hatred but from fear. Hatred comes later as a by-product of fear, but fear and anxiety come first. Anxiety and fear tear us apart and create a cycle of increasing tension. The Hebrew word for peace speaks directly to the anxious condition of falling apart. The word *shalom* means literally "to be whole." We sometimes use the expression "pull yourself together." Pull all the parts back in place and be whole! An expression that developed among the hippies in the 1960s was "get your act together." Be at peace.

Peace was the name of the city-state over which the priest-king Melchizedek reigned: Salem. When David became king over Israel and conquered the old city of Salem to make it his capital, he changed its name to Jerusalem: God's Peace. Jesus said, "Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (John 14:27). He said, "Do not be anxious about your life" (Matt. 6:25). But how does one do that? How does one go about not being anxious? How does one go about not being afraid? How does one stop worrying? It cannot be done on our own; something outside ourselves must intervene.

Peace Related to God

In the Bible, peace comes as a by-product or a fringe benefit of our relationship with God. Twice, Isaiah wrote of peace "like a river."

(48:18; 66:12, KJV). Two hymns include the same phrase. In "It Is Well with My Soul," Horatio Spafford used the phrase to characterize the best moments of life and contrasted it with "sorrows like sea billows." In the old gospel hymn, having "peace like a river in my soul" is the well spring of joy and love. But what does it mean to have peace like a river? Like a river, peace must flow from some source. It is not self-generated. It comes from somewhere else, and it is moving. Peace comes to us from outside ourselves. Like a river, peace is not stagnant. It does not sit still like a pond. It constantly flows and constantly comes to us. It is not a one-time event that can be stored up and kept forever. It is dynamic.

Peace is not only the absence of the bad things of life. It is not just the absence of conflict, fighting, and war. Rather, peace is the presence of something good in the midst of the conflict. Something good flows into the middle of conflict. Conflict does not go away, but the good that flows in overwhelms it—the good is so much stronger and so much more powerful than the bad—that our spirits are left peaceful.

This understanding of peace like a river came to me in vivid terms on a blisteringly hot summer afternoon while I was preparing a sermon and reflecting on the phrase. In the course of preparing a sermon I usually "fling" myself all over the house before I am done. I had just flung myself across the bed, but all I could think of was how hot I was. The air-conditioning vent is right beside the bed, and as I was lying there only aware of how hot I was, suddenly the air conditioner clicked on, and the cool air began to rush over me. It was still one hundred degrees outside, and the relief I felt was not just the absence of the heat. Something replaced the heat. The cool air rushed over me and replaced the hot, stagnant air. I was overwhelmed by refreshment. How does this river of peace flow to us?

How God Brings Peace

Isaiah indicated how the river of peace comes when he called the coming Savior the "Prince of Peace" (9:6). God began bringing us peace by taking the fear and anxiety out of religion. For uncountable centuries, religion seemed to exist to appease a god and keep that god from destroying us. Hollywood has popularized images of pagan rituals such as throwing young maidens into volcanoes to appease the

gods. In fact, the image has a basis, because pagan religions were filled with constant fear and anxiety, wondering what the gods might do.

But in the Scriptures we find that the “Prince of Peace” came to abolish fear: “For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross” (Col. 1:19-20). Jesus Christ brought us God’s peace so that we do not have to fear or be anxious about where we stand with God. We always know where we stand with God based on His promise. Because Jesus Christ came into the world to die for us, we know for a fact that God loves us. When we trust Him and believe that, we have full forgiveness. Peace begins with forgiveness. The Spirit of God is the river flowing through our lives that will give us peace in any situation.

Isaiah went on to say, “Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on thee: because he trusteth in thee” (26:3, KJV). Trusting God is the opening to peace. The Lord does not give us freedom from conflict. On the contrary, He often commands us to enter conflict. His peace is not the absence of that turmoil. His peace is His presence. His pulling us together is more than the absence of anxiety and fear. His presence comes in like that cool breeze to overwhelm and overshadow the cares that make for worry.

In the Old Testament an expression occurs over and over again when people were in tense situations. The Bible says the person “held his peace.” How does one hold on to one’s peace when a thousand worries or more would snatch it away? In terms of spiritual fruit, how does one bear the fruit of peace?

Having peace involves both pruning—taking away something—and fertilizing—adding something. Jesus said it all in the Sermon on the Mount. Cut out the anxiety and fear. Do not be anxious or worry about tomorrow. Tomorrow will have concerns enough without anticipating or imagining what they might be.

The fertilizing, or the positive effort that brings peace, also found expression in the Sermon on the Mount. Seek the kingdom of God and His righteousness. Practice the presence of the Lord in daily life. The promise of Jesus to His disciples was that He would be with them always. Many Christians accept His promise in theory but lose sight of His presence in the midst of all the worrisome happenings of life. It is impossible to concentrate on one’s worries and think about the pres-

ence of the Lord at the same time. Persons can think about one or the other; they can flip-flop between the two, but they cannot think about both at the same time.

When we are preoccupied with Him, He overwhelms the fear and anxiety of anything we face. He puts all our passing worries in perspective. That last night, His closing words to them before He prayed were, "I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Notes

1. Jean Raspail, *The Camp of the Saints*, trans. Norman Shapiro (Alexandria, Va.: The Institute for Western Values, 1982).