

God, Peace, and the New Testament

Study Four



Christ with his Disciples, Andrey Mironov, 2016

A starter

Are there particular passages of Scripture that bring you a genuine sense of peace?

Key verse

‘Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ’
(Romans 5:1)

Peace Through the Father

(Read Romans 5:1-4, Matthew 7:7-11, 1 Timothy 6:17)

Paul has been outlining the heart of the good news he has been teaching, that those who are sinful can find a genuine relationship with God through faith in Jesus Christ and his saving work, and he uses the phrase ‘we have peace with God’ to mean not an ending to any hostility or conflict, but a gaining of well-being, salvation, and hope. Later in his letter, he will quote from Isaiah 52, ‘How beautiful on the mountain are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace...’

Matthew brings us Jesus’ words to his disciples as he continues to teach them about life in God’s kingdom whilst walking in a fallen world. They may find relationships with others difficult to maintain as they follow his instruction to be careful and discerning whilst also loving and forgiving, but with God the rule

is simply ‘ask’, ‘seek’, and ‘knock’, which are all metaphors for prayer, with perhaps a little perseverance between them. If we are happy to give gifts to our children, then it is a certainty that God gives to those who ask.

In his letter to Timothy, Paul reminds him to tell those who appear to be wealthy not to place their hopes and life’s work in gaining riches, as these can all disappear so quickly.

Proverbs 23:5 tells us, ‘Cast but a glance at riches, and they are gone, for they will surely sprout wings and fly off to the sky like an eagle’. It is far more fruitful to direct thoughts and hopes toward God, who so richly provides.

Discussion

- 1: Is there enough emphasis on peace in the preaching and teaching we hear in church and elsewhere, and thinking of your own local community, how could more be a help?
- 2: How much of a challenge do you find it to ask God for anything in your life?
- 3: Paul talks about God providing us with everything for our enjoyment. How does that fit in with your understanding of the character of God?

Peace through Jesus Christ

(Read Luke 2:8-14, Mark 4:35-41, Hebrews 13:20-21)

Luke brings us some familiar words from Advent, as the angel appears to shepherds in the fields near to Bethlehem. It is a real mix of emotions, with the peace and the shepherds' night disturbed not by robbers or predating animals, but the sudden and (to them) terrifying brightness of an angelic presence, calming them down and sharing news 'that will cause great joy for all the people' as their Saviour, the Messiah, and Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6), has been born. And there's an invitation to visit the family in Bethlehem.

There is much to learn in the few verses about Jesus calming the storm. We might also look at it as an image of those who follow Jesus closely, through calm and storm. Despite the storm, Jesus was asleep on the bags of ballast in the stern, and here we can sense his complete trust in God, compared to the terror of the disciples!

We might also recall that it was the disciples who were asleep at a critically emotional time for Jesus prior to his arrest. However, in this storm on the lake, Jesus brings peace with a word, and reveals that the power that created the wind and rain is there for believers when storm winds blow.

The writer of Hebrews brings us a wonderful doxology, or hymn of praise, to



Annunciation to the Shepherds, Emerson White Hours, c1485

embrace some of his important themes, including the message that the God of peace is with us, enabling us to be the people he knows we can be, through the sacrificial love of Jesus Christ.

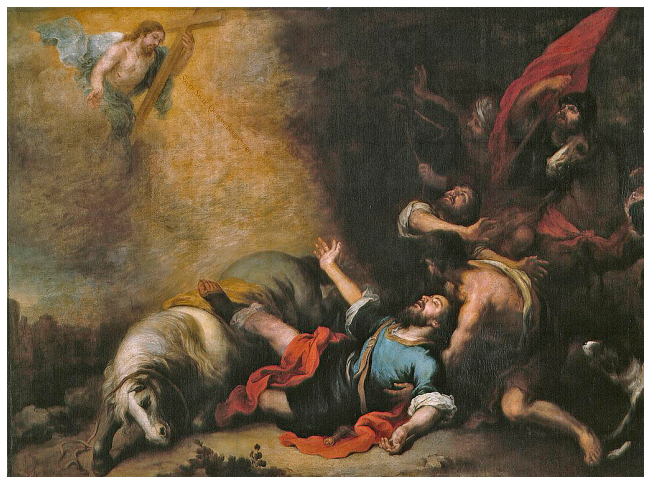
Discussion

- 4: Imagine yourself as one of those shepherds. What might go through your mind as the angel's appearance and message breaks through the darkness of the night?
 - 5: Has your faith brought you peace within the storms of life, and if so, how did that manifest itself?
 - 6: How does the passage from Hebrews speak into our theme of peace?
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Peace through the Holy Spirit

(Read Acts 9:31, Philippians 4:4-7, Galatians 5:19-23)

The story from Acts 8 and 9 chronicles a time of turbulence and growing persecution of believers, with Saul very much at the heart of this deliberate action to destroy the growing church. But then there's the amazing conversion of Saul on the road to Damascus, and within a short space of time not only has his world turned around, but we hear of him preaching in the synagogues that Jesus is the Son of God, 'baffling the Jews living in Damascus by proving that Jesus is the Messiah' (9:22). Paul then thwarts a plan to kill him by escaping to Jerusalem, where he boldly declares his newly found faith, before being moved by believers to the relative safety of Caesarea and Tarsus.



Conversion of St Paul, Murillo, c1680

But such was the power of his message that the church in the entire area enjoyed a time of peace and growth through the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

Paul is telling the persecuted believers in Philippi to imitate the meekness and gentleness of Jesus Christ in their dealings with others, rather than be tempted into retaliation. He knows this works, as it was in humility and gentleness that he worked with the Corinthians, who needed taking in hand a little to transition from the old life to the new. Here in Philippi, the encouragement is not to be anxious, but to present their needs to God, and then rest in the peace which only God can give through the Holy Spirit within us, that is 'beyond understanding'.

In writing to the Galatian believers, Paul contrasts the kinds of behaviour that might be familiar to his readers as having roots in the world (or flesh) with the 'fruit' of the Spirit. The term 'fruit' might suggest that traits such as love, joy, and peace are a revelation of the Holy Spirit in believers' lives, and rather than separate pieces of fruit are connected, as with a bunch of grapes on the vine.

Discussion

- 7: We live in a world that is sadly not short of conflict and persecution, and wherever we live, someone can easily stir up hatred on social media and extreme views expressed by those in the public eye. How should Christians respond in such situations?
- 8: Jesus talked of turning the other cheek, and Paul tells his readers to imitate Jesus's gentleness, to live lives that speak of their faith. How easy is that in the reality of ordinary life?
- 9: Read again Paul's description of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23. What difference would this make to the society you live in if this was the norm in everyday life?

'Peace is not absence of conflict, it is the ability to handle conflict by peaceful means.'
(Ronald Reagan)

'Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love.'
(Francis of Assisi)

'I speak not for myself but for those without voice... those who have fought for their rights... their right to live in peace, their right to be treated with dignity, their right to equality of opportunity, their right to be educated.'
(Malala Yousafzai)

'You cannot shake hands with a clenched fist.'
(Indira Gandhi)

Takeaway

Pray for those who are the 'influencers' in your country, the voices on radio, tv or social media who have many followers, that they might use what influence they have for the common good of all.