

Peace in the lives of believers

Study Five



Hans Multscher, *The Cross of Christ*, 1437

A starter

What can a local neighbourhood do to help bring peace into the lives of those around them?

Key verse

'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.'
(Matthew 11:28)

Peace in difficult times

(Read Matthew 11:27-30, 2 Corinthians 12:7b-10, 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18)

Matthew brings us some familiar words of comfort from Jesus for all those who are weary and weighed down with the burden of daily life. Before this, he asserts his own relationship with God as Father and Son, and it is this unique knowledge of the divine that Jesus shares with those who are his disciples and leads to his promise to be the source of comfort and peace when life is tough. The invitation is to take off the burdensome yoke of the day, be it that of the religious leaders or occupying forces and replace it with his own – discipleship - which will bring rest for their souls.

In his letter to the Corinthians, Paul mentions the mysterious 'thorn in the flesh' which troubled him. We do not know what his problem was health-wise, only that he saw it as something that focussed daily life and mission even

more upon God, his source of strength and power in times of weakness or persecution. God's promise to Paul was, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.' Paul might well see this 'power in weakness' as fulfilled in the cross of Christ, and in that understanding, find his own strength.

The passage from Thessalonians looks at the issue of grieving, picking up from the image of the cross of Christ, and Paul tells his readers that as they believe Jesus died and rose again, so those who have died, and all who will die in the future will find themselves in the presence of God forever. That is where their hope must lie, and where peace is found. Paul sets an example of expectancy for the church of every generation and age.

Discussion

- 1: What would you classify as a 'yoke' that can become burdensome for people today?
 - 2: How easy is it to transition from feeling weighed down by the demands or expectations of the world to taking on the yoke that Jesus offers believers?
 - 3: Have you ever felt that discipleship itself has become a burden, and should it ever feel so, how might that be addressed?
 - 4: Do Paul's words to both the Corinthian and Thessalonian believers speak into your own faith and experience?
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The effects of peace

(Read Acts 7:54-60, 2 Corinthians 1:3-7; Romans 5:1-5)

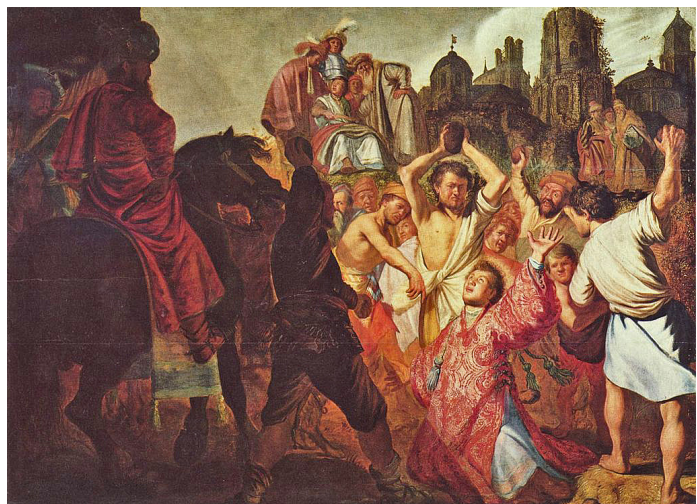
The story of Stephen's death by stoning is both brutal and distressing, and yet this soon-to-be Christian martyr faced it with both acceptance and peace. The original Greek speaks of Stephen 'being filled with the Holy Spirit', so this was his everyday experience and not an additional blessing by God.

It is through the Spirit that Stephen not only finds peace within this terrible moment but also has a prophetic vision to comfort believers watching his death. This echoes Jesus' own words when

asked by the high priest if he is 'the Son of Man?' Jesus replies, 'I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.' (Mark 14:61-62)

Paul, who, in his previous life had been present and approved of Stephen's death sentence, had seen the effect of God's peace and strength in that life, and now knew the same in his own, as he faced opposition to his teaching and the ever-present 'thorn in the flesh' which weakened him physically. So, he speaks to the Corinthian believers with authority, as he shares his experience of God's compassion and comfort, encouraging them to do the same in sharing with others the blessings of peace and comfort they have received from God.

In his letter to the Romans, Paul has been emphasising that salvation comes from faith, not by works, using Abraham as his example in the previous chapter, citing Scripture's words that 'Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.' Now he declares that with a right relationship with God through faith in all that Jesus Christ has done, we find both peace and hope through the Holy Spirit, God's presence within us.



Rembrandt, *The Stoning of Stephen*, 1625

Discussion

- 5: What does the story of Stephen in Acts say to you about faith?
 - 6: How might our life's experiences, both good and bad, be helpful in the sharing of faith?
 - 7: Is there a balance to be had between not relying on 'good works' for salvation, but not neglecting to do good in our daily lives, and where does that balance lie?
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Maintenance of peace

(Read John 15:5-11, 1 Timothy 2:1-4, Romans 14:17-19)

Faith has been at the core of this study, and a discipleship that is not just acknowledging who Jesus is but having a spiritual connection to Jesus deep inside us. The picture we have is for believers to be attached spiritually to Jesus, as a healthy branch is joined to a vine. This is how faith is nourished and flourishes, and as a well-tended vine produces a rich crop of fruit, so believers can live fruitful lives. Jesus tells his disciples this, 'So my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete.'

Along with the spiritual connection with Jesus is the importance of establishing a prayer life, and Paul looks for this in his letter to Timothy. In fact, it is top of his list for a church in Ephesus that needed setting back on the right track both in its teaching and discipleship. Paul emphasises that prayer should not be just for self but encompass all people and situations,

including those who are in authority, so that all might live 'peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness.'

Writing to the church in Rome, Paul has been addressing the engrained issue of one person considering their faith is purer because of the rules of life they insist upon, for example what they will or will not eat and drink, or whether they consider one day more sacred than another. Paul sees this as a distraction that can only cause arguments and prejudice. It is not for us to judge.

The truth is that God accepts us as we are, with a variety of different ways of serving and worship, and that is an attitude all should have, one which leads to true fellowship and peace.

Discussion questions

- 8: Grapevines are not the easiest of plants to grow if our aim is a good yield of fruit. They need encouragement, support, feeding and some pruning. How well does Jesus encompass discipleship in the picture he shares?
- 9: How important is prayer in your daily life and is there a discipline that enables you to accomplish what Paul asks of the churches that Timothy is working among?

- 10: Christians today belong to a wide range of denominations (or none) and often favour one style of ministry or worship over another. How accepting are you of other ways of 'being' and 'doing' church?

'The lessons from the peace process are clear; whatever life throws at us, our individual responses will be all the stronger for working together and sharing the load.'
(Queen Elizabeth II)

'Spread love everywhere you go. Let no one ever come to you without leaving happier.'
(Mother Teresa)

'We are not at peace with others because we are not at peace with ourselves, and we are not at peace with ourselves because we are not at peace with God.' (Thomas Merton)

'I refuse to accept the view that mankind is so tragically bound to the starless midnight of racism and war that the bright daybreak of peace and brotherhood can never become a reality... I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word.' (Martin Luther King, Jr.)

Takeaway

How well do the churches in your town get on, accepting that they are all a part of God's family? Is there more that could be done, to grow in fellowship and understanding?