

2 Thessalonians

Bible Study

Peace of God

2 Thessalonians 3:16—18

The Thessalonians were under attack for their beliefs on two fronts. There were unbelievers who didn't want them to believe in Jesus Christ, including Jews who were jealous of those who were following the Apostle Paul (Acts 17:5) and perhaps family and friends who didn't want them to worship another God (1 Thessalonians 1:9). There were also other believers who backed away from Paul's teachings and attempting to take other believers with them (2 Thessalonians 2:2; 3:6). Their persecution was actually quite intense (1 Thessalonians 1:6; 2 Thessalonians 1:4—7) and was happening to turn them away from the truth of Pauline doctrine.

Unfortunately, the persecution began to work. They became shaken when they accepted a false letter as being written by Paul, turning them away from the truth, as originally delivered by Paul (1 Thessalonians 2:13), resulting in a loss of their hope. It wouldn't be long before their faith and love would soon follow. Being unsettled in their understanding of doctrine and wearied of experiencing persecution, they lacked peace. This is why Paul leaves them with comforting words of peace.

Peace

There are different uses for the word "peace" in Scripture. Sometimes peace between two parties is in view such as between man to man (Romans 12:18; 14:19; Galatians 5:22), man to God (Romans 5:1; Colossians 1:20) or even between groups (Ephesians 2:14—15). Scripture also makes reference to an internal peace that is available to all believers (Romans 8:6; Philippians 4:7—9).

This internal peace, that Paul speaks of, is a peace that is only available to the believer, that does not depend upon external circumstances. This is similar to the joy that is available only to the believer and is separate from external influences. Happiness (or unhappiness) is related to external events, while joyfulness is associated with our relationship with Christ. This is why Paul tells the Thessalonians (and us) to rejoice always in spite of circumstances (1 Thessalonians 5:16). Their persecution and trials haven't changed, but they needed to appropriate both the joy and peace that were available to them.

Biblical peace is a peace that transcends events that happen around us. It is a peace that comes from our position in Christ. It is a peace that springs out of the comfort of God's word made alive by the Comforter, the Holy Spirit. Peace, as well as joy, are listed as fruit of the Spirit and therefore will be evident as we mature in our Christians walk (Galatians 5:22—23). When we learn to walk in a manner that is worthy, we will be walking in the power of the Spirit and not in our own power (Colossians 1:9—10; Galatians 5:16, 25).

The Lord of peace

In all their trouble and persecution, Paul doesn't tell them to be confident, believe in themselves, think positive thoughts, turn that frown upside down or make a 5-step plan. He didn't tell them to form a support group or even to find comfort with other believers. Instead, he pointed them to the Lord. Paul understood, from experience, the importance of putting his full trust in the Lord. Paul was not able to always get support from other believers and he knew it was a waste of time to look within for strength. However, he always had the strength of the Lord and the power of the Holy Spirit with Him.

The God of peace is also the God of all comfort (2 Corinthians 1:3). If you recall, when Jesus said He was going to leave the Disciples, that He would send them another Comforter in His place (John 14:16—18; 15:26; 16:7). From these verses, we can see that Jesus was calling Himself a Comforter while calling the Holy Spirit a Comforter. Just as Jesus would comfort His Disciples with His presence and His word, the Holy Spirit comforts us with His presence and God's word.

I believe there is a strong connection between comfort and peace in that comfort leads to peace. As Paul says in 2 Corinthians 13:11, "Finally, brethren, farewell. Be perfect (be made complete), be of good

comfort (be encouraged), be of one mind (be harmonious), live in peace (get along with each other); and the God of love and peace shall be with you.” As they were growing and maturing in their sanctification through an understanding of God’s word, they were encouraged and comforted. This would bring them together in single-mindedness, and they more likely would be able to live in peace with each other. The key to their peace was an understanding of Scripture, powered by the Holy Spirit, that would allow them to be united in peaceful coexistence.

This same God of peace, who could bring peace among the Corinthian believers, is able to give us a peace that goes beyond our finite human understanding (Philippians 4:7). Those who are in Christ (all believers) have the power within them (the Holy Spirit) to be able to live a life characterized by peace. In fact, the whole Godhead is involved in bringing comfort and peace to the believer (Ephesians 6:23; 2 Corinthians 1:3).

Fear

It seems logical that when you are living in fear, you will not experience peace, but this isn’t necessarily so. Fear is a natural human response to an unknown event. It can also come from not wanting to experience something that you know will happen in the future. The Disciples were full of fear being caught in a storm on the sea with Jesus (Matthew 8:16). They were afraid of dying, not realizing the person who could control the wind was with them. Paul had fears as he ministered in Corinth (1 Corinthians 2:3; 2 Corinthians 7:5). It wasn’t that long ago that he was beaten and imprisoned in Philippi along with Silas. He was then run out of town in both Thessalonica and Berea. His fears were well grounded considering the events of the past. Even Jesus had fears as he faced going to the cross. He prayed in agony and asked the Father to remove this cup of suffering, if possible.

In these cases, and others, we see men struggling with their fears, seemingly without experiencing peace. The answer to their fears was found in God, who is the author of peace. With the Disciples, God the Father, through Jesus Christ, was able to calm the seas. This was done to prove to them that Jesus was their Messiah and is able to get them through any storm. This is also a picture of Jesus Christ getting the Disciples, and believing Israel, safely through to the other side of the Tribulation.

Jesus also found his strength in the Father, who sent an angel to minister to Him and give Him strength, just as He did while being tempted of Satan for 40 days in the wilderness. Having anxiety or fear is not a sin, contrary to what most people teach. However, whom you put your trust in to get through life trials is of utmost importance.

The Apostle Paul was also hammered with fears, but also found his strength in God to continue his ministry. It was God who came to him and comforted him by promising that he would be able to continue preaching without being harassed in Corinth (Acts 18:9—10). The God of all comfort was able to give him just what was needed for him to be bold in proclaiming the Gospel, not only in Corinth, but in the rest of his travels.

Christians somehow have come to believe that fear is a sin. When we have these feelings of apprehension and worry, we think we are operating outside the will of God and that we have failed in our Christian walk. In actuality, God created us to have fear as a means to protect us. If we approached life with absolutely no fear, we would tend to do stupid things and probably wouldn’t live beyond our teenage years. Fear is god-given, and therefore good, if it doesn’t take debilitating control over our lives. I’m glad that God showed Jesus struggling with fears as He was facing going to the cross. This absolutely proves that fearing something is not a sin. Through these examples, the common thread is trust in God and in His word. It’s okay for us to fear, but the God of all comfort and peace has given us the tools we need to deal with the fears and concerns in our lives.

How can we have peace?

We all struggle with feelings of apprehension and uneasiness, and many of us have struggled with guilt over having these feelings. We have accepted that fear is antithetical to peace. I don't believe this is true since fear is on a different plane or level than peace. Fear is the reaction we have to outward experiences or pressures. If we are being physically attacked, it is perfectly natural to experience fear. If we have bad news from the doctor, again it is perfectly normal to have feelings of fear for what the future might hold. It's perfectly normal because God created us with this emotion.

Biblical peace should not be at all associated with external circumstances, rather it is one of the blessings available to us as a result of our relationship with Jesus Christ. That means that there is nothing in this world that can separate us from the peace that is available from the God of peace.

Like joy, we can decide to accept the peace that is ours in Christ, or we can reject it. There seems to be a general misunderstanding of what Paul means when he speaks of our inner peace. We usually think that we should be completely at rest and calm, letting nothing perturb or bother us. But just like most people confuse happiness with joy, most people confuse calmness and serenity with biblical peace. When everything is going well, we experience serenity, in the same way that we experience happiness when something good happens. These are emotional responses to external stimuli. Once the stimuli are removed, the emotional response fades.

On the other hand, when life seems to be spinning out of control, we feel anxiety and a lack of serenity. Similarly, when bad things happen, we can become unhappy. These are all natural emotions in reaction to external stimuli.

So, how do we tap into this biblical peace? How do we live our lives grounded in the peace promised to the believer in spite of chaos, fears and distress? By taking a hold of, or appropriating, what is already ours in Christ Jesus. Since a biblical peace is disconnected from external influences, we connect with this peace through spiritual means. As Paul writes in Romans 8:6, "For the mind set on the flesh is death, but the mind set on the Spirit is life and peace." When we focus in on all the cares of the world, we will never live the life we should be living. When we live according to the world, we strive to please ourselves, including doing everything we can to live a life of peace. We may even have this feeling of peace, even though we don't really have God's deep, long-lasting peace. The only way to have this true biblical peace is by allowing the Holy Spirit full control of your life.

Of course, this is much easier to say than to actually do. When we give up control of self and allow God to fully work in us, we are then walking in the (power of the) Spirit instead of walking in the power of self. This is what being Christ-like is all about. Just as Christ put Himself fully under the authority of the Father, we need to do likewise. It's not about cleaning up the old nature, or forcing ourselves to try harder, it's about giving up. When we follow what the Apostle Paul has taught us, then we will have that God-given peace that is completely disconnected from the world (Philippians 4:9).

Paul was able to live in contentment in spite of the trials and hardship he experienced (Philippians 4:11). Significantly, Paul speaks of his contentment in the same chapter he teaches on prayer (bringing all your requests to God) and our thought life (to think on those things that are above). We can follow his example by immersing ourselves in Scripture, allowing the Holy Spirit to empower God's word within us. We need to be instant in prayer, always in communication with God. We also need to be faithful in following Paul's teachings, because they are relevant to the Church, the Body of Christ.

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