



SOME WORDS ABOUT...

Peace (*eirene*)

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There is an essential difference between the Old Testament word for peace, *shalom*, and the New Testament word for peace, *eirene*. It is a difference in origin and intent. *Shalom* is a diffuse, benevolent peace. *Eirene* is an intense, coercive peace. *Shalom* is human peace. *Eirene* has divine associations and may have divine implementation. *Shalom* is a personal movement. *Eirene* is a social catalyst. It is the New Testament word and concept we discuss here.

Jesus' Use

It is significant that Jesus says in the Beatitudes that peacemakers shall be called children of God. (Matthew 5:9). They live in the house of God, they obey the voice of God, and they work at the tasks of God. They are children of God.

But although peacemakers are children of God, they are hired workers in the world. The work of their hands—peace—must be given to others, earned for others, and enjoyed by others. Peacemakers do not accumulate peace as moneymakers accumulate money. Peacemakers distribute peace. It is in this sense that Matthew 10:13 should be read, "And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you." The apostles are being sent to distribute peace. But the world always has the option of refusing the gift. Apostles of peace offer peace; they do not impose it. Those who are hardened against peace are free to refuse it. Thus, in verse 34 Jesus says, "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword." He may offer peace, but he does not assure peace.

The Gospel of John gives us the most penetrating insight into Jesus' use of the word. In five verses, he shows us the source, the nature, and the task of peace (14:27; 16:33; 20:19, 21, 26).

The source of peace is God, specifically the Holy Spirit (14:26-27; 20:22).

The nature of peace is made clear in 16:31-33. Few things could be less like *shalom* than the peace described here. In Jesus we have peace but in the world we still have tribulation.

Finally, in 20:19-29, we see the task of peace. Peace begins with Jesus (vv. 19, 26) and is to be carried to the world (v. 21). It will reconcile people with God (v. 23).

It is significant that in Christ God's peace can come both to the whole world (Luke 2:14) and to individuals (Luke 2:29). It is not to be understood as restricted to nations or to persons. God's rule is over all and may have its effect through any avenue. But it extends its blessing through those who follow Jesus.

Paul's Use

For Paul, as for Jesus, peace comes from God (Romans 1:7, e.g.) and God is the God of peace (Romans 15:33 and 16:20; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Philippians 4:9; 1 Thessalonians 5:23; 2 Thessalonians 3:16).

When Paul speaks of the peace of God, he does not mean the peace which God has but the peace which God gives. That peace is given both to individuals and to groups.

Sometimes very fussy persons will change Paul's statement "the peace of God which passes all understanding" into "the peace of God which passes all *human* understanding"—as if nothing could pass *divine* understanding. But that misses the point. It is "understanding"—literally, mind (*nous*)—which is surpassed by peace. It is ra-

tionality itself which is surpassed by God's peace, not just human rationality. The social catalyst which is peace is not the product of reason, and God's peace is the gift of God's grace. As such, the peace of God passes all mind, all understanding.

Peace as a gift of God to human personality is similar to peace as a gift of God to international continuity. Peace is the absence of savagery. The instruments of savagery may be neuroses or neutron bombs. Peace holds them in abeyance. Peace drains them of their power. Peace disarms them. And yet peace does not cause quietude. It is savagery which causes quietude, the quietude of death, of cessation. The lance thrust, the gunshot, the bomb blast, these cause the ultimate stillness. They take away the life. They still the pulse. Savagery silences the voice, even the breath. With savagery held off, life can flow, voices can sing. . . .

All of the letters attributed to Paul have the words "grace" and "peace" in the salutation. These represent what we have come to call the vertical and horizontal dimensions of life. In wishing grace to his readers, Paul is speaking as an apostle of the gospel, announcing God's unmerited love to them. In wishing peace to his readers, Paul is speaking as a disciple of Jesus, a peacemaker offering peace to others.

At one point (Romans 5:1, "Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"), Paul seems almost to be referring to the words of Jesus (John 16:33, "I have said this to you, that in me you may have peace."). In our savage world, we need the peace which has Christ as its source.

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