

“War and Peace”

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The only way to fight a war against the devil is to stand in the peace of Christ.

1 Peter 5:8-14

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Middle School war – Pastor Paul

It's fortunate that we had 17 years with Pastor Bill Howell who was in the Navy and gave us both battle and war stories. I don't have those kind of stories.

The closest stories I have are taking the youth to play paintball in Bethlehem. There is a fort that you are supposed to defend, an island to itself. As we begin, we meet in the middle of the fort, and I say to the kids, "Alright, where is everyone going?" A few don't know what to do. I tell them to go to the back of the fort and be watchful because people can sneak up around us. Inevitably within a few minutes, those same kids will be next to me in a trench. I tell them that they can't come to see what I am doing. They have to stay at the back of the fort. It's not that we are afraid of the enemy back there but we have to be watchful.

So far in 1 Peter he has talked about suffering but not once about the 'whys' of suffering. One of the whys of suffering is actually not a *thing* but a *one*: Satan. Satan literally means adversary, enemy. Devil means accuser, slanderer. Job would stand up and tell us yes, Satan is one who causes great suffering.

C.S. Lewis tells us in *The Screwtape Letters* that we make two great mistakes. One is that we fear Satan, and we see him behind every bush. He is not omnipresent or all powerful. He is actually a defeated foe. On the other hand, we can act like he doesn't exist. We don't give him a second thought. So we give him too much credit or not enough credit. There has to be a watchfulness and understanding of who Satan is.

The prowling lion – Pastor Paul

Peter starts out in verses 8-9 giving us a command to “be watchful.” Be a watchman/watchwoman — open-eyed. Be sober-minded, because you are at war.

We understand who Satan is but we don’t understand that he is active. We can be lulled into the idea that Satan is just somewhere out there. Peter is telling us that he is not just an entity out there. He is actively at war and at battle against us. The cease fire in the ending of Satan’s activities has not happened. “The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet” (Romans 16:20). Revelation 20:10 adds, “And the devil, who deceived them, was thrown into the lake of burning sulfur, where the beast and the false prophet had been thrown.” My grandfather would say “We ain’t there yet.” Our enemy’s doom is sealed but we are not there yet.

We think about Satan as a slithering snake. But Peter says in verse 8, “Your enemy the devil prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour.” Tigers and lions don’t nibble. They devour in gulps. We need to understand the danger of this enemy we have. Satan hates you to the point of wanting to devour you. Those belonging to the King are much more of a target than those that Satan already has.

In verse 9, Peter wants us to understand one important truth. It is completely possible for a believer—through prayer, God’s word, and God’s armor—to stand firm and resist the devil. “Resist” has a tame connotation. We are talking about an active standing against and firmly holding our ground counter to what an enemy would do.

Peter doesn’t say in verse 9 to be strong in *your strength*. He says be strong in *your faith*. It’s not sheer willpower. The faith we have is not in our exercising our faith. It’s the object of our faith—Jesus Christ—the One who is absolutely victorious over Satan. The object of our faith is where we draw our strength.

We have this tendency to look at our suffering with tunnel vision. God pulls off the blinders and says “What you are going through is what believers all over the world are going through.” Satan is not omnipresent but he has minions who do his work. We are in a fight together with people that are of different skin color, culture, and in different parts of the world. But we who belong to Jesus Christ bear his name. There’s a solidarity among us because we belong to the King, and we have a common enemy.

Spiritual warfare – Pastor Paul

Having an “enemy” means we are in a war. In this war, there are no conscientious objectors, no draft dodgers, and there are no pacifists in this spiritual battle. We are all soldiers in this war.

If we were to go back in time and put ourselves on the side of a battlefield, you could take any one of these verses and substitute a few words to get a speech that a

commanding officer would give to his soldiers. You can hear the commanding officer before going into battle saying, “Be watchful. Our enemy is all about. He is roaring like a lion wanting destroy us. Stand firm. Remember there are other people fighting this same battle. You are not alone.” It’s battle talk. Satan has come and is at war with the church. Satan is going to attack the church in two different ways.

If an army was going to surround a fortress, there would be two ways they could overcome it. The first way would be to cut off the supply lines—water and food—and eventually everyone inside would starve to death. That can’t happen to the church. As Christ said in the wilderness, “It is written: ‘Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God’” (Matthew 4:4). Satan can never cut us off from that. We can voluntarily negate it by not praying, not standing on God’s word.

The second way is that the enemy could flood the fortress with rich food, rich drink, rich pleasures, and a lavish lifestyle so that everyone inside the fortress got fat and happy. They don’t want to fight or care to fight. This is also an absolute problem with Christians today. We can be so fat and happy of the pleasures of this world that we just don’t feel like fighting. The enemy can creep right in on us.

We may not always see Satan as a roaring lion. We might just think of him more as a conniving snake but that does not mean that we are not at war. Satan’s tactics change just like in modern warfare. The Revolutionary War does not look like the Vietnam War. In the same way, Satan is not always going to come right at you face to face. This is a spiritual warfare, and sometimes we have to ask God to open our eyes.

There are no draft dodgers in this war yet we have been fed that lie that we are pacifists on the side line. We are called to go into places and snatch people from the flames of Satan’s kingdom. We are called to go to the ones Satan has in his clutches and preach the gospel of Jesus Christ. We are called to go to those who are impoverished. You better believe we are going to fight in this war. We are not fighting a war on our own. We are fighting a war that has been won by Jesus Christ.

Simon’s backstory – Pastor Bob

The original title of my sermon was “Peace,” so it’s interesting that Pastor Paul’s theme was “War.” Tolstoy would be proud. The reason I chose “Peace” is honestly a lack of time. I invested a good bit of the week preparing for the memorial service of Dr. Will Thompson, who was a beloved member of the church and a larger-than-life person in the community. On Friday I needed to give my sermon a title for the bulletin, and I just went to the last line in 1 Peter: “Peace to all who are in Christ.”

The service for Dr. Will was on Thursday. Friday’s my day off, and I spent the day pulling weeds, paying taxes, and taking a walk with Linda. Friday evening I turned to my wife and said, “I just don’t have anything yet for Sunday’s sermon. I’ve hardly thought about it all week.” We channel surfed a bit and didn’t see anything that interested us.

A number of people have recommended an online video series called “The Chosen,” the first non-Hollywood multi-season TV series on the life of Jesus. Linda and I had tried watching a couple of episodes and they just didn’t grab us. We’re so focused on what the Scriptures actually say that the writers’ creative fiction was distracting. But, we thought, if so many others love it maybe we should give it another chance.

Episode 4 ends with the miraculous catch of fish by Simon Peter and the others, prompting them to then drop their nets and follow Jesus. The producers had set up that particular scene by portraying Peter as we know him – married, but impulsive, restless, immature. After the miraculous catch, both in the Gospels and in the film, he says to Jesus, “Lord, I am a sinful man” (Luke 5:8). What “The Chosen” had done was to create Simon’s backstory. He was about to be imprisoned or maybe killed by the Roman authorities for failing to pay his taxes. “Good thing I paid mine,” I thought.

Not until Saturday morning did I have my “Aha!” moment. That same “sinful man” – that guy who so often put his foot in his mouth, who once ticked Jesus off so much that Jesus said he was the roaring lion, the devil himself, who denied Jesus three times, who 15 years later was still called down by the Apostle Paul for kowtowing to the Judaizers (Galatians 2:11) – how did he get from “sinful man” to “peace”?

On a scale of 1-10, what’s your “peace number” today, at this moment? The *New York Times* yesterday listed the top events of the first half of 2020. Impeachment trial. Kobe Bryant’s death. Coronavirus. Turmoil in the stock market and the job market. Disruption unprecedented in modern times. George Floyd and protests. More political tugs-of-war. And whatever else is doing on in your private world.

Strategy for peace

Peter wraps up his letter with a benediction and final greetings. These closing five verses offer not only a summary and review but a three-part strategy for peace.

First, perspective (10-11). “The God of all grace,” Peter says, “who called you to this eternal glory in Christ, after you have suffered a little while, will himself restore you and make you strong, firm, and steadfast. To him by the power for ever and ever.”

Peter has written a lot about suffering. Whether your suffering is a stubbed toe or a life of pain and grief, the Bible’s perspective is that it’s fleeting. On the one hand, that feels like it’s not much comfort when you’re in the middle of it. For the believer it is every comfort. There is no other comfort. You just have to wait for it.

Waiting is beautiful if what you’re waiting for is worth it. As I said in Dr. T’s service, I’m not fond of the phrase, “He’s gone to a better place.” “A better place” works for a comparison of Krispy Kreme to Donut Life. It’s not that heaven is an upgrade. You wouldn’t tell an eaglet, “The sky is a better place than the nest.” You’d say, “Soaring is what you were made for.” This life is an Eagle’s nest. Heaven is soaring.

How's your perspective? Are you focusing too much on what you can see? If so, your peace needle will drop. That's true whether your present circumstances are up or down. If they're down, you struggle with peace because you feel trapped. If they're up, you still struggle with peace if you fear things will change. Perspective gives you peace – the “little while” of this life v. “eternal glory in Christ.”

Second, people (12-13). Peter's final greetings include the mention of several individuals and connections. “With the help of Silas,” he says, “whom I regard as a faithful brother, I have written to you briefly, encouraging you and testifying that this is the true grace of God” (12). I like the “briefly” comment in a letter with five chapters!

This is probably the same Silas who accompanied the Apostle Paul on his second missionary journey and served alongside him in Corinth. He co-authored some of Paul's letters, and Peter says he wrote this letter “with the help of Silas.” Think of him like a speechwriter who put helped frame both Paul's and Peter's thoughts into words. I'll probably only write a good book if I can get a good editor. Every Peter needs a Silas.

Peter adds, “She who is in Babylon, chosen together with you, sends her greetings” (13a). “She” is probably the church, and “Babylon” likely refers to Rome. The book of Revelation uses “Babylon” as a code name for Rome as an evil world power, but Peter probably just means “Babylon” in the Old Testament sense of a place of exile. If you're in Babylon, you're not in your homeland. But even in exile, you have people.

He also sends greetings from “my son Mark” (13b). This is probably the Mark who wrote the Gospel of Mark, widely believed to be based on Peter's stories of Jesus and his preaching. Peter may have introduced Mark to Christ.

Finally, he tells his readers, “Greet one another with a kiss of love” (14a). Maybe he should have added, “Except during a pandemic,” or, “Except next weekend at Corinth.” The point of this entire section is “one another” point. It's about Peter's personal connections. It's about “encouraging” (12), “togetherness” (13), and “one anothering” (14).

Following Jesus is never a solo journey. You have people, and you need people. But relationships are always delicate, and that's why Peter has talked so much about submission – in society, in marriage, on the job, in the church. If your peace number is low, it may be because you're trying too hard to control others or obsessing over their attempt to control you.

Even during stay-at-home orders, you need people. If your peace number has dropped, it may be because you've allowed yourself to be too isolated. No, you can't go wherever you want to go – not yet – but you still have a phone, still have the Internet, still have a neighborhood. If Peter needed “help” to write this letter, you need “help” to raise your peace quotient. Don't be weary in well-doing. Stay safe, but connect with people who love Jesus and will encourage you and build up your peace.

Third, Christ. “Peace to all who are in Christ” (14b). Peter says as he ends the letter. I don’t think he’s wishing misery on non-Christians. It’s just that he’s learned over these 35 or so years since he met Jesus that the Old Testament vision of shalom is fulfilled in Jesus Christ. Christ as his peace is the only explanation for what changed that “sinful man” into a man who lived out his life in peace.

I’ve always found it interesting that the New Testament letters don’t say much about stories in the Gospels. There are only brief and passing references to some of our most-loved stories about Jesus. I can maybe give Paul a pass on that, since he wasn’t an eyewitness. But aren’t you a little surprised that Peter doesn’t allude to Jesus healing a blind man, or to the feeding of the 5,000, or to walking on water, or to Jesus’ parables or the Sermon on the Mount?

What Peter does is very much like what Paul does in his letters. Perhaps that’s the Silas connection. Peter focuses on what it means to be “in Christ.” You were baptized into Christ Jesus, he said in chapter 4, and then went on to recount Jesus’ suffering, death, descent into hell, resurrection, ascension, and sitting at the right hand of God. You are “in Christ.” You share vicariously in everything that happened to him.

By pointing you to Christ, he’s pointing you to “the God of all grace” (10). He’s focusing your attention on “the true grace of God.” You will raise your peace number when you get your eyes and heart off the newspaper and the monitor and focus on who you are in Christ, on all he’s done for you, and all you have because of him.

Freedom and peace

So there you have it – three ways to raise your peace score –

1. *Perspective:* Suffering’s for “a little while.” What’s ahead is “eternal glory.”
2. *People:* Reach out to share someone else’s suffering or let them share yours.
3. *Christ:* We are in Christ, sharing his passion and his victory.

On this July 4 weekend, we embrace two values: freedom and peace. They are both American values, and both biblical values. But those words are not used the same in America and in the Bible, even if they might overlap.

Freedom in America is the right to do what you want. Freedom in the Bible is the power to do what you should. Peace in America means prosperity and the absence of conflict. Peace in the Bible means a soul at rest in Christ whether or not there is prosperity or conflict.

Our peace is a peace that passes understanding. It’s a peace the world can’t take away. Peter’s life was transformed from an impulsive need to control things and people to a deep and abiding peace he then wanted to share with his readers. The only way to fight a war against the devil is with the peace of Christ.