

A Crushing Peace

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[0 : 0 0] Good morning. I thought about starting my sermon this morning with animal noises, but I couldn't quite get it to work in and David stole that idea anyways. So why don't we turn to pages 950 and 951 in your pew Bibles and look together toward the end of the book of Romans chapter 16 beginning at verse 17. Actually, would you look at that last verse in the passage that was read for us, verse 20. The God of peace, the God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. It's a little bit jarring, isn't it? Maybe we would expect something more like, the God of peace will soon make you feel a whole lot better. The God of peace will soon make you a large cup of tea. No, the word crush seems violent and at odds for us with the phrase, the God of peace. It seems an oxymoron like jumbo shrimp or open secret or my favorite,

Microsoft Works. It seems a bit of an oxymoron. So what kind of peace is that? Can we focus our attention there this morning? What kind of peace is this? The Old Testament speaks much about peace, about the God who brings peace and wholeness and shalom to people, to nations, even to the land. And it speaks of a restoration of the way things ought to be. And we're reminded this morning of the violence in the world, the violence in Norway. And our hearts cry out for the world to be the way it ought to be, to be restored, for brokenness to be healed, and for God's peace to be made. And that violence has nothing to do with the God of peace who even here is described as crushing his enemies. No, the peace that God brings restores things to the way they ought to be. We long for that in our own lives. We long for inner peace. We long for peace. Nobody thinks a broken home is a good thing. We long for peace in our relationships. We want things to be restored to the way they ought to be. God is in the business of making peace. He restores things that are broken. And until evil is defeated, there will be no lasting peace. The word peace actually comes up at key points in Paul's letter to the Romans. I think it occurs about 10 times in the book of Romans. And it's there at crucial points in his argument too. So he sums up in chapter 5 at a critical point in his argument, chapter 5 verse 1, therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ. When Paul goes on to talk about the Holy Spirit and living out of union with Christ by the Holy Spirit in chapter 8, he says, the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace. When he talks about scruples over food laws and deals with what's going on in the church, he reminds them that the kingdom of God is not about these things. It's about righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit. Talking about Christ, talking about the Spirit, talking about the church, Paul talks about peace. The peace that the Lord Jesus has made on our behalf, that the Holy Spirit applies to us personally and applies to our community. No wonder then, as Paul comes to the close of this letter, his benedictions are full of this language of peace. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, partway through chapter 15. And at the end of chapter 15, before he launches into the greetings, we have the phrase, we have the sentence, the God of peace be with you, the blessing.

And this title, the God of peace, is one that comes in our passage again today, the God of peace. Paul doesn't say, the God of peace is really, really nice. He speaks of the crushing defeat of evil by the God who makes peace. It's the sort of peace that is hard won, like a peace treaty after a war. Friends, we are called to share in God's peace and in his peacemaking mission in the world. Notice Paul does not say that God will crush our ancient enemy under his feet.

[5 : 1 2] No, he says he will crush him under your feet. That's actually a bit alarming. I know we are in the middle of a sermon, but can I ask you to wiggle your toes right now and look down at your feet for just a second, your feet.

This is where Paul says, you will see Satan crushed. God will do it under your feet. The church participates in this.

In Revelations 12, it's by the word of their testimony, through the blood of the Lamb, bearing witness, faithful witness, to the exalted Lord Jesus Christ, but under your feet.

Wow, this is actually a little frightening. That's a little bit too close. Can't God just send in a remote control unmanned drone? Maybe give me a TV screen to watch the whole action at a safe distance. No, he says he will crush Satan under your feet. And maybe this is just the way it has to be. We are every day, even in a civilized culture, Vancouver, we are every day much more in the presence of real evil than I think we probably realize.

[6 : 28] It's probably more than we can actually cope with. Evil is real. It's all around us. If we want to share in God's peace, we are going to need to be much more discerning about good and evil generally.

Let's briefly work through the passage, thinking about the God of peace, in the sense we've been talking about. Chapter 16, verses 17 to 20.

We can share in God's peacemaking by taking three actions that come out of this passage. The passage gives us a warning to heed, a promise to trust, and a blessing to receive.

The warning comes in these first three verses we'll spend more time on, and then the promise and blessing are given to us at the end. The passage looks a lot like a personal postscript to the letter, perhaps added in Paul's own hand.

Perhaps he takes the pen from Tertius, as he would sometimes do, and he writes his own appeal. It's sandwiched between greetings to the church in Rome and greetings from the people with Paul.

[7 : 37] Perhaps, as Paul is thinking about all these good people faithfully serving the Lord, he was reminded about others, troublemakers that seemed to follow him wherever he went, a kind of evil that enters the church itself.

So the first action he calls for is heeding, or paying close attention, or as verse 17 says, watching, scoping out. Watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught.

Avoid them. This is a call for vigilance. Imagine that your first peacemaking assignment, then, is to stand sentinel at a crucial post to look out for the enemy in disguise.

Good people tend to be very generous towards others. Good people tend to think the best of others. But Paul knows that there are people who go around causing division and creating obstacles.

And he knows that his readers in Rome might encounter some of these sorts of people, as he had in all the churches of his own foundation. Avoid such people, he says, very directly.

[8 : 51] He doesn't identify the nature of the false teaching he has in mind, but at least two things result from it. First of all, it stirs up division. And secondly, it puts obstacles in the way of believers, especially young believers.

One can spot this sort of wrong teaching because it is the opposite of the teaching that they've been received, baptized into, formed in. It's the opposite of that.

Paul wants the church clearly to remain united, not to deviate from what he calls elsewhere the pattern or form of sound teaching that has been handed down.

Don't divide. Don't deviate. This is probably a good word for us as we face a transition in our life together into a new building this fall as a church.

As we go through these changes, Paul says, I really care about unity and I really care about the essentials. Don't divide and don't deviate. This is not the time to make an issue of personal preferences, small irritations, things that you just, you know, finally like to get your say about.

[10 : 02] I speak as an unpaid layperson. This is a time for us to really hang together, to love one another and show what the gospel is really about.

The main things, the simple things, what we really believe, it's Paul's appeal to the Romans. I think it could be his appeal to us too. Let me just say a word.

If you are a new believer or you don't feel like you've really had a grounding in your faith yet, can I suggest, actually this is true for all of us, but a practical way to obey Paul's warning, heed the warning, to be watchful.

It's really easy to be deceived. And these days, in the digital age where we get so much information, it's not just books or a sermon, there's so many religious ideas coming at us.

How do we keep from being deceived and drawn away from the core gospel message that he's concerned about? Here's a practical suggestion. When Paul talks here and elsewhere about taught

doctrine, public teaching that has been passed down, he could give a basic summary or outline of this as he did in 1 Corinthians 15.

[11 : 19] I remind you of the gospel I preached, he said. I delivered to you as a first importance what I also received. And then he gives a kind of summary of the gospel. This kind of summary was something that the early church called the rule of faith.

And it was really important when the early church had to deal with heresy. It had to deal with all sorts of false teaching. Heretics used to quote isolated verses in the Bible out of context and twist them.

But we regularly confess together two of these summary statements of the rule of faith when we say the Apostles' Creed as we did this morning in morning prayer and the Nicene Creed as we do in our Holy Communion services.

You could memorize these and study them more closely. You'll notice that a lot of questionable modern religious ideas just don't measure up to the high view of Christ that is summarized in these creeds.

A lot of heresies begin with lowering our view of Christ, the uniqueness and supremacy of Christ. These statements help us summarize the message of the Bible. And they have a proven value in helping Christians discern and avoid deviant teaching.

[12 : 31] Just like the Ten Commandments serve a similar summary function in terms of ethics and behavior. There's a form and a pattern to being a Christian and the rule of faith and something like the Ten Commandments can help us.

And especially if you're wanting to be grounded in your faith and you're saying, Bruce, I could easily be drawn away into false teaching. How do I discern? Here's a good place to begin. Paul wants his readers to watch out for deviant teaching, to be on guard and to be watchful.

None of us should think we're beyond being deceived. Notice, though, that the false teachers Paul has in mind were not simply misguided, well-meaning people who didn't know what they were doing.

Their motives were selfish. Verse 18. For such persons, he says, do not serve our Lord Jesus Christ but their own appetites. And by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive. These teachers were self-serving. The people Paul is thinking of served literally their own bellies, he says. It's like he said similarly of some similar, in a similar place in Philippians, he said, their God is their belly.

[13 : 45] Whether this was a matter of mooching and gluttony, pure and simple, or a metaphor for self-centeredness, more likely, Paul clearly sees that there are people who talk a good talk in religious matters but their motivation is actually quite twisted at its core.

Here is something else to be on the lookout for. A kind of moral watchfulness. As well as a doctrinal watchfulness. The people Paul is thinking of were, he says, smooth talkers and flatterers.

What they say has a certain plausibility. It goes down easy. And he's very concerned that it's the naive that are in danger here. And he's aware bad teaching hurts good people.

So Paul says, watch closely. This is a part of the peacekeeping mission. This is something that calls, he says, for discernment. He wants Christians in Rome to be wise.

Wise watchers, savvy sentinels. So verse 19, he says, for your obedience is known to all so that I rejoice over you but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil.

[14 : 54] It takes great wisdom to discern the good and cling to it and avoid all evil altogether. Notice Paul presumes the Roman Christians are orthodox.

They have learned the apostolic teaching. He presumes they are living the faith. They are, as he says, obedient. But as well as learning the truth and living it, there is this need to be watchful and wise.

Almost, I want to say, street smart. To be naive is not wrong but it's dangerous. And I wonder if this danger begins many times with us not believing that evil is real, is really a threat.

Surely we say it is only ever a matter of well-meaning people having misunderstandings that need to be sorted out by talking things through. Well, sometimes, but it goes deeper than that.

Sometimes there are real dangerous untruths to be confronted. Think about statements like this. How easy these go down. People are basically good.

[16 : 00] Or, differences in doctrine are really just matters of opinion and perspective when it comes down to it. Or, modern people don't really believe in Satan or evil anymore, any more than

ghosts or goblins.

Well, all of these statements, Paul would say, are actually quite naive. And it's a costly naivete that gets in the way of the kind of peace God brings. Evil needs to be acknowledged and overcome. So, more briefly, the final two actions for our peacemaking assignment. We can summarize these more briefly. There is this warning to heed of watchfulness we've talked about, but the passage also gives us a promise to trust and a blessing to receive.

first the promise in verse 20 that we've already spoken about. The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet. We've talked about this, but notice that it's a promise looking forward to the future.

What do you do with such promises? Well, the action here is to trust it, to trust this promise. This balances out the command to watch, in a way.

[17:11] It's possible to become so preoccupied with watching that one goes into hypervigilance. This can happen with people who go through a trauma, and I think it can happen to traumatized churches.

One becomes anxious in watching, always under threat, in a certain kind of mode. But Paul offers a promise to balance the command. The promise is God himself will crush evil, crush Satan under your feet.

God will be the one to do it, effortlessly, speedily. At the end of the day, it is always God who fights evil directly, not us. The Psalms so often speak of trusting in the God who fights for us.

We wait in hope for the Lord. He is our help and our shield, says Psalm 33. Part of biblical wisdom is recognizing that all of our vigilance is penultimate.

It's not final. Only God has all the facts. Only God can judge finally. That is why the scriptures say, vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord.

[18:20] Human vengeance, like all human attempts to deal with evil, is prone to mistake. So we have the reassurance here that it is God's business to deal with Satan and he will do it decisively.

You maybe have already heard the echo or the allusion in this passage to Genesis, to Genesis 3. The promise to the woman that her seed would bruise the serpent's head.

This ancient prophecy is echoed throughout the scriptures. Psalm 91, you will tread on the lion and the adder, the young lion and the serpent you will trample underfoot. Jesus, with the mission of the 72 disciples, said he saw Satan fall like lightning and he gave them authority to tread on serpents. But then finally, I've already referred to the book of Revelation chapter 12. The ancient serpent who is called the devil and Satan is cast down. And the book of Revelation says, celebrates, they have conquered him by the blood of the lamb.

The God of peace finally crushed Satan under their feet as they bore their faithful witness even unto death. The ancient prophecy fulfilled. One implication of this for our peacemaking mission as people and as a church is that even in the presence of evil, we need not be discouraged.

[19:43] Setbacks are temporary. Evil does not win in the end. So, we need not become shrill, defensive, triumphalistic, angry people.

we can actually be quite joyful even under threat. However, confusing the battle at the moment where we are stationed, the final victory is certain.

Let me just read again a little bit of the call it for peace. It struck me with particular force after thinking about this passage. This line, defend us your humble servants in all assaults of our enemies that we, surely trusting in your defense, may not fear the power of any adversaries through the might of Jesus Christ our Lord.

I think that's the same sentiment. What you do with a promise like this is you trust in it in the midst of all adversaries. Sometimes when I get especially discouraged, I'm prone to that, I'm afraid, or tired of certain kinds of suffering.

My wife Carolyn will just say to me quietly, it won't be long, Bruce. The evil in the world that so discourages us, even the irrational evil of disease, disaster, cancer, the very real moral evil that oppresses people, violence in our world, violence in relationships.

[21:30] God will decisively deal with us. And so we go on faithfully at our post, encouraged, regardless of how hot the battle is where we're standing.

Finally then, there's not only a warning to heed about being watchful and wise and a promise to trust God wins, but there's a blessing to receive.

Verse 20, the last half of verse 20, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you. At the beginning and end of Paul's letters, it is something of a convention for him to offer a blessing like this in the name of Jesus.

But conventional does not mean at all the same thing as perfunctory. Quite the contrary, this is not like me signing off a letter yours sincerely without any sense of being either yours or sincere.

The Christian form of salutation extending the grace of Christ as a blessing is a summing up of the good news. It is an invocation drawing down the blessing of the living, reigning, victorious one in whose presence we are who is even now directing the church by his Holy Spirit.

[22 : 41] Think of this as your commissioning for sharing in God's peacemaking. You are watchful because you have a warning to heed. You are undiscouraged because you have a promise to trust.

And you are also empowered because you have a blessing to receive. I hope at the end of our services when we hear the benediction from the clergy from the back of the church you place yourself on tiptoes and you receive the blessing in all its fullness.

Whether it is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, the fellowship of the Holy Spirit or the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit or whatever the form of the blessing, it is a reminder that we do not simply at church describe, talk about the kindness and the grace of our loving Lord.

We receive it now. We call upon it. We invoke it. We share in it. We commend each other to it. It is the kindness of our Lord Jesus that is greater than all the evil of the world.

As Paul says in Ephesians, He Himself is our peace. And so, brothers and sisters, even today, receive this blessing. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

[24 : 06] Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen.