

Peace in troubled times

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[0 : 00] I want to talk to you this morning about peace in troubled times. My text is from 2 Thessalonians 3 verse 16 where Paul says! Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way.

The Lord be with all of you. Psalm 31 tells us about a time when David experienced fear on every side.

In verse 13 he actually calls it terror. Terror on every side. It reminds us of the current times in which we live. During this current coronavirus pandemic many can identify with the psalmist.

In fearful moments we can think of Covid-19 or SARS-CoV-2 as it should be referred to as an infection that conspires against us plotting to take our life just as David describes in Psalm 31. And we've been warned of course that the winter will be tough because of the millions of other viruses that scatter coughs and sneezes and make us more vulnerable to catching Covid-19.

[1 : 10] It is tempting then to think of this virus and other things that threaten us as enemies who pursue me. Psalm 31 verse 15. So what's the answer to such fear?

What is our protection against such enemies? David says in Psalm 31 verse 15-17 I trust in you O Lord. I say you are my God. My times are in your hands.

Deliver me from my enemies and from those who pursue me. Let your face shine on your servant. Save me in your unfailing love. Let me not be put to shame O Lord. For I have cried out to you.

The coronavirus then may be viewed as an enemy. But so is the fear that causes us to lose sight of God and forget that our times are in his hands.

In an article called Fear Not Sneer Not A Healthy Christian Response to Covid-19. Doctors Miriam Shillain, Joel Gamble and Nathan Gamble all speak about the enemy.

[2 : 14] The enemy, they say, is how the Chinese people from the early stages of the Wuhan epidemic have united their efforts. And an ancient Chinese saying explains the key to victory against any enemy.

If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. To know our enemy and to know ourselves as Christians, with the two together we can respond intelligently and appropriately as Christians.

Miriam Shillain, for example, is an Oxford University professor, a virologist and a theology graduate. And she wants us to think about how we can respond to the coronavirus with faith rather than fear.

The article I referred to give the example of Martin Luther. It speaks of Luther's reaction to a deadly plague that struck Wittenberg in 1527. At a time when Vivian Nutton, the historian of medicine, calculates that a town would experience an epidemic plague approximately every decade and a serious devastation once in every generation.

Disease outbreaks then were really fatal. For about 400 years, the fatality rate between the 14th and the 18th century was around 60 to 90%.

[3 : 36] Now to keep that in context, SARS-CoV-2 is estimated to be between 1 and 3%. Luther considered what the reaction of Christians should be at such times.

He regarded the epidemic as a temptation that tests and proves our faith and love. Our faith, he says, is that we may see and experience how we should act toward God.

Our love, in that we may recognize how we should act toward our neighbor. We must give hospital care and be nurses for one another in extremity or risk, the loss of salvation and the loss of the grace of God.

Luther was concerned from an eternal perspective about the needs, the eternal needs of the people in his town. And so he encouraged and exhorted Christians to reach out, not only to minister to people's physical needs.

Of course, there was no national health service at such times. But also to minister the gospel to people who were terrified and who were at real risk of dying.

[4 : 46] Luther encouraged Christians to find solace in the promises of God. The devil tempts us, he says, to horror and repugnance in the presence of a sick person.

But striking a blow against the devil is God's mighty promise by which he encourages those who minister to the needy. He says in Psalm 41, Blessed is he who considers the poor.

The Lord will deliver him in the day of trouble. Therefore, whoever serves the sick for the sake of God's precious promises has the great assurance that he shall in turn be cared for.

God himself shall be his attendant and his physician too. What an attendant he is. What a physician. As I say in the article to which I referred to, they were talking about why we need as Christians to respond in faith at such times as this.

Times which understandably cause so much fear and anxiety. Dr. Schilling says many of us in healthcare have taken oaths. The health of our patients shall be our first consideration.

[5 : 55] It is easy to take valiant oaths in times of tranquility and bliss. Hardship does not nullify these oaths, but rather emphasizes their sacred, inviolable nature. For Christians, there is a special duty to fulfill them, since we have been told, Let your yes be yes and your no, no.

For those of us who do not have special training to participate on the medical frontlines, we are called to responsibly play our part in society, in our jobs that help keep our economy going, in our families as parents, children or siblings, in the way we communicate, listen and respond to news, in the way we care for our neighbours, cities and communities.

Above all, we are called to pray for and do our best to support good journalism, research and medical care. For Christians, truth is distinctly important.

Every Christian has the responsibility to find and rely on accurate sources of public health officials, with the expectation that their recommendations will inevitably be imperfect, rather than criticising them.

We ought to pray for them daily. Very good advice to help us avoid the hysteria or the cynicism of our modern times. We need to take on board the exhortation of Augustine of Hippo, who said, As we are saved by hope, so we are made happy by hope.

[7 : 21] Neither our salvation nor our beatitude is here present, but we wait for it in the future, and we wait with patience, precisely because we are surrounded by evils which patience must endure, until we come to where all good things are sources of inexpressible happiness, and where there will be no longer anything to endure.

Such is to be our salvation in the hereafter, such our final blessedness. If we have, as David puts it, taken the Lord as our refuge, then we can commit our spirits into his hands and know that he will redeem us because he is the God of truth.

We can trust in him and find in him a rock of refuge, rejoice in his love, rejoice that he has our times in his hands, and we need not be afraid.

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times, and in every way, says Paul, the Lord be with you all. In writing this to the Thessalonians, he's writing to a church that has become afraid.

They had endured with Paul through trials and tribulations. They suffered great persecution. Paul had been driven out of the city during his missionary preaching there, and had to escape for his life, but others were put under great pressure who lived in the city.

[8 : 47] And still they were under pressure. So fear of death was very real. On top of that, the church was divided over teaching about the second coming of Christ.

Some people claim to have got a letter from Paul that said that the second coming had actually happened, and they'd missed it, and therefore the people who had died had died without God, without hope, for the resurrection.

They were understandably upset about that. Yet others said, no, it hasn't happened yet, and we need to write and ask Paul to find out what the truth is.

And so Paul writes in the first Thessalonians, and then later in second Thessalonians, there are a number of prophecies that need to be fulfilled before Jesus returns to earth.

And rather than them spend their time worrying about the future, they should spend their time thinking about how to please God, how to honour him with their lives, and how to work for him in a way that pleases him.

[9 : 57] They needed to stand firm and know that God would give them grace, would give them eternal encouragement and good hope, would encourage and strengthen their hearts in every good deed.

2 Thessalonians chapter 3 and verses 16 and 17. So what can we learn from our text? Our text that reminds us that Jesus is our peace, the Lord of peace, who gives us peace at all times and in every way.

Well, we can remember that Jesus is the source of our peace. In one of the Peanuts cartoons, Charles Schultz quotes Lucy, who says to Charlie Brown, I hate everything.

I hate everybody. I hate the whole wide world. But I thought you had inner peace, says Charlie Brown. I do, says Lucy. I have inner peace, but I have outer obnoxiousness.

And perhaps that reflects our attitudes and our behaviours sometime as well. Sometimes we're like the Thessalonians, waiting eagerly for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who rescues us from the coming wrath.

[11 : 14] 1 Thessalonians 1.10. Sometimes we're so excited by our service of God and by the hope that we have that we live blameless and holy lives in God's presence as we wait for his coming.

Chapter 3 and verse 13. Sometimes we have inner peace, but then when difficulties come and when fears crowd in, our lives become full of outer obnoxiousness.

And yet, and yet, Paul says, Jesus is the source of your peace. When you're afraid, when you're fearful, when things go wrong in your life, you need the grace and the peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

And notice, in chapter 1 and verse 1 of 1 Thessalonians, Paul says that, grace and peace to you, because peace only comes to us as we receive the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Because we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God. We can't have peace with God until we receive the grace and the forgiveness of our Lord Jesus Christ.

[12 : 21] So Jesus is the source of our peace. Secondly, he's the giver of peace. Jesus says in chapter 14 and verse 27 of John, peace I leave with you, my peace I give to you.

Not as the world gives, give I to you. So don't let your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid. Jesus is the giver of peace. He only, the Lord our peace.

Isaiah says, you will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are stayed upon you because they trust in you. Trust in the Lord forever, he says, the Lord is your rock eternal.

We can have peace with God and be absolutely confident in his presence, even though things around us are going wrong. Psalm 46 verses 10 and 11.

This peace comes to us independently of our external circumstances. He is our peace. Nicholas Ridley was sentenced to be burned to death at the stake in England in 1555.

[13 : 22] On the night before his execution, his brother offered to stay with him to be a comfort. Ridley declined the offer saying, I intend God willing to go to bed and sleep as quietly tonight as I ever did.

And he did. And he embraced the flames and went into his eternal destiny because the Lord was his peace. Most of us will never face trials quite like Ridley's, but we do know that our faith will be secure and our peace will be fixed if we fix our minds on Jesus and trust him to give us peace.

Lastly, Jesus is not only the source of peace and the giver of peace, he is the guarantor of peace. Paul ends this text by saying, the Lord be with you all. It is not a separate prayer, but a continuation of the same prayer.

In effect, he's saying, may the Lord bless you not only with peace, but also with his presence. And that's available to those Christians in Thessalonica who were eagerly waiting for the coming of Jesus and those others who became idle and said, what's the point of working?

We live off the benefits of others because Jesus is coming soon. We just have to wait for his coming. All of them received this blessing of grace. The Lord be with you all.

[14 : 45] The Lord give peace to you all. May you enjoy it at all times, in all ways, in fellowship with the Lord Jesus. It is because we know, says Leon Morris, that the Lord is with us and that he will never forsake us, that those who trust in him will have unbroken peace.

The peace of the Christian is the presence of the Lord. So why do we lose our peace then? We lose our peace when we stop walking with Jesus.

As we walk with Jesus and talk with him and obey him and love him, the Lord will be our peace.
Amen. And the Lord bless you.