

Perhaps you've heard the heart-wrenching story behind the hymn we sang this morning—*It Is Well With My Soul*. The man who wrote it was Horatio Spafford. He was a Christian from Chicago in the mid-1800s. He had a very successful legal practice as a young businessman, but his fortune evaporated in the wake of the great Chicago Fire of 1871. He'd invested heavily in real estate along Lake Michigan's shoreline, but he lost everything overnight. Just prior to that his son had died, but the worst was yet to come.

Spafford planned a European trip for his family in 1873. It really wasn't a vacation but more of a mission trip. He wanted to join an evangelist named D.L. Moody in one of his campaigns in England. But due to unexpected business developments, at the last minute, he had to stay in Chicago while he sent his wife and four daughters ahead as scheduled on a ship across the Atlantic. He expected to follow in a few days.

But on November 22 that ship was struck by another vessel and sank in 12 minutes. Several days later the survivors finally landed in Wales, and Mrs. Spafford cabled her husband with these words: "Saved alone." Spafford left immediately to join his wife. He wrote this hymn, no doubt stained with tears over the loss of his four girls, as he came to the area of the ocean where the ship had sunk.

I know that may sound unbelievable to you. How could a man who'd been through all of that write,

*When peace, like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

And we could ask the same question of many of us. How's it possible to have peace in this world where's there's so much tragedy, loss, brokenness, and injustice? I know many of you. I can look out among you at this very moment and see faces of people who've endured illness, loss, and unfair treatment, which would flatten most people, but here you are singing songs, sincerely worshipping God with peace in your hearts. How's that possible?

This morning we're going to answer that question. How is it possible to have peace in the storms of life? How is it possible to sing, "It is well with my soul," when it's really not so well in this upside down world of ours?

To answer this question, we're going to turn to a single verse found in Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. We've been

looking at a few of the blessings or benedictions found in the Bible, and this one is the second such blessing found in this short letter. Last week we looked at the benediction of encouragement found in 2:16–17, but today we're looking at the benediction of peace found at the end of the letter in 3:16.

Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times and in every way. The Lord be with all of you. (2 Thessalonians 3:16)

This benediction is stated in the form of a prayer. Notice that word "*may*." Paul is invoking the Lord of peace to grant these believers in the Thessalonian church peace at all times and in every way.

The Thessalonians Needed the Lord's Peace

We might wonder why Paul would ask this specifically for these people. I mean was Paul just pulling pious words out of a hat to sound like a pastor? No! If you know the background of this church, you'll see how much they needed peace. There were things going on that were disturbing their peace.

The church was suffering persecution. This started when Paul made his first visit there. As was his habit, Paul went first to the local synagogue and began to prove from the Old Testament scriptures Jesus was the Messiah. Luke tells of their mixed response, "*Some of the Jews were persuaded and joined Paul and Silas, as did a large number of God-fearing Greeks and quite a few prominent women*" (Acts 17:4–5). But there were also people in that city infuriated by this. They "*formed a mob and started a riot in the city.*" Paul was able to escape, but the new believers in Thessalonica were accused of defying Caesar's decrees. And this kind of thing hadn't stopped. When Paul wrote this letter to them a little later, he mentions, "*all the persecutions and trials you are enduring*" (2 Thessalonians 1:4). And so it was in the midst of severe persecution Paul prays the Lord of peace might grant them peace. Somehow peace is possible when it seems impossible.

But that's not all. Something else was threatening their peace. There were some fanatics in the church who believed since the Lord was coming back any day they should quit working and do nothing but wait for the Lord's return. This caused division in the church because in doing so they defied their leaders and expected others in the church to pay their bills while they waited. Paul says to them right here in chapter three, "*We hear that some among you are idle and disruptive. They are not busy; they are busybodies. Such people we command and urge in the*

Lord Jesus Christ to settle down and earn the food they eat." (2 Thessalonians 3:12). And then in the next breath, he says, "*Take special note of anyone who does not obey our instruction in this letter. Do not associate with them, in order that they may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard them as an enemy, but warn them as you would a fellow believer.*" (2 Thessalonians 3:14–15). And so here's a church being split apart, a church lacking peace, and that's why Paul prays the Lord of peace might grant them peace.

Again, somehow, peace is possible when it might seem impossible. And I'd say Paul would pray the same thing for us regardless of our situation. Some of you are experiencing conflict and division in your own families. Some of you have fellow believers with whom you're divided for some reason. Some of you live in fear of a financial collapse or a health problem. It might seem like peace is impossible in the midst of all of that, but it's not.

This reminds me of an experience I had in 1998. I was speaking at a conference in Albania with a fellow CPC'er, and it happened to be during the war between Albania and Kosovo. I can remember landing in Albania and seeing all the fighter planes lined up at the airport. It was far from a peaceful time. A week later when it was time to leave we were told all flights out of Albania were grounded. We were stuck—at least that's what we thought. It wasn't a real pleasant situation; we wanted out of there fast! However, our Albanian friends had a plan. They drove us to the border and put us in a taxi-cab, which would drive us five hours south to a city in Greece. Guess what city it was? Thessalonica, or what they call today Thessaloniki, which is really a beautiful city right on the Aegean Sea. We spent the night there before flying out the next morning. It was really quite pleasant! There we were enjoying peace right in the midst of harrowing circumstances!

What is Peace?

But this brings up an important question—what is this peace Paul is talking about? I mean "peace" is kind of a vanilla word. It's used and overused. In the English language, we use it in many different ways. We use it to talk about a state of mind, what we call "inner peace." It's that sense of calm, tranquility, bliss, contentment and well-being you feel when everything is well. That's a nice definition of peace, but it's rather shallow because calm feelings, tranquility, and quietness can be produced by a lot of things. They can be produced by a pill, alcohol, a lie, and by a nap. Calm, peace, tranquility, and a sense of well-being can be produced when your uncle dies and leaves you a fortune. It can be produced by therapy, by the reassurance of a friend, or somebody whispering sweet nothings in your ear. That's not the kind of peace Paul is praying for here.

The same is true in relationships. The world defines peace as the absence of conflict. That may be a good place to start, but it's not a good place to end. Two people might settle their conflict by shooting each other in the head; their conflict is over, but so are their lives. Some people view peace as a truce. I've

known married couples, who have lived together in a kind of armed truce for years. That's not peace; that's a cold war. Some people adopt a "peace at all cost" mentality. They avoid issues that might bring conflict. They don't deal with the problem; they just ignore it. Jesus never told us to opt for peace at all cost. He knew standing for him would cause division among families and friends.

So what is this peace Paul prays for? To begin with, we have to go back to the Old Testament. The Hebrew word *Shalom* is the word the Jews use for peace. *Shalom* isn't just the absence of conflict but the presence of soundness, completeness, and well-being. The word "wholeness" describes it well. And that peace can't be separated from a relationship with God. God said through Isaiah, "*If only you had paid attention to my commands, your peace would have been like a river, your well-being like the waves of the sea.*" (Isaiah 48:18).

In the New Testament, the Greek word for peace is *eirene*. Peace in the New Testament is grounded first and foremost in the work of Jesus Christ. Through the work of Jesus on the cross, we have peace with God. We're told Jesus himself is our peace and he reconciles us not just to God, but to one another, thus making peace. And it's only as we know him, walk with him, and trust in him, we experience peace within ourselves and in our relationships. His peace can't be produced by a pill, by sleep, by alcohol, or by material gain. We're talking about the attitude of the heart and mind, which calmly, confidently believes and knows all is well between our soul and God. It's the confidence that everything is right between God and myself. It is the confidence He is lovingly in control of my life now and in eternity, which then flows into all my relationships.

The Source of Peace is Jesus Himself

Now what this means and what's clearly reflected in the benediction is the source of peace is Jesus himself. That's why Paul says, "*Now may the Lord of peace grant you peace...*" This isn't something you manufacture on your own. This is something only he can give you. Notice he's called "*the Lord of peace.*" That's very interesting because repeatedly in the New Testament Paul refers to "*the God of peace*" but only here does he say, "*the Lord of peace.*" He's talking about the Lord Jesus. We know Jesus is the promised "*Prince of Peace*" and we know he purchased our peace with God on the cross, but here we see he's "*the Lord of peace.*"

One of the reasons he's the Lord of peace and the source of peace is because peace is one of his attributes. Peace is an attribute of God, and that's reflected in his Son. We normally think of God as being characterized by attributes of grace, mercy, love, justice, righteousness, omnipotence, and all those classic attributes. But do you ever think of Him as being characteristically peace? Whatever it is He gives us, He has, and He is. He's the Lord of peace. The Romans used to boast about the *Pax Romana*, which was the peace that existed between nations in the Roman

Empire. But here we see real peace is impossible apart from the Lord of peace.

This comes through even more beautifully in the upper room the night of his betrayal. This was a dark and dreadful night for his disciples. Jesus told them he was leaving them and they were confused and anxious. But Jesus said to them, *“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid.”* (John 14:27). Notice he says, *“MY peace I give to you.”* Jesus says, “It’s not the peace the world gives, but it’s MY peace. I have it right now in the midst of all that’s happening. And you can have it just like I have it.”

In the past couple of weeks, we’ve all heard about the tragic suicides of two well-known people. Anthony Bourdain and Kate Spade were on top of their respective worlds. Bourdain was a celebrity chef, a widely read author, who achieved the pinnacle of success in food documentaries, which flung him all over the planet. He had a beautiful daughter and a girlfriend. Kate Spade sold her epic handbag collection in 2007, had a husband and a teenage daughter, and had won every fashion award possible. But under that sheen of success and happiness, there was no peace. I understand mental illness and depression can be a debilitating thing for anyone, but I can’t help but think how it might have been different for them if they’d known the Lord of peace.

The Gift of Peace is Given it at all Times and in Every Circumstance

Notice what Paul says about this peace he gives us. He says it’s a peace given *“at all times and in every way.”* The NASB translates this, *“in every circumstance.”* The Living Bible simply says, *“no matter what happens.”* You get the message. This gift of peace the Lord of peace gives has nothing to do with our circumstances. You can be going through a gut-wrenching trial, but still know this peace. You can be in a room with people you have nothing in common with but Jesus, and still know this peace. You can be hardcore Democrat and placed in a Community Group with a zealous Republican and still live in peace. You can be about to lose your job or your marriage or your child and still know this peace. The Warriors or the Giants or the 49ers could never win another championship, and you could still know this peace.

So why is it that even as followers of the Lord of peace, we so often lack it? It isn’t the Lord’s fault. He doesn’t change. He’s always the Lord of peace. It’s our fault. What happens? It’s very simple. We stop trusting. We take our eyes off Him and become victimized by doubt and fear, by the threat of the future, the unknown, not to mention jealousy and strife, and we lose our peace. Isaiah the prophet once said this to God, *“You will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are steadfast because they trust in you; trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord himself, is the Rock eternal.”* (Isaiah 26:3–4). The people who

can ride through the toughest issues of life in a calm manner are not putting their head in the sand. They’re just trusting God. So when the pressure hits, and we begin to feel the disturbing of our peace, what do we do? We do what the psalmist did. In Psalm 42:3 he says to himself, *“Why, my soul, are you downcast? Why so disturbed within me? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise him, my Savior and my God.”* Trust in God. Hope in God. Turn from focusing on your circumstances to Him.

The Lord Be With You All—Peacemaking

There’s one more thing I want you to see in this benediction. Notice he follows this up with these words, *“The Lord be with you all.”* I don’t want you to miss that word *“all.”* In fact, there are many “alls” in this passage. He prays we’d have peace *“at all times.”* He says, *“The Lord be with you all.”* Even down in v. 18, he says *“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.”* This is Paul’s doctrine of “no Christian left behind.” He knew there were some folks on the edge in that church, but he wanted them ALL to know this peace. And this is a reminder to us when you know the Lord of peace, and he grants you his peace, this will move you deeper into community with others. Often times, those “others” are those, who for whatever reason, we’d rather not be in community with. Remember, back in Matthew’s gospel Jesus said, *“Blessed are the peacemakers for they shall be called Sons of God.”* (Matthew 5:9). When the Lord of peace grants us peace, we become peacemakers.

Peace doesn’t happen passively. Peter tells us to *“seek peace and pursue it”* (1 Peter 3:10). The writer of Hebrews echoes this thought when he says, *“Make every effort to live in peace with all men...”* Both of these writers are telling us peace is elusive. It doesn’t come easily or automatically; it must be actively pursued.

For example, Jesus said this, *“If you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First, go and be reconciled to them; then come and offer your gift.”* (Matthew 5:23–24). Apparently, making peace with a fellow believer is more important than acts of worship. Jesus basically says, “Don’t bother coming to church if your brother has an issue with you. First, go and make things right with your friend.” Peacemaking is more important than church-playing. I guess Jesus doesn’t care much about filling the seats in our auditorium. I mean if we all did this there might not be anyone here! Jesus says it doesn’t matter who’s right or who’s wrong—YOU go and be reconciled. And that might be painful. It might be the pain of saying, “I’m sorry. I blew it. I was wrong. Would you forgive me?” It might be the pain of saying, “What you did was wrong, but I forgive you for that.” In any case, you’re seeking to make peace and live in peace.

This also means we’ll be peacemakers in this fractious world of ours. It means we’ll move into our world and seek to bring

shalom where there's brokenness, pain, and hostility. We'll ask questions like, how can we bring shalom to our borders where there's been so much brokenness these past few weeks? How can we bring shalom to our high schools where there's been so much gun violence? How can we bring shalom to an area where fewer and fewer people can afford to live? Again, making peace may cost us.

In the fifth century, a monk named Telemachus wanted to live his life pursuing God, so he lived alone in the desert praying and fasting. One day as he prayed, he realized his life was based on a selfish love of God. If he were to serve God, he must serve people. So he returned to the city where there was sin and need.

He headed for Rome. He arrived at a time when Rome had become officially Christian, and people were pouring into churches. But one pagan practice still lingered in Christian Rome—the gladiator games. While Christians weren't thrown to the lions, prisoners of war were cast into the arena to fight and kill each other. Spectators roared with bloodlust as the gladiators battled.

Telemachus arrived in Rome on the day of the games. Following the noise, he made his way to the arena where 80,000 people

had gathered to celebrate. The fights began and, Telemachus stood aghast. Men for whom Christ had died were about to kill each other to amuse a supposedly Christian populace.

So what did he do? He jumped into the arena and stood between the two gladiators, imploring them to stop. The crowd was furious at the delay of their "entertainment," and after several shouts and threats, they stoned him to death. The rest of the contests were canceled that day. However, three days later, the Roman Emperor declared Telemachus a martyr and ended the gladiatorial contests.

The days of the gladiators are long past, but what about you? Where is your arena? Where will you carry on this work of peacemaking?

How is it possible to have peace in the midst of the storms of life? How is it possible to make peace in this upside down world of ours? It's only possible when the Lord of peace, Jesus Christ, grants us his peace at all times and in every way. Jesus grants us a peace that's not just our private possession but meant to be shared in costly acts of making peace.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.