9-2-18

Ephesians 2:16-18

Peace; this idea has been sought by mankind since the fall. In spite of all the attempts to bring peace to the world, or even to parts of it, it remains unattained. In fact, because of the fall, it will not be attained by mankind. Our ideas of peace are flawed by selfishness, set aside by greed, and there are many in the world who simply don’t want it. There is only one pathway to peace and that is Jesus Christ; as Paul said in verse 14, “for He Himself is our peace”. We who believe on Christ have a peace in this world that passes understanding, and are heading for a true and lasting eternal peace in the fullest sense of the word. Those who reject Christ will never experience peace.

Paul spoke earlier in chapter 1 of a mystery. This mystery was revealed to Paul and the other apostles after Jesus returned to His Father. He refers to it as “the summing up of all things in Christ”. And specifically, that by Christ’s work on the cross, believing Gentiles could be brought into the family of God; They would be made one with the people of Israel.

Paul pictures this bringing together as knocking down dividing walls. Jesus put an end to the division between Jews and Gentiles by making the faithful of both groups into a new creation: Christians. Jesus also overcame the division between both groups of people and God. Christians were reconciled to God and became spiritual children of Abraham; became children of God the Father. All this by God’s grace and mercy through Jesus Christ; mankind could not achieve any of this. Accordingly, Paul gives glory to God. This is very important for us; we must give Him glory and praise Him for what He has done. The consequences of what we would have faced are too horrible to imagine. We must be devoted to being instruments of bringing God glory because He deserves it and because it puts to shame all His enemies.

In verse 17, we are told that Jesus is not only our peace, not only brought about peace, but proclaims peace.

And He came and preached peace to you who were far away, and peace to those who were near

In this verse, Paul combines parts of two quotes from the prophet Isaiah and changes some words in order to clarify the meaning. We might ask, “*How can he do this*?” The answer is because he is an apostle. The office of apostle was given to a few men immediately after the earthly ministry of Jesus. These men had received instruction directly from the risen Lord, and were given special gifts by the Holy Spirit of the *authority* to both interpret and to write Scripture. This office of apostle is no longer in existence today; any who claim this authority are to be avoided.

Let’s consider the two passages of Scripture from Isaiah. The first is 52:7,

How lovely on the mountains  
Are the feet of him who brings good news,  
Who announces peace  
And brings good news of happiness,  
Who announces salvation,  
*And* says to Zion, “Your God reigns!”

From here, we get the first part of our verse 17 in Ephesians; “*He came*” and “[*He*] *preached peace*”. Twice in our Isaiah passage it mentions “*brings good news*” which is the “*He came*” portion of our verse. Isaiah also says “*announces peace*”, which goes with our “*preached peace*”. When the New Testament quotes from the Old Testament, it is always beneficial to look at what is around the quote. The last line of Isiah 52:7 says “And says to Zion, ‘Your God reigns!’” This is an affirmation to the Jews, an assurance, that the God of Israel, Yahweh, is God and He rules supreme. Additionally, God is the One who brings the good news; this shows, in yet another way, that Jesus is God.

If we go a little further down, we come to verse 10:

The Lord has bared His holy arm  
In the sight of all the nations,  
That all the ends of the earth may see  
The salvation of our God.

For the LORD to bear His arm means to show strength. This is what God did through Jesus on the cross. Death, sin, and satan were all defeated in this one powerful act. In Ephesians, Paul has often pointed out the power of God in bringing about His glory, creating a new people, and restoring fellowship with us. For the Jews, this passage would have meant that other nations would have seen them saved by Yahweh. But it goes much deeper; the salvation of God is not only seen by other nations, but is available to them. God’s power extends to all the earth, not only to His chosen people.

The other passage from Isaiah that Paul uses is 57:19,

Creating the praise of the lips.  
Peace, peace to him who is far and to him who is near,”  
Says the Lord, “and I will heal him.”

In this chapter, Isaiah is prophesying God’s restoration of Israel. Notice the first line speaks of praising God, which should become our ultimate goal in the Christian life. The second line about peace would have originally been applied only to the Jews, many of whom were dispersed. The timing of this prophecy would have been after the Assyrians had destroyed the Northern Kingdom of Israel and deported the survivors to other nations. Isaiah lived and prophesied in the Southern Kingdom of Judah. So, those near would be those still in the existing kingdom of Judah, while those far would be those Israelites who had been sent away to other nations.

What Paul does here in Ephesians 2:17, is take this prophesy to a deeper level: Those near were the Jews, those far were the Gentiles. The Jews would have been near to God because they were the chosen people, the Gentiles were far because they didn’t have access to God.

Notice that the word “peace” is used twice, “Peace, peace to him who is far and to him who is near.” In most modern translations, our verse 17 in Ephesians also has the word “peace” twice, “Peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near.” Paul separated the word “peace” to make sure it was understood to apply to both groups; Jews and Gentiles. Also, notice another change he made. In Isaiah, it says “**him** who is far”, but in Ephesians, it says “**you** who were far”. Paul was mainly writing to the Gentiles, so he made it plain that he was speaking to them directly; that this peace applied to them.

If we read a little further in Isaiah 57, we see that the next two verses apply to the condition of mankind; in Isaiah’s time, in Paul’s time, and in our time.

But the wicked are like the tossing sea,  
For it cannot be quiet,  
And its waters toss up refuse and mud.  
“There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked.”

Aren’t the world’s oceans and seas a good metaphor for mankind? Always moving and rolling, always restless. If you go to the beach, the water is usually brown because it is always stirring up the sand and mud. Any junk floating there will eventually end up on shore. Mankind is always in turmoil. It cannot be at peace. The seas are always torn between two great forces: the gravity of the earth and the gravity of the moon. This constant pulling by opposing forces causes the water to always move, it cannot be still. Occasionally a storm will come up; these forces cause the sea even greater turmoil and destructive motion.

People are always torn. The great forces of satan, the world, and the flesh are always pulling us toward evil. But deep inside of all of us is that mark of God. We were created in His image to have fellowship with Him. This is sometimes described as a “God shaped hole” that we desperately try to fill. Although distorted by sin, our God image still pulls us. Also, Adam’s act of disobedience was to eat of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. We have inherited from Adam a knowledge of what is right and what is wrong. Evil and God’s image, right and wrong; these are always pulling at us; we are torn between opposing forces. In our natural state, we cannot be at peace. Occasionally, too, a storm comes; satan attacks, sickness or death enter our lives, or life’s difficulties just build up to a breaking point.

So great is the turmoil, that we read in Revelation 13:1 of the beast coming up out of the sea. This is the anti-Christ. He will rise to power out of turmoil, satan will raise him up out of the sea of humanity. For a short while he may give the appearance of peace, but his true nature will be revealed in destroying peace. He will be the opposite of Christ, the Prince of Peace.

This is the lot of fallen mankind; seeking peace but not finding it: Unless, of course, they become a member of God’s new creation – Christians. What a beautiful promise Paul reveals to us: that we can have peace and will have peace through Jesus Christ. It is for Jew and Gentile, it is for all who will accept Christ as Saviour and become children of God. Although we as Christians still live in this world of chaos, we have an internal peace that the rest of the world doesn’t know or understand. We look forward to the return of Jesus when He will rule the world with an iron rod and peace will be on the earth. Finally, after the millennial reign, true peace, with no threat of returning sin, will be in the new heavens and new earth. This promise is made clear in Revelation 21:1,

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away, and there is no longer *any* sea.

No more turmoil, no more opposing forces; even the symbol of it will be gone. Discord will not even be remembered. Praise our Almighty God for His ability to bring these things about. Praise Him for making a way for us where there was no way. We get a glimpse here of how far above us our Creator God is, He is able to do what we can only imagine.

Paul follows up his quotation of Isaiah with verse 18: for through Him we both have our access in one Spirit to the Father. Once again, all we have is through Jesus Christ. It is through Jesus that God the Father has chosen to work; has chosen to bring all things together. Jesus is the One who came into the world to fulfill Isaiah’s prophecy of preaching peace. But there is an interesting twist in how this preaching comes about. Recall from the Gospels that Jesus didn’t particularly preach peace during His ministry on earth. We learn from Matthew 4:17 that He preached “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” The thing is, that during His ministry on earth, Jews and Gentiles could not be one, and there was still enmity between God and man. It was not until His death and resurrection that this peace could be made.

It was when Jesus stood among His disciples after His resurrection that He said “Peace be with you.” We also keep in mind that God, in His wisdom, choses to work through people. Once the Holy Spirit was given on Pentecost, the disciples understood that peace had been made between them and God through Jesus Christ. The mystery was then revealed to them, and especially to Paul, that there was also to be peace between the Jews and Gentiles. Jesus preached peace, but He did it through His apostles and His disciples. He continues to preach peace through us today.

In verse 18, Paul uses the word “both” just like he did back in verse 16. “Both” is Jews and Gentiles together in a new creation. And because we are a new creation indwelt by the Holy Spirit, we have access to God the Father. This is important. Previously, only the Jews had access to God and that was in a very limited way. They had an earthly mediator, the High Priest. Once a year, on the day of atonement, the High Priest was allowed to come before God in the holiest and inner most part of the temple; the holy of holies. He could only enter with blood. The Gentiles had no access to God at all.

When Jesus was crucified, the veil that separated mankind from the holy of holies was torn in two; a powerful symbol of a new access to God. Now all Christians have unrestricted access to God; this is due to the work of Christ on the cross and takes place through the Holy Spirit. He intercedes for us in prayer because we are humans and we need help. Jesus prophesied to the woman at the well that a time was coming when God would have people who would worship Him in Spirit and in truth. That time is now; we Christians worship and pray to God by the power of the Holy Spirit and He is the Spirit of Truth.

One more thing to notice about verse 18: It contains the Trinity. [F]or through Him (Jesus Christ) we both have our access in one Spirit (the Holy Spirit) to the Father (God the Father). How wonderful; God’s efforts toward our salvation are not half-hearted. All of God - Father, Son, and Holy Spirit - are concerned for us. The entire Trinity works to restore our fellowship and relationship with them. Again, we are faced with the question: With such great love poured out upon us, how else can we respond other than with our very lives?

Prayer

LORD God, by Your Son, Jesus Christ, You have made us a wonderful new creation, acceptable to You and able to come before You in praise and supplication. By grace through faith in Jesus, You have provided for us salvation and restored fellowship with You, which we lost because of our sin. The mercy You have for us is undeserved but gratefully accepted.

Thank You for the peace that has been given to us through Jesus Christ. Most importantly, we now have peace with You, Father. We can have peace in our lives by trusting in Jesus. Our peace now is not perfect, we are still subject to the effects of evil, our faith is weak. But still we trust in You, knowing that You are completely worthy of our trust.

We look forward to the coming peace that will be brought by our Lord and Saviour and King: Jesus. He will bring true peace, He will establish lasting peace and we pray for His Kingdom to come. Thank You for this sure hope, thank You for overcoming all evil; may it bring about glory for You for all eternity.

It is in the name of our Saviour Jesus Christ we pray

Amen