

Peace: A Clarification

In today's culture, when someone talks about "peace" they most often are referring to how they feel. In this sense, peace can be described as a state of tranquility, being content or satisfied; the internal experience that comes from the absence of conflict. For believers "peace" with God is a precious gift. Because the word is used in different ways, it can lead to confusion for believers who are seeking to attain and understand this gift. In the New Testament, peace is often referring to peace with God or the peace of God which can, but does not always, lead to an emotional experience of peace.

Four usages of the word "peace":

- 1. Peace with God:** a reconciled relationship between God and an individual (see *Romans 5:1*).
Peace with God belongs to the believer by grace through faith. Although knowing one is right with God can be accompanied by positive emotions, peace with God *is not as much felt as it is known* through understanding biblical teaching (*Ephesians 2:8*; *2 Corinthians 5:17-21*). Peace, in this sense, is a present possession of every believer because it has been promised to the believer. It is important to note that while the believer is promised peace with God through faith, the believer is not promised a feeling whereby they know they are saved. Peace with God is referring to a relational shift from being an enemy of God to a child of God. This is most commonly referred to as being "saved" or "converted."
 - **Consider:** The thief on the cross had this type of peace. His spiritual life was made right through faith in Jesus (i.e., he was justified).
- 2. Peace of God:** awareness that our circumstances rest in God's hands (see *Philippians 4:7*, *Colossians 3:15*).
The peace of God refers to confidence the believer, one who already has peace with God, has in knowing God is good, trustworthy, and in control. When the believer is able to hold onto these truths, the peace of God comes through trusting in God no matter the circumstances. We are confident our circumstances are in God's hands and He can be trusted, even if our feelings say otherwise.
 - **Consider:** A brother in the church has just received a diagnosis of terminal cancer. His physicians have stated there is nothing more they can do for him, and they suggest starting hospice care immediately. While this news is certainly unpleasant for the brother and his family, he looks at them and says, "The Apostle Paul said it best, 'For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.' God is going to give us grace one-step at a time through all of this. You can be sure of that!" For this man, the painful reality of terminal cancer and the rapid approach of life's end is blunted by the abiding biblical promises he holds dear. Because he has peace with God, he is able to rest in the peace of God.
- 3. Peace as emotional confirmation:** We feel peaceful. In today's society, this is the most common use of the word "peace". This can lead to accidentally tying our present day definition of peace to the biblical usage of the word, when the Bible is actually referring to something other than emotional peace. When this occurs, it often causes fear and doctrinal confusion. Peace as an emotion can be felt by the believer and unbeliever alike as part of the human experience. There is no doubt emotional peace can be experienced by the believer as a result of experiencing the first two types of peace listed above. However, it is not accurate to say one must feel emotional peace in order to be at peace with God or to know the peace of God.
 - **Consider:** How would you respond to the following individuals who are all describing peace (or lack of peace):
 - A convert who by all accounts is ready to be baptized (Elder, ministers, family agrees), but whom has refused baptism for the past 3 years because he/she isn't completely sure they are at "peace with God."

- A man who is divorcing his wife for another woman tells you he feels peaceful about his decision. He says he believes God wants him to be happy.
- A woman who practices Zen Buddhism tells you she found peace through the path of daily Buddhist meditation. She says she went to church for years and never found peace there.
- A member listens to a sermon and reports feeling the peace of God overflowing in his life and expresses gratefulness about what God has done for him.
- A single brother in the church feels God is leading him toward asking for a particular sister in marriage. However, based on the single brother's spiritual immaturity, general lack of direction in life, and tendency toward impulsivity, the elder doesn't share his enthusiasm about moving forward with the proposal. When the elder shares his concerns about the proposal with the brother, the brother responds, "But I've prayed about it a lot, and I feel peaceful."
- A sister in the church hears others sisters talking about how peaceful and close to God they feel as they do their devotions. They report experiencing a palpable feeling of peace that God is with them and loves them. The sister gradually becomes disillusioned and discouraged as she tries to feel this same sense of peacefulness others verbalize to her, but she simply cannot feel it. Even though there is no evidence that this is true, she concludes her walk with the Lord is flawed in some way due to the lack of emotional confirmation.

4. **Peace:** wishing blessing upon another.

This usage of peace is often seen in the introduction or salutation of Epistles (see *Romans 1:7*, *1 Cor. 1:3*, *Titus 1:4*, *2 John 1:3*). This is akin to wishing blessing or speaking encouragement.

When the Meaning of Peace is Confused:

1. Spiritual Confusion

- Gives the impression peace is obtained rather than received.
- Gives the impression our emotions are the indicator for truth.
- Gives the impression peace is elusive and must be sought. This leads to searching for "peace" rather than searching for Jesus.
- Directs individuals to trust their internal experience more than, or at least equally with, scripture.
- Inadvertently believing the emotional feeling of peacefulness is the indicator of salvation and/or of being right with God.
- Stirs fear regarding the basis of salvation and loss of salvation (e.g., A believer who thinks, "I don't feel peaceful right now... maybe I'm not saved.").
- Lack of willingness to be baptized due to uncertainty about fully having peace (i.e., emotional peace) instead of being at peace with God.
- Confusion regarding our church doctrine about salvation (i.e., what is the basis of peace with God? When does salvation occur?, etc.).
- Converts feeling inferior because they "got peace gradually" instead of in a "sign."
- Converts feeling inferior because their testimony of being at peace with God hasn't been confirmed by overwhelming positive emotions and/or a miraculous sign.

2. Mental/Emotional Impacts

- Anxiety about possible loss of salvation and their current standing with God due to misunderstanding their emotions.
- Clients with mental and emotional struggles are put in compromising situations:
 - Individuals with OCD/scrupulosity suffer greatly due to fears about lack of peace.
 - Individuals with depression often feel like they have lost their peace with God.

3. Relational Impacts

- Judging other people based on one's personal feelings.
- "I can't support you for baptism. I just don't feel peaceful about it."
- People avoiding accountability from others by saying, "It doesn't matter what you think, I have peace about it."

4. Difficulty in Decision Making

- People making life-changing decisions based solely on the presence or absence of emotional peace.
- People believing they were led to a decision by God based on emotions of peace who then experience great doubt, spiritual distress, and estrangement from God when things don't work out for them (i.e., they feel like God abandoned them).
- Difficulty discerning whether to send and/or to accept a proposal for marriage due to a misunderstanding about the role of emotional peace and the leading of God.

Philippians: Peace Case Study

Once an individual has relational peace with God, it is then possible to experience the peace of God. Consider *Philippians 4:6&7*, "Be careful for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus."

If we think about the context of Philippians, we know this book was written to a group of believers who were an encouragement to Paul while he was being held in prison. We also know there was conflict in this group of believers. Euodias and Syntyche were at odds with each other, no doubt causing conflict within the larger body. In addition, it is likely the audience was worrying, fearful, and not feeling emotional peace. God's instructs the Philippians through Paul in these verses (*Phil. 4:6-7*) to not worry; instead, they should pray and be thankful, which will lead to the peace of God. The tone of verse 7 is not that you must have the peace of God but one of encouraging the believers to direct their focus toward God. Paul was encouraging them to believe and behave in a manner consistent with their relational peace with God. In essence, Paul was reminding the Philippians to seek and speak with God and in so doing, worry would reduce and the peace of God would increase. They would not necessarily always feel positive emotion nor would their circumstances necessarily change, but they would know and trust in their Creator. We do this by focusing on the truth that God is a gracious father who has a good plan for His children which can lead to trusting Him in the most difficult of circumstances. Believing God is both gracious and sovereign can give the believer confidence that though we live in a fallen world, where we often struggle God sets the path and His path is good. While this may not bring emotional peace it is the essence of holding onto the peace of God.

How the concept of "Peace" can affect decision making.

Several factors go into making wise decisions which are honoring to Christ. Most of these factors are principles from the Word such as biblical precepts, prayer, godly counsel, etc. For more information on these principles and others, please refer to the Biblical Decision Making Document.

We have a decision making "tool" that is both encouraged and cautioned in Scripture. Scripture encourages the believer to use their logic to count the cost of decisions and develop a plan for moving forward. There are also examples in Scripture where individuals are directed by God to do things that don't make sense to them in the moment. For example, Samuel is told to anoint David as the next king instead of one of David's brothers (*1 Samuel 16*). Since our logic can be both a help and a hindrance, we should neither discard it as a tool nor rely too heavily on it for making all decisions.

Another "tool" often referred to in this process is the concept of peace. There are not specific passages in scripture which tell us to use or not use our emotions in decision making. However, many use emotions heavily in their decision making. Emotions, much like our logic, can be helpful, but they can also be a hindrance. During a decision making process, there is an important difference between resting in the calm assurance of the peace of God versus seeking a strong emotional confirmation of "peace" that could actually be based on a multitude of other factors in our life. Therefore, it is wise when making decisions to be primarily led by principles from the Word rather than solely logic or emotions.

Summary

Peace in the biblical context can be seen as a progression, with salvation (peace with God) as the starting point and emotional peace can be felt as desirable, but often elusive. Peace with God is not an emotion but a state of relationship established on God's grace and forgiveness.

Consider: A convert who started repenting 4 months ago is killed in a car accident during a severe storm. While he was growing in his faith in Christ, he was not yet brought to the church as having declared "being at peace" with God and was not baptized. Even though this convert may not have come to a full realization of "peace" (usage #3 above), he had peace with God (usage #1) and therefore the silver lining of this tragedy was that his family and friends had peace (usage #2) knowing he had the promise of Heaven.

Too often, we get this progression turned around. We start with how we feel and then try to work backward to assess our relationship with God. This poses a significant problem in that we are trying to determine our relational state with God through our own logic or emotional state. This can lead to wrong conclusions and great pain. Instead, the biblical model is to see peace as progressing from (1) salvation, to (2) trusting God, to (3) feeling emotions of peace at times. Think of salvation as a position and the latter (trusting God and emotions of peace) as cycles that can ebb and flow as we walk through life. With this in mind, we can conclude that even when we do not experience emotional peace and lack trust in God, we have, according to scripture, relational peace with God.