

Prayer and Peace

Out of the midst of all their intense fear and suffering and misery, the Israelites cry out in fearful repentance, *“Moses, we’ve sinned! We admit it! We’re sorry! Pray to God that He takes these terrible serpents away from us! We’re dying here!”* God’s response is ***swift and sure... although it’s not at all what the Israelites were looking/praying for.*** Rather than take the serpents away, God commands Moses to construct a bronze serpent and put it on a staff—a cross—in the middle of the Israelite encampment... in the middle of all those deadly serpents. He then attaches His holy Gospel promise to that earthly vessel. *“Everyone who is bitten, when they look at that bronze serpent, will be saved.”*

Again: Your Lord **never** takes the deadly serpents away, nor does He ever promise that the Israelites won’t ever be bitten. Their prayers don’t go ***unanswered***, but He doesn’t answer their prayers the way they want/expect; e.g., magically bestowing on them a life now free of all fear, suffering and death. Rather, in the very ***midst*** of all that fear, suffering and death He directs them to focus on Him and His promise of life. And even here, that Divine Gospel promise is attached to the very image and likeness of the very thing that was ***killing*** them. God didn’t have Moses build a bronze rainbow or a big bronze happy face emoji or a massive dollar sign. No! This promise was attached to a serpent; ***to the very image and likeness of the death that was terrorizing them.*** Anyone who was bitten—sentenced to death—and who looked upon that image and likeness of death, looking on in faith, trusting in and holding fast to the Word and Promise of God attached to that gruesome image of death, would live. They would not die. Faith held fast to the fact that God would make good on His promise for life, deliverance, and peace.

Fast-forward fourteen-hundred years, and we find ourselves in the upper room with Jesus on Maundy Thursday evening, ***mere minutes*** before He leaves the upper room and goes out to the Garden of Gethsemane. He speaks these words to His disciples, then prays His High Priestly prayer for them, and then goes out to the Garden...and you know the rest of the story. *“Behold, the hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, each to his own home, and will leave Me alone. Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with Me. I have said these things to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.”*

Jesus doesn’t sugar-coat or soft-sell His impending betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion, nor does He sugar-coat or soft-sell the disciples’ ***terrified and selfish response*** to all the terror they’re about to witness. They *will* flee. They *will* deny even knowing Him. They *will* utterly abandon Him. Three days later they will

still be *self-quarantined* behind locked doors in self-centered self-preservation. And yet... Jesus bespeaks His peace to them. And that's something worth noting too. The peace that Jesus bespeaks them isn't a *reminiscent peace* grounded in the "good old days" that they shared together over the past three years, nor is it a peace that's built upon a magical, pain-free "someday" in the *unforeseen distant future* when they finally leave this vale of tears and go home to heaven. Nope. It's a very *present-tense peace* that's focused squarely on His cross and suffering. *"Take heart. I have overcome the world."*

Did you catch that? Overcoming the world is already a done-deal for Him, that's how sure-and-certain His victory is! Jesus points them to and focuses them *on His cross*, assuring them and promising them that in that cross—that image and icon of wrath and judgment and death—He has overcome the world, once and for all time. Their peace will be found by trusting, not in their eyes and their feelings—*not in their own reason and strength*—but in the Word and Promise of God; the Word and Promise of God Himself in the flesh, who was lifted up and nailed to a cross for all the world to see; *the very epitome of gruesome suffering and death*.

Fast-forward another two-thousand years, and here we are. *Out of the midst of our own present sorrow and fear and suffering* we still confess and cry out for deliverance; for God to do something. Nothing has really changed, has it? Your Lord still desires nothing more than to give you His peace. He desires nothing more than to deliver you from your sinful fears and anxieties; from the sin and death all around you... *although He's not working in the way so many of us are expecting (or demanding)*. He has never promised you a peace that is absent of all suffering and tribulation, at least not while you reside on this side of eternity. He never promises "easy street" to anyone living in this fallen and sinful world. *"Take up your cross and follow Me...."* Your Lord certainly never calls you to quarantine yourself from Him and His means of grace! Just listen to His own High Priestly prayer (John 17). Rather than asking that we be *removed/quarantined* from all suffering and temptation, He prays for us *while we still reside in the midst of suffering and temptation*. *"In the world, but not of the world."* He doesn't pray that we be utterly removed/quarantined from the world. Rather, He gives to us His peace *in the very midst* of all this tribulation and suffering and sorrow. *"In the world you will have tribulation, but take heart, for I have overcome the world."*

Nothing has changed. We're still being directed to focus on and hold fast to our Lord's Word and Promise; the Word and Promise that saves us and delivers us and gives to us His peace. Earlier on in His ministry, Jesus said to Nicodemus (one of the chief Pharisees, who had come to Him under the cover of darkness), *"Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life."* What immediately

follows—the very next verse—is John 3:16. Jesus Himself directs Nicodemus to His cross.

Nothing has changed. This Word and Promise of God’s gifts of life, salvation and peace is attached to the very image and icon of God’s wrath and judgment against sin [*the cross*]. Talk about mysterious and strange! Here is God’s wrath against all sin for all time, and at the same time, here is God’s unconditional and incomprehensible love for you. Here is death and damnation, the due wage for your sin, and at the same time here is God’s grace and mercy for you; His undeserved gift of life—your life. Here [*the cross*] is where our Lord Christ declared victory—your victory! “*It is finished!*” I know this looks like **defeat** in every sense of the word. By any worldly measure this does **not** look like One who is overcoming or winning **anything**. And yet...our Lord tells us and promises us that this **exactly** what is going on here. Faith looks to this cross and hears His Word/Promise and believes...**and is saved**.

And this isn’t merely a reminiscent kind of faith that looks only to something that happened on a dark Friday so many centuries ago. Look your baptism, where Christ Himself brings this cruciform, resurrection victory to you, putting His name upon your head and your heart. You ARE baptized. It’s not a past-tense thing. It’s blessed present-tense reality. You ARE baptized. Look to the altar/rail, where Christ Himself comes to you in the present to nourish you with His victorious Body and Blood; the very Body and Blood that has already overcome all sin, death, and the devil. Look, listen, and receive these good gifts of life as He places His Body and Blood upon your lips and gives you His peace. Listen as you depart and make your way out into this serpent-filled valley of shadowy death and despair. “*Depart in peace.*” That’s not a suggestion. **That’s description. That’s reality!** Christ really/truly gives you His peace; a peace the world does not know, does not have, and cannot give you. It’s a peace that surpasses all understanding; a peace that is only apprehended in the confidence of saving faith.

Now... this real presence and peace of Christ should mean something to you, even in the midst of your sorrows, your fears, and your sufferings. It’s so sad to think that many Israelites still suffered and died so unnecessarily. God had given them the remedy, and yet so many of them still refused to look on in faith and be saved. They had the cure... and yet it meant nothing to them. They suffered and died for no good reason.

Folks: Nothing has changed. If your health fails you or you don’t get the healing you so desire or you lose your job or your financial security ends up in the latrine, ***do you still have God’s peace? Do you still belong to Jesus?*** It’s sad, but so many Christians today don’t have God’s peace because they’re still so

consumed with self-preserving worry/fear. They're too busy looking for the things they think make for peace. They cry out to God for deliverance/peace, and then *hide/flee* from the very means that God uses to give them His deliverance/peace. They won't draw near to God *until* their prayers/demands are answered. Kind of makes you wonder who is Lord and who is servant in those relationships, doesn't it?

Here's where we'll call it a day: We have our Lord's promise that the very gates of hell will not prevail, so neither will anything that this fallen and sinful world can throw at you. **You belong to Christ! Be at peace!** Hold fast to Him and His all-powerful mercy, grace, and love; a love so deep and true that He willingly took on flesh in order to have that flesh lifted up on that wretched cross for you, all so that you may have His gifts of life and peace to the fullest. Folks: Whether you live or die and everything in between, you belong to Him. May this cruciform, real-presence mystery of God's love for you, on full display for all to *hear, see, and receive*, give you peace the peace He desires for you, now and into all eternity.

AMEN