



St. John the Beloved

Peace has a special Biblical connotation. It is often called the first fruit of faith. *"Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ"* (Romans 5:1). The Lord Jesus Christ is considered the "Prince of Peace". Being the truest source of peace known to man today, the Son of God, found no price great enough for peace and shed His own blood for its sake, *"Having made peace through the blood of His cross"* (Colossians 1:20).

Peace is considered one of God's greatest gifts to us in the Person of the Lord Jesus Christ and to keep Him ever present in thought, the word peace was to become the Jewish word of custom to address both a greeting and a good-bye so important was the word for God's presence in everyday life. Today, we continue to recite in the Divine Liturgy, "Peace be with all", before the Prayer of Reconciliation and following the Orthodox Creed.

The Lord Jesus Christ often spoke of perfect peace reconciling humanity with God and not being afraid. *"Peace I leave you with; My peace I give to you. I do not give you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid"*

(John 14:27). This the Lord Jesus Christ spoke to His disciples concerning His eventual sequence of death including His Resurrection, Ascension into Heaven, and the Pentecost sending of the Holy Spirit. It further implies that peace is more than an earthly gift left behind, but a spiritual gift and an inheritance to the faithful.

This "Peace be to you" message was to fill the disciples hearts with such great peace, with such great joy, and such great comfort to go out and spread such Great News that it would continue to impact our lives some two thousand years later.

Peace was not only the message at the end of the Lord Jesus Christ's earthly life but it was the message present from its very inception. The Archangel Gabriel said to St. Mary upon her destiny to be the mother of the Lord Jesus Christ, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." To further ensure peace an Angel of the Lord said unto St. Joseph, "*Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit*" (Matthew 1:20). Both, St. Mary and St. Joseph (through his willing faith inspired adoption) were to receive THE gift of peace.

The angels announcing to the lowly shepherds "*Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people...*" (Luke 2:10). This was indeed THE night of peace, the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ. This verse was to be followed with "*Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth, peace*" (Luke 2:14). When did peace come to earth except when the Lord Jesus Christ the Son of God was born and brought His goodness and goodwill to all men?

The Lord Jesus Christ spoke these words to the disciples following His Glorious Resurrection, "*Why are you troubled? And why do doubts arise in your hearts?*" (Luke 24: 38) again reinforcing with peace there is no need to be afraid, no need for doubting or for troubled hearts. Peace enlightens our joy and happiness. There is no abounding negativity with peace. Only peacefulness brings us nearer to the Lord our God.

So rigidly did the early church hold fast to the concept of peace that should one not choose to abide in peace they could be rejected from the church! This is shown in documented endeavors of many early Christian writers, most notably in the Apostolic Tradition. An example of this can be found with the church at the close of the second century permitting converted soldiers to remain in military service following their baptism only provided they did not

bear a sword, take oaths, or participate in idol worship. The peace of the Lord continued to remain strong in the hearts and minds of the Christian early church fathers.

Hippolytus bears witness to this practice in his *Apostolic Tradition* (c. 200) and writes, "A soldier of civil authority must be taught not to kill men and to refuse to do so if he is commanded and to refuse to take an oath. If he is unwilling to comply, he must be rejected for baptism. A military commander or civic magistrate who wears the purple must resign or be rejected. If an applicant or a believer seeks to become a soldier, he must be rejected, for he has despised the God of peace" (*Apostolic Tradition* 16).

Tertullian (c. 200) wrote, "...How will a Christian man participate in war? In fact, how will he serve even in peace with a sword? For the Lord has taken the sword away. It is also true that soldiers came to John the Baptist and received the instructions for their conduct. It is true also that a centurion believed. Nevertheless, the Lord afterward, in disarming Peter, disarmed every soldier."

What is this peace of God and why is it connected most often to deter fear? Fear is present in most facets of life. We see homes with electronic alarm systems, learn of children with their family's guns at

schools; hear constant talk of the Iraq War, Israeli bombings, and disruption of life in Southern Egypt. People ask, "But should we not be cautious and watchful?" Certainly, but alarm systems do not deter fear. Fear is not cast out by suicide bombings in the Middle East. Rather wars and rumors of war, gives seed to more fear and growing fear becomes the needless cause of tyranny and troubles of the day.

It must be said here, that many Biblical scholars today believe, "But I tell you not to resist an evil person. But whoever slaps you on your right cheek, turn the other to him also," means not to resist violence with further violence escalating the violence. In essence it means that an evil person or one that directs evil to another person can only be overcome by goodness. Why? Because it keeps us as individuals incurring the slap, peaceful helping us to maintain our goodness, and keeping us free from anger and its destructiveness. It teaches us the preference of other fruits of peace such as forbearance being favored over violent acts. The teachings set forth do not contradict the state's need and right to protect its citizens and to punish criminals. Rather, it addresses our actions and responsibilities as individuals.

It reinforces and turns our focus to, "*Blessed be the peacemakers, for they shall be called the sons of*

*God*" (Matthew 5:9). Peace brings us as Christian individuals into communion with God being called His sons. Peace brings us into harmony with God's created world. Peace is in essence imitating the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore only peacemakers can share in God's peace, share it with others, and participate in the work of God's only begotten Son. His Son and we as peacemakers being His sons become as one with the Lord Jesus Christ.

Only the peace of God keeps fear in check. Only the peace of God assures us all that we are not alone regardless of what is happening in the world, in our communities, and in our work places. Peace gives us the presence of God working in our lives, making us confident that whatever comes our way it can be taken care of.

Tertullian (c. 207) wrote this about peace and the perfect world as the Lord Jesus Christ was the perfect Person of peace, "and they will beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks.' In other words, they will change the dispositions of injurious minds, hostile tongues, blasphemy, and all kinds of evil into pursuits of moderation and peace. 'Nations will not lift up swords against nations.' That is, they will not stir up conflict. 'Neither will they learn war any more' that is, provocation of hostilities. So you should learn

from this that Christ was not promised to be powerful in war. Rather, He was promised to pursue peace. Now, you must deny either that these things were foretold (although they are plainly seen) or that they have been fulfilled (although you read of them)."

The pursuit of peace be to all,

Bishop Youssef,

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