

“Begin Peace Talks”
Romans 5:1-8
Series: The Missing Peace Week 1. Peace with God
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The Woodside Church

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Well 2020 is done. Yet we all know our struggles will not disappear just because a ball dropped in an empty Times Square. So how will you face the perils of 2021? We have a fire alarm system at Woodside. The keypad in the lobby communicates important instructions. One day in the middle of the pandemic, the alarm system gave me a one word recommendation of what to do: PANIC!

We’ve seen a lot of panic and pandemonium during this pandemic. At times, do you feel like you are on one of those twirling, whirling carnival rides? Are you strapped in by circumstances beyond your control? Are demands and decisions flying at you so fast they make your head spin? Are the burdens and pressures pushing down on your chest like a pachyderm?

What makes you feel powerless? What’s beyond your control? Are you afraid of catching corona? Are you weary of wearing these masks? Is your job hanging by a thread? Are your parents getting a divorce? Is your spouse no longer in love with you? Is your teenager experimenting with risky behavior? Is your child struggling with online school? Is your body doing something that has the doctor’s stumped? Did you recently lose someone you love? Are your emotions raging, addicted or numb? Sometimes it gets so bad you feel nauseous. You want to get off.

Two things are true as we enter 2021: 1. You and I are powerless to change many of these circumstances. 2. God wants to give you Peace not Panic in these circumstances. Paul gives us this incredible description of God’s love in Jesus.

You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Romans 5:6-8

When there are so many self-help books, TV personalities and celebrity gurus offering you advice on how to deal with life, why should you trust Jesus? Paul’s simple answer is, “Because He loves you.” That sounds like a trite cliché. Yet the love of God is deep. Deeper than a soldier’s love for the flag he carries into battle. Deeper than the love of a protester who marches for a cause. Deeper even than the love of parents who would willingly take the place of their sick child.

Perhaps you’ve heard me share about the moving experience Lisa and I had while walking among the countless crosses in the cemetery above Omaha Beach in Normandy, France on D Day. Each cross bears the name of a soldier who gave the last full measure of devotion for the cause of freedom. How can God’s love be deeper than that? We love

country, causes, and children because they love us back. 'But God proves His own love for us in this:' Paul writes, 'When we were still His enemies, when we were still powerless, while we were still sinners, that's when Christ died for us' (see Romans 5:6-8). As incredible as this seems, as hard as it is to say, it would be like our soldiers laying down their lives for the Nazis. Through Jesus, God loves us even though we refuse Him, reject Him, rebel against Him and crucify Him. There is no greater love.

For if, while we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Romans 5:10

If God so loves you when you are His enemy, how much more will He care for you, defend you and save you now that you are a member of His family? That is a love that's stronger than death, a love that never lets go, a love that never loses hope. Now that you are His child by faith, He wants you to receive His peace in the middle of your pandemic.

Desmond Tutu is the Archbishop of South Africa and a winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. Along with Nelson Mandela, Desmond Tutu guided South Africa through the oppressive days of Apartheid into a democratic and hopeful future. Time magazine asked him, "What's your favorite Bible verse?" He replied,

Romans 5:8. "[While] we were yet sinners, Christ died for us." It sums up the Gospel wonderfully. We think we have to impress God so that God could love us. But he says, "No, you are loved already, even at your worst."

God's incredible love gives him a completely different outlook on the world. Another question asked if he is optimistic about the future. Desmond Tutu said,

I'm not optimistic, no. I'm quite different. I'm hopeful. I am a prisoner of hope. In the world, you have very bad people—Hitler, Idi Amin—and they look like they are going to win. All of them—all of them—have bitten the dust.¹

How do you receive God's peace? Begin Peace Talks with God. Wars usually end with peace talks. When it's a draw, equal opponents agree to lay down their arms and live side by side. When one army wins, the other is forced to accept terms of surrender. These can include subjugation and slavery. God's peace is different. His goal is not revenge but reconciliation. He wants to restore you to His family. If you want to have peace this year, you must begin by making peace with God. The peace Jesus gives cannot be found here on earth. He says,

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

After the horrors of Apartheid, Desmond Tutu, Nelson Mandela and the leaders of South Africa could have sought revenge. Instead they formed the Truth and Reconciliation

¹ "10 Questions," Time magazine (3-22-10), p. 4

Commission. To heal the nation and avoid more violence they invited perpetrators and victims to come forward and tell the truth, to bring injustice into the light.

The hearings started in 1996. The mandate of the commission was to bear witness to, record, and in some cases grant amnesty to the perpetrators of crimes relating to human rights violations, as well as offering reparation and rehabilitation to the victims. A register of reconciliation was also established so that ordinary South Africans who wished to express regret for past failures could also express their remorse.²

How do we begin peace talks with God? **Trust God.** Paul writes,

Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God.
Romans 5:1-2

I'm sure some thought the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was a trap. It took a lot of trust to even come to the table. You may not trust God. Maybe you feel the Lord wants to punish you. Or perhaps you are angry at God. It takes faith and trust just to come to the Table. Yet when you do you discover, through the blood of Jesus, you receive three gifts:

Pardon for the Past: "Therefore since we have been justified through faith..." Previously in Romans, Paul teaches we are not on parole but fully pardoned by God. We are declared, "Not Guilty" by the Judge. The charges are dropped. The record is erased. The punishment falls on Jesus, not on us.

Peace for the Present: "We have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand." Jesus completely reconciles and reunites us with our Heavenly Father. There is no separation between us and God. A peace, a contentment this world cannot give, cannot understand, and cannot take away becomes ours when we are in a relationship with God through Christ.

Promise for the Future: "And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God." Our peace-filled relationship with the Lord gives us the confidence that one day we will see Him in all His wonder, power and glory, that we will be filled with that glory and that we will be completely free of whatever holds us prisoner in this life.

Now you've heard this before. So why don't you feel this peace? You and I have to **Tell the Truth.** I just finished reading through the twelve Minor Prophets in my Quiet Time and the consistent theme woven through them all is this: idols disturb our peace with God. While Jonah is underwater in the belly of the big fish he says,

Those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them. Jonah 2:8

² [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth_and_Reconciliation_Commission_\(South_Africa\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth_and_Reconciliation_Commission_(South_Africa))

Hear this: God does not withdraw His love and peace. When we cling to an idol, we turn away from God's love and peace. We believe idols will give us love, joy and peace. They don't, they can't, they won't. Idols promise power, pleasure, popularity. They feed your pride. Yet Idols will take you under. You don't need to tell God the truth about your idols. He already knows it. You have to get honest with yourself and throw away the idols. The first peace practice in the New Year is an Idol Inventory. Idols demand sacrifice. To what do you sacrifice your time, money, energy, family and/or health? What gets in the way of your relationship with God? Be honest with yourself. Examples: Career, Possessions, Person, Place, Money, a Grudge, One of the Seven Deadly Sins (Angry, Lust, Envy, Greed, Pride, Laziness, Gluttony). Tell the Truth about your idols.

Take the Peace Path. Throwing away your idols will send you through withdrawal. Every addict who has gone through withdrawal will tell you it is painful. Yet there is no other path to recovery and peace. This is why Paul says,

Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance, character; and character, hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us. Romans 5:3-5

There will certainly be struggles and even suffering in 2021. There are struggles and suffering whenever we throw away our idols. Don't let this drive you to despair. Choose, instead, God's pathway to peace. Let the Lord use this suffering to give you the strength to endure, which in turn refines and sharpens your character and eventually gives you hope through the power of the Holy Spirit. What'll it cost you (physically, emotionally, financially) if you stop putting it first in your life? What steps can you take to let it go or at least put it in its proper place so it doesn't disturb your peace with God?

Joni Eareckson Tada, no stranger to suffering, compares it to sandblasting. Years ago she saw the façade of a cathedral blackened by years of grime and soot. Yet after an extensive sandblasting project, the cathedral emerged from the scaffolding radiant and glorious. If we offer our suffering to God, He can sandblast away the accumulated hurts, hang-ups and habits that are not helpful. Joni says.

The beauty of being stripped down to the basics, sandblasted until we reach a place where we feel empty and helpless, is that God can fill us up with himself. When pride and pettiness have been removed, God can fill us with "Christ in you, the hope of glory."³

We don't seek suffering or struggles. But they will come. The question is: Will you let them harden you or will you allow God to lead you through to hope?

Jennifer was not on speaking terms with God. At times you might even say she was at war with Him and with life. Jennifer writes,

³ Joni Eareckson Tada, *A Place of Healing: Wrestling with the Mysteries of Suffering, Pain, and God's Sovereignty* (David Cook, 2010), pp. 86-87.

Many years ago I moved into my house, resistant, ungrateful and very depressed and angry. I had left a bad relationship and was using drugs to fill the Jesus shaped hole in my heart. Not long after I moved here things started to change. I did stop using drugs but continued to feel all the feelings I previously spoke of. I befriended a neighbor named Peggy who knew the Lord and she prayed and prayed for me.

Peggy invited Jennifer to church. Jennifer refused again and again. Yet Peggy kept praying, inviting and being a friend. Not just for one year or five years but for more than ten years. Finally, Jennifer began peace talks with God. She laid down her idols and surrendered to the Lord. Jennifer is Jennifer Hunter. Her neighbor is Peggy Wilson.

When I finally gave my heart to Jesus, I became a new creation - changing the way I think, feel and act. Fast forward almost 10 years: now I consider myself a daughter of the King. Jesus is in my home, my heart, my healing.

There will be struggles in 2021. Don't panic. Begin the peace talks with God.