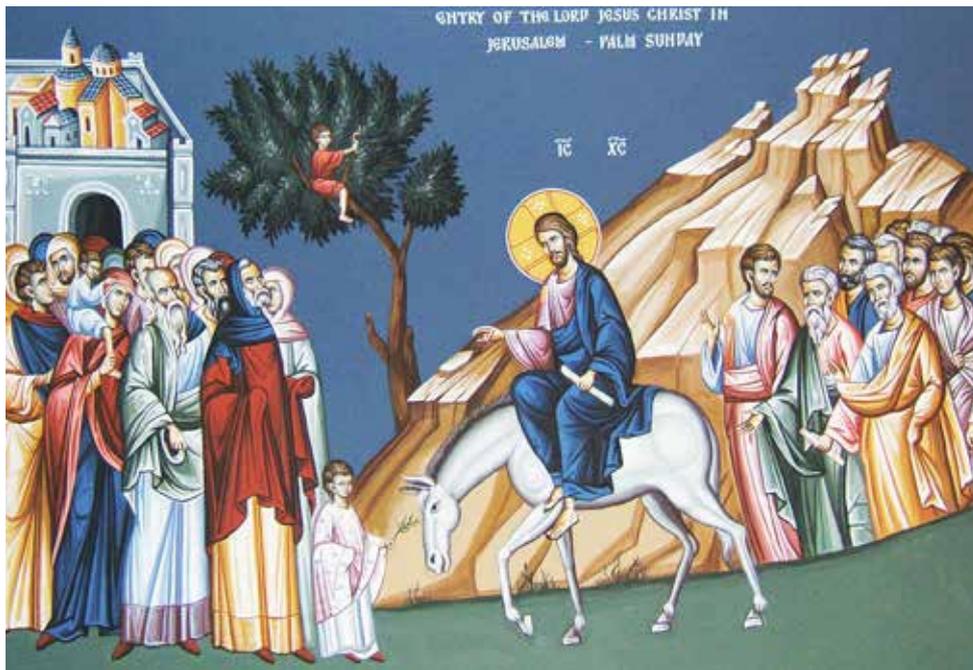


The Human Destruction of Peace

Study Two



Entry of Jesus Christ into Jerusalem, Anon, Serbian icon

A starter

What do you come across in daily life that's most likely to disturb your inner peace?

Key verse

'There is no peace,' says my God,
'for the wicked.'
(Isaiah 57:21)

Sin and self

(Read Isaiah 57:18-21; Luke 19:41-44)

Isaiah's words reflect the state the Jews had allowed themselves to get into, which angered God but also revealed his amazing grace, with the offer of healing and restoration to 'the mourners' in despair over what they see around them. God offers 'Peace, peace, to those far and near', and a welcome home for the wayward children - as with the parable of the Prodigal Son. The 'far and near' in his promise might also include foreigners.

But for those who will not acknowledge how far they have fallen, there is a vivid illustration of restless, unfulfilled lives, and the well-known and well-used phrase, 'no peace for the wicked'.

We get a glimpse of the heart of God in Jesus' words as he approached

Jerusalem. The nation has once again lost its focus, this time on the presence of Jesus, their Messiah. A nation's search for peace, both physical and spiritual, has failed to realise that its source is standing among them, and with that spiritual blindness comes judgement.

Jesus was on the last leg of his journey to a cross and knew that the suffering and pain he faced would not be limited to himself. Although some had responded to Jesus' words and presence, the majority had not, and having missed this opportunity would find not peace, but conflict, when in A.D. 70 Titus of Rome laid siege to and destroyed Jerusalem.

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Discussion

- 1: How does Isaiah's word picture in verse 20 sum up the human condition?
- 2: The world of social media offers many ways to bring happiness and contentment into lives, but often at a price. Can you think of a few, and whether they fulfil their promise?
- 3: What if Jesus were to have made his first appearance to our generation with a similar message and call to follow - would the response be any different?

Fear and anxiety

(Read Matthew 6:31-34; John 20:19; 1 Timothy 6:9-10)



Luca Signorelli, Christ Appearing to His Disciples, 1514

Fear and anxiety are not uncommon challenges along the journey of faith, and Jesus knew that well. These words come after a talk about the dangers of focussing on the comforts of now, rather than the blessings of heaven, summing up with 'where your treasure is, there your heart will also be', and 'you cannot serve both God and money.' However, the need for physical comfort and security as we get older is a genuine issue for many, and a cause of anxiety.

Jesus' argument is that materialism is a distraction to our spiritual life. Far more important for believers is to pursue righteousness and the life of God's kingdom. Worrying about what may or not happen tomorrow makes no sense in this

context, for God knows all our needs and if tomorrow brings fresh troubles, God's grace will be there for us.

John's story of the disciples hiding from the Jewish leaders after the crucifixion speaks into this, as Jesus appears to his frightened friends with the Jewish greeting 'peace be with you'. But this is more than a simple greeting, as peace was both at the centre of his work and remains Jesus' gift within the kingdom.

Paul, in his advice to Timothy, emphasises the dangers of wrong priorities in life (here mentioning wealth) and how they might lead people into dangerous choices that can ruin lives.

Discussion

- 4: How easy is it to not worry about tomorrow, and how can we strengthen that desire to do as Jesus asks, so we might embrace the peace he offers?
- 5: Is the 'Shalom' Jesus greets his frightened disciples with, which means so much more than 'Hi', 'Hello' or 'You alright?', encompassing peace, wholeness, and contentment, something all believers could use more often?
- 6: Paul warns of temptations and distractions that can lead long term into grief. He mentions the love of money, but can you think of other things that can divert us from the 'straight and narrow' path we should follow?

Consequences

(Read Genesis 6:5-8; Isaiah 24:6-10; Romans 8:7-13)

The passage from Genesis 6 takes a reader up to the story of Noah and the flood. Theologians have argued over the meaning of verses 1-8 for centuries, and it may help to look at this part of the creation story in a bigger picture of the relationship between humankind (represented by Adam and Eve) and God.

Presented with a beautiful world (or garden) to care for in the company of the Creator, they chose a different way, desired knowledge and power, and from that moment, things went very wrong. The knowledge of good and evil they discovered had not been beneficial.

Far better would have been to trust in God. Humanity suffered, and God grieved and was 'deeply troubled'.

Perhaps the picture (which on the surface looks grim and dark) becomes clearer as we meet Noah, whose name in Hebrew, spelt backwards, is identical to the Hebrew word for grace – which effectively makes Noah a reflection of God's grace, in a rebooting of the relationship between Creator and Creation. There are consequences to sin, but there is also God's grace and mercy.

Isaiah brings no less depressing news for the people regarding the consequences of sin, telling his readers that 'the earth is defiled by its people' (24:5), a message that seems to encompass the whole earth, and possibly even beyond. This is God's judgement on the whole of society, and it's a sorry and fearful story. In the few verses we're looking at, it may well be a picture of fear which keeps people locked in their homes. But all is not lost, because just a few chapters later we have 'In that day...' (27:2) and the prophet is talking of Israel's restoration.

Paul sees a mind that is influenced by the values of the world as being hostile to God and commends his readers to be aware of this and rely instead on the promise of Jesus Christ, that the Holy Spirit will be within and give life to all believers. 'If you put to death the misdeeds of the body', he says, 'you will live'.

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Discussion

- 7: How does the passage from Genesis speak into your faith?
- 8: There are consequences to every decision or action we take in life, but where can they have the greatest impact?
- 9: Does the story of the Flood in Genesis take on new meaning with the suggestion of Noah being seen as a reflection of God's grace?
- 10: There is an element of risk in the decisions we make every day, so how might we ensure that any risk assessment limits potential clashes with God's will for our lives?

'I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness; I hear the approaching thunder that, one day, will destroy us too. I feel the suffering of millions. And yet, when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too shall end, that peace and tranquility will return once more.'
(Anne Frank)

'Revenge, lust, ambition, pride, and self-will are too often exalted as the gods of man's idolatry; while holiness, peace, contentment, and humility are viewed as unworthy of a serious thought.'
(Charles Spurgeon)

'When the power of love overcomes the love of power the world will know peace.'
(Jimi Hendrix)

Takeaway

How much time do you spend with your Bible, and could a broader understanding of God's Word through study help you on your journey of faith?

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