

PERSPECTIVE

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PASTORAL REFLECTIONS
ON *peace*

LIVING IN THE “NEVERTHELESS”

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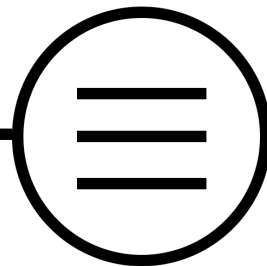
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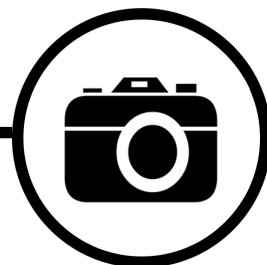
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Pastoral Reflections on Peace: Living in the “Nevertheless”

I'll never forget one of the first speeches I ever gave. My boss, a U.S. senator, had been asked to address the inaugural meeting of a bioethics advisory commission he made possible. But he couldn't attend. He sent me, a young staffer, in his place.

A group of intimidating people filled the room: doctors, lawyers, professors, and political professionals. I was a novice. My nerves rattled as I sat there in my grey suit, beads of sweat gathering on my brow, overwhelmed by the sense that I was in over my head.

I raced through my prepared remarks. Then, before anyone could respond, I nervously and awkwardly stood up, hoping that if I exited the room quickly no one would remember how it went. As I shuffled back to the office, I had no peace.

WE'VE ALL BEEN THERE

What I experienced that chilly, October day isn't unusual. Everybody knows what it's like to be uneasy, out-of-sorts, anxious, and afraid. From the soldier deployed on his first mission to the salesman about to make his first pitch, we've all had to reckon with nerves that won't calm down, a heart beating out of our chest, and thoughts spinning out of control. Everyone longs for peace; very few know where to find it.

What comes to your mind when you think about the word peace?

- ✦ Sitting in the shade on a warm, sandy beach with your favorite book in one hand and a cold drink in the other?
- ✦ Your home, late at night, after all the kids are in bed and nobody is demanding your attention?
- ✦ A month without another report of a mass shooting, suicide bomber, or drone strike?
- ✦ Going to work without worrying the boss is going to yell at you, the vendor is going to fail you, or the customer is going to abandon you?

We all know life is full of disappointments. Whether large (war in the Middle East) or small (pain in our lower back), feelings of unrest seem woven into our daily lives.

Whatever the trial, our gut tells us something is wrong. We aren't supposed to be crushed by anxiety, beaten up by worry, or battered by loneliness. In the midst of a world that seems to know no peace, we are left longing for rest.

LIVING IN THE “NEVERTHELESS”

This lack of peace is especially problematic for Christians. We've read enough of the Bible to know God expects us to be at peace. Nearly every New Testament letter begins with a call for peace to mark our lives (Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:3; 2 Cor 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph 1:2; Phil 1:2; Col 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:2; 1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2; Titus 1:4; Philemon 1:3; 1 Pet 1:2; 2 John 1:3; 3 John 1:15; Jude 1:2; Rev 1:4).

The apostles called the church to know the peace of God because they had seen the power of a peace-filled life. Even as the sword of persecution hung over its head, the early church thrived: “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up” (Acts 9:31). Paul, who set himself up as an example, reminded the Christians in Philippi he knew how to live at peace: “I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound” (Phil 4:11-12).

Paul and the first Christians followed in the footsteps of their Savior. Jesus suffered under the expectation of the crucifixion. He prayed for a way out, but he remained at peace with whatever the Father ordained: “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done” (Luke 22:42).

Christians are supposed to live in the “nevertheless.” Scripture calls us to accept whatever God allows, to rest in whatever God sends, and confess with Samuel Rodigast, the seventeenth-century hymn writer:

*Whate'er my God ordains is right;
Though now this cup, in drinking,
May bitter seem to my faint heart,
I take it all, unshrinking.*

Each of us is called to live in the “nevertheless” by trusting God in any and all circumstances. What makes this so hard, and how can we “walk by the Spirit” (Gal 5:16) in such a way that peace bursts forth more naturally?

The answer is found in understanding the root of peace.

THE ROOT OF PEACE

From Genesis to Revelation, the root of peace is the atoning work of God. When we hear the word, “peace,” we shouldn’t first think of being calm in the face of a speech or some other trial. As tempting as it might be, we shouldn’t think first of the tranquil beach. We should think of God making a way for sinners to be reconciled to him.

Peace, in the Old Testament, was given by God to those who came to him through the shed blood of the sacrificial animals. No wonder some of those sacrifices were actually called “peace offerings” (Lev 3)! The psalmist rejoiced in these sacrifices, praying to the LORD, “you forgave the iniquity of your people; you covered all their sin” (Psa 85:2). Looking at the temple, where God atoned for the sins of his people, the same psalmist saw “steadfast love and faithfulness meet; righteousness and peace kiss each other” (Psa 85:10). In other words, through the blood of a lamb without blemish, God replaced wrath with love, infidelity with faithfulness, sin with righteousness, and enmity with peace.

Peace, in the New Testament, is the gift the Father grants those who come to him through the shed blood of his Son. We all offended God, each and every one of us (Rom 3:9-18). We all deserve God’s wrath because of our sin. God, in his loving kindness, provided a way of escape. He delivered up Jesus “for our trespasses,” and he raised him “for our justification” (Rom 4:25). Those who were once God enemies, God now calls his friend. How is this possible? Through the blood of Christ. What is this called? Peace. “Therefore, since we have been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Rom 5:1).

At its core, peace is not singing “Kumbaya” around a campfire with a dozen of your closest friends, going to work each day with the inner-confidence that all is well, or a tranquil feeling manufactured by 45 minutes of yoga. The root of peace is the objective reality that God has adopted you into his family as his precious son or daughter. Peace is the fact, solid as granite, that because of Jesus’ work on the cross, every believer is “sanctified in Christ” who will “sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 1:2, 8).

The power of a tidal wave won’t be limited to the ocean—it will eventually hit the shore. Likewise, someone who knows the peace of God will find it impacts every aspect of his life.

Because the gospel is a message of peace (Acts 10:36; Eph 6:15), our biggest problem—God’s wrath—is behind us. But there is more to peace than the end of God’s wrath. The Christian who knows the root of peace will see branches of peace extending throughout his life. Having been reconciled to a holy God, the Christian will find himself at peace with others and at peace with himself.

PEACE WITH OTHERS

Christians are called to live at peace with one another (Mark 9:50; Rom 12:18; 14:19; 1 Thess 5:13; Heb 12:14; James 3:18; 2 Pet 3:14). In fact, the peace we have with God and with one another can’t be separated. It’s impossible to be reconciled to God without his peace spilling over into personal relationships. Notice how Paul connected the two:

But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ. For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility by abolishing the law of commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to those who were far off and peace to those who were near (Eph 2:13-17).

Under the Old Covenant, the “law of commandments and ordinances” privileged the Jews. They were God’s special, chosen, uniquely loved people. The nations were their enemy. But, in Christ, the barrier between Jew and Gentile has been dismantled. Just as the fall of the Berlin Wall united East and West Germany, so now the walls that divide humanity—ethnic, social, cultural, economic—have been crushed under the weight of Christ’s atoning death and resurrection. The church is now one body. In Christ we are at peace with God and we are at peace with one another.

What does this look like in your life?

- Are you building relationships with non-Christians of other ethnicities, colors, and backgrounds with confidence God will build his church as a monument to his passion for peace?
- Do you build discipling relationships with people from all walks-of-life as a testimony to the reality that “the gospel has made one new man in place of the two?”

- ♦ Will you forgive those who have wronged you, with the conviction that “so far as it depends on you” you must “live peaceably with all” (Rom 12:18)?

PEACE WITH OTHERS

The peace we have with God is foundational, and peace with others must be pursued. Yet there is peace within the believer that we would be foolish to neglect. So Paul prayed, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope” (Rom 15:13).

Far too many believers—behind the pulpit and in the pew—are living without this peace that God has promised to those who love him. Perhaps it’s because they’ve failed to ask for it. Perhaps they’ve taken their eyes off the root of peace. For whatever reason, they have not yet learned, as Paul did, “the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need” (Phil 4:12).

The secret is to remember that those in Christ are redeemed and secure, safe and accepted. Those who have been justified by Christ are forever free to find their identity in Christ. It doesn’t matter how bad the speech goes, how unkind your friend has become, or how uncertain your future plans are. The rock-solid truth is that you have been justified by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. If this is true, the mountains in your life that seem impassable become pebbles you can barely see.

When our vision of God is big, and the root of peace—his atoning work—is in focus, our problems seem much smaller. They are real, but they aren’t ultimate. In other words, when we are confident God has decisively dealt with our sin, our personal weaknesses no longer overwhelm us. This is how Paul could be acutely aware of his own frailty but even more aware of God’s strength: “But we have this treasure in jars of clay, to show that the surpassing worth belongs to God and not us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed” (2 Cor 4:7-9). These are the words of a man who knew peace within.

REMEMBER THE CROSS

It’s hard to believe, but I’ve been preaching now for over twenty years. I’m no longer scared of public speaking (praise God!), but I still wrestle with anxiety. Hardly a week goes by where I’m not overwhelmed by the reality that whatever treasure I have, God has truly deposited it in a jar of clay—me!

Walking by the Spirit (Gal 5:16) and pursuing the fruit of peace (Gal 5:22) means remembering I’m not primarily a preacher or a pastor. For that matter, I’m not primarily a husband, father, son, or friend. First, and foremost, I’m simply a Christian whose biggest problem is behind him. I’ve been “justified by his grace as a gift.” Jesus has dealt with the wrath of God I deserve. He has drunk the full cup of God’s fury against me by hanging on that tree in my place. Now I can live in the “nevertheless.”

When I’m tempted to think my sermon isn’t good enough, my ministry isn’t strong enough, or my life isn’t what it ought to be, I remember the cross. Calvary is the root of my peace. Then, and only then, can I take a deep breath, keep moving, and, wherever possible, sing.

*Whate’er my God ordains is right:
His loving thought attends me;
No poison can be in the cup
That my Physician sends me.*

~Aaron Menikoff

Five English Reformers

Written by J.C. Ryle

Bookstall Price \$13



What are you willing to die for? Do you have a cause for which you would be willing to lay down your life? Are you against abortion? Would you die to stop a baby from being murdered? I am pretty sure that most of us today would be hard pressed to die for a cause.

However, things were different 460 years ago in England. It wasn't uncommon for men to be willing to die for a cause. In fact, many walked directly into the flame. And this is what the book, *Five English Reformers* is all about. Written by J.C. Ryle in

1890, it describes the lives of five men: John Hooper, Rowland Taylor, Hugh Latimer, John Bradford, and Nicholas Ridley. All died as martyrs in 1555 at the hand of Queen Mary, sometimes known as "Bloody Mary." Why did they die? The main reason for being burned at the stake was, as John Bradford wrote, "I deny transubstantiation, which is the darling of the devil, and daughter and heir to Antichrist's religion" (29).

This teaching, which is as false today as it was 500 years ago, would as Ryle says, "spoil the blessed doctrine of Christ's finished work when he died on the cross. A sacrifice that needs to be repeated is not a perfect and complete thing. You spoil the priestly office of Christ. If there are priests that can offer an acceptable sacrifice of God besides him, the great high priest is robbed of his glory" (32).

These five men, along with hundreds of others, were willing to burn at the stake instead of acquiescing to a false teaching. As I was reading, it was with great thrill I discovered I have an ancestor, John Bland, who was also martyred in 1555. Reading this book may serve to be an encouragement as you learn how believers in the past acted out their love for Christ; so much so that they would gladly suffer and die for him. Lord, make Philippians 3:10-11 real to us today, "That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead."

— RECOMMENDED BY LARRY CHANDLER

Excerpts from the Book

1

"The state of the laity in the diocese of Gloucester was as unsatisfactory as that of the clergy. This, of course, was only natural. Like pastors, like people."

—John Hooper: Bishop and Martyr, p. 67

2

"Be of good cheer, Master Ridley, and play the man. We shall this day light such a candle, by God's grace, in England, as I trust shall never be put out."

—Hugh Latimer as he and Ridley were about to be burned at the stake.

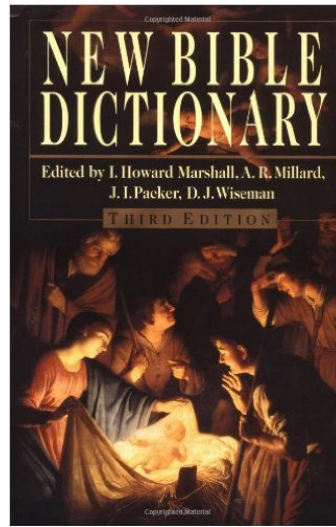
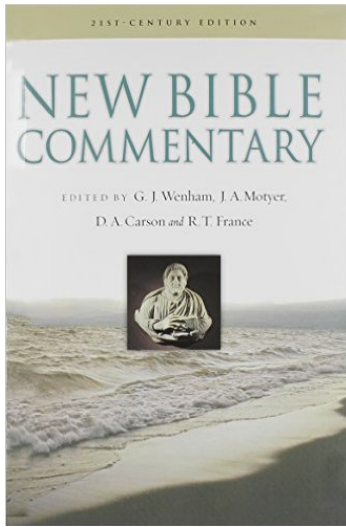
—Nicholas Ridley: Bishop and Martyr, p. 212

3

"Their blood was the seed of the church. The good that they did by their deaths was more than they did all their lives. Their martyrdom made thousands think who were never reached by their sermons. Myriads, we may depend, came to the conclusion that a church which could act so abominably and cruelly as Rome did could never be the one true church of God; and that a cause which could produce so much patient and unflinching sufferers must surely be the cause of Christ and truth."

—John Hooper: Bishop and Martyr, p. 83

New Bible Commentary & New Bible Dictionary



Read your Bible long enough and you are bound to begin asking questions. “Who is this Melchizedek fellow?” “What on earth is happening in Ezekiel?” “How do all the pieces of wisdom in James fit together?” At times, a good study Bible is all you need to answer your questions. But, sometimes you want a little bit more than your study Bible has to offer. When that happens, where do you turn? The Internet can be helpful, but it’s hard to know if what you are reading is reliable. Individual commentaries are great, but they are often expensive and many assume a basic knowledge of Hebrew and Greek that most just don’t have. Fortunately, InterVarsity Press has provided two incredibly helpful resources in the *New Bible Commentary* and *New Bible Dictionary*. As both a student and teacher of the Word, these two volumes are my go-to resources when I run into questions in my Bible reading and study.

The *New Bible Commentary* provides readers with brief, but insightful commentary on every book of the Bible. The commentators are leading Old and New Testament scholars who have labored to make the content of their commentary accessible to all. The volume also contains several helpful articles related to approaching the Bible and its various literary forms.

The *New Bible Dictionary* provides definitions and descriptions of key Bible terms, from Aaron to Zuzim. Like the *New Bible Commentary*, the dictionary’s entries are written by leading Evangelical scholars. Most entries are brief, but incredibly helpful when it comes to understanding the who, what, and even where of certain people, places, and things mentioned in Scripture. I regularly recommend both books to those who teach at MVBC, and I highly recommend them for anyone looking to dig deeper into the Word.

– RECOMMENDED BY DUSTIN BUTTS

Excerpts from the Book

1

“Because the Bible is God’s word, it is vitally important to cultivate humility as we read, to foster a meditative prayerfulness as we reflect and study, to seek the help of the Holy Spirit as we try to understand and obey, to confess sin and pursue purity of heart and motive and relationships as we grow in understanding. Failure in these areas may produce scholars, but not mature Christians.”

–D.A. Carson, “Approaching the Bible”

New Bible Commentary, p. 18-19

2

“Justification is the key to Paul’s philosophy of history. He holds that God’s central overarching purpose in his ordering of world-history since the Fall has been to lead sinners to justifying faith.”

–J.I. Packer, “Justification”

New Bible Dictionary, p. 638

3

“Those who read the gospels merely to discover historical facts about Jesus may succeed in doing so, but they will have missed the point. The gospels are for those who would ‘believe’ and ‘have life’. The facts about Jesus are recorded not for interest alone, but for response.”

–R.T. France, “Reading the Gospels”

New Bible Commentary, p. 903



He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.

-Hebrews 1:3-4

We continue through Hebrews 1:3-4 in seeing the supremacy of Jesus Christ. The Christians to whom Hebrews was written were tempted to abandon Christianity and revert back to Judaism, largely because of the persecution they endured for following Jesus (10:32-39).

Before the author exhorts and encourages them to preserve in the faith, he first reminds them of how gloriously supreme Jesus is over everything and everyone in the old covenant. They were not abandoning just any religious leader. They were turning their backs on God himself for Jesus is “the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power.” Jesus does what only God can do—uphold the universe by his word and make purification for sins—because he is God. To look upon Christ is to look upon the glory of God because he is the “exact imprint of his nature.”

Christian, there is no one and nothing more glorious and perfect than Jesus Christ. The Lord gives us a lot of different means to preserve in the faith. But the driving motivator for them all is to remember who it is you follow—the fully God-man, Jesus Christ.

One of the most theologically explosive phrases in Hebrews is: “he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” After Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, he “sat down.” The point is that redemption was accomplished. Full atonement for sins had been made. Nothing was left for Jesus to accomplish in order to reconcile God to man. The author is echoing Jesus’ cry, “It is finished” (Jn. 19:30). His mission was complete, and now he is seated waiting to judge the world.

Jesus sitting is in stark contrast to the priests of the old covenant, who never fully and completely rested from offering sacrifices for sins. “And every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God” (10:11-12).

Christian, you need not add anything to your salvation. What God plans, God accomplishes. You are to obey and follow his commands. But that is simply fruit of what God has done in your life by applying the redemption that Jesus fully and finally accomplished for you!

— BRAD THAYER

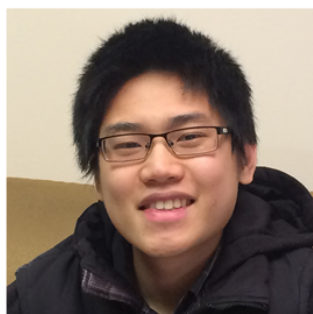
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