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The Peace God Promises
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ONE

THE PEACE YOU LONG FOR



One day a father was sitting in his study, attempting to work while keeping an eye on his young son. Looking around for something to occupy the boy, he tore a picture of the earth from the pages of a magazine. Ripping the picture into small pieces, he cupped the shredded blue and green papers in his hands and offered them to the boy as a gift. “Here’s a puzzle for you to put together,” he said.

Trotting out of the room to reassemble the puzzle, his son seemed happy with his new assignment. Turning back to his work, the father smiled, confident that at last he could count on some uninterrupted work time. But his sense of satisfaction vanished when the boy walked back into his study, triumphantly announcing the successful completion of the puzzle. “How,” the surprised father asked, “did you put it together so quickly?”

“It was easy,” the boy replied. “There’s a person on the other side of the page and when you put the person together, you put the world together.”

The boy's unintended wisdom cuts to the heart of our quest for peace.

Perhaps you are reading this book because you wonder what life would be like if you could find a way to banish your anxiety or to let go of the peace-destroying thoughts that plague you. Or maybe you are hoping to rid yourself of memories that control and disturb you. Or perhaps you are sure you will explode if one more thing gets added to your harried schedule. Whatever the circumstances, you want the peace God promises to become more evident in your life.

There was a time in my own life when I thought (but did not admit) that money would make me feel secure. At other times, I was sure life would calm down if only I could find a way to exert more control over my circumstances and the people who were causing me difficulty. Perhaps you've been drawn to other strategies, building your life on the assumption that peace will come as soon as you find the perfect relationship, the perfect vacation, the perfect job. Of course there's nothing wrong with a good vacation or a great job. And finding someone who loves you is one of life's great gifts. All of these can add happiness to your life. But none is capable of producing the peace God promises.

The problem is not so much that we are searching for a kind of peace that does not exist (more about that later) but that we are looking for peace in the wrong places. It's like searching for New York City in Florida. No matter how many times you drive from Jacksonville to Key West, you will never find it.

So what should we do? Perhaps it is time to ask God to teach us about the kind of peace he promises to give, to let him "put us back together" as persons made in his image. Maybe the best way to pursue our dreams of peace will be to focus first on God's dreams for us. Who does he want us to

be? What does he want us to believe? One thing we can be sure of. The peace God promises isn't a solitary, selfish kind of peace, like gold to be hoarded and kept. His peace is more like leaven. It can make us into people whose lives can touch the world, transforming it with grace and truth.

For most of us, the word *peace* has a certain wistfulness to it, an "if only" quality. "If only I could get a better job"; "If only I could afford a vacation"; "If only I had married someone who was easier to get along with"; "If only my kids would listen"; "If only I could retire." This sense of wistfulness arises because we can think of countless things that prevent us from experiencing the peace we desire. Always, the peace we long for seems just out of reach.

This is especially true during certain seasons in our lives. Several years ago, I began thinking about how I would celebrate a milestone birthday when it was yet a ways off. As the mother of two young children, I longed for a little peace, for time to get away from the incessant demands that children inevitably make. I wanted to do what I wanted to all day long for an entire week with no one tugging at me, no one needing me, and no one making any demands.

A full two years before that birthday, I decided I would celebrate on some island paradise. Perhaps the Cayman Islands. Just thinking about it made me feel more relaxed, anticipating the warm sand caressing every step, the blue-green water stretching out to the horizon. One year out, I thought it might be more practical to plan a trip to Florida. There are lots of gorgeous beaches in Florida. Six months in advance of my significant birthday, I set my heart on a weekend in Chicago. Then, a week before the big day, I thought, "If only I could get out to the mall!"

Each of us can come up with our own list of "if onlys" — of the things or the people who make our lives feel fragmented

and stressful. Such lists, of course, imply that peace is situational. We will experience peace once our troublesome circumstances are resolved, once that difficult person moves on, once we find a new job. Circumstances do, of course, affect our sense of happiness. But what happens when our circumstances remain frustratingly the same, as they so often do? Can we still find the peace God promises? Or are we the grand exception, the one person to whom his promises do not apply?

Listen, for a moment to a few of the promises God makes to us in Scripture:

*You will keep in perfect peace
those whose minds are steadfast,
because they trust in you. (Isaiah 26:3)*

*The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance,
kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-
control. (Galatians 5:22–23a)*

*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)*

Did God really mean it when he said these things? If so, what kind of peace was he talking about? And what exactly did Jesus mean when he spoke of “my peace” and of giving it “not as the world gives”? Furthermore, how could Jesus say these things on what must have been the most troubled night of his life? Just a short while later he would fall on his face in Gethsemane, praying to his Father about the fearful events that would soon overtake him. To his lethargic and prayerless disciples, Jesus described his soul as being “overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death” (Mark 14:34). He knew, though they did not, that in just hours he would suffer arrest,

abandonment, and death. How, then, could he speak of peace and of having so much of it that he could give it away?

The very first words Jesus speaks to his disciples after his resurrection, when they are gathered together, are these: “Peace be with you!” (John 20:19, 21), as if he knows precisely their need, terrified as they are by the Romans and by the religious leaders who conspired to murder their rabbi. They are in profound turmoil because everything they believe has been called into question by his death. Was Jesus only a foolish dreamer and they his gullible disciples?

The Hebrew phrase Jesus probably used to greet his astonished friends was this: *Shalom aleikhem*—“Peace be upon you.” This is the traditional greeting by which many Jews still greet each other today. But instead of wishing his disciples peace in an ordinary, everyday kind of way, Jesus was actually delivering peace in person. Noting the wounds in his hands and side and seeing him alive again, his disciples would have known that this was no dreamer. Truly he was the long-awaited Messiah. This shocking realization must have produced in them a new and deeper kind of peace, one they could never have imagined. To understand the full import of Jesus’ words, it will help to ask what the biblical word *shalom* means and what it reveals about the nature of the peace God promises to give.



Comparing the English word “peace” to the Hebrew word *shalom* is like comparing a twig to a log or a boy to a man. When we think of peace, we tend to think of an inner sense of calm or an absence of conflict. The idea of *shalom*, however, means these things and more. It means “wellness,” “completeness,” “perfection,” “safety,” “soundness,” “success,”

“wholeness,” “health,” and good relationships between people and nations. When there is *shalom*, everything is as it should be, our lives are as God meant them to be, our world is in the order he intended.

To experience peace in its fullness is to experience healing, satisfaction, prosperity. To be at peace is to be happy, fulfilled. It is a sign of the blessed life, of the new creation. Peace has a whiff of paradise about it. It offers us a taste of the world to come.

The gospels use the Greek word *eirēne* for “peace.” One commentator says that peace “is a state of being that lacks nothing and has no fear of being troubled in its tranquility; it is euphoria coupled with security.” I don’t know about you, but I would gladly settle for a little bit of “euphoria coupled with security.” But is this what God promises in the here and now? History does tell of martyrs who went to their death gladly and peacefully. And Paul, writing from prison, says that he has “learned the secret of being content in any and every situation” (Philippians 4:12). Paul seems to be saying that it is possible to learn to be peaceful regardless of our circumstances.

Still, it would seem that even Jesus did not always experience emotional peace. Witness his anger at the way the temple had been turned into a marketplace, or his tears at the death of his friend Lazarus, or his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Perhaps neither Jesus nor his Father are promising that we will always *feel* peaceful, at least while we are here on earth. Maybe they are more concerned that we learn to base our lives on the peace that Christ has won, experiencing ever-deepening *shalom* as we follow after him.

We know that the world’s original harmony was wrecked by sin. Like a Molotov cocktail thrown into a backyard garden, sin exploded the world that God had made, fracturing

and dividing it. Instead of wholeness, brokenness; instead of health, illness; instead of friendship with God, alienation; instead of peace, strife.

Because we live in this fallen world that is yet to be fully redeemed, we can only glimpse the fullness of God's *shalom*. Sometimes we sense this kind of peace as we worship with others or as we pray quietly or when forgiveness is asked for and received. *Shalom* is life as it should be. Bent things are straightened. Hurt things are healed.

The Bible locates *shalom* in only one place—in God himself. Early in the history of his people, God instructed Moses to extend this blessing to them:

*The LORD bless you
and keep you;
the LORD make his face shine on you
and be gracious to you;
the LORD turn his face toward you
and give you peace. (Numbers 6:24–26)*

We find peace by living in harmony with God. As we do, our divisions, both external and internal, start to heal. We become fulfilled, complete. The harmony we have with him in turn produces harmony with others and harmony within ourselves.

I admit that I have yet to meet anyone who seems perfectly at peace. But I do know some who seem closer to that ideal than others. Mr. José is the janitor at my daughter's school. Even without a high status job he is one of the most admired men I know. Parents and students love Mr. José because he is kind to even the most difficult children. The peace he radiates helps set the tone for the entire school.

I know a pastor and his wife who have experienced extraordinary things in their ministry. Whenever I hear about their

next venture, my stomach begins to churn because of the risks they take. I have watched them as they have listened to God and then made decisions that can't possibly work unless God comes through. And he does come through, often in remarkable ways. Maybe you know people like that, people who are able to take on challenges with an underlying sense that no matter what happens, God is still with them.



All of us come to our longing for peace from slightly different places. I confess that one of my least favorite Scripture passages is from 1 Peter. In it, Peter urges the Christians of Asia Minor, specifically the women, to develop a “gentle and quiet spirit” (1 Peter 3:4). This has always rubbed me the wrong way, perhaps because, though I am neither loud nor brash, I would not characterize myself as particularly gentle. And why, I wonder, does Peter address only the women? Are men off the hook then, free to behave in rough and brutish ways? Couldn't a case be made that men in particular have a need to reign in their aggressions?

I have been tempted to conclude that Peter preferred women who were passive and weak rather than strong and confident. Such a preference would seem to fit the stereotype of many Middle Eastern males even today. But is that entirely fair? I have recently begun to wonder whether I have been misreading the advice Peter was giving the early Christians. What if, instead of urging them toward weakness, Peter was urging them toward strength, saying, in effect, that they were capable of becoming people whose peace was so strong that it radiated a kind of steady calm to everyone around them?

As I have thought about Peter's advice concerning a gentle and quiet spirit, I have realized that some of my own worst

interactions, especially with my children, have happened when I have felt anything but gentle at the core of my spirit. Instead of radiating calm, I fear I have sometimes radiated anxiety in the form of nagging comments, irritation, or anger. In the light of such self-recognition, gentleness and the peace from which it springs suddenly begin to look more appealing.

My need to become a more peaceful parent has been my own entrée to the subject of peace. I want to stop worrying so that I can help create an environment where trust and faith can grow. This is what makes me want to explore what the Bible means when it talks about peace, especially as it applies to the human spirit. Are there disciplines, ways of living that lead to peace? And conversely, are there ways of looking at the world and responding to it that lead to anxiety and a conflicted life? This book represents my search for answers to these questions. I approach the topic not as an expert, nor as someone who has mastered the things that lead to peace, but as a fellow explorer, drawn to the subject because of my own need. As such, this is not primarily a book about world peace but about personal peace, which can in turn affect the wider world in which we live. To quote Wendell Berry, “One must begin in one’s own life the private solutions that can only in turn become public solutions.”

Though I approach the subject with my own needs in view, I realize that others will be drawn to it from different directions. You may, for instance, be sensing your need to repair a strained relationship. Or perhaps you have been frustrated by past hurts that will not heal. Or maybe you are bothered by the pace and insecurity of modern life. You want to find ways of both slowing down and calming down.



There are, of course, countless obstacles to discovering the peace we seek. For instance, though we live in the richest nation on earth, many of us are plagued by financial insecurity. During the recent economic turmoil, I confess to many sleepless nights, wondering if my life savings were going to be washed away by an economic tsunami. How would I send my children to college, what if I couldn't pay the bills, how could I follow the biblical injunction to tithe when business conditions were so depressed? I wish I could tell you that I have come through with flying colors, trusting God to provide. But that would not be entirely true. Nor perhaps would it be true of many others who have lost far more than a good night's sleep. Is it possible to experience *shalom* even in the midst of so much tension and difficulty?

And what about psychological ills like anxiety and clinical depression? Though medicine and therapy may help, they cannot always vanquish our fears.

Remember the movie *Psycho*? I have a friend who refuses to take a shower if she is the only one home, just in case Norman Bates happens to be in the neighborhood. Apparently, she isn't alone in her fears. Here's what a few more self-confessed neurotics had to say about taking showers. Their comments are posted on a website entitled "I am neurotic."

If I am home alone and decide to take a shower, I get really scared that someone will break into my house and kill me when I'm naked and vulnerable. To keep this from happening, I sing different genres of songs in the shower (rap, show tunes, country). I do this in hopes that the killer will enjoy one of these types of music and decide against killing me.

Second post:

I have the same fear, but I get out of the shower,

while it is still running. This way, anyone waiting for me to finish won't know I am actually out of the shower. Then with a towel securely wrapped around myself, I take the stick from my loofah and quickly open the door ready to attack. Just in case, I have the element of surprise on my side.

Third post:

If you are singing country, it still might get you killed.

From the number of additional responses to the initial posting, it seems clear that on any given night there must be thousands of people belting out songs in the shower, not because they are feeling carefree, but because they are desperately hoping to scare off a serial killer!

We laugh at the stories of these self-confessed neurotics, but neuroses are anything but funny for those who suffer them. Many years ago I began to develop a phobia about flying. I started to dread getting on a plane. This was a problem since my job at the time involved a great deal of travel. The slightest turbulence would result in sweaty palms and a racing heart. One day as I was fearfully flying across country, I felt God nudging me.

“What are you afraid of?”

“Of crashing and dying.”

“And then what would happen?”

“Well, I would be with you.”

“Then what are you afraid of?”

As this discourse was proceeding, another thought came into my mind: *Perfect love casts out fear*. I had always interpreted this passage from Scripture to mean that once I attained perfect love, I would no longer experience fear. It suddenly occurred to me that God himself embodies perfect love.

His love could cast out my fear. So I asked him to remove the fear of flying from my life, to push it out with his presence so there would be no more room for it in my mind. Immediately, I felt a sense of peace, and the phobia I had been developing was stopped in its tracks. Since then I have had occasional bouts of fear during a rough flight, but nothing that could be called phobic.

Why do I tell you this? At least in part to assure you of my credentials as a person in search of peace. Also to give you permission to examine your own fears in light of God's grace and the peace he wants to extend to you.

Fear, of course, is a natural emotion. When it is operating properly, it can help us survive threatening circumstances. None of us, for instance, should feel comfortable strolling down the road with a tornado in sight. Our fear helps us do the prudent thing—in this case running for dear life toward shelter or lying face down in a ditch. But fear that has metastasized into generalized anxiety or that has grown to phobic proportions is neither natural nor helpful. Such fears can cripple our relationships and poison the future as well as the present.

Fear also has a mysterious power of attraction; that is, it can draw the very thing we're afraid of into our lives. I remember the moment I encountered the famous quote from Franklin D. Roosevelt's first inaugural address: "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." I was still a child, but I thought it sounded like nonsense. I knew there were things to fear—a snake might bite you, a car might run over you, your mother might die. I didn't understand that Roosevelt, quoting Francis Bacon, was trying to rally people in the midst of the Great Depression, warning them about fear's destructive power. He knew that financial panic could result in financial ruin. Our fears can attract what we fear the most.

Like fear, stress is also a normal part of life. But the pace of modern life has made stress levels skyrocket. Several years ago, an Amish newspaper was deluged with hundreds of letters from people wanting to know how to become Amish. Many of these people were looking for a way to opt out of modern society in order to pursue what they saw as a more peaceful life, little realizing that living with Amish austerities might produce its own kind of stress for those unused to them.

Though modern western societies have produced many marvelous things, they have not generally produced cultures conducive to developing a sense of personal peace. Little wonder that the Swahili word for “white man” — *mzungu* — literally means “one who spins around.”

Robert Sapolsky, professor of biology and neurology at Stanford University, points out that prolonged stress “can wreak havoc with your metabolism, raise your blood pressure, burst your white blood cells, make you flatulent, ruin your sex life, and if that’s not enough, possibly damage your brain.”

So much for the good news.

What about those of us who suffer not only from prolonged stress but from depression? It is impossible, of course, to quantify such suffering. Fortunately, medication and therapy can be tools God uses to bring us to a place of greater peace. But medication has its limitations. Though it can ease and sometimes erase our suffering, it cannot ultimately extend to us the kind of peace that God is promising.



That peace has been won by the person we know as the Prince of Peace, or in Hebrew *Sar Shalom*. Though Jesus spoke of bringing a sword, he also brought *shalom* to all who embraced the gospel.

- To the woman bleeding for twelve years, he said: *Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering.* (Mark 5:34)
- To the woman who washed his feet with tears, he said: *Your faith has saved you; go in peace.* (Luke 7:50)
- To the disciple who doubted, he said: *Peace be with you! . . . Stop doubting and believe.* (John 20:26)
- To his disciples before his death, he said: *My peace I give you.* (John 14:27)

In these scenes and many others from the Gospels, we see Jesus restoring what is broken, healing what is bent, saving what is on the brink of destruction. If we want peace, we must embrace the one who brings it. Living as his disciple is the only way to experience all that Christ has for us.

Let's turn again to the words Jesus spoke to his disciples on the night before his death: "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).

Peace in our world is usually won and maintained by military might. But the peace Jesus offered his disciples is a different kind of peace, extended in a different kind of way. It is a peace obtained, not by a show of power but by an apparent show of weakness—Jesus died on a cross like a criminal and outcast. By virtue of his love and his obedience to the Father, Christ achieved a peace that only he could win. Because he was divine and human, he was the only one capable of representing the interests of both a holy God and sinful humanity.

It is this peace that Jesus was already extending to his disciples the night before his death. Like a father who realizes his children's world will be shattered the moment he's taken from them, he tried to reassure them that, in the end, all

would be well. Because he lived out a perfect obedience to the Father, we can have peace with God, and that peace can be the unshakeable foundation on which our own lives are built.

But we are still human, still subject to emotions that do not always align with spiritual realities. And there is still a future dimension to God's peace. We live in a broken world; we are still broken people. Christ has not yet returned to establish the peace that will last world without end, amen. At times, our own world will seem to fall apart, as he did the night before his death. We may feel afraid, stressed, frustrated, grieved, angry, or confused. Spiritual forces of evil may try to rob us of our faith.

Knowing this, Jesus sent us his Spirit to guide us into the way of peace. The Spirit will guide us as we seek to follow Christ, growing in peace and extending that peace to others. God uses everything in our lives, the best and the worst, the easiest and the hardest, to effect our healing and to remake us in his image. As he puts us back together, we are reminded of the story that began this book, of the child who reassembled the torn picture puzzle of the world. By reshaping our souls, Christ transforms us into instruments that he can use to put the world back together.

Etty Hillesum was a Jewish woman who wrote about peace in one of the least peaceful moments of her own relatively short life. Imprisoned by the Nazis during World War II, she perished at Auschwitz on November 30, 1943. Though she could have gone into hiding, avoiding the fate of millions of Jews, she refused, choosing instead to "share her people's fate." A year earlier, in September of 1942, she wrote this diary entry:

"Let me just note down one more thing for myself: Matthew 6:34:

'Take therefore no thought for the morrow: for the morrow

shall take thought for the things of itself. Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof.—’

“We have to fight them daily like fleas, those small worries about the morrow, for they sap our energies. We make mental provisions for the days to come, and everything turns out differently, quite differently. Sufficient unto the day. The things that have to be done must be done, and for the rest we must not allow ourselves to become infested with thousands of petty fears and worries, so many motions of no confidence in God . . . Ultimately, we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it towards others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will be in our troubled world.”

That is the mission of this book, to help us reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves so that there will be more peace in our troubled world. In doing so, we, too, will have to fight the infestation of daily fears and worries, the continual “motions of no confidence in God,” replacing them with the peace that comes from resting in the character of God.



The chapters that follow explore various dimensions of the peace God offers us. The first six chapters attempt to lay a foundation for living a life of greater peace, exploring important themes like belief, forgiveness, and belonging, without which we cannot find the peace for which we long. Remaining chapters look at topics like simplicity, rest, and gratitude in order to explore how we can both grow in peace and learn to share that peace with others.

A small book on a large topic, *The Peace God Promises* won't tell you everything you want to know about peace, but it may well get you started on a journey that will change your

life. If yours is anything like mine, progress on that journey may be sometimes hard to measure. You may even feel as if you are taking one step forward and two steps back. Like life itself, our progress toward peace does not follow a linear path. But as you continue to live for Christ, you will find that in the end, even the least peaceful times in your life will have drawn you closer to the one who is himself our peace. The mystery of how exactly this can happen resides not so much in our own efforts but in God's grace and in his unswerving desire to deliver on the promise he has made.



In order to experience the peace we desire, it is vital that we look closely at the stories that shape us, the narratives that define our understanding of the world and our response to the people and events we encounter. Why? Because these narratives are a little like stealth aircraft. Just as jets that fly invisibly under the radar, the stories we live by often develop and mature beneath our consciousness. Yet they possess tremendous power to move us either closer to peace or farther from it.

PURSUING PEACE

1. Many of us believe that peace depends on our circumstances. “If only” we had enough money, enough time, enough patience, then we would feel peaceful. What are some of your “if onlys”?
2. In what ways did Jesus show himself to be a man of peace?
3. Etty Hillesum said, “Ultimately, we have just one moral duty: to reclaim large areas of peace in ourselves, more and more peace, and to reflect it towards others. And the more peace there is in us, the more peace there will be in our troubled world.” What might your life look like were you to take her statement to heart?
4. Describe a time in your life when you felt peaceful. What made you feel that way?