

## "NOW THE GOD OF PEACE"

Paul S. Rees, D.D.

Always, whether men are tightening each other or fawning upon each other, God remains "the God of peace." By which I mean that His supreme, unceasing, and final purpose for His creatures and His world is not discord but harmony.

Exactly this was the faith of St. Paul and the early Christians. Does anyone suppose that they were not realistic when they spoke glowingly of "the God of peace?" Does anyone imagine that they were able to coin and find comfort in such a phrase because they lived in a tranquil and untroubled world? Upon the contrary they waded through waters so deep and so dark that, on one occasion, Paul declared, "Our flesh had no rest, but we were troubled on every side; without were fightings, within were fears." Where, we might ask Paul, was "the God of peace" during those harrowing hours? And Paul answers with one of those fine in-spite-of phrases which light up the New Testament. "Nevertheless," says he, "God, who comforteth those who are cast down, comforted us." So, chin-deep in difficulties, they still had experience of the unfailing God who, through the lips of Jesus, says, Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you; not as the world giveth give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid."

Now what happens when the whole of our life is given over into the hands of God? What does He then become to us? I propose that we seek an answer by tracing out the truth which gathers about three passages in the New Testament in which we find the expression, the God of Peace."

**I. The God of Peace as the Presence Who Calms Us:**

Consider Romans 15:33—"The God of peace be with you." Let philosophers wrestle with the idea of God, and theologians with the attributes of God, and scientists with the works of God; but as for plain people, interested in the inner and sustaining vitality of true religion, nothing can satisfy them short of the realized presence of God. It is this experience of the presence that Jesus came to make possible to men in a new way. He came to put vividness, and beauty, and strength, and assurance into the experience. He came that, after having revealed God in utter love and in redeeming grace, He might say to men, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the age."

The pity is that we read those words,—too many of us—and they mean little more than so much printer's ink on a piece of white paper. Such a remark is not exactly gentle, I know, but before you resent it, be courageously honest with yourself. Is God real to you as an actual, living, loving, guiding, understanding, and upholding presence in your life? Have you been introduced to Him the Jesus-way? By which I mean, Have you come face to face with Him in Christ, as the One who has convicted you of your sins, as the One to whom you have confessed your sins, and as the One from whom you have received the priceless boon of assurance that your sins have been forgiven? Do you honestly know what the early Christians meant when they testified, "Therefore, being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ?"

More than that, do you do what that famous old saint, "Brother Lawrence," said that

he did amid the pots and pans of the monastery kitchen. do you daily "practice the presence of God?" Do you know what it means to converse with Him as a friend—a friend who sits down with you, so to speak, in the silent shrine of your own inmost soul and imparts to you the power and glory of heaven for the tasks and turmoils of earth? Do you know what the Bible means when it says that "Enoch [who lived, by the way, in godless days] walked with God?" Or what Paul means when he declares, in the howling tempest and amid the shivering of the doomed ship on which he rode, There stood by me this night the angel [Christ] of God?"

If your heart has its glad affirmations in reply to these questions, then you know, in the Christian sense, what peace means in this trouble-torn world. You know that it does not mean coziness: it means confidence. It does not mean ease; it means adequacy. It does not mean a delicately poised comfortableness; it means a divinely proffered companionship. It does not mean uninterrupted health, wealth, and prosperity: it means an unfailing inner strength, renewal, and resiliency.

Troubled heart, baffled soul, there is a message here for you. The God of peace, of whom I speak, is not so named because He sits in some high, solemn and detached way, gazing down upon you and saying coolly: "This is good for you, this suffering that has smitten you like a thousand fiery arrows." That is a heathen's conception of deity.

Some folks, I fear, have thought that our God is like those carefree divinities of the pagan mind. But He is not. Put that in bold type: HE IS NOT! How do I know it? Because one day—and countless days since—I saw with unveiled eyes a Cross. Upon that Cross I saw the form of one tortured and twisted in a crimson sacrament of pain, suffering for no wrong of His, but for love of those who slew Him. From those lips I heard words that were impossible to doubt: He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." And there—as nowhere else in all the world—my soul found its answer to those who would tell me that God is too great, or too distant, or too infinite, or too something, to be concerned about my troubles. There, at Calvary, I gathered boldness to shout, "You are mistaken! God is not an absentee sovereign who lives above and beyond the aches and ills of life. He is not outside of my tears and losses and sorrows: He is within them. He is within them because He is within me, sharing my otherwise crushing load, guiding my stumbling feet, and reaching up to tear at least some tiny hole in the low-hanging cloud, that through it might dart one bright beam of the eternal hope."

**II. The God of Peace as the Purifier Who Cleanses Us:**

We turn now to I. Thessalonians 5:23, where we read: "And the very God of peace sanctify you wholly; and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." In the Christian order of things surely it can be said that our second point follows naturally and logically upon the first. If we have the presence of the God of peace, we simply cannot escape the issue of holiness.

The practical question is this: how far are we Christians prepared to go with God (or should we say, How far will we let Him go with us?) in making something clean and lovely and Christ-like out of us? Do we really long to be free from sin, to have a self that is fundamentally organized and unified around

the mind of Christ that possesses us? There are too many of us who sing hymns about longing "to be perfectly whole," but we are glib and shallow about it. When it comes right down to it, we are not ready to give up our right to our ourselves, or part company with every attitude, habit, and disposition that contradicts the spirit of Christ, or lay on the altar, once and forever, all the capacities and possessions which we call "ours" but which are really God's.

When it comes right down to it, we find our carnal, unsanctified hearts siding in with the creeds of men more than the words of Holy Scripture. We read in one of the historical catechisms, "No man, even by the aid of Divine grace, can avoid sinning, but daily sins in thought, word and deed," and we go for that because it gives generous comfort and leeway to the worldly, wayward, and selfish urges within us that we have never allowed Christ to deal with.

Or perhaps we go off balance at another point, and conjure up false notions of what it means to be wholly sanctified as a follower and friend of Jesus Christ. We tell ourselves that people who go in for sanctification usually end up by professing that they have reached a place where they are never tempted—a claim, incidentally, that very few fanatics have ever made. Or, there is that related bogey which frightens us—the teaching that sanctification means the impossibility of committing sin. It does not, of course. And extremely few have been the deluded souls who ever dared to say that it does. But there is an unholy devil who makes it his unholy business to keep these skeletons dangling before the fearful eyes of Christians who really should know their Bible well enough to know better.

What I have found, in reading and praying over my New Testament, is that there is a definite and decisive sanctification of the Christian's heart, and there is a daily sanctification of the Christian's life. Both are in the mind of St. Paul in the passage which is before us. "The very God of peace sanctify you wholly." Weymouth renders it "make you entirely holy." The verb in the Greek is in the tense called the aorist: a ministry of cleansing that is decisive and thorough! That is the sanctification of crisis, in which the Christian has an encounter with his Lord.

Then the apostle adds, ". . . and I pray God your whole spirit and soul and body be preserved blameless unto the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ." And that is the sanctification of process: the daily yielding of our cleansed being—the whole of what we are as redeemed men and women under the Lordship of Christ—to God's will and service. This daily yielding, moreover, includes the humble recognition and confession of our shortcoming and infirmities.

But mark you, if you want to make a success of the sanctification of daily process, you will need to make sure of the sanctification of definite crisis. Somewhere God must be allowed to uncover the unsightly and unseemly depths of your self-life. Somewhere there must be a revelation of the deeper meaning and power of the Cross of Christ with its uncompromising message: "Except a corn of wheat fall into the ground and die, it abideth alone; but if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit."

Some months ago I received a letter from a father and mother whose daughter, in her late teens, had attended a school where I had spoken. They wanted me to know about the

(Continued on Page 5)