

Chapter Two

The New Testament Concept of Peace

by Earl Palmer

The word *peacemaker* appears in the New Testament in Matthew 5 and is one of the nine blessings that Jesus Christ gives at the beginning of the Sermon on the Mount, which is our Lord's commentary on the law.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be satisfied. Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons

of God. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven (vv. 3-10).

And then in the final Beatitude, the final blessing, our Lord ties these blessings to Himself directly. "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you" (vv. 11-12)

"Blessed are the peacemakers." What does the word *peace* mean? What does it mean to be a peacemaker? Jesus Christ our Lord, Himself helps us to understand the meaning of that word in His Thursday night discourse. In the text from John 13 through 16, our Lord dialogues with His disciples, and in the midst of that dialogue He promises them the gift of the Holy Spirit. John 14:25-27 reads:

These things I have spoken to you, while I am still with you. But the Counselor [literally, the one who comes alongside], the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things, and bring to our remembrance all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid.

And then finally in the sixteenth chapter, at the very close of that Thursday night discourse, after our Lord has baffled His disciples with figures that they cannot fully

understand and then tells them plainly that He is about to leave them and go to His Father, the disciples in verses 29 and 30 say, “Now you are speaking plainly, not in any figure! Now we know that you know all things, and need none to question you; by this we believe that you came from God.”

Jesus answered them, “Do you now believe? The hour is coming, indeed has come, when you will be scattered, every man to his home, and will leave me alone.” Literally within minutes, perhaps an hour or so, in the Garden of Gethsemane, this prediction was fulfilled as the disciples scattered.

Then our Lord closes with these amazing words, “Yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me. I have said this to you, that in me” (now He repeats it again) “you may have peace. In the world you have tribulation” (literally “pressure” is the word or “turbulence”); “but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world.”

What does this word *peace* mean? Certainly in these three texts where our Lord Himself uses the word, three things have become clear about the meaning of the word. First of all, peace has its origin in God. It has its origin in our Lord Himself. It is His gift that He gives. In fact, He calls it “my peace.”

Secondly, peace is an experience of healing, or an experience that occurs in the midst of pressure, in the midst of tribulation. The word *peacemaker* implies that. The Apostle Paul’s term is the word *reconciliation*. When Paul gives his own commentary on the word *peace* in Ephesians 2:14-18, he adds the word *reconcile* to explain this peacemaking part of the meaning of the word *peace*.

This is also true in the Old Testament *shalom*. In the 250 uses of *shalom* in the Old Testament, some 60 of them have to do with the resolution of crisis, or the sense of safety after crisis is resolved. There is this sense of recon-

ciliation, or peacemaking, where in the midst of turbulence, in the midst of crisis, a healing has occurred.

And then third, peace has a result. It is something that happens not only from God, not only in the midst of crisis, but it also moves through us and has a result in our lives. Righteousness and justice are the result of peace. It is "My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you" (John 14:27).

Here you have that sense of peace as fulfillment. Two-thirds of the uses of shalom in the Old Testament carried this sense of health or wholeness or fulfillment. It is one of the predominant messianic terms that is used throughout the Old Testament in referring to the fulfillment of God's plan.

As Christians we need to put into focus the meaning of reconciliation, the task and the experience of reconciliation, of peacemaking, that second meaning of peace, the peace that occurs in the midst of crisis, in the midst of pressure or tribulation.

It seems to me there are two levels or stages that make up the journey of reconciliation. The first stage is what I am going to call the "experience of restraint," or the "experience of repentance." In other words, the first stage describes a clearing away of debris, of slowing down, so that the next, deeper level can be experienced.

When this first level of peacemaking, of reconciliation, occurs, we call it restraint. I really think that is what is meant in 2 Thessalonians 2, when the restrainer force is introduced in that great text by the Apostle Paul as a force that brings restraint and clears the debris to prepare the ground for the deeper resolution.

It is what our Lord Jesus does in John 8 when a group of people capture a woman caught in the act of adultery and throw her right at the feet of our Lord and then challenged Him by saying, "In the law Moses commanded us to

stone such. What do you say about her?" (v. 5). John, in his own observation of this event, says that they were tempting Christ. And twice in that John 8:1-11 narrative John tells us that our Lord stoops over and writes in the sand.

Now John does not show the slightest interest in what He writes, but twice he observed that Jesus stoops over and writes in the sand. Helmut Thielicke calls this the intervention of the majestic silence of God. What is Jesus doing in that incident? He is slowing down the action. He is restraining the event. He is not bringing peace. He is not resolving the crisis that is in the hearts of those who are already tempting God by what they have done. They do not care about the preservation of the family. They do not care even about the crisis of adultery. They said they caught her in the act of adultery but they have not brought the man. And what does our Lord do? The first thing He does is to slow everything down. In effect, He restrains that event.

He does not resolve it. The resolution will come later. In fact the shadow of the cross is over that event. The resolution, the forgiveness that He is going to offer to this woman, will have to be won for that woman by our Lord Himself because He interposes His own life between her and the crowd. But what Jesus does do is to protect the crowd from doing more harm than they have already done. They have already tempted God, but they have not yet committed murder.

When Jesus writes in the sand He slows the event down, restrains it. He protects the crowd, and He protects the woman. Twice He does this and, finally, He makes the statement, "Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her" (v. 7). And we are told in John's text that from the eldest to the youngest they walked away. So finally our Lord is left alone with this

woman, and He says to her, “Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?” (v. 10). She replies, “No one, Lord.” He says, “Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again” (v. 11).

That is an example of restraint. It is an example of the first level of reconciliation. It is *not* reconciliation. Neither is it the healing of the woman or the crowd, but it is restraint. It is not the solution but is the step before the solution. It is a boundary that has been set up to protect people from doing more harm than they have already done.

Restraint is the role a police officer plays when a brawl takes place in your neighborhood. Most brawls, unfortunately, are domestic brawls—maybe a man and wife are fighting it out and somebody in the apartment building finally calls the police. The police come and enter into the situation and restrain the two people. They restrain the crisis but they have not healed it.

This is also the role that a peacekeeping military force can play, such as has been played in the Middle East. We would be foolish to say that the kind of fragile restraint present in Lebanon is peace, because there are deep anxieties, anger and all kinds of resentment, some of them new and some of them old, that have got to be worked through. But an international armed military peacekeeping force only serves as a restrainer. It is not the resolution. It is an intervention that slows everything down. At least that is what it is supposed to be.

Now when we restrain ourselves we call it repentance. This is what the Bible means when it talks about turning around, repenting.

Take the brawl between the husband and wife. When he goes about his business that day he begins to feel, “Wow, what a short fuse I have. I’m always blasting people over the silliest things. I feel terrible about this and I

want to work it through." Now when he begins to feel this, a restraint begins to build up inside him. We call this repentance, the recognition of harm and danger.

Repentance may be what happened in John's account when he says that from the eldest to the youngest they left. Jesus turned the focus of the crowd back upon themselves. When they began to recognize their guilt and the harm and danger that lie in the course of action they were involved in, then they used self-restraint. However, it is still not peace. The person who says, "You know I am a very proud person" may be showing self-recognition. It may not yet be repentance, but it could be, and it could be the beginning of a turning toward reconciliation.

But it is still not peace. Something more must happen. What is this restraint, whether outer restraint or inner restraint? I will give you a word that describes what I think it is. It is *time*. It is opportunity. When we self-restrain, we give ourselves time, a pause. It is a pause that offers an opportunity, and as such it is a sign of God's grace in that He grants us time to repent. In other words, the fact that God allows us to repent is one of the signs of God's grace.

More must still happen. In the parable of the Prodigal Son our Lord magnificently portrays this sign of grace. As the young man is restrained in a sense by the change of circumstance in the country when the poverty and the famine hit, he comes to himself—that is self-restraint, that is the beginning of repentance. And then he says, "I must go to my father." And he turns himself toward his father. He is still not healed; that still lies ahead. The relationship with the father must first be healed and, finally, also with the elder brother.

But now he has turned himself toward the father, toward the possibility of reconciliation. And what he has is time. That gift of repentance that God gives us is a part of the mystery of the gift of freedom, the freedom by which

we sin and then the freedom by which we can repent: it is the gift of time.

I think one of the most remarkable articles I have read on this subject is in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's book *From Under the Rubble*. This book is a series of essays, which Solzhenitsyn edited, mainly written from the Soviet Union by anonymous authors or under pseudonyms. One of the essays, by Solzhenitsyn himself, is called "Repentance and Self-Limitation." He starts the essay with the following words: "The blessed Augustine once wrote, 'What is the state without justice. It is a band of robbers.'" Even now, fifteen centuries later, many people will readily recognize the force and accuracy of this judgment, an ethical judgment about a small group of people as applied by extension to the state. Then Solzhenitsyn develops this argument. He basically traces the biblical principle of repentance and then states that the biblical principle of repentance is a virtue for human beings to practice; what we must do is apply that principle to states and to nations.

Solzhenitsyn defines repentance as self-limitation. When that crowd in Jerusalem, from the eldest to the youngest, walked away from that potential stoning incident, Solzhenitsyn would call that repentance because they self-limited themselves. They denied themselves the right to do harm, and they turned away. They turned around.

Solzhenitsyn then comments: "After repentance, once we renounce the use of force, self-limitation comes into its own as the most natural principle to live by. Repentance creates the atmosphere for self-limitation." He continues: "Self-limitation on the part of individuals has often been observed and described and is well-known to all of us. But as far as I know, no state has ever carried through a deliberate policy of self-limitation or set itself such a task in a general form, though when it has done so at difficult

moments, as in some particular sector such as in food rationing or fuel rationing, self-limitation has always paid off handsomely." He says that when states have self-limited themselves they have always benefited. Yet he says he has never seen a state self-limit itself as a general policy.

He goes on to explain why. "Every trade union and every corporation strives by all possible means to win the most advantageous position. Every firm aims at uninterrupted expansion. Every party wants to run its country. Medium-sized states want to become great ones. Great ones want to rule the world." And then he says, "We are always ready to limit others, and that's what politicians are always engaged in. But nowadays the man who suggests that a state or a party, without coercion and simply in answer to a moral call, should limit itself, invites ridicule."¹ Solzhenitsyn then calls upon his own country—by the way, he wrote this while he was still living in the Soviet Union—and upon the United States and the other nations of the world to self-limit. In other words, to take part in the first steps of reconciliation. The first step to reconciliation then is that slowing down, that self-limitation. And when we do it ourselves it is repentance. It is what grants us time.

Now we as Christians do not glorify this time or this opportunity, but we are grateful for it. We do not glorify the absence of conflict, because our word for peace, *shalom*, is a bigger word than that. It is a word that has its origin in God's character and it has its result in God's justice and God's righteousness.

In the reconciliation mandate which we have we do not glorify the absence of war. For instance, we are not pleased when we break up a conflict between a husband and wife before they injure one another. But as Christians we have an instinct to want to see the deeper resolution

occur. We want to see the healing occur so that we do not glorify the time that is given to us by self-restraint and repentance. But we are grateful for it and we live and work for it. And the reason is that we want to be close to one another.

This is why Paul does not want the Christians to leave Rome or Corinth and go up into the hills to escape the city streets. Paul wants us to be in close. He wants us to see the whites of the enemy's eyes, to be close enough to relate to these people, because God has a message of hope. Christians have the peace of God, the good news to share with the world. That is why we as Christians, though we do not glorify the absence of war or the fact that there is this first level of restraint, should not describe this as peace, because it still lacks the resolution, the health of *shalom*.

We ought to be grateful for restraint and we should call it what it is. It is time that has been given to us to be close to another human being in order, by the grace of God, to see the deeper resolution occur. This is the chief moral flaw in blood revolution and bloody suppressions of insurrections, because after such runaway vengeance is all over and all is quiet on the western front, then people are dead who might have been reconciled. Then it is too late.

We, as Christians, have an instinct for restraint. We have a concern to see restraint occur, to see this first level of the peacemaking task take place because we have a concern for the deeper level, a deeper peace.

What is the peace that is at the deeper level? We now must return to our first principles. Jesus gave us the clue when He said, "My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled." The Lord Jesus Christ, who gave us the peacemaking mandate in Matthew 5, also gave us the peace to go with it. The peace that we have from Jesus Christ is the peace

that restores the four-fold relationship that makes up a human being: (1) our relationship to God, (2) our relationship to ourselves, (3) our relationship to our neighbor, and (4) our relationship to the earth. This is the anthropology of the Ten Commandments. It is also the anthropology of the Apostle Paul in Romans 1. It is the way God has made us.

For us, war and the crisis of human sinfulness is the crisis that causes a break to occur in any of these four relationships. When my relationship with God is broken, then I do not know who I am and I tend, because man and woman are incurably religious, to find something else to worship. So I choose idols, and I destroy the earth in my choice of idols. Thus my relationship with the earth is distorted when my relationship with God is broken. When my relationship with myself is flawed, and I cannot see myself as beloved in God's sight, then how can I love my neighbor? Or if my relationship with my neighbor is chaotic and harmful, how can I come and worship God?

Notice that our Lord in the Sermon on the Mount brings all of these four relationships into focus. We have four basic relationships, and the peacemaking mandate that our Lord Jesus Christ has given to us is the mandate that yearns for the resolution of broken relationships—our relationship toward God, toward ourselves, toward our neighbor, and toward the earth.

The peace of Christ also has a righteous result. It is interesting to me that the word *shalom* is translated by three Greek words in the Septuagint. This, of course, helps us to understand the way the word *peace* then comes into the New Testament. When the Septuagint translators were trying to find Greek words from *Koine* Greek to render the 250 usages in the Old Testament of *shalom*, they chose three Greek words. The sort of garden variety word is *eirene*, the word that is the linguistic root for the

word *peacemaker*. It is the common word for peace in the New Testament.

We find in the New Testament what this word means just as we find out what *shalom* means in the Old Testament—primarily by studying how it is used in the text. That is the main clue to meaning. *Eirene* is a bland Greek word. In Greek it means very little; its basic meaning is “harmony” or “absence of war.” While it is used in the New Testament, you might say it is enriched by the fullness of the Old Testament word *shalom*.

The other two Greek words are very interesting. In many of the places where *shalom* appears in the Old Testament, the Septuagint translators used the word *telios*, which means “fulfilled.” *Telios* shows the sense of fullness that is implied in the eschatological nature of *shalom* in the Old Testament, this moving toward a goal—toward God’s righteousness, toward His fulfillment. Peace has a goal; it is going somewhere. It is not just the absence of war. That is why we should not call it peace when the man and wife are not fighting anymore. We are concerned about the resolution of their relationship, about how they feel about their relationship with God, with the earth, with each other, and with themselves. This is the Christian instinct we have from the gospel.

The third word I find the most intriguing of all. It is the word *soter*, which is the word from which we get all of the salvation vocabulary of the New Testament. I have often thought that the Apostle Paul, when he uses the word salvation, is using it primarily as his Greek word choice to express the fullness of what Old Testament *shalom* is all about. *Shalom* is the integration, the healing, the salvation of a human being, where a person is made whole, where all the parts are brought together, and reconciliation has occurred between God and myself and the earth and my neighbor: it is now that I have been saved. It is a process

that happens because of the cross of Christ and because of His victory over death and His victory over sin.

It is interesting that in the great scene in Luke 19, when our Lord calls Zacchaeus down from the tree, He says, "I want to spend tonight in your house." Zacchaeus comes down and our Lord spends the night with him. The crowd murmurs, "He's gone in to be with a tax collector, sinner." And then in the very next line in Luke's account, Zacchaeus stands up and says, "Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything, I restore it fourfold" (v. 8). Now *there* is repentance—a real turnaround. He has self-limited himself. And then comes this great line from our Lord. After Zacchaeus says that, the Lord says, "Today salvation has come to this house, since he also is a son of Abraham."

Jesus restores Zacchaeus's identity and then He gives him this marvelous word—salvation, peace, shalom has now come. And notice that it has its origin from God. It is the reconciliation of a human being in which all the fragments are brought together and he is made whole. It has justice. It has righteousness in it. That is peace.

We are called to be peacemakers. I think one of my favorite scenes in all the Chronicles of Narnia is the final scene in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, when Susan and Lucy get to ride on Aslan's back, and to run all over Narnia. C.S. Lewis says it is better than riding on a horse because a horse makes so much noise with his hoofs. Can you imagine riding on one of the lions from Trafalgar Square, holding onto its golden mane? Since they have soft feet they do not make any sound at all. Aslan runs through Narnia and makes one huge leap over the whole wall of the castle, and inside the castle are all these poor Narnians who have been turned to stone by the Winter Witch. Aslan de-stones them, and makes them all alive again.

Lucy and Susan get a chance to ride on Aslan's back and to be peacemakers with him, and to bring life to where there was no life, and to bring hope where there was none. But before that can happen, before they can ride on Aslan's back, some other things had to happen. A traitor, Edmund, had to be healed. Lucy and Susan also had to be made aware of a deeper magic which was manifested when Aslan broke that great stone table and took the treachery of Edmund upon himself; he conquered the deep causes of war and became the peace himself.

We cannot be peacemakers until there is peace in our own hearts first. I cannot be a peacemaker, I cannot ride on Aslan's back until he has broken that great table and has won the peace for me. This is where peace begins in the New Testament. "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you." It is a peace that comes from Jesus Christ. It is right that before we can be peacemakers in the world, we ourselves have to be made right first, right with God, right with ourselves, right with our neighbors, and right with the earth.

Note

1. Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, "Repentance and Self-Limitation," *From Under the Rubble* (Chicago: Regnery-Gateway, Inc., 1981).