

+ Acts 26:19-29 + Big Words of Easter: Peace + 2nd Sunday of Easter + 3 April 2016 +

CIR HIRI!¹ Dear Friends Enjoying Peace through Jesus,

Saul was not a peaceful man. He was tremendously gifted. He was a scholar, a theologian, a leader of men. He was zealous and outspoken, even fearless, but peaceful? No one who knew Saul would describe him in that way. Sure, he sought peace, but only on his own terms.

After Jesus rose from the dead and visibly ascended into heaven, he poured out his Holy Spirit and sent his good news out into the world through his disciples. People were becoming Christians every day, leaving behind the old laws and customs of the Jews because Jesus Christ was God's promised Savior who finally brought them peace with God.

Not everyone thought so highly of Jesus of Nazareth. Saul, in particular, was deeply offended. He considered Jesus to be nothing more than a blasphemer, just a mortal man who was claiming to be God. It disgusted Saul to see so many people leave behind the faith that he held so dear to follow this Jesus. His anger and disgust boiled over until he decided that he would **"do all that was possible to oppose the name of Jesus of Nazareth"**—and that's exactly what he did.

Saul was not a peaceful man. He did everything he could to destroy the Christian church. He barged into Christian homes and hauled Christian men and women into prison, but that wasn't far enough. He wanted to wipe out the name of Jesus forever. He publicly supported the death of Christians who refused to deny Jesus. He broke into Christian gatherings in friendly synagogues and **"tried to force them to blaspheme."** Saul became so obsessed with destroying the name of Jesus that he actually traveled **"to foreign cities to persecute"** Christians. Saul thought he was doing God a favor by fighting Jesus and hurting his followers, but God had other plans.

One day as Saul was traveling to Damascus in Syria to arrest more Christians, the Lord stopped him dead in his tracks. With a blinding light, the Lord got through to Saul. **"Why do you persecute me? ...I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting..."** Saul was blinded with self-righteousness and violent rage against Christ himself. He deserved to be crushed, yet Jesus gave him peace. In fact, Jesus had a mission of peace for Saul. **"I am sending you to them to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me."** The violent Saul became Paul, the proclaimer of peace with God through the light made known in the risen Christ. What else could Paul do? Paul was turned from his violent ways by his living Savior. So he began to proclaim peace with God through Jesus.

As before, not everyone took kindly to that message of peace. Wherever Paul proclaimed peace with God through Jesus, many would reject his message. Some would even go so far as to follow him from city to city to twist what he had taught the people, ruining the new peace they had in Christ. In other places, Paul suffered beatings and prison from his enemies.

Yet Paul kept preaching. He kept on pointing people to their living Savior. He proclaimed that peace with God is only possible because Jesus has conquered death—and the Holy Spirit created faith in people's hearts through that message. People repented. They confessed their sins before the Lord and finally had peace for their souls.

That peace through Jesus began to show itself in action. Left at the foot of the cross was their self-righteousness and arrogance and lust and greed and immorality. At peace with God, they humbly served one another. They cherished God's gifts of marriage and contentment, but most of all, they trusted in Jesus Christ, their living Savior, who gave them lasting peace. Jesus filled that God-shaped hole that everyone has—and it showed!

Yet the enemies of Christ and his peace sought to silence Paul once and for all. A mob of zealous Jews attacked Paul in the temple courts and tried to kill him, but God had other plans. He used the local Roman garrison to rescue Paul, but that rescue and the charges brought against Paul by his enemies led to trials and imprisonment. On several occasions Paul had to make his defense before kings and governors. That's why we find Paul here in Acts 26 presenting peace with Jesus to a regional king named Agrippa.

¹ "Christ is risen!" "He is risen indeed!" This is known as the *Paschal Greeting*, one of the oldest and most widespread traditions in the Christian church. Throughout the weeks of the Easter season, whenever the minister says to the people, "Christ is risen!", they automatically respond loudly and boldly, "He is risen indeed!"

Paul didn't seem all that impressive anymore. He was in chains. His prospects of convincing the high and mighty to side with him or to listen to him were slim to none. Yet the man, who once described himself as having been **"a blasphemer...a persecutor and a violent man,"** (1 Timothy 1:13) was now proclaiming Christ's peace before the high and mighty. His message was simple—a message of peace with God foretold by ancient prophets, **"that the Christ would suffer and, as the first to rise from the dead, would proclaim light to his own people and to the Gentiles."** Paul offered to all his hearers a gift—peace with God through the light made known in the resurrection of Christ—but sadly no one wanted that gift.

"You are out of your mind, Paul! ...Your great learning is driving you insane." A rather silly response when you think about it, but Paul's listeners thought he was just babbling foolishness. Peace through Christ made no sense to them. They were too clever, too powerful. They ridiculed Paul.

Amazingly he remained at peace. You can see the impact of Christ's peace in how Paul responds to those who want nothing to do with Jesus or his peace. **"I am not insane...What I am saying is true and reasonable."** Paul even tried to convince King Agrippa, who knew the Old Testament, who knew the prophets and the promises of the coming Messiah, but he didn't want Christ and his peace either. **"Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?"**

Agrippa meant to silence Paul and his message of peace through Christ because that message seemed to poke at something the king did not want to reveal. He thought he had all the peace he needed in his power, in his wealth, in his intellect and love of culture, but Christ's peace made Paul persevere. **"Short time or long—I pray God that not only you but all who are listening to me today may become what I am, except for these chains."** Paul wanted every soul in that room to share his peace with God.

So what were you before Jesus brought his peace into your life? For some of us, we can only remember being Christians since the Holy Spirit brought us to faith in infancy or early childhood through the waters of Holy Baptism. Even so, think about those times when your sinful nature has reared its ugly head. Think about those times when you've caved into temptation, when you've given into that deep, dark weakness that always seems to plague you. That's what you are by nature, but God had other plans and shined the light of your living Savior into your darkness early on.

For many of you, you can remember a time when Christ and his peace were not a part of your life. Maybe you were going through the motions of what looked like a "righteous" life, but you know the troubling truth of what you were on the inside. You didn't have peace. Maybe you were just trying to be a good person or maybe there were times when you didn't care or didn't know you should so you just went along with whatever your sinful nature or those around you were doing. Yet you didn't have peace. Maybe you tried to find peace in something inside yourself or in something you had or in someone in your life, but it never stuck. You didn't have peace, until God shined the light of your living Savior into your darkness.

Now Jesus didn't knock you off your horse with a blinding light so you could finally see the peace he earned for you, but he did bring you his peace. Someone shared with you the amazingly good news that Jesus lived and died and rose again for you. Someone brought Christ's peace into your life. Perhaps you know who did that. Perhaps you don't remember anymore, but Jesus changed your life with his peace just as he did for Paul.

All those attempts to make peace with God by your goodness? Jesus lived that perfect life for you in your place. All those times you've given into that deep, dark weakness? Jesus has never given up on you. All that guilt that's slowly been piling up in your life? Jesus took that burden off your shoulders, off your heart, off your mind and forgave that debt of guilt with his own blood. All that fear of the unknown, uncertainty about the future, worry about yourself and loved ones? Jesus removes all of that as he shows you the emptiness of his tomb with his nail-pierced hand. All of that is yours because you have peace with God through the light of your living Savior.

So what impact has Christ's peace had on you? In Paul's life, he went from being a violent man obsessed with wiping out the name of Jesus to a man of peace obsessed with spreading the name of Jesus. Now you do have a sinful nature that continues to rear its ugly head, but Christ's peace does change your life. Maybe you see it in how you respond to trouble and difficulty in your life. You have peace with God through Jesus! Is there really any need to freak out? Maybe you see it in your outlook on life. You have peace with God through Jesus! That means you look heavenward. Life doesn't end with death—and your troubles are momentary, because you have eternity with Jesus coming. Maybe you see it in how you talk or act or interact with others or in the choices you make or the priorities you set. You have peace with God through Jesus—and that peace impacts your life now!

There is one way that Christ's peace impacts all our lives just as it impacted Paul's. Even though King Agrippa and those with him rejected Paul's message of peace, he didn't give up. That once-violent persecutor of the Church wanted nothing more than that everyone who heard him speak would become like he was—a people at peace with God through Jesus.

You have that same peace and that moves you to want to share that peace with others. Think about it! Peace with God means forgiveness. Peace with God means strength in trouble, comfort in grief, and help in difficulty. Peace with God means eternal life with Jesus Christ, your risen Lord, their risen Lord. Isn't that the greatest gift you could share with the people you love?

That word "peace" is a pretty big word when you have it through your risen Savior Jesus, isn't it? May that peace with God through Christ that changed Paul's life centuries ago and is changing our lives right now continue to change the lives of many others for years to come. **CIR HIRI!** Amen.