

## THOUGHTS ABOUT PEACE AND HOW TO ACHIEVE IT

Peace inevitably means the cessation of war and conflict. Based on our experience of past wars (e.g., World War II, the Korean Conflict, Vietnam, Afghanistan, Iraq, etc.), peace does not suddenly come about with a ceasefire and the end of “hot war.” Although a “cold war” has some attributes of peace, it is not the true peace we expect or long for. Indeed, wars often bring more problems than they sought to resolve in the first place. Conflict, and the results of conflict, are long-lasting. It takes great and continuing effort, over the long-term, to foster cooperation and understanding between contending sides.

What is peace to Christians, and how do we get there? Indeed, what does peace really mean in a world of conflict, confusion, and endless competition?

The Bible tells us that peace is a gift from God to His people; it is a state of balance, comfort and direction in our personal lives. However, God does not give us that peace for ourselves alone. As Jesus indicated on countless occasions, God’s peace is meant to be shared with others. The main condition is that the other needs to be open to, and receptive of, the gift. Ideally, the other person will respond to our olive branch in kind. Though, that often is not the case.

Peace cannot be “forced” on the other side. Rather, the generous offer of peace needs to be generously accepted. This requires, first, mutual respect and the absence of threat.

Similarly, peace must be accompanied by justice. Where justice is “giving the other his due,” to be effective it must be tempered with mercy, i.e., “giving the other more than his due.” Seeking justice thus requires sacrifice. There can be no finger pointing. Instead, humility is required to demonstrate that we are all responsible (to some degree) for the deficit of peace.

The world is now confronting active warfare in Europe, incipient warfare in the Middle East, and many situations of unrest, gang activity, and violence all over. As Christians, how do we deal with these issues? Is there an effective way to address them?

Jesus came into our world during an era of conflict: political, social, economic and religious. His approach was to be open to all he encountered, wishing them “Shalom,” that is, “Peace be to you, may all go well with you” (John 14:27). Of course, Jesus, like the prophets before him, was not universally accepted and welcomed; even when rebuffed, though, he entered into dialogue with expectation and hope for a change of mind. He also challenged people to be true to their Bible-based principles.

While we all long for peace, calm, and security, we usually can only attain those states for short periods (2 Thessalonians 3:16). Then, the world intrudes on our life, and presents matters that require our attention. So, that kind of peace is temporary and does not bring us the complete rest we seek. Continuous, comforting rest in God is another way to describe heaven.

Jesus understands our world quite well (John 16:33). We always have some degree of turmoil, problems to be solved, social justice issues, violence of various sorts, and general inability to get along with others. Some of these problems come from the fact that we do not all share the same mentality or approach to life.

Christ's "peace" refers to a hope and reassurance that goes beyond what a fallen world can offer – transcending all understanding (Philippians 4:7). It is permanent, guaranteed, and

eternal (Hebrews 6:18–19). Christ encourages His followers to keep their "hearts" from fear and trouble.

The Gospels call us frequently to “Repent.” The Greek word behind that is “metanoia,” which means an expansion of our thinking, superseding old patterns, and constant growth spiritually. Growth comes about through our encounters with the world’s problems. To bring about peace, we individually must change. Dealing with social justice issues should soften our hearts and deepen our understanding. When the occasion arises, we might be called to step in and intercede on behalf of the innocent or the victim of violence (Matthew 5:9). Growth also involves educating ourselves about issues that the government and social authorities are facing. Our advocacy on those issues might be part of the solution, and a way to bring about peace (Colossians 3:15). Those who promote peace have joy (Proverbs 12:20).

The Bible urges us to pray for all people everywhere—including, and especially—for our enemies (1 Timothy 2:1–2). That is a tall order and a constant challenge for all of us. Even so, it is worthwhile, and this prayer alone may bring us peace. The Bible provides many passages about peace. Those seeking peace and assurance of God’s gift of peace to us may wish to pray Psalm 91.

Pope Francis also offers a Prayer for Peace:

Now, Lord, come to our aid! Grant us peace, teach us peace; guide our steps in the way of peace. Open our eyes and our hearts, and give us the courage to say: "Never again war!"; "With war everything is lost". Instill in our hearts the courage to take concrete steps to achieve peace. (USCCB)

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