Why can’t we just get along?” asked Rodney King, a man whose beating trial sparked the Los Angeles riots in 1992. This question reflects more than one troubled heart. It reflects the anguish of all who have borne the burden of hatred and violence. At no time, however, is the question more troublesome than when it raises doubts about spiritual answers. Never is the question more bothersome than when someone asks, “If peace comes through a relationship with God, why hasn’t the church been a more important source of racial and ethnic reconciliation?”

In the following pages, RBC biblical counselor Dan Vander Lugt takes a look not only at a difficult issue but also at some of the solutions that can come with a renewal of faith.

Martin R. De Haan II
WHERE IS THE PROMISED PEACE?

“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!”
—angels at the birth of Jesus (Lk. 2:14)

The announcement that filled the sky over the shepherds’ fields had been a long time in coming. For centuries, Israel had waited for her “Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6).

Yet 2,000 years later, ethnic and racial fires burn. Religious Jews are still waiting. The ancient streets of Bethlehem shudder with fire bombs and tear-gas grenades. The ancestors of Ishmael and Isaac clash again and again as a reminder not just of Mideast trouble but of a world stunned by the bad blood of ethnic rivalries and land wars.

In our generation, the problem is more extensive than the inner cities of America, the streets of Kosovo, and the ongoing struggles between the Dutch landowners and native groups of South Africa. Even more disturbing is the often-heard comment that the most racially divided hour of the week is the worship hour on Sunday morning.

It is against such a backdrop that we remember a nation who for centuries longed for the day when even nature would be at peace with itself. The wolf would no longer prey on the lamb. Children would play with wild animals (Isa. 11:6). A coming Messiah would recycle weapons of war into farming equipment. Under His rule, the nations would not learn war anymore (Isa. 2:4).

When Jesus was born, all signs seemed to indicate that this Prince of Peace
had finally come. A new star ruled the sky. Angels filled the night. Wisemen brought gifts. A king became nervous.

Yet, when the “Son of promise” became a teaching Rabbi, He disappointed His disciples’ hopes and dreams. Even though they saw Him calm stormy waters, comfort grieving families, and silence demons, He never became the Prince of Peace they expected. Instead, they heard Him predict separation and division even within His followers’ own families.

*Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to “set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law”; and “a man’s enemies will be those of his own household”* (Mt. 10:34-36).

The irony was profound. Jesus didn’t bring the kind of peace His followers expected. But He did bring an unexpected kind of peace that spread through a brutal pagan world. While family members who disagreed about Christ remained divided because of Him, others who had been racial and ethnic enemies suddenly became friends. Jewish and Gentile people who accepted Christ became a powerful example of racial reconciliation among those who found unity in Him.

*If anything is clear, it is that Jesus wasn’t the kind of peacemaker His followers thought He would be.*
Prior to receiving the knowledge of Christ, vast regions of the world lived under the spell of fear, magic, and superstition. They practiced human sacrifice, glorified warfare, and routinely committed atrocities too revolting to describe. Yet the spreading knowledge of Christ gradually broke down the tribal hostilities of these people, civilized them, and even laid the foundation for the Renaissance, the scientific revolution, the abolition of slavery, the emancipation of women, and the establishment of modern democratic government.

The results bear the profound imprint of something else Jesus told His disciples when He said:

*Peace I leave with you,*
*My peace I give to you;*
*not as the world gives do I give to you* (Jn. 14:27).

Jesus did bring peace.

But it wasn’t the “lion, wolf, and lamb” conditions Isaiah spoke of (Isa. 11:6). The peace promised by the prophets and the angels still seems like a distant dream. The centuries since Christ have been like the centuries that preceded Him. Military expert Homer Lea estimated that only 234 of the past 3,400 years have been peaceful. He said, “To speak of the end of all wars is like speaking of the end of all earthquakes” (*Smithsonian*, July 1993, p.104).

What did Christ mean when He spoke of a peace that is “not as the world gives”? Why did He say, “Blessed are the peacemakers” (Mt. 5:9), while emphasizing that He had not come to bring peace but a sword? Where can we find this peace that is newsworthy enough to cause a sky full of angels to declare, “Peace on earth, goodwill toward men!”?
PEACE IN THE FACE OF DAILY NEEDS

“What man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone?” —Jesus (Mt. 7:9)

Ethnic and racial hostilities are often expressions of class wars and economic differences. Behind our prejudices, anger, and fear there is often an economic interest related to home values, jobs, and social mobility. Money talks like a god. It promises power, prestige, comfort, and security.

But if we choose to let money define our worth, it becomes a heartless idol that makes us fearful of anyone or anything that poses a threat to what we are clinging to. In many ways we can become like the pathetic billionaire who spent the last days of his life living with uncut nails and hair, lurking in his penthouse tower, living on Campbell’s soup and ice cream, terrified of germs, cut off entirely from family or any other human warmth, watching the same old movies again and again late into the night.

The trouble with our daily needs is that nothing on earth can satisfy them permanently.

Jesus showed His disciples that it was possible to have the peace of mind to enjoy life’s blessings without being enslaved by them. Although He was a Nazarene (from “the other side of the tracks”) who had “nowhere to lay His head” (Lk. 9:58),
He demonstrated by personal example that the heavenly Father is not only aware of every sparrow that falls (Mt. 10:29) but that He knows the number of hairs on everyone’s head (Lk. 12:7). He gave us reason to believe that the Father in heaven is a much better and far more attentive Father than any of us could be to our own children (Mt. 7:7-12; Heb. 12:9-10). Deeply concerned that the disciples share the peace of His own relationship with His Father, He declared:

Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. . . . For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble (Mt. 6:25,32-34).

This is the growing peace that can distinguish a child of God from those who are obsessed with the futile battle to gain material security at the expense of others. This is the inner security that is alone capable of freeing us from the fear and envy that causes conflicts with others.

If we don’t trust our heavenly Father to meet our needs, we will become involved in a vicious struggle for power and security.
If we don’t trust our heavenly Father to meet our needs, we will become involved in a vicious struggle for power and security, as described by James:

Where do wars and fights come from among you? Do they not come from your desires for pleasure that war in your members? You lust and do not have. You murder and covet and cannot obtain. You fight and war. Yet you do not have because you do not ask (Jas. 4:1-2).

James reminded us that war is rooted in the human heart. Conflict at all levels grows out of a failure by one or more people to believe that as they obey God, He is committed to providing for their daily needs.

A lack of peace and goodwill occurs when we fail to know or believe the One who said:

Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. Or what man is there among you who, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will he give him a serpent? If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask Him! (Mt. 7:7-11).

Jesus lived with that kind of peace in the face of daily needs. He trusted His heavenly Father in a way that personified the kind of peace and goodwill that talks louder than money.
PEACE IN THE FACE OF PREJUDICE

“Do not hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory, with partiality.”
—James 2:1

If struggle over daily needs is a test of our trust in God, the same can be said about our struggle with personal feelings that keep us from seeing one another through His eyes.

It’s difficult to be objective about people we think pose a threat to us. It is also hard to feel good about those who are suspicious of us because of how their ancestors felt about our ancestors. It’s not easy to feel good about those who, on the basis of their skin color, feel that their rights are more important than our own, or that their anger is justified by something we cannot change.

Yet, few things show less trust in God, and few things destroy peace and goodwill more than fears and suspicions that express themselves with prejudice. Few things contribute more to resentment than first impressions and lasting attitudes rooted in skin color, family name, nation of origin, or anything else that has no relationship to the individual qualities of a person’s heart or mind.

It’s just as true, however, that few things are addressed more directly by the peace that Christ brought. Few things are closer to the heart of God
than a gospel that is designed to unite people of longstanding hostilities. Few things are more capable of breaking down pride and prejudice and ethnic or class struggle more than God's plan for a multiethnic, international body made up of all people who believe the truth about His Son.

This is not to say that the body of Christ has lived up to its calling. In too many cases, we unconsciously reflect the racial, social, and economic bias of our community. In too many churches, women, singles, blacks, Hispanics, the poor, the unattractive, and the uneducated are not treated with the kind of respect that Jesus would give if He were running the church.

That is not by design. At the foot of Christ's cross, and at the foot of His throne, the wealthy bow as low as the poor. Any black, white, Hispanic, Asian, or Indian who believes in Jesus becomes a brother, a sister, and a co-equal in the forgiveness, family inheritance, and everlasting life of Christ.

The church is to be a place where gratitude and oneness override differences and distrust.

This unity and equality of persons was revolutionary in the time of Jesus. The Rabbi from Nazareth wasn't asking His followers to continue to think like their fathers thought about Gentiles and women and poor people. He wasn't asking for more of the same. He was offering a new attitude based on a new Father, a new family, a new wealth, and a new basis of peace.
The Oneness Of Jew And Gentile. The apostle Paul described the influence of the gospel on a major prejudice in his day. This influence would eventually have such far-reaching effects as the creation of modern civil-rights legislation. While describing a kind of peace that Christ provided, Paul wrote:

_He Himself is our peace, who has made both one, and has broken down the middle wall of separation, having abolished in His flesh the enmity, that is, the law of commandments contained in ordinances, so as to create in Himself one new man from the two, thus making peace_ (Eph. 2:14-15).

To appreciate this revolutionary statement of how Christ had brought peace, we need to remember the prior relationship of Jews and Gentiles. In the Jewish temple of Jesus’ day there was a wall that separated the outermost court—the Court of the Gentiles—from the inner court where only Jews were permitted. This separation of Jew from Gentile wasn’t just a formality. The wall separating the two courts contained an inscription declaring that any Gentile who passed beyond the wall of separation would be put to death.

Since this partition was called for by Mosaic Law, it might be easy to assume that the God of Israel was Himself prejudiced against Gentiles. But from the call of Abraham, the father of Israel, God made it clear that His plan was to use Israel to bring blessing to the whole world (Gen. 12:2-3).

God reminded the Jewish people over and over that He had not chosen them because they were more
attractive to Him. He sovereignly chose them because if He had not, all the world would have continued to turn away from and against their Maker. God’s initiative to choose Israel as a witness to Him was designed to offer salvation to any Gentile who believed in the God who was revealing Himself through Israel.

Over time, however, many of the Jewish people failed to see how undeserving they themselves were, so they developed a heartless attitude toward the Gentiles. Their contempt was fueled in part by the beliefs and practices of the Gentiles.

The gods worshiped by Gentiles reflected the dark side of human nature. These gods were sometimes wicked, tragic beings at the mercy of cruel fate. As a result, Gentiles had little understanding of the repulsiveness of sin.

In Greco-Roman times, Gentile life was cheap. Gladiatorial contests and other bloody spectacles were offered for the entertainment of the masses. Infanticide was common. Literature and art that has come down to us from that time clearly depict its degenerate sexuality. Prostitution, promiscuity, homosexuality, and pederasty were rampant. The “barbarians” outside of the Empire were equally depraved, practicing human sacrifice and other things too debased to mention.

For the people of the Mosaic Law, the Gentile way of life was in stark contrast to the principles of God. But...
in spite of huge barriers, Christ established the New Covenant, removed the wall dividing Jew and Gentile, and brought them to unity in the church.

But the removal of the middle wall of partition symbolized a peace that went far beyond the historic difference between Jew and Gentile. The peace that Christ brought also removed a basis for other deep and historic prejudices. Addressing the church in Galatia, Paul wrote:

*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal. 3:28).*

This statement was revolutionary, because another serious prejudicial barrier was the one found between men and women.

**The Oneness Of Men And Women.** In Hellenistic times, women were generally considered inferior to men. Women were thought to be driven by passion and animal instinct, possessing less power of will and intellect than men. Girls from even the wealthiest families received inferior education. Respectable women were generally sequestered within the home, appearing in public only under very limited circumstances. In many places they were not even allowed to own property. Among wealthy Greeks, women weren’t even generally considered the most suitable objects for romantic passion. Men preferred boys and younger men as objects of sexual desire.

Because girl babies weren’t as desirable as boys, they were often taken to a place outside of the city and abandoned. These babies were killed by wild animals, died of exposure, or raised
by strangers—usually for eventual sale into slavery or prostitution.

Paul’s statement that “in Christ” men and women are accepted, valued, and adopted into the family of God as co-heirs of God was therefore a liberating message of enormous significance. Even though Jesus would appoint 12 men as apostles, and even though Paul would call for godly male servant leadership in the home and church, the overriding mark of the church was that men and women would love and respect one another as co-heirs of the grace of life.

_The Oneness Of Rich And Poor._ At the time of Christ, systems of justice were weak. Problems of class conflict were prevalent. In what was probably the earliest of the New Testament letters, the apostle James quickly addressed the kind of economic prejudice that could deface and distort Christ’s intent for the church (Jas. 2:1-4).

This was revolutionary thinking for people living in the middle of the first century. A poor person could expect little respect. He couldn’t even take his freedom for granted. In times of economic depression and famine, he might have to sell himself or members of his family into slavery. There was no “social safety net.”

Outside of Jewish law, slaves had no rights. They could be killed or abused at their owner’s whim. Rebellious slaves were often condemned to a living death in galleys or mines. The New Testament’s ringing declaration of oneness in Christ stood in stark contrast to the deeply divided world of the first century. Yet as James’ words remind us, we often fail to rise to the vision.
of a family of equals and co-heirs with Christ.

The Oneness Of All In Christ. In Christ, all blacks and whites, rich and poor, men and women, young and old, educated and uneducated are equally:
- loved and forgiven
- accepted and set apart
- adopted and made co-heirs with Christ
- indwelt and gifted by the Holy Spirit
- protected and provided for by God

To persons who share such a relationship, the New Testament offers guidelines. Writing to Ephesian Christians, Paul urged:

I . . . beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (4:1-3).

This is the kind of love God wants to share with all who call Him Father. It is the kind of goodwill He wants to give those who are willing to believe that He loves a woman as much as a man, a Gentile as much as a Jew, a black as much as a white, a poor man as much as a rich man, a stutterer as much as one who is eloquent, a disfigured face as much as a physically beautiful one, and an uneducated person as much as one with a Ph.D.

The apostle John wrote, “We love Him because He first loved us. If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar” (1 Jn. 4:19-20). We cannot be for God while being against those He loves. While it is impossible to avoid the anger of those who resent our acceptance of Christ, it is very possible—as much as it depends on us—to pursue
peace with all, and especially with those who share our faith in Christ (Rom. 12:18; Gal. 6:10).

We cannot be for God while being against those He loves.

OVERCOMING TEMPTATIONS TO DISCRIMINATE

The Temptation To Abuse Power. To a pragmatic, worldly-wise person, Jesus’ teaching concerning power is strange and unsettling. The way we naturally try to protect ourselves is to get as much power as possible over the people and circumstances in our lives. Power seems to offer security. And in the short run, such a strategy seems to work.

Prejudice and power, however, can become interwined. For instance, prejudice that refuses to believe what God says about blacks and whites, men and women, or rich and poor creates an illusion of control and superiority. When we “label” another person, we gain a measure of control over him—even if only in our own minds. Minorities, like individuals, often get used to a particular label or role. Once cast in a role by a dominant majority, a minority will continue to act the part, even when it is harmful. Prejudicial labels have the power to become self-fulfilling prophecy.

Of course, when power is gained through prejudice, it is based on lies and half-truths. But its illegitimacy doesn’t affect its usefulness. Should we be surprised that prejudice is effective? It uses the same tactics as the devil and his demons. Satan has no legitimate right to power. He is a usurper who has
gained control over the present world-system through deceit and the exploitation of sin and fear. But the fact that sin and fear can be cultivated into such tremendous power illustrates clearly why prejudice is so pervasive (Eph. 6:12).

Satan understands power. He is the ultimate power-broker, manipulator, and wheeler-dealer. Jesus Himself referred to Satan as the “ruler of this world” (Jn. 12:31; 16:11). One of the tests Jesus faced early in His ministry was His temptation by Satan in the wilderness.

The Son of God had given up the exercise of His divine power and had become the humblest of servants. Satan, the madly arrogant usurper, actually had the diabolical gall to try to get Christ to lay aside His humility and exercise His power to turn rocks into bread, to force angels to come to His aid, and to take control of the kingdoms of the world by worshiping Satan rather than by the obedient way of the cross. Satan’s tactics are insightful. He tried to get the Son of God Himself to take life into His own hands rather than to continue to rely on the Father for everything He needed (Mt. 4:1-11).

**Satan tried to get the Son of God to protect Himself with power the Father had not given to Him.**

The truth of Christ is not like the lie of our adversary. His teaching brings us gratefully to our knees to receive what God has done for us. The truth of the gospel is that we are wisest not when we try to protect ourselves by taking
control of the people and circumstances of our lives but when we humbly and obediently depend on God to protect and provide for us.

In the process of living out such an attitude, we learn to see one another from a perspective of mutual love, rather than from a perspective of power, authority, or rights.

This is what we see in Paul’s New Testament letter to a slave-owning brother named Philemon. While himself in prison, Paul met Philemon’s runaway slave Onesimus and led him to personal faith in Christ. After personally observing Onesimus’ faith and enjoying his fellowship, Paul wrote a letter asking Philemon to receive Onesimus back as a brother in Christ. In the past, Philemon had power over Onesimus. By rights he could have insisted on that right. But Paul appealed to Philemon to lay aside his prerogatives and humbly embrace Onesimus as a brother with whom he shared a real oneness in Christ. That is the way of peace.

It is when we lay aside our “social power” and join Christ in associating with all members of His body that we are in a position to begin to see one another through the richness of what our Lord Himself is doing in us.

Glen Kehrein of Circle Urban Ministries writes about his own experience in stepping to the level ground of the cross. Having grown up in a small town in Wisconsin, Glen says he missed the richness that comes from associating with those who are often the victims of power and prejudice.

Before I moved to Chicago from Ripon,
Wisconsin, it never occurred to me that I needed the inner-city church. What did that have to do with me? I was happy; I was fine. First Corinthians 12 was a nice spiritual thought, but I didn’t really feel a need for my black brothers and sisters. I had not yet opened my eyes to the spiritual reality that “those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable” (v.22). But it is true. Many of my black brothers and sisters in the Lord have a depth of spiritual wisdom and character because they know oppression, poverty, and need. Without them, I would be spiritually impoverished, as if I were missing a hand or an eye or a foot (Breaking Down Walls, p.172).

This is the richness of God’s family that we are so often apt to miss because of our pursuit of this world and its illusions of power.

**The Temptation To Scapegoat.** People who have not come to understand and accept their own sinful weakness before God are apt to form conflict-causing prejudices toward others. They are apt to look for scapegoats to act as lightning rods for their own personal anger and frustration. In this respect, the practice of scapegoating functions much like a drug. It offers a powerful emotional release. Gordon Allport wrote:

> It seems to be undeniably true that man’s instinctive response to frustration is aggressive assertiveness in some form. An infant when balked will kick and scream. Under anger it certainly shows no sign
of love or affiliation; its reaction is random and wild. The infant attacks not the true source of the frustration, but any object or person who crosses its path (The Nature Of Prejudice, p.343).

Throughout life, the same tendency persists for anger to center on available rather than logical objects. Sometimes, certain types of scapegoating become common in particular cultures. The Jews have tragically been the traditional scapegoats in Western society. They have been blamed for everything from the bubonic plague to the Great Depression.

It is probably because of this evil human tendency that Jesus gave this severe warning:

You have heard that it was said to those of old, “You shall not murder, and whoever murders will be in danger of the

judgment.” But I say to you that whoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment (Mt. 5:21-22).

Jesus told us to consider the “plank” in our own eye before we judge another person for the “speck” in his (Mt. 7:3). How can we be “slow to anger” if we aren’t even fully conscious of how angry we are? Only by

How can we be “slow to anger” if we aren’t even fully conscious of how angry we are?

cultivating awareness of our own anger, and only by seeing and admitting our own sin, can we see how pointless and destructive it is to vent our anger on someone else.

An interesting biblical example of angry projection
is seen in David’s reaction to the prophet Nathan (2 Sam. 12). Nathan told David about a rich man who, while having many sheep of his own, took the pet lamb of a poor neighbor and killed it for dinner. Upon hearing this, David was furious and demanded the death of the arrogant and insensitive rich man.

    David had just done something much worse than the rich man in Nathan’s story. David had murdered a loyal soldier in order to hush up his adultery with the soldier’s wife and to add her to his harem. But when Nathan told him the parable, King David completely missed his point. He self-righteously demanded that the offender be put to death. Only then did Nathan say, “You are the man!”

    Perhaps the most deceitful and destructive of all forms of prejudice is that of repression and projection. Anyone familiar with basic Christian doctrine knows that all of us are sinners. Not one of us can rightfully claim that he isn’t (Rom. 3:9-26; 1 Jn. 1:8). In spite of this, we all find it difficult to acknowledge our sins and shortcomings. The desire to avoid facing our own sinfulness may cause us to attribute our sins to others.

    Gordon Allport states: Suppose there are unwanted traits in oneself—perhaps greed, lust, laziness, and untidiness. What the sufferer needs is a caricature of these attributes. . . . He needs
something so extreme that he need not even suspect himself of being guilty (*The Nature Of Prejudice*, p.388).

Admission of personal sin is not easy. It isn’t comfortable. Yet if we don’t let God lead us in the path of peace, we will repress our own sin and weigh down others with the burden of our projection, prejudice, and anger.

**The Temptation To Stay Comfortable.**

Recently, a new field of academics has appeared in seminaries and Christian colleges. It is called “Church-Growth Studies.” This discipline is concerned with analyzing the factors that determine church growth. One observation made by experts is that people naturally feel more comfortable with people like themselves. People of the same racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups tend to gravitate toward each other. Although they may not have a conscious desire to be separate from other racial, cultural, or economic groups, they just “naturally form homogeneous churches.”

Since this is “natural” and doesn’t seem intentional, why would it have anything to do with prejudice? Raleigh Washington and Glen Kehrein make some thoughtful comments about these important questions:

Do we need each other? Those who believe in “homogeneous churches” and “niche marketing” or Afro-centrism and self-determination don’t necessarily think so. Other than trying to avoid race riots, why should we go through all the grief necessary to achieve racial reconciliation? Why fight human nature? . . .
The real question, however, is do we solidify the human tendency to flock together with our own kind into a “principle” for the body of Christ? Do we accept a “separate but equal” mindset for Christian fellowship and relationship?

Our answer is no. We cannot get along without each other if the body of Christ is to be salt and light to a world torn apart by racial strife (Breaking Down Walls, p.170).

It can’t be denied that it is always difficult for us to try to break down barriers between people. Our natural tendency is to spend time with people who are least likely to misinterpret us and make us feel uncomfortable and awkward. It takes real effort to make a marriage work. No less commitment is needed to achieve spiritual and emotional unity with people who are not like us culturally.

Actually, in the kingdom of this world, people who exclude others can seem to have an advantage. Gordon Allport describes a motivation for prejudice that he refers to as “the principle of least effort”:

If I reject all foreigners as a category, I don’t have to bother with them. . . .
If I can ticket, then, all Negroes as comprising an inferior and objectionable race, I conveniently dispose of a tenth of my fellow citizens. If I can put the Catholics into another category and reject them, my life is still further simplified. I then pare again and slice off the Jews, and so it goes (The Nature Of Prejudice, pp.365-366).

Certainly, different cultural groups are more comfortable and expend less energy when they remain
Our natural tendency is to spend time with people who are least likely to misinterpret us and make us feel uncomfortable.

The question, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus’ answer was the parable of the Good Samaritan, a story about a compassionate man from a despised minority group (Lk. 10:29-37). Raleigh Washington writes:

On the way to the cross, Jesus broke down a lot of barriers between people as He brought the good news of God’s redemption (and it got Him into a lot of trouble). He shocked the healthy by touching the “unclean” lepers; He bewildered His power-hungry disciples by telling them they had to become like little children; He embarrassed the self-righteous by refusing to condemn the adulterous woman; He offended the “righteous” by associating with sinners; He shamed the rich by praising the small gift of a poor woman who gave sacrificially; He provoked the “ethnically pure” Jews by inviting half-breed Samaritans to become children of God.

These barriers didn’t come falling down by accident. Jesus intentionally went out of His way to make a point: “If you’re going to follow Me, the barriers need to
come down. In fact, these barriers are keeping the people from seeing who I really am” (*Breaking Down Walls*, pp.127-128).

Although it may be more “comfortable” for us to associate with people who are like us, is it beneficial? Would it make sense to sit only with the members of our immediate family at a reunion? Should students study only the subjects they have already mastered? As Washington and Kehrein point out, the benefits of becoming acquainted with people of other backgrounds far outweigh the “discomfort.”

Sociological research has demonstrated that belief is more important than race or sex in determining whom we choose as friends. How can we avoid the conclusion that the “comfort” of homogeneous churches is related to selfishness and spiritual laziness? When the avoidance of discomfort becomes a guiding principle for church growth, there can be no doubt that the Spirit is being “quenched” (1 Th. 5:19), that spiritual growth will be limited, that God’s anger will be provoked (Mt. 25:14-28), and that such congregations will become lazy and fearful (Prov. 22:13).

When we take risks for the sake of the kingdom of God, the challenges that we encounter make it possible to grow emotionally and spiritually in ways that would never be possible if we remained comfortable and far from the field of conflict. The “principle of least effort” is not our guiding star.

*We also glory in tribulations, knowing that tribulation produces perseverance; and perseverance, character; and character, hope* (Rom. 5:3-4).
PEACE IN THE FACE OF THE FUTURE

“Everyone who has this hope . . . purifies himself.”
—1 John 3:3

It was not easy for the first followers of Christ to defer hopes of political peace. As Jewish people schooled in the Hebrew Old Testament, they had reason to believe that Messiah would eventually conquer the world. The prophets pictured Him ruling over the entire earth from the city of Jerusalem. Writing of that day Isaiah predicted:

Now it shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the Lord’s house shall be established on the top of the mountains, and shall be exalted above the hills; and all nations shall flow to it. Many people shall come and say, “Come, and let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; He will teach us His ways, and we shall walk in His paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and rebuke many people; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore (Isa. 2:2-4).

That day will not come easily. Isaiah went on to describe a terrible day of judgment (Isa. 2–4) that will precede the peace that will follow (Isa. 4:3-6; see also Jer. 30:1-7 and Dan. 12:1). Yet, after this period of cleansing, God’s kingdom will be established. Messiah’s government will
finally be seen as good for the whole world. Under the rule of the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6), Gentiles will share in the worship and peace of the Lord (Isa. 56:7; 66:23; Zech. 14:16; Mal. 1:11).

In light of the climactic nature of the days of Christ’s coming rule over the earth, it’s no wonder that after Jesus’ resurrection His disciples were still wondering whether they would see that day.

They asked Him, saying, “Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?” And He said to them, “It is not for you to know times or seasons which the Father has put in His own authority. But you shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”

Now when He had spoken these things, while they watched, He was taken up, and a cloud received Him out of their sight. And while they looked steadfastly toward heaven as He went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel, who also said, “Men of Galilee, why do you stand gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will so come in like manner as you saw Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:6-11).

This word from the angels reassures us that God has not forgotten His promises. History is not out of control. In the end, evil will not win over good.

While we don’t know when this is all going to end, God has a calendar and a plan. He sees it all. With that assurance, He asks us to trust Him not only for the future but for today as well.
PEACE IN THE FACE OF DEATH

“No man has power over the wind to contain it; so no one has power over the day of his death.” —Solomon (Eccl. 8:8 NIV)

People who are afraid to die are often afraid to live. They are also apt to fear one another. Being with co-workers poses a danger of life-threatening germs. Living among the poor raises the possibility of being robbed and killed for food or drugs. Offering a helping hand is out of the question because of the possibility of falling into the trap of someone who will turn around and rob, sue, or kill you. Even driving our neighborhood streets is a risk, considering the careless, drunken, or reckless people behind the wheel.

Jesus recognized that fearful people can have little impact for good. He knew they would find it difficult to become His friends or disciples for fear of risking the anger of His enemies (Mt. 10:25-27). Therefore Jesus said:

*Do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell (Mt.10:28).*

In saying this, Jesus was not encouraging His followers to take foolish risks or to live without regard for their own safety. What He was doing was encouraging them to stand with Him and to be faithful to Him at all costs. The Teacher wanted His followers to be courageous, honorable, and loving in the face of their enemies. Yet the only way they could be loving toward those who hated them was to learn to
fear God more than man. People have always been tormented by fear of death. Although Freud and other atheists have popularized the idea that belief in immortality is the result of wishful thinking, most ancient people feared and dreaded the possibility of an afterlife. Not only did they fear the kind of existence they might enter after death, but they struggled with guilt and a vague fear of condemnation.

Such apprehension is reflected frequently in ancient literature. In Plato’s *The Republic* (380 BC) there is a dialogue in which an old man named Cephalus expresses feelings about the event that ultimately takes all of us:

For you know, Socrates, when a man faces the thought of death there come into his mind anxieties that did not trouble him before. The stories about another world, and about punishment in a future life for wrongs done in this, at which he once used to laugh, begin to plague his mind with the fear that they may be true. And either because of the weakness of old age, or because, as he approaches the other world, he has some clearer perception of it, he is filled with doubts and fears and begins to reckon up and see if there is anyone he has wronged. The man who finds that in the course of his life he has done a lot of wrong often wakes up at night in terror, like a child with a nightmare, and his life is full of foreboding: but the man who is conscious of no wrong looks forward with cheerfulness and with hope, “the comfort of old age” as Pindar calls it.
But even though people fear death and judgment, they still long for the immortality that alone can make sense of our existence. If death is the end, if there is no hope of an afterlife to give meaning to those who have done right or borne the fury of evil in this life, then, as the Spanish philosopher Unamuno writes:

“If it is true that I am to die utterly,” we say to ourselves, “then once I am annihilated the world has ended so far as I am concerned—it is finished. Why, then, should it not end forthwith . . . ? If living for the mere sake of living or for the sake of others who are likewise doomed to die doesn’t satisfy the soul, what is the good of living. Our best remedy is death (p.44, Tragic Sense Of Life).

This sense of tragic meaninglessness has often tormented those who have no assurance that the grave is a threshold to a better place.

The peace Jesus offered became a source of hope in the face of death. When He encouraged His friends not to be afraid but to receive from Him a peace that the world cannot give (Jn. 14:27), He offered a peace that is far more important than military ceasefires and peace accords.

*Jesus offered a peace that is far more important than military ceasefires and peace accords.*

It was a peace that Jesus Himself showed in the face of His own problems. In time, His friends would see Him struggle in the Garden
of Gethsemane and then submit willingly to a form of execution designed not only to kill but to publicly torture and shame.

Jesus knew that His messiahship involved more than having “the government . . . upon His shoulder” and being called the “Prince of Peace” (Isa. 9:6). He knew that for us to have peace in the face of death He must destroy the power of death. He knew that sin had broken our relationship with God, and that unless it was paid for, all of us would live under the threat of eventual judgment and separation from God.

Jesus knew that He would have to experience separation from the Father and that He would have to endure our rightful punishment. He clearly understood Isaiah’s prophecy, which said:

Surely He has borne our grieves and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed Him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon Him, and by His stripes we are healed (Isa. 53:4-5).

Nature mirrored His agony. An unnatural darkness descended over the earth from the sixth to the ninth hour (Mk. 15:33; Lk. 23:44-45), an earthquake shook the earth, the great veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom, rocks were split, and graves were opened (Mt. 27:51-52).

We can’t fully comprehend the depth of Jesus’ faith—an inner peace and trust in God’s love so strong that He willingly suffered an agonizing and violent death as our substitute. His matchless
courage and faith opened heaven’s doors for the rest of us. Because of His peaceful confidence in God’s love, our sins can now be forgiven, and we can have inner peace in the face of death. The apostle Paul wrote:

For if when we were enemies we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more, having been reconciled, we shall be saved by His life. And not only that, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received the reconciliation (Rom. 5:10-11).

And then in a letter to the Corinthians he added:

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. Now all things are of

God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, not imputing their trespasses to them, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God. For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him (2 Cor. 5:17-21).

This is where peace begins. Peace with God gives us a basis for peace in the face of everything else.
Can you say with the apostle Paul, “Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ”? (Rom. 5:1). If you can’t say this with confidence, and you don’t know how to take the first steps of faith in Jesus, then entering the path of faith is both easy and difficult. The easy part is realizing that Christ has mediated peace with God for you. He died to pay the price for our selfishness and hatred, and rose to show that God had accepted His sacrifice for our sin. Salvation is given to us when we trust what Christ has done for us. It is rooted in simply accepting the good news that all who believe have everlasting life (Acts 16:31; Jn. 5:24).

The difficult part is to realize how terribly sinful we are, and how our acceptance of God’s free gift of salvation makes us debtors to His mercy and love. We can’t accept the truth of Christ’s gospel without taking the first step on a path that leads inevitably to the renunciation of our arrogance, hatred, and prejudice.

You do not have to realize all of this now. It is a truth far too wonderful to grasp all at once. But you need to know that the very act of faith by which the free gift is taken is an act that will result in a changed life from the inside out.

There is peace. It comes through the intervention and mediation of the same One who said to a brokenhearted sinner, “Your faith has saved you. Go in peace” (Lk. 7:50).
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