



## YOUR DISTINGUISHING MARK

Catalog No. 1057

2 Thess 3:16-18

Fifth Message

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March 24th, 1996

Baseball season is upon us. Those of you who have children in Little League spent a couple of hours yesterday watching a game or two. I endured parts of three games myself.

The game of baseball teaches great lessons about life. A favorite Charlie Brown cartoon shows Schroeder, garbed in outsized catcher's mask and chest protector, walking to the mound. He hands Charlie Brown the ball and laments: "The bases are loaded again, and there's still nobody out." Charlie Brown asks: "So what do you think?" Schroeder ponders the question for a moment and then replies: "We live in difficult times."

Indeed we do. "If it's not one thing it's another," a friend of mine complains, "and some days it's both." Terrible things keep happening to us, cruel events that seem devoid of sense and meaning. Bitter ironies thwart our desires, foil our plans, frustrate our hopes and break our hearts.

And it doesn't stop. We think that things will get better and life will get easier as we grow older, but that's a fool's dream. The hardest tests are yet to come. Earl Weaver, the manager of the Baltimore Orioles and the bane of American League umpires, used to charge out of the dugout bellowing: "Is it going to get any better or is this it?"

I hate to tell you, but this is it.

Life is indeed difficult and demanding. In just the last few weeks I've been made aware of marital breakdowns, impending divorces, rebellious children, loss of employment, horrible accidents, medical traumas, and emotional meltdowns.

Can there be any doubt that the thing that we need most in this world is peace?

Today we come to our final study in the apostle Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians. The last verse of this little book, Paul's final greeting to the church there, dictated by the apostle to his scribe just before he wrote his own distinguishing mark, keeps ringing in my ears in these difficult times:

**Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance. The Lord be with you all!** (2 Thess 3:16, NASB)

That is why it is so important that Jesus came: He is the Prince of peace! Oftentimes when we face a problem we actually have two problems—the problem itself, and the problem of our anxiety over the problem. What we

desperately need is the assurance that we can face these things with the Lord's peace.

Peace is something that Jesus gives, and he gives it supernaturally. Once he was on the Sea of Galilee with his disciples when a fierce storm struck. The disciples were competent mariners; they had navigated their way through storms on that lake many times. But now, the storm swirling around them, they were stricken with terror, and they panicked. The wind probably ripped the sail to shreds. The boat began to sink, and they were paralyzed with fear.

But all the while, Jesus was sleeping. At last they woke him up, crying in terror: "Don't you care that we are drowning?" Do you remember his words to them? First, he said to the waves: "Peace! Be still!" The wind died down and it was completely calm. Then, turning to the disciples, he said: "Why are you so afraid? Do you still have no faith?" They still had to row the boat to other side, but Jesus had settled the issue of their anxiety.

During these difficult days we must remember that Jesus is the One who brings tranquillity and peace to our hearts in the midst of all the problems we have to face. The Lord is with us.

My friend Marty Mathiesen shares his favorite cartoons with me. A recent one shows a scruffy-looking prophet carrying a placard that reads: "The end of the world is not at hand. You gotta learn to cope." There is truth in that statement. We don't know when the Lord is coming. He may come in our lifetime. He could come very soon. That is our sure hope that keeps us steady. But he hasn't come yet. In the meantime, the way we cope is by knowing that the Lord is with us.

On the night before Jesus was crucified he spent an extended time with his disciples, preparing them for his departure. They were deeply troubled that he was leaving, but he told them: "It's all right. I am coming back. I have provided for your destiny, and I have taken care of the interim as well. I will provide my presence. I will come back and then I will not only be with you, I will be in you. I will dwell in you through the person of the Holy Spirit. And you also have my Word. These are sufficient to give you peace. That is all you need to keep you together until I come back."

These are the resources that are available to you and me today. They are the same resources that the apostles had. They had the indwelling Christ, and they had his

teaching. We have the same. We have his presence and his Word. These are what will give us peace.

That is why Jesus could say to his disciples: *"Peace I leave with you."* Are you troubled and frightened? Are you confused and anxious? Jesus has given you the elements that produce peace. He is not going to pour a bucket of peace on you. That is not what he is talking about. Peace is not something that comes from nowhere. Peace comes from the awareness that Jesus is present and in control, and we have all the resources we need to cope with our circumstances. We have his presence and his Word. These are what make us adequate to handle anything that life brings our way.

*"My peace I give to you; not as the world gives, do I give to you."* The peace that the world gives is short-lived. It's always dependent on circumstances, things like success, how other people think about you, a sports score, or some foreign substance. But the peace that Jesus gives endures. It is the unqualified sense of well being that comes when we realize that he is with us. That is why he can say to us: *"Let not your heart be troubled, nor let it be fearful."*

There are many things that make life worthwhile, but there are two things we cannot do without: the presence of the indwelling Christ, and the Word of God. These are the essential parameters, the fixed points around which everything else revolves. If we don't have these, we don't have anything. These are what we need. You don't need a husband. You don't need a wife. You don't need to have children. You don't even need a job. You don't have to have health. What you need is God and his Word.

Over the next couple of weeks we will celebrate the cross and the resurrection of our Lord. His first words to his disciples after he was raised are the same as the words he shared with them before he was crucified. It was Easter Sunday evening, and the disciples were having the first Sunday evening service. They were squeezed into a house in Jerusalem. The doors were locked, because they were afraid that at any moment a policeman would arrive with a warrant for their arrest, and like their Lord, they would be tried and executed.

As they were sharing their experiences of the day, Jesus came and stood in their midst and said to them: "Shalom" (Peace). I always imagined that Jesus passed through the wall, but I think what probably happened is that he was there all the time, listening to their conversation. He was invisible, and he became visible.

Later, when our Lord ascended into heaven, we are inclined to think there was a short vertical ascent, and then he disappeared. I don't think that heaven is somewhere "up there," however. We use those spatial terms simply because they are useful to us. I believe that heaven is another dimension. It is all around us. It is the realm of the unseen, but it is just as real as the realm of the things that are seen.

I believe our Lord is right here today in this room,

just as he was in that room in Jerusalem. He is with you as you drive home today. He will be with you at that picnic you are planning. He is with you when you go on dates. He is with you on business appointments. He is with you in school as you sit at your desk. He is with you in the kitchen. He is with you in your office, in your shop, in your garden, at your computer, on the baseball or soccer field. Wherever you are, our Lord is there, present with you.

So the first thing Jesus said to the disciples on that first Easter Sunday was: "Peace be with you." That was the standard greeting in that day in the Middle East: *Shalom*. Jews still use it today. But I think our Lord had more in mind than a mere greeting. He wasn't just saying, "Good Morning" or "Good Evening." In fact, three times in that passage he says, "Peace be with you." That is because his legacy, his inheritance, what we receive as a result of his presence with us, is peace—peace, inner calmness, tranquillity.

Jesus said: "I will never leave you or forsake you." He used a double negative. We don't do that in English, but they did in Greek. "I will never under any circumstances forsake you," he promised. Friends fail us, spouses walk out on us, parents disappoint us, therapists refuse to return our calls, but the Lord is with us every moment of the day. We need to make ourselves think about his presence; to acknowledge that he is with us, as real as he was in the days of his flesh. He will never say "Good-bye."

Will you remember that today when someone forgets to do what they were supposed to do and you are alone and feeling resentful? Will you remember that the Lord is there, and that his word to you is: "Shalom: My peace I give to you"? When you are all alone at night and there is no one else to share your bed (or maybe there is, but you still feel that nobody in the world cares or understands), know that he is there in the room, just as real as he was in that room in Jerusalem, and he still offers that peace. That is where true peace comes from.

When the husband that you depended on for many years to make decisions is no longer there, remember that Jesus is there. Don't run from the pain. As Richard Foster says, "God becomes a reality when he becomes a necessity." We sometimes don't know that God is all we need until he is all we have. And his first words are an offer of tranquillity.

If we had Paul's original letter, we would discover that the last two verses are written in different handwriting from the rest of the text. At this point, the apostle took the pen in hand, and scrawled his own signature, *Paulus*. He wrote this final greeting (verse 17):

**I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, and this is a distinguishing mark in every letter; this is the way I write. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. (3:17-18)**

God is with us. Of that there is no doubt. Let us remember to think about his presence, to acknowledge

that he is with us, as real as he was in the days of his flesh when he walked with his disciples amid the sorrows and the haunts of this world.

One of my favorite stories in the Old Testament is told in 2 Kings 6. The prophet Elisha and his servant were in the city of Dothan. The king of Syria, Ben Hadad II, was upset with Elisha because he kept tipping off King Joram of Israel to Syrian troop movements (God was providing the inside information for Elisha). Ben Hadad decided to put an end to the prophet. He stormed in with his entire army to besiege the city of Dothan, where Elisha and his servant were staying.

During the night, the Syrians circled the city and waited for dawn. The next morning, Elisha's servant rose early and looked out over the walls. When he saw the Syrian army he panicked. He woke Elisha and told him the bad news. "It's all over," he said. "What are we going to do?" But Elisha said to him: "Don't worry. There are more of us than there are of them." Imagine the look of bewilderment this statement drew. But Elisha prayed and said: "'O Lord, I pray, open his eyes that he may see.' And the Lord opened the servant's eyes, and he saw; and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha." Elisha and his servant captured the entire Syrian army and led them off to Samaria.

We cannot evaluate a situation in terms of what we see. What is observable is real, but it is not the ultimate reality. In a materialistic world like ours the only real things are those that we can detect with our five senses. People say, "What you see is what you get." But there is another realm of reality, one that is more actual, more factual, more substantial than anything we can see, hear, touch, taste, or smell. It exists all around us. It is not out there somewhere; it is right here. Behind what we see is the all-powerful, all-loving God. We must remind ourselves daily of this reality.

And we must grow eyes that "see." This happens as we feed on God's Word. Faith comes from hearing the message, Paul told us. One of the questions we can ask ourselves as we spend time in God's Word, is this: Has it enabled me to see?

Seeing is also a gift of God given in answer to prayer. And so Paul prays that the eyes of our hearts may be enlightened that we may see what otherwise would not be seen. Prayer is the means by which we receive all of God's good gifts. It is the highest expression of our dependence on him. Prayer moves that which we know from our heads to our hearts; it bridges the gap between what we know and what we are.

Horatio Spafford, a dynamic Christian attorney who was influential in the founding of the Moody Bible Institute, lived in Chicago at the turn of the century. Following the great Chicago fire in 1871 he put his wife and children aboard ship and sent them to Europe. He wanted to get them out of the city while it was being rebuilt. As they were crossing the Atlantic Ocean their ship was struck by another vessel in the middle of the night, and both ships sank. This mother saw her four children drown. She was struck by a falling mast, but she was miraculously saved. She fell on some floating debris and later was picked up and taken to Wales.

While she was in a hospital there, she telegraphed back to her husband these two words: "Saved Alone." Horatio Spafford took the first ship to Wales. As it was sailing across the Atlantic, near the spot where the ship had gone down, Dr. Spafford walked along the deck and contemplated all that had happened. That was when he was moved to write the hymn that we sang earlier this morning, *It Is Well With My Soul*:

*When peace like a river attendeth my way,  
When sorrows like sea billows roll;  
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,  
It is well, it is well with my soul.*

That is the message that Jesus wants to communicate to us this morning. Whatever my lot, he has taught me to say, "It is well with my soul." Or, as the apostle so beautifully puts it here at the close of his letter: "*Now may the Lord of peace Himself continually grant you peace in every circumstance.*" That is the key to contentment. That is the secret that enables us to rest.

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