OPENING THE SCRIPTURES

Peace and Those Who Make It, Part 1
Old Testament Background

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In the "Contemporary Significance" section of his comments on James 3.13–18, David Nystrom enumerates several examples of churches of which he had personal knowledge who had either failed to confront or had denied substantial tensions in the interest of keeping the peace. In one instance, he reports that a church's "new senior pastor announces to the congregation that he desires the entire staff to stay in place, but in private makes it clear to one staff member that his resignation is required." When that person's resignation is announced, the man is asked if he is being "forced out." He replies that he is leaving "'in the interests of peace and the welfare of the church'" (Nystrom 1997, 213–214).

Nystrom labels the man's answer a lie. He is not accusing him of intending one thing and saying something else; the man really did not intend to contribute to a church fuss and so, to avoid that, he left. No, Nystrom says, he lied because he falsely represented peace. Continuing a practice frequently seen in churches, the departing staff member identified peace as an "absence or denial of tension within the body" instead of "wholeness within the body." Since the peace he sought was not in harmony with Scripture, it was a false peace and therefore, in Nystrom's view, a lie (Nystrom 1997, 214).

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Whatever you think of his reasoning, Nystrom's assessment points to the need to study peace in light of how Scripture defines it, not as understood in contemporary culture. As Harold Songer observed, when we do, we discover that sometimes the only way to have genuine peace is to "disrupt the community for its ultimate good by declaring war on superficial compromises which pass for peace" (Songer 1972, 126). Our purpose in this study is to explore that thesis and its impact on how we understand and apply James 3.18. Part one will examine the OT understanding of peace.

Peace Defined and Described

Previously, we briefly mentioned the difference between the Bible's view of peace (שָׁלוֹם, *šālom*; εἰρήνη, *eirēnē*) and the common contemporary meaning which defines it as "the absence of obvious tension" (Nystrom 1997, 212). The biblical view also differs from the understanding of the ancient Greeks who saw peace as the trait of a nation not at war and then in terms of relationships without discord or trouble (Spicq 1994, 424–426). In contrast, when "reading the OT, one has the impression of entering another world … because of the new content of this idea" (Spicq 1994, 426). Generally speaking, *šālom* means "completion and fulfillment—of entering into a state of wholeness and unity, a restored relationship" (Carr 1980, 930). Indeed, "the great innovation of the OT is to make peace a religious idea: it is a gift of God" (Spicq 1994, 427–428). Thus, it is understandable that, in addition to *eirēnē*, the LXX translators also rendered *šālom* with other words, including σωτηρία (*sōtēria*, salvation), ὑγιαίνω (*hygiainō*, to be healthy or sound), and τέλειος (*teleios*, complete).

Two other OT themes are also connected with peace. The first is *covenant* with its focus on the obligations to be met, including restitution if necessary, so that relationships could be put right and be what they were intended (Gerlemann 1997, 1340, 1343). Closely tied to covenant was the idea of *justice,* or *righteousness*, the way things were when they were in harmony with God's nature and ways (Healey 1992, 206).

Peace Illustrated

In biblical understanding, then, peace is an objective reality, "the creation and maintenance of a state of truth, honesty, righteousness, and justice" (Nystrom 1997, 212). We more readily grasp this when we look at texts that highlight the contrast between being at cross-purposes with God and being right with him.

One example is Psalm 85, a community lament attributed to the Sons of Korah that begins by pointing to a time when God had shown his displeasure with the people who were seeking restoration. YHWH had once been favorable to them, had restored Jacob's fortunes, forgiven and covered their sins, and withdrawn all his wrath and hot anger (vv. 1–3). But now, YHWH is distant, and the people need restoration. Will God "put away [his] indignation toward [them]"? Will his anger ever recede? Will he ever revive them so they can again rejoice in him? "Show us your

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steadfast love [חֶסֶד, *ḥeseḏ*], O LORD," they pray, "and grant us your salvation [יְשַׁע, *yēša*ʿ; LXX σωτήριον, *sōtērion*]" (vv. 4–7).

In verse 8, the tone and direction of the lament change. The psalmist expresses the desire to hear what God the LORD will speak, confident that "he will speak *peace* [*šālom*] to his people, to his saints." Assuming they do not "turn back to folly" and will "fear him," his salvation will be near to them and his glory will dwell in the land (vv. 8–9). Things will be as they are supposed to be. "Steadfast love and faithfulness [will] meet, righteousness and peace [*šālom*] [will] kiss each other." Faithfulness will "spring up from the ground" and "righteousness [will] look down from the sky." The LORD will give what is good and the land will be fruitful. The people will be righteous and follow God's way (vv. 10–13). Life and their relationship with God will be right, as intended.

Isaiah 32 paints a similar picture. In contrast to the demise of Egypt, to whom some of them will flee for refuge (cf. ch. 31), the covenant infidelity of God's people will be replaced by restoration. A king will "reign in righteousness," supported by "princes who [will] rule in justice" (Isa 32.1). Instead of fear, a failing land, and a forsaken palace—afflictions to be experienced by complacent people who have forsaken YHWH (vv. 9–14)—God's Spirit will be "poured upon [them] from on high" (v. 15). Good fortune will return; justice and righteousness will permeate the land.

> And the effect of righteousness will be peace [*šālom*],
> and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.
> My people will abide in peaceful [*šālom*] habitation,
> In secure dwellings, and in quiet resting places (Isa 32.17–18).

Life and the people's relationship with God will be right, as intended.

Conclusion

The pervasiveness of the contemporary view of peace as solely the absence of tension makes it harder for us to hear and internalize the biblical understanding defined above. But if we will correctly understand Jesus as the Prince of peace, see what it really means to have internal and interpersonal peace, and be peacemakers who "reap a harvest of righteousness" (Jas 3.18 NIV), we must realign our thinking with the biblical understanding and act on our new understanding to change our practices accordingly.

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Additional Thoughts on James

"Since wisdom as Torah obedience in this life sometimes results not in earthly bliss but in earthly suffering, the motivation for wisdom/obedience is not simply that things will go better in this life, but that one will be rewarded in the coming age. Most Jewish wisdom writings subsequent to Sirach, and indeed virtually all Jewish literature in the century prior to Jesus, adopt this eschatological motivation.… The eschatological element is thus also seen in James."

~ Dan G. McCartney. 2009. *James.* Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament. Baker Academic, 48

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