

Jehovah Shalom

What was a guy to do? The story sounded familiar. Once again Israel was doing what was right in their own eyes and were, as a result, paying a steep price: the loss of God's protection and the ensuing attacks of the neighboring Midianites and Amalekites. It had been seven long years since the end of the 40 year peace under the leadership of Deborah and Barak, and Gideon wasn't adjusting well to life on the run in the mountain caves and fortresses. Add to that the daily fear of another Midian raiding party and it was no wonder that finally everyone was crying out to the LORD. There wasn't a day of peace to be found. Every day was a battle. He remembered the story of God's deliverance from the hands of mighty Egypt, but that was way back then, and this is now. Today it felt like Yahweh had abandoned them.

Try to put yourself in Gideon's sandals when he discovered from the angel of Yahweh that he like Moses was to deliver Israel. He was going to be the answer to Israel's cries! The angel even had the audacity to call him a valiant warrior, making it sound like he was going to be a one man army! We can't blame Gideon for his skepticism when we read that he was the baby of the house, and that his family was the least in the tribe of Manasseh. As a result, Gideon asked for a sign to verify the angel's words, which the angel quickly supplied. Wow, it wasn't a case of mistaken identity after all! All of a sudden the good news that the angel had proclaimed sunk in: "The LORD is with you." This wasn't figurative language but real. In the mystery of God's ways, He had appeared to Gideon in angelic form, and Gideon knew it. This "face to face" encounter could only mean one thing, his imminent death. It is here that Gideon hears the angel's comforting words: "Peace to you, do not fear; you shall not die." Upon receiving these reassuring words Gideon proceeded to build a memorial alter to the LORD and named it for generations to come "The LORD is Peace."

Jehovah Shalom, what a strong tower! Like Gideon, I am overwhelmed to be able to be in the LORD's presence and live. In that place where there should be fear there is peace instead. The angel of the LORD's response to Gideon is amazing. "Peace to you" was a common way of greeting, meaning "may you be well". To be well is the root meaning of peace in the Old Testament. To be well is, of course, to be "whole, to be complete," to have physical and spiritual resources sufficient to one's needs. How significant to be coming from the mouth of God, especially in light of what had been asked of Gideon. In Gideon's response it is clear that he understood the implications. The Covenant God of Israel was to be with Him and in this presence he would experience wellbeing in spite of all the chaos created by Israel's rebellion and the daily unnerving consequences. No wonder he worshipped.

While the Old Testament focused on the interpersonal and social wellbeing that peace brought, the New Testament adds to it an inner wellbeing, tranquility, or blessedness as a result of the New Covenant. In the presence of the Lord there is peace. There is no

greater tranquility than being right with our Creator and conversely there is no greater trouble than being at odds with Him.

In today's churches I witness many restless souls, people who seem to be ever looking for something that brings peace to their frantic and stress filled lives. And the Lord knows that I would have to include myself in that number. As a pastor, I am not unsusceptible to this plague. For the longest time in ministry I felt the squeeze and stress of life. At times I believed that pleasing people would bring peace, but people are rarely pleased, least of all by me! At other times I would look to accomplishment in the "Lord's work" to bring a sense of inner satisfaction, but the "Lord's work" is never finished with many results often not seen for years! Maybe the answer was Christian fellowship, but the church is made up of people, ever changing and like all human flesh here today and gone tomorrow. I looked to my family, as well, but they too were mere humans; children grow up, move on unable to address my restless state within. Oh, I would never have admitted to such a pursuit. I proclaimed from the rooftops that true peace could only be found in the presence of God. We preachers are a funny lot. We sometimes imagine that if we say something long enough and strong enough it is the same as our reality. But we are disciples too, ever growing and learning; for the church and her leaders not to understand and accept this is folly.

There was a time not all that long ago, that the reality, not just the teaching or the knowledge finally "sunk in". Just like Gideon, it was during a time of chaos and confusing circumstances that I came "face to face" with God. Oh, I don't mean I saw someone, but I did experience His presence in a new way, a way that put people, the Lord's work, Christian fellowship, and family into proper perspective. In Christ, God is with me; I could weather the uncertain and often surprise storms of life in peace. In my journal I wrote:

In the midst of my feverish activity, it has been too easy to lose my first love with joy quickly following suite. Unless I enjoy intimacy with my Father through Christ by the Holy Spirit my joy diminishes and life becomes duty and obligation, colorless and humorless. I need to learn of Jesus not only in His death but also in His life, receiving by faith the peace that allowed Him to sleep even in the middle of a wild Galilean storm as the disciples' boat was tossed from wave to rolling wave.

My new prayer: My dear merciful and compassionate Father, by the power of your Spirit through reliance in Christ, please help me. I desire that my daily activity be formed by and reflect intimacy with You. I want to live in the reality of your presence. Today I turn from restlessness to your rest. Amen

Like you I am still learning and growing, and His presence makes all the difference in the world.

Assignment:

1. To gain some background for Gideon's story read Judges 2:8-17. What are your first impressions? What do you learn here about life in Israel? Do you see any comparisons with Gideon's context and your own?
2. Now read Gideon's story in Judges 6:1-24, or least this initial part where another of God's names are revealed. What was happening in Israel? What was Gideon doing when he encountered the angel of the LORD? What was Gideon's initial attitude to the angel's news? Describe how you would have felt if you were Gideon.
3. Take some time to reflect on the following Scriptures and note below each what you learn about peace and its relationship to God.

Leviticus 26:2-6

Numbers 6:22-27

Isaiah 48:18

Names of God_lesson 1o_Jehovah Shalom_group

Isaiah 26:3

Psalms 119:165

John 14:27/16:33

Romans 5:1-2

Ephesians 2:12-14

Philippians 4:4-9

4. Try to summarize all that you have read. How is God challenging you? Do you have peace both for today and for eternity? If not, why not according to the scriptures? Have you been running to Jehovah Shalom? Is He your strong tower? If He is, be ready to give a witness to God's presence in your life.